

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## *The truth about E. Coli*

**Amanda H. Kahn**

**I**t's amazing: There are so many educated, bright people on this campus, yet ignorance prevails.

In the last decade of the 20th

century, you'd think people would be more familiar with the sciences. The most farfetched, apocalyptic visions of the doom potentially wrought by research should be dismissed with a wave of the enlightened hand. Hey, we all read the Tuesday *New York Times*, right?

Well, public awareness will never exist without thorough education. Columbia has recently taken a step in the right direction by mandating four semesters of science for the classes of 1996 and beyond.

But much of education lies in learning to evaluate information encountered outside the classroom in a sensible, non-reactionary manner. And recent events on this campus have demonstrated that a significant number of people can be swayed by exaggerations and false claims.

I'm referring to the Barnard-Columbia Save the Audubon Coalition (B-C STAC), or, more specifically, their assertions that the presence of a biotechnological research laboratory in Washington Heights would be a threat to the health of the neighborhood. Whatever my personal opinions are about honoring Malcolm X, or of treating those charged with infractions in a just manner (and taking into account certain members' important contributions to the Columbia community, in terms of working for an

African American Studies program and the restoration of decrepit buildings in this neighborhood), are of lesser import here. What infuriates me are the lies B-C STAC has spread around campus, lies which have gone virtually unchallenged.

A fact sheet produced by the coalition states, in reference to having a biotech center in the Washington Heights neighborhood, "This is what's known as ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM."

And is it environmental racism to build four such facilities in a 10-block area on the Upper East Side, adjacent to at least four schools and less than a mile from the 63rd Street home of University President Michael Sovern (and Katharine Hepburn, I. M. Pei, and UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, among other distinguished residents of Sutton Place)?

Columbia may not yet know the exact nature of the experiments to take place in the center. But scientific and economic necessity [read: National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant money and consumer drug demands] dictate that the activities at the Audubon will be virtually indistinguishable from research going on at the New York Hospital, Cornell University Medical Center, Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and the Rockefeller University.

Trust me; I worked at one of those institutions and am currently a

volunteer employee at another.

Nor is the bio-safety level two research any more dangerous than the experiments already being performed at the Health Sciences campus, according to Dr. Edward Christman, director of environmental health and safety for Health Sciences.

Referring to the research at the proposed building and at any of the major research centers around New York City, including Columbia Presbyterian, he said, "The difference is in the objectives and the individual researcher's interest, but the types of things being done in the labs are all just about the same."

That includes research using little mutated Escherichia Coli, the same friendly bacteria who help you digest dinner; recombinant DNA, a naturally-occurring substance without which we never would have evolved from amoebae and chimpanzees; and the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which is difficult to keep alive in sterile nutritive mediums, let alone in fresh air. HIV and other blood-borne pathogens, "pose a risk only if they are injected into the bloodstream directly," said Christman.

So, are the environmental racists going to venture through the streets of Washington Heights, pricking local women and children with in-

fectured needles and smearing mutant bacteria colonies on food in the *bodegas*? Get real.

The fact is, the people most at risk are the researchers handling these infectious agents with their own hands—"those closest to the facility," as the B-C STAC paper states. Yes, it is sort of scary, handling vials of blood with only a layer of latex protecting you. Nonetheless, thousands of scientists around the world do it every day as their means of subsistence. My former boss, for instance, works with HIV. But I have a feeling that if men and women with more than a decade of study behind them—the future winners of Nobel prizes, even—feel comfortable working with the stuff, it can't be all that dangerous.

Hell, I've already irradiated myself once or twice when working with DNA. I guess I'm on my way to success.

Disposal of radioactive products, carcinogens, tissue samples, viruses, contaminated objects, and bacterial samples is a straightforward process. I called the environmental safety offices of four of the institutions listed in this article (and looked at the thick employee handbook of the other, which is located in my desk drawer). All follow a strict set of guidelines issued jointly by the NIH and the Center for Disease Control, and are subject to regular in-

spection by the Occupational Safety Health Administration. Different forms of trash are separated into anywhere between five and 12 color-coded containers, sterilized at high pressure (which kills anything and everything), and destroyed or burned. If, perchance, some freak explosion or fire occurred, most harmful materials would be destroyed before entering the neighborhood. Biological material is simply too fragile to escape into the community and cause any sort of threat.

BC-STAC also claims that biotech, by definition, could include agricultural engineering, Nazi-type eugenic experiments, and “biotechnological weapons.” Mmmm-hmmm—I hear there’s a viable economic market for superviruses (especially in the Middle East). New York, with its fresh air and rolling hills, is a real center for agribusiness these days, as well. I hear the biotech center may be synthesizing love potions, too. Come on, B-C STAC: These “extreme” (to use your own word) hypotheses further discredit your claims of environmental racism.

I think you get the point. To those of you who believed their arguments, I hope I have convinced you of their inaccuracy. And to those who saw through them from the start, more power to you.

## *The Wrath of Kahn* intro**Spection**

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