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## Letters

### Past tense isn't innate

In "Everybody's Talkin'" (SN: 5/3/97, p. 276), Steven Pinker theorizes that innate language abilities cause us to form past tenses regularly and that we then learn the irregular forms by rote memorization.

This does not explain languages that have several different conjugations, each with its own rules for past tense formation. Then there is Chinese, which does not have a past tense as such. If there were a hardwired past tense formation rule that we inherited, all of these languages would form the past tense exactly as English does.

You could argue different inherited neurological patterns in English-speaking and Chinese-speaking populations, but that seems far-fetched, particularly since each population seems to learn the other's language quite well.

Ivan Mann  
Hoover, Ala.

### Reining in resistance

"Proliferation of Pills" (SN: 5/17/97, p. 310) was good as far as it went, but it missed the real issue—liability.

Lawyers run medicine these days, not doctors. In the case of antibiotic resistance, the doctor has to worry about being sued if he or she does *not* prescribe an antibiotic for a sinus infection. Until doctors' liability is removed, questions of antibiotic resistance will remain.

Zane Binder  
Corona, Calif.

As a practicing family physician, I find that only a small proportion of my patients are amenable to explanations of why they do not need antibiotics. This number has increased slightly in the last couple of years, but these patients are still a small minority.

There are other confounding problems as well.

Some patients simply aren't educated enough, even with a lengthy explanation, to

understand that they don't need antibiotics. Furthermore, with "managed care," most of us are required to see more folks in fewer minutes, and explanations probably treble the length of the office visit—go figure.

Better than any of the other nonantibiotic remedies that you suggest is self-administered saline drops or irrigation (1/2 teaspoon salt to 8 ounces of water, plus a pinch of baking soda)—probably better than antibiotics, too!

Ed Sargent  
Shedd, Ore.

If we are really concerned about generating resistant organisms, we should outlaw the routine practice of giving low doses of antibiotics to healthy cattle, chickens, or other animals used for food. For those bacteria that are not unique to humans, this practice may generate resistance more efficiently than short courses of higher doses occasionally given unnecessarily to people.

Ken Olum  
Sharon, Mass.