Cambridge 02138

Humanities hubris, hoop humor, undergraduate proximity

ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE

Thanks for the fine article on antibiotic-resistant bacteria by Katherine Xue (“Superbug,” May-June, page 40). Patient demand and doctors’ compliance turned antibiotics into monster-makers. A favorite teacher of medical microbiology at the University of California, San Francisco, Ernest Jawetz, stressed the importance of prescribing an antibiotic only after culturing the affected area. Too many doctors skipped that step to accommodate patients, so resistant organisms grew and turned hospitals into danger zones. A psychiatrist, I never prescribed antibiotics, but heard the warnings again at Harvard School of Public Health. Unfortunately, the facts of microbial life were brushed aside by doctors too willing to please rather than counsel their patients. The profuse distribution of hand sanitizers

7 WARE STREET

Meet Harvard squared

Beginning with this issue, New England readers will see a renamed, redesigned, and—most important—reconceived special section in their copies of Harvard Magazine. Harvard squared (“Harvard Squared”) replaces the previous regional section, which has included a campus events calendar, features on aspects of New England life, and a review of a local restaurant. (In both incarnations, the contents serve those who live in or visit the area often; those farther flung around the globe can access the regional coverage through our mobile app, to facilitate your use of the region’s resources. We’re fortunate to work and live in this rich and engaging environment, and look forward to making it more accessible to you. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

With this issue, we extend our profound thanks to Katherine Xue ’13, a former Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow at the magazine and, this past year, a full-time colleague. She has contributed important feature articles on the sciences (with others still in the pipeline), and a great variety of vivid news reports online and in John Harvard’s Journal. Katherine leaves, as planned, for the genome-sciences doctoral program at the University of Washington. She goes with our warmest wishes—and our hope that she will continue to combine her interests and skills, in writing and in science, in the years ahead.

We also welcome our first Daniel Steiner Undergraduate Editorial Fellow, Francesca Annicchiarico ’16, a Dunster House resident and social studies concentrator from Portogruaro, Italy. She began reporting in mid May, as the spring semester ended, and will serve readers into mid summer. We’re lucky to have her.

~John S. Rosenberg, Editor
is another example of selling non-remedies to an uninformed and gullible public. Bacteria adapt: what doesn’t kill them makes them stronger.

E. James Lieberman, M.P.H. ’63.

Potomac, Md.

Katherine Xue’s article is a wake-up call for urgent action to protect antibiotics. The author is right to note that the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) voluntary plan for countering routine livestock use of antibiotics is but a small step in light of the maturing scientific consensus that the widespread overuse of antibiotics on industrial farms contributes to the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

The FDA’s plan to promote “judicious” use of antibiotics by the livestock industry, adopted late last year, relies on voluntary compliance by the pharmaceutical industry and ignores the biggest use of these drugs: to compensate for crowded, unsanitary, and stressful feedlot conditions. Letting industry police itself won’t work. We don’t give our kids antibiotics to prevent disease because we don’t keep them in squalor; we should not risk these “miracle drugs” so that livestock can be kept more cheaply.

Today, 80 percent of the antibiotics in the U.S. are sold for use by farm animals rather than people. We can’t stop the crisis of antibiotic resistance unless the livestock industry is part of the solution. FDA can move to require stricter controls now.

Peter Lehner ’80
Executive Director, Natural Resources Defense Council
New York City

I was pleased to see the article on antibiotic resistance. However, its explanation for why most “large pharmaceutical companies have abandoned antibiotic research and discovery” described the industry’s symptoms but failed to diagnose the nature of its disease.

The FDA makes approvals of antibiotics more difficult than for other drugs, which has predictably left the world with a pall of antibiotic resistance. For antibiotics, the FDA has historically stiffened its already stringent “safe and effective” test by layering on demanding comparative tests. It has also historically refused to allow clinical tests by pathogen and required sponsors to prove efficacy in each of dozens of organs. These and other policies have brought us to the brink of an agency-wrought public-health nightmare.

Current FDA commissioner Margaret Hamburg ’77, G ’78, M.D. ’83, deserves credit for moving the agency away from some of its worst policies, but time will tell whether she forced enough change fast enough to save the millions of lives at risk.

Michael J. Astrue, J.D. ’83
Belmont, Mass.

The author was general counsel of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1989-1992) and chair of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council (2000-2002).

I was especially glad to see that the article emphasized the importance of rapid diag-
nóstics. However, this discussion was focused on developing rapid diagnostics for use in hospital settings. Given that most antibiotic over-prescribing occurs in response to common ailments presented in outpatient clinical settings, I think deploying rapid diagnostics in primary-care practices would be even more important.

I am always struck by how quickly primary-care doctors prescribe antibiotics when it is not at all clear, in fact is perhaps unlikely, that a bacterium is the cause of the ailment at hand. Why not stop and run a test, especially since the illness is not life-threatening (as it can be in the hospital setting)? I suspect the cost of lab work is the cause. How short-sighted, given that the cost of increasing antibiotic resistance seems far more significant and far-reaching. There is something wrong with the incentives in our healthcare system. The availability of rapid diagnostics could help. I understand that rapid diagnostics already exist in outpatient clinical settings in Europe. Why not here? Perhaps scientists at the Harvard-wide Program on Antibiotic Resistance can learn from their colleagues in Europe.

JEAN M. MURPHY, M.P.P. ’86
Arlington, Mass.

This article on “superbugs” may have accidentally stumbled across the answer to America’s great question of the era: why are we all getting so fat? In discussing the use of antibiotics in livestock farming, the author points out that “for reasons still poorly understood, small amounts of antibiotics regularly mixed into feed make young animals gain weight up to 8 percent more quickly....” What about small amounts of antibiotics regularly mixed into meat consumed by humans? This needs further research.

MARIAN HENRIQUEZ NEUDEL ’63
Chicago

HUMANITIES HUBRIS?
While it is reassuring to learn that faculty members in the humanities are trying to arrest and reverse the decline in their number of majors, two things occur to me upon reading “Toward Cultural Citizenship” (May-June, page 35).

First, why weren’t those same faculty members contacting alumni who teach in the humanities at schools where there is no similar decline? For example, at my own institution (a private liberal-arts college in Minnesota), the number of history majors is growing steadily and approaching its all-time high. The classics, religion, and English are in fine shape as well. Maybe we, and other schools like us, know something that Harvard doesn’t. But, as usual, our experience and insights aren’t sought. Instead, Harvard comes up with its own plan, which leads to my second observation.

According to the article, the authors to be read in the new humanities colloquium consist entirely of white males from Western cultures. Is this the 1960s? Maybe Harvard’s enrollment problem is related to its taking an approach that today’s students reject. In high school, they are increasingly taught world history and world literature. They come to college eager to study other cultures and other peoples. When they study U.S. history, it’s not their grandparents’ curriculum. The research conducted by Stanford’s Sam Wineburg shows that high-school students name non-whites such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks as the greatest Americans, which connects to the way they are taught U.S. history in school.

Don’t get me wrong. I teach medieval and early modern European history. Shakespeare and Luther are among the writers I believe every college student should read. But if we tried to build our curriculum entirely around U.S. and European history and assigned only white male authors, we would be losing majors, too. Asian history is the most popular specialization in our history major, and has been for a few years. Courses on gender history and queer history fill every time they are offered. Our students love medieval European history, too. But it is the diversity of offerings and of the voices they read and hear in our classes that keeps them coming back for more, and draws them to major.

So, Harvard humanities faculty, how about not looking down your noses at alumni in fly-over country, and see what you can learn from us?

ERIC J. CARLSON, PH.D. ’87
Professor and chair of history,
Gustavus Adolphus College
St. Peter, Minn.

IT IS ENCOURAGING to learn that Harvard professors are concerned about the sharp decline in student majors in the humanities and the corresponding impact on the University’s ability to teach the skills “that remain exceedingly important to being a citizen and an educated person.”

This alarm is rather ironic since Harvard and other “elite” universities have for decades systematically eliminated required undergraduate general-education courses in the humanities. It should also hardly come as a surprise that persistent attacks on Western ideas and institutions, the allure of race, class, gender, and critical theory in the classroom, and the politically correct hostility to dissent and the free expression of ideas have undermined the “relevance” of the humanities for college students. The claim that Harvard is doing “an enormously courageous thing” by rediscovering the primacy of the humanities in undergraduate education is too self-serving and self-congratulatory by half. But, better late than never.

SHELDON M. STERN, PH.D. ’70
Newton, Mass.

HOOP HUMOR
My brother and I, both Harvard grads, were amused to see our father, E.C.K. Read ’40, highlighted in the most recent Yesterday’s News (May-June, page 23). His exploits as Harvard Lampoon editor and winner of the Wellesley Hoop Race are part of the family lore. Ned was also featured that year in Life Magazine and, much to his own amusement before he died, was invited to address the Wellesley class of ’39 at its fiftieth reunion. Separately, his [1973] Letter to the Editor of this publication about postgraduate nightmares of being late for an exam, without his pants or #2 pencils, triggered a firestorm of corroborative responses.

His classmate, Jack Kennedy, may have been better known, if less “notorious.”

JOHN C. READ ’69, M.B.A. ’71
Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

COLLEGIATE PROLIXITY
Noah Pisner’s “Word-upmanship” (The Undergraduate, May-June, page 30) is truly a delight.

But really, he should be more precise. If lexiphane means “someone who shows off by using big words,” then his substitutes miss out: prolix has something to do with Latin “pouring out,” hence “windy,” but not “showing

(please turn to page 86)
LETTERS (continued from page 6)

off”; loquacious is similar to prolix and again not necessarily showy; circuitous is “round-about/won’t get to the point”; circumlocutory is similar to circuitous but carries the added implication of “devious with intent to dissemble/deceive” (yes, this last is redundant, but it has alliterative value); disgressively means “can’t or won’t stay on the point.” Leave aside the more pedantic quibble that he’s trying to synonimize (hal) adjectives with a noun.

Why not just settle for pretentious? But this would commit the academic sin of using a short, clear, almost universally understood word when it’s so much more fun to use an arcane uncommon word that is, well...pretentious.

Ted Pearson Jr. ’61
Tucson

ANIMAL RESEARCH REDUX

Regarding Dr. Schneidewind’s letter concerning animal research (May-June, page 6): may I say that after my graduation in 1960, I spent several decades as a part-time animal caretaker at the Harvard Biological Laboratories, and have a pretty good idea about how researchers treat laboratory animals. I saw no deliberate instances of cruelty.

I would suggest that those who feel that use of laboratory animals (without their consent?) is “indefensible” (her word), should be consistent. I believe that those who agree with Schneidewind should carry a little card with them at all times. The card would state that in case of a medical emergency, during which they could not speak for themselves, they did not want to receive any medications or surgical procedures which had been developed through the use of live animal research. Does this seem reasonable?

Robert A. Campbell ’60, Ed.M. ’61
Weymouth, Mass.

SCHLESINGER, REMEMBERED?

Anent the life of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (Open Book, March-April, page 57) and Marshall S. Shapo’s fine letter referencing it (May-June, page 7), I just received a telephone call from a junior at the College soliciting for the annual Harvard College Fund.

After he completed his task, we chatted a bit. When I asked him his major, he said economics, and that he is thinking of going to work in Wall Street after he graduates. When I asked him his major, he said economics, and that he is thinking of going to Wall Street after he graduates. Why not just settle for pretentious? But this would commit the academic sin of using a short, clear, almost universally understood word when it’s so much more fun to use an arcane uncommon word that is, well...pretentious.

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After he completed his task, we chatted a bit. When I asked him his major, he said economics, and that he is thinking of going to work in Wall Street after he graduates. While talking further about economics as a career, I happened to mention John Kenneth Galbraith. He hadn’t heard of him. A bit later I happened to mention Paul Samuelson. Never heard of him, either. Then a bit later, I mentioned Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and this time I said, “You certainly must know of him?” He said “Yes, I do.” To which I replied, “Who was he?” He sheepishly said, “I just said that. I really don’t know.”

He had never even heard of any of them. Stunning. He should do very well on Wall Street.

Kenneth E. MacWilliams ’58, M.B.A. ’62
Portland, Me.

DOES THIS RING A BELL?

Following publication of the item about “Bellboys” (Yesterday’s News, March-April, page 20), a reader commented on “amusing nicknames for undergraduate houses….Lowell House….acquired the nickname ‘Bellboys.’ At the time, Lowell House was where all the students on scholarships lived.”

I never heard the nickname used during my Lowell House years, but there’s another reason why it could have been. Have you ever heard or seen the massive Russian bells that occupy Lowell’s blue belfry, or their infamous Sunday concerts?

Your version hints at a degree of elite snobbery that I don’t believe prevailed among Harvard undergraduates. I think most of my housemates would disagree with your premise—including those with names like Birdseye, Lamont, Lodge, Morgan, and Weatherhead.

James Fitch ’50, M.B.A. ’53
Former scholarship student
Santa Rosa, Calif.

QUESTIONING CLIMATE CHANGE

President drew Faust has recently detailed University resources, research, and finances dedicated to “climate change” issues, which present a reasoned approach to the issue. Far from “settled science,” as some would claim, there remain many contradictions and partisan claims on both sides. Hoorah to Faust and Harvard for the balanced inquiry.

Peter McKinney ’56
Chicago

Editor’s note: The president addressed the issue in an April 7 e-mail to the community; it began, “Climate change represents one of the world’s most consequential challenges” (see “Harvard Details Climate-Change Actions” at http://harvardmag.com/climate-14). For more, see “The Divestment Debate,” page 22.