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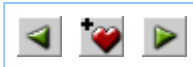
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2056

FIFTY years ago scientists were predicting the little-known study of genetics would, in time, develop into one of the most productive areas of research, but they doubted anyone would land on the Moon for generations.

Today they are forecasting a world 50 years hence where quadriplegics can run the marathon after being cured and where future Dr Doolittles can talk with the animals.

Computers will be able to make findings based on intuition, alien life-forms will be found living among us and anyone tired of their body can pop along to their doctor to get a replacement. The predictions are made by more than 40 leading scientists to help the magazine New Scientist to celebrate its half century. Only time will tell if they are more accurate than Astronomer Royal Sir Harold Spencer Jones who, at the launch of Sputnik 1 in 1957, said: "I am of the opinion that generations will pass before man ever lands on the Moon and that should he eventually succeed in doing so there would be little hope of his succeeding in returning."

Professor Robert Sinsheimer was spot on, however, when he predicted in 1957 that there was huge potential in the study of genetics — "at present a rather fuzzy, abstract idea".

If the 2006 generation of scientists are right, in 50 years there will be devices to detect and interpret the emotions of animals as diverse as monkeys and fish. Professor Daniel Pauly, of the University of British Columbia, said: "I think the most important development for the oceans would be a device that could detect, amplify and transmit to us the emotions and fleeting, inarticulate 'thoughts' of animals in such a form as to evoke analogous emotions and thoughts in human brains."

"This would first work with primates, then mammals in general, then the other vertebrates including fish. This would cause, obviously, a global revulsion at eating flesh of all kinds, and we would all become vegetarians."

The discovery of alien life will be the biggest advance, according to Professor Freeman Dyson, of the Institute for Advanced Study, at Princeton in New Jersey. "The biggest breakthrough in the next 50 years will be the discovery of extraterrestrial life. We are only now developing the tools to make our searches efficient and far-reaching, as optical and radio detection and data processing move forward."

ET may even be found here on Earth, suggested Dr Chris McKay, of Nasa's Space Sciences Division, in California. "In the next 50 years we may find evidence of alien life frozen in the ancient Martian permafrost, perhaps dead but biochemically preserved. We may find it on the surface of Europa. There is even a chance we will find alien life forms here on Earth," he said. Similarly, Professor Paul Davies, of Arizona State University, said that aliens may have lived on Earth for millions of years. "Most life is microbial, and you can't tell just by looking whether a microbe is 'our' life or alien. If they are here, they could be identified soon. And the discovery that all life on Earth did not, after all, have a common origin would virtually prove that we are not alone in the universe."

In medicine, unlimited supplies of organs for transplant are expected to be made possible. They would be grown in animals, such as pigs, but would be made from human cells, predicted Professor Bruce Lahn, of the University of Chicago. Going one step further, Professor Ellen Heber-Katz of the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia, forecasts the routine replacements of bodies through regenerative drugs.

Treatments will first be developed to regrow damaged fingers and toes and over the half-century techniques will advance so that whole limbs and spinal cords can be repaired.

Life-spans will increase, said Professor Richard Miller, of the University of Michigan. "It is now routine, in laboratory mammals, to extend life-spans by about 40 per cent," he said. "Turning on the same protective systems in people should, by 2056, be creating the first class of centegenarians who are as vigorous and productive as today's sexagenarians."

One academic believes that we will have discovered the origins of the Universe. "The most significant breakthrough in cosmology in the next 50 years will be that we finally understand the Big Bang," said Dr Sean Carroll of the California Institute of Technology.

WHAT THE SCIENTISTS PREDICT

Robot helpers: although two-year-old humans can identify and classify objects, robots cannot do so with any reliability. There is also a need to find a way of letting computers evolve, freeing them from adherence to defined inputs and outputs, so that they can react to the outside world

They're out there: several scientists predicted the discovery of alien life — "in the ancient Martian permafrost, on the surface of Europa, or spewing out of the geysers on Enceladus". One said that establishing a human colony on Mars would provide an insurance policy against catastrophes on Earth — "will we be smart enough to do this?"

Running repairs: in the next 50 years it is anticipated that we will have drugs that cause severed spinal cords to heal, organs to regenerate and lost limbs to grow back. Universal donor cells will be injected into the body and will migrate to the site of injury, where tissue repair can occur without rejection. We will be able to

grow unlimited supplies of spare human organs

We will also...

Find evidence for dark energy, a phenomenon inexplicable within today's physics although it is thought to be related to the origin of the universe

Prevent ageing by understanding the ways in which cells from long-lived animals — people, whales, bats — are resistant to many forms of injury. This will help us to create anti-ageing drugs that will extend our lives by up to 40 per cent

Communicate with animals by detecting and transmitting the "thoughts" of animals in a form analogous to human thoughts and emotions, first in primates and then other vertebrates

Understand the Big Bang, create a unified theory of everything, survive a major disaster and let natural evolution start all over again, find an inexhaustible form of green energy

The Times (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/newspaper/0,,173-2455236,00.html>)

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