

A Special Report

Cheryl Freeman is both a very determined and a very courageous lady. A trained nurse, some years ago she suffered a debilitating injury while working for an overseas aid programme, an injury that gravely reduced her ability to work and which has resulted in years of ill health. Returning home, she discovered that there was little that medical science could do to relieve her pain and suffering and so she sought relief from various practitioners of "alternative" healing.

It is what she discovered during this search that set her on a course of investigating and exposing the claims made by many such practitioners, with a particular focus on the wide range of unproven devices for which diagnostic or therapeutic claims (or both) are made, and for which there is no good evidence. Her courage in the face of the harassment and legal threats resulting from her investigations has been an inspiration to many of us, and we are delighted that we can now publicly salute that courage. For her dedicated work in this field, she was named (as "Nurse Cheryl") as Australian Skeptic of the Year for 1999.

The following article covers only a few of the many investigations Cheryl has conducted into many different claims, and it only scratches the surface of the frustration she has experienced in trying to get someone to take notice of the threat posed to public health by the unmonitored proliferation of devices for which exaggerated therapeutic claims are made, and for which the evidence of efficacy is vanishingly slight.

With some notable exceptions she has met with political and bureaucratic inertia, and an almost total indifference from the news media. There are many regulatory agencies, state and federal, which might (or should) be concerned with what Cheryl has discovered, but bureaucracies are adept at shoving difficult problems onto someone else, and that has happened to Cheryl many times. Hopefully, there are some small signs that this is changing, albeit far too slowly for something as dangerous to public health as this.

When bureaucracy fails to act, one role of the Fourth Estate is to prod them into action. In this case the media has abdicated its role. The news media, normally all too willing to expose scandals, has avoided any serious investigation into what can only be seen as a dangerous threat to public health. Whether this is through genuine journalistic ignorance because of the technical nature of the problem, or through a misplaced sympathy with the new age anti-scientific claims of the promoters, it is difficult to say. Cheryl Freeman has provided, over many years, enough sustenance to whet any journalistic appetite, but the follow-up stories have been rare.

Whatever the reason, they are missing a very big story indeed if only they care to look. Few suburbs in Australia are without at least one clinic offering false diagnoses and treatments of dangerous conditions, from gadgets that simply do not work.

Barry Williams

