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From old moms to plastic water bottles

Science is full of unexpected discoveries, some coming at decidedly awkward times. Just as there can be a breakthrough in negotiating the end to a war that comes to everyone's surprise on a major holiday, or intense spurts in which a writer completes a book in a week, there are times a scientist may feel awash in troubles but then see the world afresh as the facts fall into place in a new way.

An element of chance enters science, just as it does everyday life. But, as Louis Pasteur noted, chance favors the mind that's prepared to understand the world from a new angle.

Here's the story of a prepared mind and the discovery that may have major implications for our plastic water bottles and other food packaging.

Professor Patricia Hunt is a genetics expert who investigates how and why older moms are more likely to give birth to babies with a number of birth defects. Many of us women don't know it, but the tiny eggs in our ovaries are actually as old as we are — we don't make them afresh as life goes along. And the older those egg cells are, the more likely they are to have certain problems. To be blunt, older moms run a greater risk of having babies with certain birth defects.

Scientists do study human moms, but we can also learn a good bit from seeing how and why the eggs inside a "mouse mom" change over time. When scientists study animals, we generally have one set of mice with problems and another group called the "control." The idea is to treat both groups in exactly the same way (same food, same bedding material, same little exercise wheels, same tiny televisions). Any differences between the groups should come about due to the one crucial difference that's being studied, say the presence of a particular gene or the age of the egg cell.

Normally, the control group shows boring results. It's the regular stuff of mouse life. But some years ago, Hunt found she had a puzzle on her hands. Quite suddenly, the mice in even the control group in her lab were having a lot of miscarriages. Hunt and her team had to retrace their steps and look for anything that would explain the change.

In the end, Hunt discovered that the mice's plastic water bottles had been cleaned at one point with a harsh detergent. That detergent apparently meant that some chemicals in the plastic — chemicals that are like the hormone estrogen — were moving from the bottles into the water. That small change created the big differences in the mouse mom's reproductive life.

The possible implications in Hunt's discovery for people are substantial. We use hard plastics every day. They come in different kinds, but some of them can add the estrogen-like chemical "bisphenol-A" into the liquid or food they contain. It's still not crystal clear that bisphenol-A itself is really the culprit at issue in the matter — there's complex chemistry at issue — and more will be heard from on that front in the news.

Still, millions of Americans have decided they want to limit their exposure to the chemicals that come out of hard plastics. Stainless steel water bottles, or those made of plastics advertised as "free of bisphenol-A" are one option, and you can see lots of them at the store. (My 40-year old glass thermos, purchased for 50 cents at the next-door neighbor's yard sale, works nicely for me, but that solution will be over the day I drop the thermos.)

Thanks to Professor Hunt's work and her prepared mind, we've learned a lot about plastics in recent years, including some surprising discoveries that came along in unexpected ways. The fruits of science are not always what we can predict, but they make a valuable harvest — and they can change even basics in our kitchens and lunch boxes.

Pasteur was right in emphasizing we must prepare our minds — and those in the next generation — so that they can continue to make the discoveries that will propel our progress in the 21st century.

E. Kirsten Peters is a native of the rural Northwest, but was trained as a geologist at Princeton and Harvard. Questions about science or energy for future Rock Docs can be sent to epeters@wsu.edu. This column is a service of the College of Sciences at Washington State University.

Editorial comment:

The first 10 weeks is the most dramatic and vulnerable period in a baby's life. During this time, all of your baby's organs will begin to develop, and some will start to function. While your baby is in this embryonic period, he/she is particularly susceptible to anything that might interfere with his/her development.

Many babies suffer from lifelong problems which were caused by chemicals and/or drugs consumed by their mothers during this period of time.

Fruitport Community Schools to hold Kindergarten Round Up

(Submitted by Fruitport Community Schools)

Fruitport Community Schools is inviting families of children who will be five on or before December 1, 2010 to attend a session of Kindergarten Round Up to be held according to the following schedule:

Tuesday, April 13 at 7 p.m.

Shettler Elementary, (737-7595)

Wednesday, April 14 at 7 p.m.

Beach Elementary, (773-8996)

Thursday, April 15 at 7 p.m.

Edgewood Elementary, (865-3171)

You can get more information or pre-register for the evening by contacting your local elementary school.



What can you do with a 30 pound cabbage?

By Mary Weimer

In the first place, where would you get a 30+ pound cabbage? Just ask 87-year old Fred Hradsky. On just 10 acres, the man has quite a garden. He has farmed nearly all his life, growing corn, tomatoes, pickles, peppers, etc. This past summer, in his garden on Sternberg Road, Fred grew several cabbages, two of which weighed over 30 pounds each.

And the answer to the question? Make sauerkraut, of course.

Fred does that every year, as this photo shows.



Baker College names honors students

(Submitted by Baker College)

Baker College has announced its honors students from the Fall, 2009 semester. The Fruitport area students named to the President's List include Jason Hoyt, Hollie Potts and Matthew Stefanich.

Dean's list students include Christopher Allen, Tiffany Blandford, Denise Christiansen, Darlene Cyr, Patricia Danielson, Mia Debruyne, Paige Dolphin, Robert Faith, Cameron Fielstra, Twosixtwo Fiveonezerozero, Jaelyn Frye, Danielle Holland, Russell Laarman, Sarah Lager, Erin Lehman, Andrew McNinch, Daniel Olthof, Melanie Pastotnik, Susan Poel, Michelle Ponce, Deana Richter, Lori Rivera, Kathy Rodriguez, Shawn Rollston, Michele Sauers, Henney Scholte, Donna Schucker, Tereasa Tekautz, Brook Terryn, Rick Tice, Michael Valdez, Anna Vermaire, Tavra Wahr, Dana Warren and Erin Warren.

Also named to the dean's list were Nunica residents Bradley Ashcraft, Tanya Brady, Kyle Bross, Hope Brouwer, Dawn Burns, Thomas Burns, Willene Burns, Leann Gould, Michael Greene, Angela Mcfarlane, Barbara Pellegrom, Jesse Peterson and Rebekah Place.

Transparency for taxpayers

(Submitted by Michigan Department of State)

Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land posted her department's latest expenditure report online as another affirmation of taxpayers' rights to know how government is spending their money.

The 72-page document, which covers the entire 2009 fiscal year, is the most detailed expenditure report available from any state department.

"Citizens shouldn't have to guess at what is being done with their tax dollars," Land said. "At the Department of State, we believe spending information should be easily accessible and thoroughly documented. Accountability is a virtue of good government."

The department has been issuing the quarterly reports since 2008. They include comprehensive information such as salaries by positions, payments for individual office leases, contracts, employee travel, utilities, and grants to local governments.

Land gave credit to the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland for advancing transparency in the state. The center encourages state government leaders to go beyond the basic requirements of right-to-know laws through its *Show Michigan the Money* initiative.

Visit www.Michigan.gov/sos to view the data or other information about Department of State services.