

# Matters for Concern

We cannot help but be confused by the mixed signals we receive regarding the status that 'alternative medicine' receives in our society. In this issue, we see the welcome news, reported by Cheryl Freeman, that a naturopath in NSW has been convicted and fined for using highly dubious techniques for diagnosing disease, while we also should be concerned by her report on the seeming indifference of the regulatory authorities to the proliferation of equally dubious methods of scanning for breast cancer.

We read Richard Lead's report that substantial amounts of taxpayers' money is being awarded to five alternative health associations to enable them to establish national registration systems. We hear of universities setting up research programmes to determine the validity of various "complimentary" methods, but we also read of universities offering degree courses to practitioners of those systems, *before* the results of the research are known.

*If* this money and research serves to winnow the wheat from the chaff of this contentious field, with the result that viable techniques and treatments become part of mainstream medicine while the remainder is consigned to the dustbin where it belongs, then these are worthwhile activities. But we are not at all confident, based on the current

uncritical political, public and media acceptance of preposterous claims made for much of alternative therapy, that this will be the outcome.

It is also curious that, while the media are full of stories about the imminent collapse of medical indemnity insurance schemes and the threat that poses to orthodox medical practice, we have heard nothing of any similar concern in the alternative field. Could this mean that alternative practitioners are better insurance risks than orthodox practitioners? Or could it mean that alternative practitioners are rarely covered against malpractice law suits, with the accompanying risk to anyone who has been maltreated, that they can never gain reasonable compensation? We have little doubt which is more likely to be the correct answer.

That there are unscrupulous charlatans peddling dangerous nostrums to the unwary can hardly be denied. Unfortunately, such is the status of official concern (or unconcern) about such practices, that we cannot be confident that anything will be done about them.

We recently received a letter (to the Skeptics web site) from a Queensland mother, Susan Malone, who had experienced just such dangerous advice from an unscrupulous practitioner, at a time when she was

extremely vulnerable to manipulation. Further, she recounts the pressures she felt to conform to societal expectations brought on by our uncritical acceptance of suspect claims. We reproduce her letter here with her gracious and courageous permission. We challenge anyone to be unmoved by her story.

## Susan's letter

*I have considered myself a skeptic ever since I can remember (Sunday school days), however I still could not avoid becoming a victim of the power of the guilt and trickery used by promoters of alternative cancer treatments.*

*My 12 month old son was diagnosed with a very rare form of adult liver tumour. We started the process of chemotherapy and operations that were available through the paediatric oncologists, even making use of the best liver transplant surgeon who happened to be in Brisbane at the time. These magnificent surgeons and specialists kept our son alive and improved his health for some time. The inevitable occurred of course, the tumours returned and I began my journey of accepting the approaching death of my son and learning to enjoy every moment of his life.*

*A little before this time I was approached by well-meaning friends and relatives about a 'naturopath' who, I was told, had 'cured many cancers'. Even though my skeptical mind didn't want to believe this, as a mother of sick child I was made to feel guilty that I wasn't trying everything possible. I thought I'd have nothing to lose, while at the same time keeping everyone around me happy and satisfied (apparently quite a common reaction of parents of terminally ill children) so I reluctantly and cautiously rang for an appointment. I was surprised that he practised from an office in among respectable Brisbane medical specialists 'on the Terrace'. I was suspicious when at first they said there was a four month waiting list, but then they suddenly had a cancellation the next day!*

*My suspicions were further confirmed when the naturopath held a silver rod against my leg to 'read the energy' from my son sitting on my lap through to my leg. He entered this information in a machine, then made up a potion for me to give to my son. He made a diagnosis of leukaemia (good guess I suppose, as that is the most common form of cancer in young children). When I informed him that he actually had a tumour, he replied that he had a tumour and leukaemia at the same time (silly oncologists to miss that!). After paying over \$150 in fees and potions, I didn't want to burden my son with more 'medicine' but I still felt guilty. Friends and family were so pleased that we had some extra hope. I still can't believe that I actually began to give my son doses of this potion.*

*I also remember now that he also told me that my son probably developed the cancer because I put his cot in the wrong area of the room (over some type of mineral/metal deposit in the earth below!). I think I was so embarrassed at the time that I had actually paid another human being to tell me this rubbish that I blocked it out of my mind. Reality finally*

*came upon me, so I decided to throw out the potion, but to continue to tell friends and family that I was giving him the doses. Why didn't I think of that idea before I parted with the \$150?*

*My son died, as expected, a few months later and it still makes me angry that quacks can so easily take money from people in vulnerable situations. Why does our Government let these practices continue? Surely anyone with even the smallest degree of intelligence can see through the validity (or lack) of these practices. I still wonder today if his young assistant really believed in what she was doing, but I'm sure the naturopath knew exactly what he was doing!*

### And another thing

We have heard much recently about stem cell research into finding treatments for various dangerous or debilitating diseases, and about the competing claims of embryonic v adult stem cells. This line of research, it is reasonable to suppose, holds out the promise of relief for many people who suffer from these ailments.

Not surprisingly, much attention has been focused on various moral and ethical considerations about the research, as well as the scientific issues. Again it is hardly surprising that much of the very vocal opposition to embryonic research has come from church groups, and pressure is being applied to Members of Parliament to support one or other of the sides in this debate in a conscience vote in the Parliament.

All of this is perfectly proper, because there *are* moral and ethical, as well as scientific issues involved in this research. It is also appropriate, in a democracy, for churches (or any other group or individual) to hold and state positions on these issues. What is improper is that the opinions of church groups on such matters should be seen as having some especially privileged position attached to them. Recent revelations

that the same church organisations have been involved in the covering up of criminal offences perpetrated by some of their clergy against children, means that their position in any debate on ethics must be in considerable doubt.

This is not to suggest that any organisation should be held to blame, morally, for the actions perpetrated by some of its members (though it might still attract legal sanctions). Paedophiles can be found in many different occupations and they are often expert in hiding their nature. Further the whole issue of child sexual abuse, which must horrify any decent person, is an area whose waters have been considerably muddied in recent times (as we predicted they would be in *the Skeptic*) by spurious claims, promoted by other interest groups, of repressed and recovered memories relying on now widely discredited techniques.

The issue here is not the fact of sexual abuse of children, horrible though it is, but the fact that complaints about members of the clergy engaging in it have been acknowledged by the churches involved; and that these churches have not only *not* done what they are legally required to do in reporting a crime, but have actively sought to cover-up the fact that the crime has been committed. Apart from the legality of concealing a crime, their practice of moving offending clerics from one area to another is simply neither an ethical nor a moral thing to do.

Yet these organisations would still ask us to believe that they have special insights into what is moral or ethical, and that they have the right to impose those views on everyone else. Given their own actions, this is an untenable position to hold and it would seem to me that any assumption of privilege by them in matters of morality and ethics is no longer valid (if it ever was).

By all means have a debate on the ethics and morality of stem cell research, but let us also strive to keep the humbug to a minimum.

**Barry Williams**