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The Rock Doc

by Dr. E. Kristen Peters

The good news from the front lines

"Part of the federal stimulus package that you may not have heard much about contains good news for one of our deepest national strengths.

"Science and engineering, education and the research that flows from it have richly blessed us as a nation since the 1940s.

"I'm confident these core American strengths — aided in part by the stimulus — will be a major factor in what pulls us out of the current recession and propels us into the next phase of national economic growth.

"I know you are used to hearing grim tidings about education in America. But to paraphrase Mark Twain, the stories about the death of American education in general and science education in particular are greatly exaggerated.

"I've spent my life in and around major universities, and the clear good news is that college-level science and engineering education is an American powerhouse that is getting stronger.

"Here's my evidence:

"First, university students from abroad come here by the thousands every year to study technical subjects. Years ago, it was the best and the brightest of Europe that came. The Europeans still come, but these days there are also many clever students arriving at our universities from China, India, and a variety of other nations as well.

"The smartest and most dedicated young people of the world vote with their feet when it comes to getting an education in science and engineering. They choose our colleges for good reason, and often they remain with us for productive careers spanning decades.

"The second fact to note is that the high-tech revolutions in electronics and biotechnology are each unfolding in large measure here in the U.S. We take it for granted that new microchips and better software to run them are produced here each year. The U.S. also has hundreds of the world's top companies that are harnessing our ability to change DNA and modify organic molecules in ways that are revolutionizing everything from medical treatments to productivity in agriculture. University-sponsored research overlaps with the forward progress being made in both these arenas.

"True, our companies must compete with foreign counterparts. But competition is a good thing, not a sign of weakness. Competing makes us more likely to focus on what we do best — fundamental innovation that leads to the greatest improvements and progress.

"Finally, and this point is dear to my heart as a geologist, research at America's universities has led to our tremendous success in many different energy technologies. For example, our engineers are world leaders in researching next-generation solar panels, and our research chemists are breaking ground toward discovering fundamentally new ways of harnessing energy from sunlight.

Another point is the work of our geological engineers, who have created a wide array of techniques to explore the deep Earth and recover fuel from it with minimal impact on the environment. We are second to none in this crucial field.

"Our chemists and engineers are also leaders in designing vastly more efficient nuclear energy plants with improved fuel cycles, a source of carbon-free electricity we can increasingly tap in coming years if we choose.

"Great scientific research depends on top-quality graduate students and young professionals. We have both in abundance because our educational system is working well for many young Americans. Just for example, many more high school seniors have calculus and Advanced science under their belts than did kids when I was a teenager. That means many students — very much including those coming out of our public high schools — have a running start on a university degree in science or engineering by the time they sit down in their first college class.

"Finally, America's capacity for technical innovation and science education will be boosted by the stimulus package signed into law. The bill's substantial shot-in-the-arm for science and engineering will accelerate innovation that can help the next two generations of Americans prosper.

"Doubtless you've been impressed over the past 20 years by the revolutions in electronics, medical scans and more versatile energy technologies.

"But believe me, we ain't seen nothing yet. The fruits of American science and engineering will continue to amaze us, and they'll propel yet more economic growth for us."

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.

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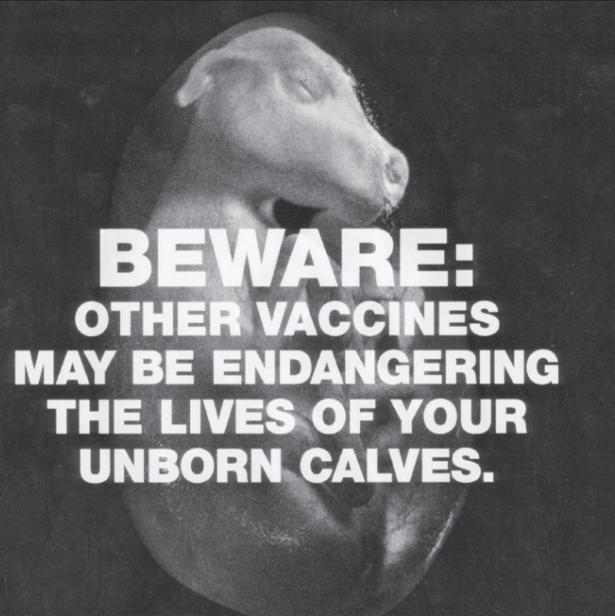
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**BEWARE:
OTHER VACCINES
MAY BE ENDANGERING
THE LIVES OF YOUR
UNBORN CALVES.**

This picture is from a Bovi-Shield Gold ad in a farm magazine, warning farmers to be careful what medication they give their cows so that the unborn calves are not endangered.

Shouldn't we humans be as concerned about negative effects on our unborn babies as farmers are about their unborn calves?

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF AN UNBORN CHILD

- *Day 18* after conception - Heart begins beating
- *5 weeks* - Tiny arms and leg buds have formed
- *6 weeks* - Face has two eyes
- *7 weeks* - Pain sensors appear
- *2 months* - Brain begins to form

CAUTION:

The first three months of a child's development are the most critical. Many things the mother intakes can have a negative effect on her child for its entire lifetime!

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