

SKEPTICS TEST PSYCHIC SURGEON

By Mark Plummer

the
Skeptic

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When a small paragraph advertisement in "The Age" on January 3rd stated that an English medium-psychic surgeon would be commencing practice in Melbourne the Australian Skeptics swung into action.

The advertised numbers were rung and we were told that Mr Roman Diakov acted as a medium for deceased surgeons to conduct psychic operations. An appointment was arranged for an elderly "patient" and her "son" to attend for surgery.

The "patient" was actually seventy-three year old medical practitioner Dr Miffy Beadnell and her "son" was magician Mike Wilton, a committee member of the Australian Skeptics.



Our team of Dr Beadnell and Mike Wilton found Mr Diakov's "clinic" located in a new villa unit at 22 Aitken Street, Kew. The family room of the villa was the "reception area" and the receptionist/nurse went to great lengths to reassure the seemingly fragile elderly lady that there would be no pain.

We were informed there would be no blood either as Mr Diakov worked only on the "psychic body". The "nurse" assured our team that operations done to date had been very successful.

Diakov left to prepare himself and donned a white coat. Wilton was assured he would be able to observe the treatment in the bedroom which became the "operating theatre" for the night. With dim blue lighting and the strains of "Michael, Row the Boat ashore" Dr Beadnell was laid on the bed/operating table.

After a suitable brief prayer Daikov slowly stood, then walked with a limp. He had adopted the plummy accent of a pommy "Doctor Roberts".

"Dr Roberts" then examined Dr Beadnell's cranium with a special invisible psychic microscope. Dr Roberts amazed our team with the revelation that the brain was divided into two halves (the left and the right) and was composed of millions of cells. Dr Roberts stated that several of these naughty cells were mishaving themselves. This was explained in layman's terms as being akin to a car motor with loose spark plugs.

The problem explained, the treatment began. Several special, invisible psychic tubes were inserted through Dr Beadnell's head, threaded through the body

and came out through the soles of her feet.

Then all the "bad fluids" were psychically drained from her body. This was followed by the passing of hands down the length of the body and the amazing discovery that one half of the patient's brain was hot. More passing of hands followed but clearly a second opinion was needed.

"Dr Roberts" left Mr Diakov's body and "Dr Mauriss", supposedly a deceased French gynaecologist took over. Dr Mauriss' french accent had clearly deteriorated since his death, to say nothing of his diagnostic talents, for the diagnosis was that the patient's stomach pains were caused by displaced pelvic bones after the birth of her last child.

Lying on the bed, our Dr Beadnell couldn't remember having had any children, not even a miscarriage.

"Dr Mauriss" also diagnosed deafness in her left ear. Our patient couldn't remember deafness having ever been a problem, but clearly this, like the birth of her various children must have slipped her memory.

"Dr Roberts" returned to wrap up the post operative treatment. The good lady would have to come back for further treatment. She would feel quite tired over the next few days and must drink plenty of water. She would also pass more fluid than normal. (One would hope that anyone drinking more water than normal would also pass more water than normal.)

Our team posed a few more questions for "Dr Roberts" to find out that he was a practising brain surgeon at St Bartholomews before dying in 1948. Before more questions could be put Dr Roberts had to depart leaving us with Mr Diakov to show our team out the door.

The opinion of the Australian Skeptics testing team (in case you haven't guessed) is that the utterances of the "doctors" who operated revealed a complete lack of any medical knowledge. Their diagnosis was wrong, and the hopeless french accent merely added to the conclusion that Mr Daikov was false.

Our findings confirm that of an American Federal Court Trade Commission judgement in 1975 that "psychic surgery" and "psychic healing" is pure fakery and fraud accomplished by the deception and trickery of the "psychic surgeons" to deceive trusting persons into the false and mistaken belief that human bodies have been opened with the bare hands, diseased material, or disease causing material removed and the incision closed all without pain or suffering.

And Mr Diakov? If you can reach him on the advertised phone numbers please tell him the Australian Skeptics are wondering how to explain the item in their books "Psychic surgery fee \$20" to their auditors.

DORIS STOKES WRONG - POLICE

Doris Stokes, well known in Australia through her television performances in which she claims to communicate with the dead, has been shown to be wrong by English and American police.

In her recently published book "Voices in my Ear" Stokes claims to have solved two murder cases in England. One was of a small girl at Krikham and the other of children at Blackpool.

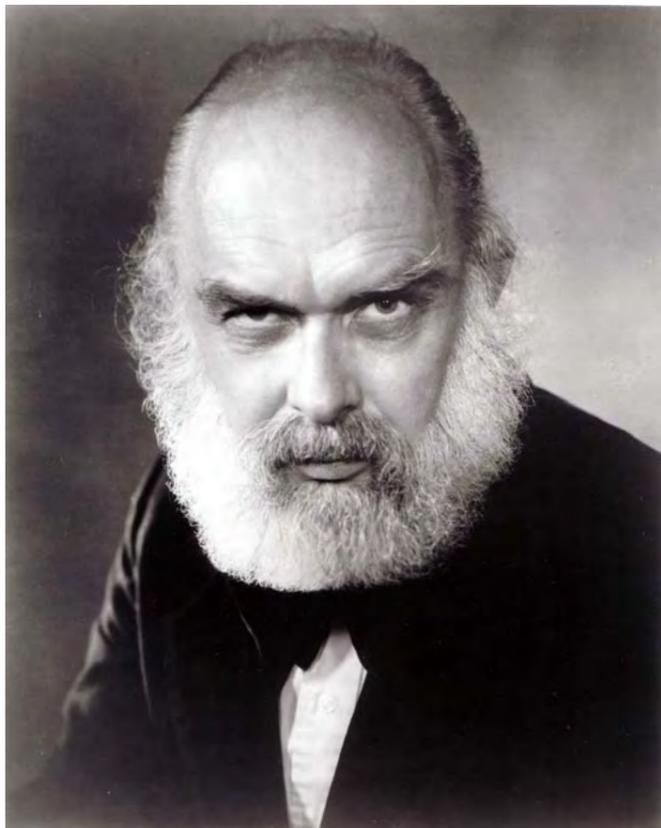
Detective Chief Superintendent William Brooks of the Lancashire Constabulary has stated that Stokes made no contribution whatsoever to the detection of either murders.

inform Stokes of the names of his assailants or provide an accurate description of them.

Captain William H. Cobb, Commanding Officer of the Homicide Division of the Los Angeles police stated that his police department does not solicit the services of clairvoyants, psychics or persons practicing parapsychology when conducting investigations.

However, Cobb noted people involved in these fields do volunteer their "special" information when they believe it will be beneficial to the investigation.

Cobb stated that his detectives



James Randi

While in Beverley Hills, Los Angeles, Stokes claims that a local murder victim Weiss contacted her and described details of his murder.

James Randi contacted the Los Angeles police who told him that all of what Stokes said the murder victim Weiss told her (excepting details as yet uncorroborated) was readily available to the media at the time Stokes made details of the "psychic conversation" public.

The murder is still unsolved. The murder victim neglected to

must keep an objective frame of mind during their investigations to ensure a thorough investigation is conducted. Therefore, they are obliged to review this type of volunteered information regardless of their personal beliefs as to its value.

Usually reliable sources in the media industry have stated it is unlikely Stokes will be invited back to Australia to appear on television in the light of the Australian Skeptics investigations of Stokes credibility.

PERTH STILL THERE!

Extensive research by the Australian Skeptics has shown that the city of Perth is still there.

In January this year clairvoyant Joseph Gyapai predicted that a giant wall of water seven-teen metres high would sweep Perth and all Western Australian towns between Bunbury and Broome in the early hours of Monday February 9th.

His prediction was publicised by the Perth media and led to Peter Gregson, the scientist in charge of the Perth Geophysical Observatory, to issue a statement to allay public fears. Mr Gregson said that although the observatory could not say a tidal wave would not occur the statistical chances of it happening were so slight as to be not worth considering.

Mr Gregson said that even if a tidal wave did occur the wide continental shelf with its gradual slope would protect the coast. The frictional losses in the wave travelling across a wide shelf would dissipate it.



Mr. Gyapai's predictions did not cause the same reactions as the predictions of a great tidal wave in Adelaide in January 1976, so it was not necessary for Sir Charles Court to stand on the beach to thwart the prediction. The great Adelaide Tidal wave may have been stopped by the actions of Premier Don Dunstan standing on Glenelg beach at the time the Adelaide tidal wave had been predicted.

Some Easterners waited with bated breath on February 9th to see if Perth and its troublesome sandgropers were swept away. When no news of the tidal wave came through by midday some speculated it was possible the usual media and political conspiracy had covered up the event. However we can now reveal that our research has shown that Perth is still there. No doubt many Perth surfers were disappointed they had missed the "big one".

HEARD ANY INTERESTING CLAIMS ABOUT THE PARANORMAL IN AUSTRALIA LATELY?

- The Australian Skeptics are keen to hear about paranormal claims in Australia. Send us newspaper cuttings, or write us a letter setting out the details. Our address is Box 1555 P, G.P.O., Melbourne Victoria, 3001

ALIEN HONEYCOMB TESTED

By Mark Plummer

John Pinkney and Leonard Ryzman's recent book "Alien Honeycomb" describes the finding in Australia of "the first solid evidence of UFOs."

The book's preface and the press releases state: "The UFO which exploded over a vast, desolate timber property in Queensland, scattered its intricate, eerily beautiful wreckage for several kilometres.

"Most of the pieces were collected by officers from the RAAF which, without public announcement, immediately despatched the material to the Pentagon laboratories.

"But some of the wreckage was retrieved by private investigators - among them, the authors.

"This book chronicles our search for the smashed building blocks of what must have been 'an aerial palace'. It reproduces the commentaries of eminent scientists, perplexed by material whose nature has defied their understanding; and summates the research project in the United States, which shows that the wreckage contains 'unknown'..." "The gorgeous, hectically-coloured wreckage retrieved from Greenbank promises to yield up scientific secrets that should be shared by all mankind."

Their claim would only be substantiated by the fragments in their possession being confirmed as "exotic" by detailed scientific analysis.

The book does not provide any such analysis. "Commentaries of eminent scientists" are referred to, however these turn out to be only transcripts of observations about the fragments made by anonymous scientists. These are at best subjective comments made by looking at and handling the fragments and are not based on any thorough scientific testing.

According to the authors the book "Summates the research project in the United States, which shows that the wreckage contains "unknowns". This comment seems to be only based on the following quote from "Don", an engineer and "expert. . . in aeronautics". Don turns out to be the person who originally prompted the author's investigations and search for the fragments rather than a detailed independent expert.

As Pickney and Ryzman will only surrender their fragments to the United Nations, Australian Skeptic and Sydney multi-millionaire Dick Smith flew a research-

Senior Lecturer of the School of Textile Technology at the University of New South Wales.

We reproduce his report;

"Both of the specimens submitted for test appear to have been involved in a fire at some time and were covered with a carbonaceous matter.

"The flat specimen having on its surface a pattern of hexagons, consisted of three layers of similarly woven fabric, the weave pattern for which is

This is quite a common



and well-known weave called a 4-end sateen or 1/3 transposed twill. Whether the three layers of fabric in this specimen were originally separate or have become fused together as a result of the fire it is not possible to say.

"The so-called "honeycomb" like fabric came apart quite easily yielding layers of formed woven fabric, the weave pattern for which is

This weave is known as a plain weave, is the simplest of all



weave patterns and has been known for thousands of years.

"Yarns in both weaves were found to be multi-continuous filament ones. Elemental analysis of material in the filaments was carried out using a model I.S.I. - 100A - Scanning Electron Microscope fitted with a model PGT System 3 Energy Dispersive X-ray Analyser.

This analysis showed that the filaments consisted largely of silicon and calcium, with a medium amount of aluminium, a small amount of magnesium, trace amounts of iron and titanium and possibly very small traces of potassium, sulphur and chlorine. The elements identified and their proportions indicate that the material of the filaments of both fabrics is a glass similar in type to one commonly used in the manufacture of fibreglass. There were no unknown elements present in the materials examined.

"Filaments extracted from the specimens were also examined using a Projectina projection microscope at a magnification x 500 which showed that all of the filaments were circular in section and extremely regular. Filament diameter was found to be 6 µm, indicate of a quality of glass similar to that described as DE in the American Society for Testing Materials Standards ASTM-D578-Standard Specification for Glass Fibre Yarns.

"Tests for chemical reactivity indicated the material was extremely resistant to the normal range of solvents, acids and alkalis, typical chemical behaviour of glasses. Again, temperature resistance of the material was high, filaments tending to glow in a bunsen flame rather than burn or melt, behaviour again typical of glasses. Softening temperature of the material was about 850°C, typical of E type fibre

glass. Density of the material was not determined accurately. It was, however, greater than 2 g/cm³.

"All of the above tests confirm the results obtained by SEM analysis, viz. the material in glass.

Dr. Hickie concluded that the materials submitted for analysis were woven fabrics in plain and sateen weaves and woven from multifilament fibreglass. They had obviously been in a fire and are covered with carbonaceous matter.

Dr. Hickie felt it was highly likely that individual layers of the plain woven fabric had been thermally set into the forms necessary to fabricate the "honeycomb" type material.

Fibreglass yarn has been manufactured in quantity in many countries throughout the world since production of commercial grades began about 1938.

The Australian Skeptics understand that the United Nations General Assembly has yet to debate Messrs. Pickney and Ryzman's request for the United Nations to test and evaluate their

AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS "GOLDEN BENT SPOON" COMPETITION

As so much paranormal silliness goes unrewarded in Australia the "Australian Skeptics" have launched a national competition to reward those active in supporting the claims of the paranormal.

The first awards will be announced during the "silly" season of January 1982 and the winner in each category will receive a golden bent spoon as a reminder of the efforts of one Uri Geller in the paranormal field.

The categories are:

Academic:

To the Australian scientist who says the silliest thing about parapsychology. Dr Osborne of the Caulfield Institute of Technology is an early nomination with his claims about forty "psychic" children in Melbourne.

Funding:

To the funding organization that awards the most money in Australia for the silliest things in the paranormal. The Australian Government is an early starter here with its funding of Transcendental Meditation through Medibank. The Transcendental Meditation Organization claims to be able to teach people to levitate and become invisible.

Performance:

To the "psychic" who takes in the most people with the least talent. "Psychic" Joseph Gyapai who predicted a great tidal wave would sweep Perth on February 9th of this year has an early lead

Media:

To the journalist and news organization that supports the most outrageous claims of the paranormal. Leo Apple writing in "The Australian" is the first nomination for 1981 with his astrological predictions for Hawke and Bjelke-Peterson

Political:

To the gullible politician most easily taken by claims of the paranormal. Premier Joe Bjelke-Peterson's continuing support for the water-powered nuclear fusion Horvath car may prove hard to beat.

Let us have your nominations during the year.

The Editor,

The T. V. program on Dowsing was a skeptic's delight. The testing was rigorous and the dowzers looked suitably foolish.

Until the results were read out, when I was unpleasantly surprised. The gold was found well below chance probabilities, but the water was found 20% of the time.

Twenty percent is *significant!*

You then performed some sleight of, hand be adding the scores together, bringing the total percentage closer to chance and (hey, presto!) causing that uncomfortable significance to vanish.

It doesn't matter if the dowzers think they have an ability to find all sorts of things equally. Water and metals are very different substances and the scores should be looked at separately.

No more does it matter that the dowzers greatly overestimated their presumed ability. Only the results matter!

Also, as the scores were averaged, it's likely that certain individuals scored higher than 20%. I'd like a look at the exact results of all tests, which at present suggest that some dowzers are *twice as likely* as you or I to find water!

To me, that cries out for an explanation!

Yours in curiosity,
Rona Devlin

(A paper on the Sydney Dowsing tests will be published shortly. Ed.).

Dear Editors,

The failure of water diviners in Sydney to locate water, brass or gold, despite prize money of \$40,000 had repercussions in Western Australia. As W.A. President of the National Well Water Association I appeared on an ABC radio programme to discuss the results of the test and water divining in general. Needless to say I took the opportunity of using phrases such as 'more water underground than you can poke a stick at etc. etc. As a result, W.A. diviners got up in arms and said that N.S.W. diviners were only learners and if the challenge had been held in W.A. a 100 percent success rate would certainly have been achieved.

Naturally, divining is of wide public interest so the ABC organised a test of their own for the W.A. diviners, using ten cardboard boxes, a kilo of brass and a kilo of gold.

Twenty-six diviners turned up to display their prowess on a site not far from the Swan River. Not one was driving a Rolls Royce. An armoured car was used to conceal the cardboard boxes and for the first test, the kilo of brass was put in box no. 2 and a kilo of sand in all other boxes. Similar to the N.S.W. test a variety of sticks, wires, keys and pendulums was employed and all diviners got a positive response. One diviner did not use any instruments, claiming he could feel the vibes through his fingers. Another, we termed the long distance diviner, used a method which required him to stand back 80m and take a sight on each box from four different points of the compass - a fairly lengthy and time consuming exercise.

Eventually all twenty-six diviners stood proudly by the box of

LETTERS

not having the courtesy of a diviner alongside. Surprise, surprise. Yes, you guessed correctly, box no. 2 with the kilo of brass was the only one not divined. The odds against that happening must be quite large. For the record we in Western Australia do not have a requirement for diviners who can locate sand, for that is a commodity we sand-groppers have in great abundance.

At this stage, one very verbal diviner, pulled out of the contest because didn't we know you can't divine through glue, and of course all cardboard boxes do have a component of glue otherwise they would fall to pieces.

The second test, under great security used the kilo of gold. Now, if I was a security guard I would watch that kilo of gold very closely. Five diviners successfully picked the box containing the gold claiming gold is a pure metal whereas brass is a mixture of metals. Also I think that the successful five were not aware of the security guards close proximity and attention to his gold bar.

By this time, thanks to our long distance diviner, time was beginning to run short and so the contest was modified so that the kilo of gold was put under one of boxes 1 to 5, and the brass under one of boxes 6 to 10. I was curious to watch the live successful diviners in the previous round and noted that they again all picked out the same box as each other. Perhaps there was something in this divining after all. Sad to say, another fizzer, for the gold was not under the box of their choice.

And so it went on, and as time progressed the explanations began to come thick and fast. Were we not aware that seventy-three streams of water were racing along beneath the test site, that we were sited over a large sheet of aluminium, a rubbish dump and a Water Board pipeline; that the metal jewellery worn by the female (and some male) spectators was throwing the instrumentation out of line.

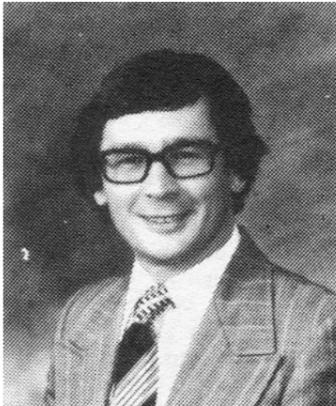
Fortunately, as twilight began to fall, we were able to start eliminating diviners who had no chance of reaching the magic 50 percent success rate. A country diviner who had flown his own plane down so that he could take part in the contest, had to leave before dark, otherwise he would have been grounded. He actually flew over on his way home and I'm sure I saw his wings dip down as he passed over the site - perhaps that was the secret, an airborne diviner.

In the end, possibly because of the way in which the contest was shortened, and with it the odds of success increased, one diviner finished up with a 50 percent success ratio. Statistically, the chances of success were 18 percent, and overall the success ratio in our contest was 17.6 percent. Enough said.

Our successful (?) diviner was flown to Sydney courtesy of TAA and was given the opportunity of winning the \$40,000 prize.

Unfortunately, on this more auspicious occasion, his forked twig let him down and he returned home empty handed.

Paul Whincup



cher to Brisbane to trace the material and interview Mrs Fraser, the owner of the property where the fragments were found.

The researcher came back with several pieces of the material acquired from Mrs. Fraser. These were then tested by Dr. Hickie,

BIORHYTHMS CAUSE AUSTRALIA-N.Z. TENSIONS

When Greg Chappell ordered his brother Trevor to bowl underarm rather than overarm in that Test the reaction was sensational.

New Zealand's Prime Minister Muldoon made a scathing attack on the Australians. Australia's Prime Minister Fraser called for a report. In New Zealand brawls erupted between Australian tourists and Kiwis.

Relations between the two countries sunk to a low level.

Papers editorialized, writers analysed, and letters to the Editor came in thick and fast.

Melbourne Herald sportswriter Terry Vine came out with his explanation of Greg Chappell's actions. According to Vine, Chappell's biorhythms - the three cycles within your body that are supposed to control your physical, emotional and intellectual facilities - were all in their negative phase.

Vine used his Kosmos 1 biorhythm computer to show that Chappell's physical cycle was in the 22nd day of its twenty-three day run, his emotional cycle in the twenty-third day of a twenty-eight day run and his intellectual cycle in the 20th day of its twenty-three day run.

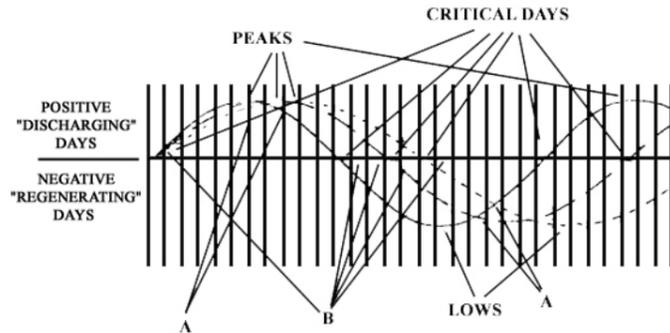
Dr. Brian Quigley, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Human Movement studies at the University of Queensland studied the alleged relationship between bio-rhythms and sport.

Quigley made a study of all world record breaking male athletes in track and field events

from 1913 to 1977. His findings were presented at the 26th Annual Meeting of the American College of Sports medicine and Pan-Pacific Conference.

Quigley found the evidence for biorhythms consisted of retrospective anecdotal accounts of selected events such as the

athletes' birth dates were available, as published in the 1978 Edition of the International Amateur Athletic Federation Progressive World Record Lists. Where more than one record was broken in a single event, the event was counted only once as a single outstanding performance.



Chappell action which supported the theory. He found it was equally easy to select events which contradicted the theory.

He found a good deal of name dropping, a lack of definition of terms, inadequate details of methods, data and statistical analysis, insufficient justification of conclusions, and the omission of fully-documented references to original research publications.

For his own study Quigley calculated the physical, emotional, intellectual and mean "bio-rhythms" from the date of birth of the athlete and date of event for 700 men's metric world records in track and field. These represented all the records from 1913 to 1977, for which the

Dr. Quigley found there was no evidence of any of the three cycles having anything to do with breaking of world records.

Conversely the theory of biorhythms would suggest that records are less likely to be broken on days when two or three cycles are in the critical phase. However again Dr. Quigley found nothing in the results to support this theory either.

As there is no evidence from the analysis of 700 world records which could support the existence of "biorhythms" affecting sporting performance, writer Terry Vine has now been nominated for the Australian Skeptics "golden bent spoon" award in the media category.

SKEPTICS TO TEST LEVITATION CLAIMS

By Mark Plummer

If you haven't learnt to levitate yet and have a spare \$5,000 or so you might be interested in enrolling in a Transcendental Meditation course.



Practitioners of advanced Transcendental Meditation courses in Australia have publicly claimed they can levitate. They include Dr John Price, a Lecturer in Mathematics at the University of New South Wales.

Following a complaint, the Victorian Ministry of Consumer Affairs carried out some preliminary investigations but were unable to validate the claim that members of the International Meditation Society could levitate. When members were asked to demonstrate self-levitation they declined.

Jim Ramsay, the Victorian Minister of Consumer Affairs stated that a proper investigation would have meant a diversion of a considerable portion of the Ministry's resources. He stated that in the absence of any formal complaints and with the knowledge of other priorities facing the Ministry of Consumer Affairs it was considered inappropriate to continue the investigation.

Since this decision was made, a top member of the International

Meditation Society, Dr Byron-Rigby, M.B.B.S., and a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists announced on the ABC Science show that they were open to any investigation. Dr Rigby is described in International Meditation Society literature as Chief Minister for Health and Immortality, World Government of the Age of Enlightenment.

As this offer was made unreservedly "The Australian Skeptics" have decided to take up his offer and we have written to Dr Rigby stating that we are prepared to investigate their claims of levitation under proper scientific controls in either Melbourne or Sydney.

We would be delighted to talk with anybody who has levitated or watched levitation.

The results will be published when we have completed our investigations.

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MASS HYSTERIA

By Dr. Allen Christophers

Students of the paranormal are familiar with claims of miraculous cures of disease where the improvement in condition is brought about by suggestion on the part of the healer.

The other side of the coin is the situation where diseases are generated by a process of suggestion. In "The Story of San Michele", Axel Munthe, himself a physician tells how he incapacitated a rival by talking him into a disabling illness.

The phenomena arises perhaps more often amongst a group of people, and is then usually called "mass hysteria". These outbreaks of mass hysteria most often affect young adolescents.

The symptoms complained of are those thought to be appropriate to the occasion. The patients often believe they suffer from poisoning or an infectious disease. Very often, the outbreak is started by a "trigger figure" from whom the others copy the symptoms. The symptoms of the trigger figure are usually, but not necessarily, imaginary.

One of these outbreaks occurred in Victoria in June last year. It involved about half of a group of eighty children from McKillop College, Werribee, who were holidaying in Gippsland.

The trigger figure in this case was an adolescent girl who had an attack of the hyperventilation syndrome, also known as panic

breathing. The overbreathing is due to emotional causes, sometimes but not always, in a panic situation.

The symptoms are real and will develop in anyone who over-breathes. The symptoms in this case were photophobia, blurred vision, feelings of hot and cold and abdominal pain.

Within a few hours, half of the children were sick. Many were plainly hysterical in the ordinary sense; but many had symptoms very similar to the trigger figure. The combinations of abdominal pain with feelings of hot and cold suggested an epidemic of infectious gastro-enteritis from food poisoning.

The outbreak had completely subsided as quickly as it arose, that is, within a few hours. At least some of the children following the trigger figure had genuine attacks of overbreathing and these, no doubt, added a touch of authenticity to the whole proceedings.

The next day there was no trouble; but a recurrence occurred next day when the children were returning to Werribee in two buses. The second attack occurred at Drouin where they had stopped for a short break. Again it involved about half the children, mostly those involved in the first attack.

There were at least a few genuine cases of panic overbreathing. Again the attack subsided within a few hours. One of the girls was detained at Warragul Hospital for a short time.

Although the children were apparently well on reaching home, many were obviously apprehensive and wondering when they would fall victim to this mysterious disease.

It is not surprising therefore that isolated attacks continued sporadically amongst the children over the next few days, and a number were admitted to hospital. Investigations by the Health Commission indicated that the outbreak could not have been due to any organic disease. As odd children were still succumbing, it became necessary for the Commission to reluctantly label the outbreak as hysteria.

This diagnosis was resisted by the school authorities generally and very fiercely resisted by parents, who would not believe that their children were hysterical.

By co-incidence, another attack of mass hysteria in children made headlines about a month later. This attack involved almost five hundred children who were attending a carnival in Nottingham, England.

The children in the jazz bands started to collapse, "They were just trembling all over and fainting".

The hospital said that the symptoms were "consistent with exposure to fumes of some sort, causing nausea, burning of the eyes and a metal taste in the mouth".

At first poisoning; by insecticide was suspected; but no trace of

insecticide could be found.

Eventually expert medical opinion diagnosis also was strongly resisted by the band organizers and by the parents.

It is typical of media reporting of such events that whilst the first account of the outbreak blaming insecticides was given headlines; the subsequent disclaimer was published in a short paragraph hidden towards the back of the paper.

Mass hysteria requires for its generation a number of predisposing factors to set the stage. It usually requires a large collection of teenaged girls in a situation fraught with considerable emotional tension or excitement.

The exciting cause is often a bad smell that suggests the presence of a poisonous gas and the attack is usually precipitated, by a trigger figure. This trigger figure may be someone more suggestible than the others, or may be someone who happens to be genuinely ill.

Those who follow copy their symptoms from the trigger figure. Most often the outbreak subsides as quickly as it started and this is usually associated with the removal of the patients from the situation they thought was responsible for their disease.

If the outbreak is small, it often does not attract the attention of the media.

If it is reported, it is usually ascribed to some poisonous agent. When further investigations reveals the hysterical nature of the illness,

the media have lost interest and the true diagnosis is rarely revealed to the public.

One could not be blamed for believing that there was a conspiracy of silence. The media are interested in reporting a poisoning; but are not so interested in reporting the final diagnosis that it was all in the mind.

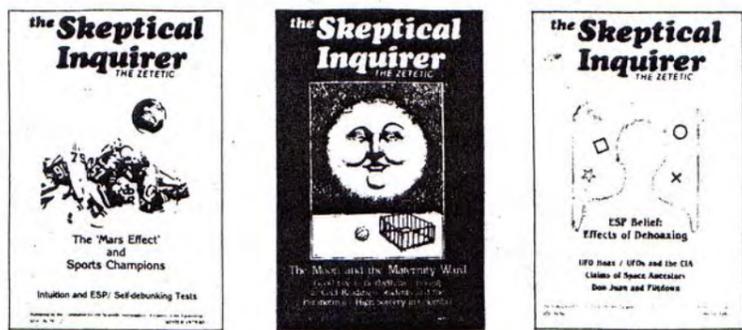
The patients and their parents are naturally unwilling to accept the fact that the illness was not genuine. Not to be forgotten are the medial practitioners who early diagnose some organic disease, and who would look a little foolish by a revelation of the truth.

Small outbreaks of mass hysteria are fairly common; but for the reasons given above most of them are not publicized.

The rather remarkable feature of the episode involving the McKillop College children was that it gave the appearance of a mysterious infectious disease rather than a poisoning. For this reason the outbreak was not cured by the return of the children to their homes. The children continued to wonder when they would be smitten by this mysterious disease.

This state of mind was responsible for the persistence of isolated cases amongst the children after they returned home. It was this persistence of the outbreak which forced the Victorian Health Commission to divulge the unpalatable truth about the genesis of the outbreak.

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(Seasons refer to Northern Hemisphere seasons)

The Aims of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal was organized on 1 May 1976 at an annual meeting of the American Humanist Association devoted to "The New Irrationalism: Antiscience and Pseudoscience." It had as its sponsoring members some twenty-five scientists, authors, and scholars.

The Committee came into being because of frustration with the widespread growth of belief in the "paranormal". This term is being used to describe not simply parapsychological phenomena, but all claims that go beyond the "normal" range of data.

There has been an uncritical acceptance by wide sections of the public of many claims of "paranormal" phenomena as true, even without testing; The Committee was therefore founded to act as a forum for the critical examination of such claims.

Some of the critics of the Committee have accused it of being engaged in an "inquisition" or "witch hunt," of being "biased" or locked in by established scientific views. We regret any such implication.

In our original statement of purposes, published in The Humanist magazine, we stated unequivocally: "We wish to make clear that the purpose of the Committee is not to reject on a priori grounds, antecedent to inquiry, any or all [paranormal] claims, but rather to examine them openly, completely, objectively, and carefully."

Although it is true that many members of the Committee are skeptical of many claims of "paranormal" phenomena, we wish to reiterate that we are committed

to the methods of science. Thus (1) we are willing to consider and investigate areas however strange or anomalous they may seem to the existing state of knowledge. We are receptive to the creative formulation of hypotheses, but we insist that (2) to introduce or entertain a hypothesis does not constitute confirmation of it and that (3) there must be sufficient evidence directly or indirectly to verify such hypotheses before they can be accepted. However, we surely do not wish to limit or narrow the range of scientific inquiry and reject possible new sciences or new fields of inquiry.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal is committed first of all to the quest for truth, and that we wish to stimulate significant inquiry and to follow it wherever it leads.

In this venture we are ready and willing to work with all those who are committed to scientific techniques and methods, including objective inquiry into new areas of research, and we invite those who are so committed to join in the work of the Committee, to send us information about their studies, to bring to our attention new data and theories. We welcome suggestions about plans and projects that the Committee should undertake.

-Paul Kurtz
Chairman

(Paul Kurtz is Professor of Philosophy at the State University of New York).

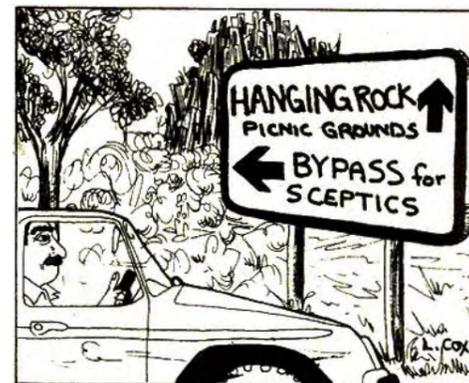
AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS

Last year Sydney electronics entrepreneur Dick Smith sponsored a visit to Australia by James Randi, magician and principal investigator for the American based "Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal".

James Randi, Dick Smith, Phillip Adams, Richard Carleton and a businessman put up \$50,000 as a prize for anyone who could prove psychic phenomena in front of Randi. Over a hundred people came forward to be tested for water divining, spoon bending, extra-sensory perception, psychic photography and psychic metal detection. All failed to prove their claims in front of independent observers.

This is not to say psychic phenomena does not exist and a group of Australians decided to set up an Australian section of the now International committee to continue the search and testing of the claims of the paranormal. It was decided to call the group "The Australian Skeptics" as a short and catchy title. Its interim committee met for the first time in January 1981 and consists of:

Mark Plummer, Chairman
(Solicitor)
James Gerrard, Secretary
(Aviation Consultant)
Dr Allen Christophers
(Medical Practitioner)
Dr Bill Cook
(Publicist)



Dr John Crellin
(Surgeon)
Logan Elliot
(Clinical Psychologist)
Dr Peter Kemeny
(Physist)
Loris Purcell
(Magician)
Joe Rubinstein
(Engineer)
Mike Wilton
(Magician)

This is the first issue of The Australian Skeptics newsletter which will normally be produced in a duplicated form. Subscription for the first year will be \$2. Back issues of the American "Skeptical Inquirer" advertised opposite can be purchased through the Australian Skeptics. The Australian Skeptics' address is Box 1555 P, G.P.O., Melbourne, 3001.

"THE AIMS OF THE AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS"

- To establish a network of people interested in critically examining claims of the paranormal.
- To prepare bibliographics of published materials that carefully examine such claims.
- To encourage and commission research by objective and impartial inquirers in areas where it is needed.
- To publish articles, monographs, and books that examine claims of the paranormal.
- To not reject such claims on a priori grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather to examine them objectively and carefully.

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