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Diagnosis faulty -
prognosis poor
Richard Gordon

This issue contains two disturbing reports of investigations into alternative therapy practitioners. In the first instance, Harry Edwards and I arranged for a healthy young woman to visit a number of practitioners in Sydney, to see what they would make of her request for a checkup; in the second, John Foley in Adelaide, who had fortuitously developed a classical dose of chicken pox, visited five alternative therapists there.

The results of the visits were particularly interesting in that the focus of our concern was on diagnosis, rather than treatment. It is shown here that the practitioners involved created fictitious disorders when consulting with a healthy person, and were totally unable to recognise a classical presentation of a common illness when confronted by it.

It is often suggested that we shouldn't concern ourselves with alternative practitioners because, at best, some people benefit from the placebo effect from contact with an empathetic person and, at worst, they are harmless. However, as these investigations clearly show, there is a great deal more to worry about than whether an alternative practitioner may (or may not) be any more empathetic than a clinically trained medical practitioner.

In response to the claim that various 'natural' remedies actually do have a therapeutic effect, these two articles show that, as it is unlikely that an alternative therapy practitioner will make an accurate diagnosis in the first place, any putative benefits to be obtained from their treatments are worthless.

Our two investigations indicate that, in relying on an alternative practitioner, people run the following risks:

Healthy people may be misled into believing they have a disorder (which cannot be shown, objectively, to be present), given 'natural' remedies, and presumably told they are cured at follow-up.

The alternative therapists consulted in Adelaide, despite making claims to be highly qualified, were not only quite incapable of recognising a common illness, but were also incapable of making a diagnosis, or of offering treatment appropriate to that illness.

In these cases, as one of our test subjects was in general good health, and the other had a painful, though not lethal, disease, it could be said that they suffered no harm from the consultations. This is, however, of no consolation, as there can be no guarantee that other patients, with far more serious (even life-threatening) ailments would fare any better after subjecting themselves to the diagnostic skills of alternative therapists. And not all serious diseases are nearly as obvious as chicken pox.

It seems obvious, therefore, that the increasing number of people relying on alternative therapies may pose some dire consequences for public health in Australia. It is a problem that is too important to be swept under the carpet.

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We were delighted to read that one of our favourite journalists, SMH science writer, Leigh Dayton, and her colleague Jenny Curtin, were winners of the “news in print” section of the Law Society of NSW Media Awards for Excellence in Legal Reporting. The awards recognised their outstanding coverage of the “Noah’s Ark” trial last year.

Leigh, one of Australia’s premier science journalists, and a tireless promoter of science in the public arena, has since left the SMH and has joined the ABCTV Quantum team. She also tells us that she will soon be taking out Australian citizenship. G’donya mate.

We are indebted to John Atkinson from the Isle of Man, who has been keeping us informed of some extraordinary goings on in the England Soccer World Cup team. It seems the England coach, Glenn Hoddle, invited a faith healer, Eileen Drewery, onto his support team to help prepare the squad for the ordeal ahead. Ms Drewery is alleged to have exercised a dead spirit that was having a negative effect on one of the players.

So far, so good. Then Mr U Geller, a noted soccer fan and former spoon bender, weighed in with an article in The News of the World, claiming that he, too, was part of the support team, and had taken part in a spiritual cleansing ritual with Mr Hoddle, Ms Drewery and a member of the squad. Hoddle took exception to his claim, labeling it “an extraordinary combination of inaccuracies, lies, exaggeration and misleading innuendo”, and took legal action against Mr Geller and the newspaper. Mr Geller said he would defend the action vigorously. There the story rests for the time being, with the likely result being Germany 3, UKQCs £500,000.

It is useful to record, however, that Mr Geller’s has made a previous excursion into science at Southern Cross University, in northern NSW. The “empowerment” process was unusual, to say the least. In the first test for each subject, one glass of water was placed next to a computer used to the Infinity web site, and was empowered by clicking onto a screed that read “radical diagnosis”; in the second test, the screed was entitled “elan vital”; in the third test, the empowered glass was placed on a piece of paper which had a “special for this occasion” spell written on it, entitled “Is there a God?” (Stop laughing, this is serious science.)

A very sophisticated and sensitive thermal imaging camera (Infra-metrics ThermaCAM IR focal plane array radiometer) was used, and was operated by Mr Mike Ratine from Infratherm Pty Ltd, throughout the tests. The camera was calibrated to measure temperature variations of 0.1 °C. Most of the subjects showed temperature fluctuations of +/-0.2 °C throughout the duration of a test, with occasional momentary peaks of 0.3 °C or 0.4 °C, an artifact of lifting the glass, or in one case, a big jump when a watch came into the frame. The fluctuations were random throughout the tests, and could not be attributed to the drinking of the water.

None of the fluctuations matched those on the videotape Dr Wilson showed of tests he had done, which recorded variations of +4 °C to -4 °C. Curiously, Dr Wilson, the only believer tested, showed the lowest number and magnitude of fluctuations. Richard Lead showed the highest; his skin temperature consistently increased throughout the tests (but only by about 0.7 °C in total, though not as a result of any particular ingestion of water. We put his down to Richard’s proneness to getting hot under the collar (or armpit, in this case). Ch 7 also submitted Dr Wilson’s statistical analysis of his successful “athlete test” results to a skilled statistician from UNSW Psychology Department, who pointed out very
that the first suspected that the had healing powers after the had “several times picked up birds looking like they were dead and, after a few seconds in my hands, they flew away”. We have spoken to several people with experience in the bush, and none could recall ever seeing a bird “looking like it was dead”, that wasn’t very obviously dead, i.e. squashed all over the road, or half-eaten by a cat. If any of these birds had been capable of resurrection, it would have been miraculous indeed.

It was an interesting experiment, conducted, as far as conditions would allow, in a scientific manner. As we expected, it did not bear out the hypothesis of empowered water, though Dr Wilson did not appear to be convinced by the negative results. It is open to speculation why someone in a responsible, nominally scientific, position in an accredited academic institution, could be so convinced of the validity of what was, on the surface, such a highly implausible claim. We choose not to speculate. We congratulate Today Tonight, Greg Quail, and the crew, for the responsible way they covered this story. As a result of our first appearance on TV in a semi-nude state, the Skeptical subjects have received a number of calls, dripping with salacious innuendo, from female Skeptics, and we loved it.

*     *     *

Our editor writes on the Perils of a Professional Skeptic.

If ever I achieve the distinction of being entered in Who’s Whom, I will have to list under Hobbies “Being mistaken for someone else”.

It all started some time in the early 1970s, when I first moved to Sydney, and long before I became a Professional Skeptic. Needing the services of a GP, I looked up a friend-of-a-friend, Dr Jim Blackburn. Jim was a rotund bearded chap, but nothing untoward occurred to me until I noticed that his other patients always looked at me strangely in the waiting room. Then one day, one of them asked me “Why are you sitting in the waiting room, Doctor?” Jim and I laughed about it but, on reflection, we did resemble each other enough to be brothers. However, a couple of years later, things got worse.

One night, as I emerged from a taxi outside a restaurant in Paddington, a prototypical Little Old Lady bailed me up and demanded, “Can I have your autograph?” Mystified, I complied, penning my name on the proffered piece of paper. “No”, she said, “write your real name”. More mystified still, I asked “Who am I?” “You’re Rod Marsh” she replied, naming the current Australian wicket keeper, then appearing in a Test match at the SCG. I assured her I wasn’t, and went into the restaurant. Half an hour later, the said Mr Marsh turned up, proving that the LOL intelligence network was in perfect running order.

Some years later it struck again, his time at the very first Skeptics Convention we held, in the Institution of Engineers theatre in Milson’s Point. A keen young visitor approached me in the foyer and asked for my autograph. Chuffed greatly by my apparent notoriety, I signed her programme with a flourish, to be immediately brought back to Earth by her response, “Oh, so you’re not Philip Adams then?” I reflected briefly on the ephemeralism of fame.

Another few years on and I found myself accosted in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, by a tourist with a distinctly German accent, who started speaking to me as though we were old friends. After listening for a few minutes, I asked him, “Who do you think I am?” “You’re Paddy McGuinness, aren’t you?” Sadly, I enlightened him in the negative. Mind you, I used this incident as an excuse to bail up Paddy in the street a few weeks later, and introduce myself.

Now the curse of the ubiquitous face has struck again. Recently I was sitting, musing over a cup of coffee, outside a cafe in Crows Nest, when a passer-by sauntered up and said, “Aren’t you that writer Thomas Keneally?” “No” I replied, “I’m much better looking.”

The curious thing about all this is that, apart from my old medico mate Jim Blackburn, I really don’t look much like the people for whom I have been mistaken. All of us, except Rod Marsh, have beards, and none of us could be described as anorexic, but hat is about where the similarity ends. What is it about beards that makes their wearers all look the same? And why have a case for the anti-discrimination commission? My real fear is that one of these days one of these other bewhiskered gents will commit some heinous crime and I will end up in Long Bay.

So far I have heard no reports of Messrs Marsh, Adams, McGuinness or Keneally being accosted by strangers demanding to know “You wouldn’t be Barry Williams by any chance, would you?” but that’s probably because they are too embarrassed to admit it.

Now I’d like one of our mathematical experts to work out the odds against anyone being wrongly identified so many times, and each time for someone quite well known. It must be paranormal, so I think I might demand the $100,000 Challenge.
The first I heard about a haunted house was on April 2 when Jack Ellis, the editor of a regional newspaper, spoke on the Darwin ABC Radio 8DDD, recounting a tale of demonic possession and metaphysical assault from "the other side". Briefly, the story is:

Over a period of time the residents of a fibro house in McMinns Drive, McMinns Lagoon (30 km from Darwin) have been victims of an ongoing series of bizarre, unexplained events. These manifest themselves in many ways; glasses flying through windows, showers of gravel inside the house, knives thrust into doors, objects falling, with no human intervention, gravel and scrabble pieces being formed into messages, and, of course, thumps and bangs when there was no one there.

Ha! I thought (as one does in these situations) and immediately phoned several of the Darwin Skeptics committee members to assess the gravity of the situation. So much for a low stress tropical lifestyle!

The media began their feeding frenzy. Firstly ABC TV News contacted me wanting the Darwin Skeptics’ point of view, which they recorded for the evening edition. Later, ABC Radio rang for an interview, which went to air at 4pm, just after a psychic had plumbed the depths of her past life experiences to recommend that a lost soul “use its imagination and go towards the light.” In this interview, I tried not to stir too much, merely stating we were “doubtful” of its authenticity and that I hadn’t heard anyone ask the appropriate questions, such as:

* When did it start? (April Fools’ Day joke gone too far; remember this was April 2.)
* Has it happened before? (A report mentioned one of the residents having a similar experience in Queensland.)
* Are the occupants believers? Do they have a penchant for the mystical? (A reporter had told me of a collection of astrological books, tarot cards and pentagrams in the house.)
* Have all the natural possibilities been addressed? The primary thrust in this interview was to impress listeners not to jump to unwarranted conclusions. One last question I had to ask was:
* Do the owners of the house know it’s being trashed?

Previously aired interviews we had learnt that there had been up to three exorcisms, with one Greek Orthodox priest allegedly fighting unseen demons trying to close his Bible and tearing out its pages as he performed his rites.

That night, after the ABC News, I received my first threat. A person called the Skeptics phone to say that if I didn’t shut up he would “hunt you down and get you”. He identified himself as Andrew; any questioning was obviously not invited. I tried to be reasonable but as his tone became harsher, I asked, “Didn’t you ask for money for the story?” “Well somebody’s got to pay for the damage”, he replied.

It seemed that, while every Tom, Dick and reporter was allowed to witness the ethereal transgressions a McMinns Drive, the occupants were adamant that no Skeptic would darken their door. We were obviously the only group perceived as a threat.

Before this mystical miasma foisted itself upon us, I was what could be called a ‘media virgin’. I was quite taken aback to the extent one’s concise utterances could be so creatively re-engineered to say something totally alien. Consequently some of my interviews took on a whole new life of their own.

The following day we kicked off with ABC radio talkback, with a very skeptical Fred McCue. The subject was “weird phenomena”. During the show the host was accused of “closed mindedness” due to his failure to accept the proposition, “this must be a ghost; so why not accept it”? His counter-argument was that the believers are the closed-minded ones for jumping to premature conclusions. This resulted in him being called a Neanderthal.

In the course of the day, heaven-quaking news erupted. Channel 7’s Today Tonight had bought the exclusive rights to the haunting, thus halting any further reporting by other media. I immediately phoned Barry Williams with the latest development and he proceeded to fill me in with the names, dates and contact details of the Channel 7 crew. I knelt humbled before the Oracle. As Barry foretold, Greg Quail, Channel 7’s reporter, rang me when they arrived. We agreed on several days’ grace to allow their investigation, then we would pow-wow about any information he had gleaned.

Darwin Skeptics did not meet Greg until April 7. Prior to that, several members of the Skeptics, Stefan Dippel, Steve Yearby, Ron Gray (independent Ghostbuster of Tiwi) Derek Hogben and I, met to discuss a course of action. After stimulating conversation and a few beers (or was it the other way around?) we decided to set a much more cautious tone. A person called the Skeptics phone to say that if I didn’t take anything away from the investigation, then we would ridicule the occupants of the house in any way, we thus hoped we would placate those who were preventing us from entering.

When we finally met Greg Quail and two of his camera crew, James and Gavin, they were adamantly something odd was going on. They had captured 30 individual incidents on film, two of whom very clearly. As they recounted some of these, their demeanour seemed honest and their conviction was passionate.

Here are some of the juicier bits for the connoisseur:

* Gavin was in the roof changing batteries in one of the infrared cameras, when he was startled by a loud bang, followed by several loud ricochets as a rifle cartridge, obviously thrown with great force, fell in front of the other IR camera. No one else was present.
* In the living room two cameras were set up, one at each end. The one looking out towards the kitchen caught a baby’s bottle falling from a microwave oven of its own accord; no wind or seismic activity was recorded (however at the critical moment, someone walked between the camera and the bottle and the beginning of the fall was not shown. It is likely this event was a normal occurrence, which had nothing to do with the “haunting”)

**Spook spooked by Skeptics**

Simon Potter
Skeptics had our first look in the house with the rest of dwindled proportionately to increased scrutiny. Darwin objects such as beds being moved, Scrabble tiles spelling been what could be called “mega-manifestations.” Larger Prior to any serious involvement by the media, there had orchestrated occurrences? to occurrence? Could it be a cocktail of everyday and persons re-entering rooms from a direction that later the house without being observed. Had anyone noted the roof, or loose iron on the roof etc. Regarding the human double walls, hidey-holes, recent evidence of people in entail looking for clean or dirty ceiling fans, hidden doors, requiring a complete medical from peak to bilge. This may start. One must have a totally controlled environment, present case, this sort of question does not bear asking. question, “Could someone have made something to eat and the toaster is not in the same spot I left it in, so it must can say, ‘Look at the evidence, crumbs all over the floor flies around the room at night, it does not make it fact. I illustration, I offered:” Just because I believe my toaster something does not necessarily make it true. As an was definitely going on, but stressed that a firm belief in appeared on 8DDD, telling all about what his team had witnessed, with similar passion and conviction he had displayed when recounting it to us. I was interviewed immediately after Greg and I concurred that something was definitely going on, but stressed that a firm belief in something does not necessarily make it true. As an illustration, I offered:” Just because I believe my toaster flies around the room at night, it does not make it fact. I can say, ‘Look at the evidence, crumbs all over the floor and the toaster is not in the same spot I left it in, so it must rue’”. Of course a Skeptic would ask the obvious question. “Could someone have made something to eat last night that you are not aware of?” Presumably, in the present case, this sort of question does not bear asking. Our committee had agreed on a plan of action from the start. One must have a totally controlled environment, requiring a complete medical from peak to bilge. This may entail looking for clean or dirty ceiling fans, hidden doors, double walls, hidey-holes, recent evidence of people in the roof, or loose iron on the roof etc. Regarding the human factor, no one would be able to move inside, or approach the house without being observed. Had anyone noted persons re-entering rooms from a direction that later recorded an event? Or the time it took from human access, to occurrence? Could it be a cocktail of everyday and orchestrated occurrences?

Addressing these criteria is the basis of any proper investigation, and chasing people and objects with a camera could not be construed as a controlled environment. Prior to any serious involvement by the media, there had been what could be called “mega-manifestations.” Larger objects such as beds being moved, Scrabble tiles spelling warnings, words written in the drive- way gravel etc. These dwindled proportionately to increased scrutiny. Darwin Skeptics had our first look in the house with the rest of the country on TV on April 13. We were suitably impressed with the apparent sincerity of the tenants and scope of events. After initial scrutiny we agreed some things did not gel, e.g.:

*With other reported hauntings, pets had been observed to cringe and whimper (or at least hide from a malevolent presence). Our victims’ dog appeared particularly blasé about the whole thing.
*If I had a disturbed disembodied soul, with a penchant for chucking steak knives and assorted hardware about willy-nilly, I would be a trifle more concerned about the safety of my 13-month-old baby.

Re-checking the Channel 7 footage, almost all events recorded were small objects. Items such as shards of glass, cartridges, AA batteries, small rocks, a spinner and the ubiquitous steak knives falling “from up there somewhere”. Have any of our “fan advantaged” readers ever stuck or hung objects to a fan, switched it on and played “duck”? With his in mind the events took on a new look. Reviewing all the tape from go to whoa, it became obvious that his could easily account for a least 60% of the captured incidents of flying hardware.

With a little experimentation we easily recreated delayed-reaction events in our own homes, allowing all members of the household to be present when it “went off”. Consequently we found it possible to “arm” all the fans in the house and set them off at will with the innocent action of turning them on or up.

By this stage The Darwin Skeptics realised we weren’t ever going to have access to the house. Channel 7’s final instalment, stating that their investigation was inconclusive although many unexplainable things had occurred, was cancelled. Fresh evidence had emerged that, on April 21, one of the residents, Kirsty, had been caught on tape throwing a bottle cap. Other members of the house had acted beautifully, exuding perfect innocence, even when confronted with the proof.

Earlier that fateful day a handyman, working at the house, went on record with a spine-chilling tale of an unexplained shower of glass and rocks aimed in his direction. However it was the actions of that very man that spelt the undoing of “The Creature from McMinns Lagoon”. Someone overlooked the fact that he hitherto broken and taped non-reflecting glass in the sideboard had been replaced with normal glass. It was in his glass that the reflection of a person throwing an object was caught by the camera. Protestations of innocence succumbed to earful admission when Kirsty was relentlessly grilled by Greg via phone. She claimed that she feared Channel 7 didn’t have sufficient incidents on tape, and was just trying to boost hem a bit. In other media, she has denied making this admission, but it was too late. It had gone on too long; heur luck simply ran out and the story died.

Perhaps it is easy to pass this off as a bit of harmless fun, even, perhaps, a way to make some easy cash. However there is often a dark side. As mentioned earlier, two men had been killed in an horrific car accident with which the “poltergeist” seemed to be linked. On hearing of his “haunting”, a relative hastened from interstate to communicate personally with the “lost soul”. Due to my respect for privacy and decency I shall not elaborate, however the result is obvious, there may have been more victims here, than just commonsense and rationality.
News comment

Cherchez la fan

Barry Williams

By now the notorious “Humpty Doo Poltergeist” (see preceding story) may well have entered the folklore of Australia as an unsolved case of a supernatural event. A story in the Weekend Australian Magazine, subsequent to the main stories on TV, tells of a journalist’s investigation of the goings-on, and leaves us with his puzzled view that here must have been something mysterious involved. This episode may, even now, be being described as the one that baffled the Skeptics”. The reality is, we suspect, somewhat different.

We first heard of his spook through the news media, and through calls from Darwin Skeptics, Simon Potter and Brian de Kretzer. Channel 7 then invited us to visit the site, but were prevented by the residents’ insistence that Skeptics would not be welcome in heir home. It is difficult to understand why they should have taken this stance, as Australian Skeptics was always likely to be the only disinterested group capable of dispassionately investigating what was going on, without any preconceived ideas.

Had we been allowed to visit, we would have conducted it somewhat differently from what was done. Had we been allowed to visit, we would first have sought to rule out natural phenomena as the cause of the occurrences. It is interesting that he only incident the TV cameras recorded in (almost) its entirety, was a baby’s bottle falling from the top of a microwave oven. This was most probably a natural event, as any parent of a young child could attest. Modern babies bottles are made of lightweight plastic and, when empty and with teat attached, are noticeably top-heavy. Any such bottle standing up is likely to fall over at the slightest breath of wind or vibration of he floor. This appears to be what happened in this case.

Our next task would have been to restrict any chance of human intervention. It is curious that he events that happened with independent witnesses around tended to be manifested by small items (gravel, AA batteries, bullets, steak knives, shards of glass) being seen bouncing from the floor or furniture, or being found on the floor after a noise had been heard. Witnesses claimed to have been present when these events occurred, but none of hem reported actually seeing the beginning of he flight of any of he objects. They attested that he people present at the time could not have thrown the objects. Probably true, but we have another culprit in mind.

After discussions among Skeptics in Darwin, Melbourne and Sydney, Simon Potter conducted an experiment in his own home. He attached small items to he top of his ceiling fan blades, using a piece of adhesive tape. To our complete lack of surprise, these items stayed in situ for a while, before flying off in unpredictable directions and with considerable force. This easily matched the presumed trajectories of he objects in he “haunted house”, and could have accounted for most of the occurrences.

But here is another reason to suspect he fans. Darwin is a city with a certain reputation for the amount of beer consumed there. Even more ubiquitous than ceiling fans in hat fair city, are beer cans, and they were very much in evidence in the TV pictures shown of the house. Empty beer cans are very light, yet we heard nothing of them unaccountably flying around the house. Why should this be so? A teetotal spook is one explanation, yet we prefer another.

Batteries, bullets, steak knives and the other recorded projectiles, are all “low-profile” items, none of hem being much more that 1 cm in thickness. Had they been attached to he top of a fan blade, hey would have been invisible from floor level, while a beer can attached here would have been obvious to anyone in the room.

Had we been allowed to investigate, we would have immediately inspected the top of every fan in the house. We are confident that we would have found either marks in he dust, indicating that something had been attached there, or pristine clean surfaces (and who cleans the tops of ceiling fan blades?). In either case we would have regarded this as evidence that we had found the launching platform for the mobile hardware.

Of course, some of he items flew around outside the house, where there are no fans. But outside the house, on a block with plenty of rees, it is not oo difficult to imagine someone surreptitiously tossing a handful of gravel into the air and letting gravity take its course.

Much was made in media reports of the number of outsiders who were “baffled” by what was going on, but we cannot ignore the heightened air of expectancy and media hype that surrounded this series of events. The witnesses interviewed were journalists, a couple of security guards, and a priest. None of hem could imagine that someone in he house could have thrown the things, nor did any of hem think to check the fans. We suspect hey were victims of he hype, and that heir critical faculties were downgraded thereby. In an case, journalists on the trail of a juicy “human interest” story are not necessarily he best witnesses, and, as priests are in he supernatural business, hey are predisposed towards such explanations.

Of course, as we were not allowed to investigate, we cannot say for certain hat hat is how things happened -it may even be true that the house in McMinns Drive, Humpty Doo is haunted by a poltergeist. However, the methods we have suggested, work, and if we ever decided to set up a hoax haunting to fool our friends and to trick the media, that’s how we would go about it.

Far from baffling the Skeptics, his case is one in which we were frustrated by our inability o gain access to he site o conduct a proper investigation. We can only speculate why the residents were so implacably opposed to our presence, but it cannot be ruled out hat they were afraid hat we might discover he truth. For some reason, many people seem to hink that Skeptics are people with an innate ability not o be fooled, and treat us as hostile witnesses as a consequence. That is not true -we are no more immune to being taken in than anyone else -but we do understand that he first rule for investigating such events is o rule out all mundane causes before even considering the paranormal. That is what we would have done in his case, and that is what none of the other investigators attempted.

Occam’s Razor was called for here, but we strongly suspect hat entirely different blades were responsible for this Top End spook
If you were given a health check up by four different qualified medical practitioners, it would be reasonable to expect that here would be a consensus of opinion, both in respect of your healthiness, or any conditions perceived by the examiners during their consultations. If the second, third and fourth opinions confirmed he first, then a misdiagnosis would be very unlikely. Can the same confidence be placed in alternative health care practitioners?

My current undertaking is a handy reference book on alternative health care claims for use by Australian Skeptics. As the final chapter took shape, I was approached by Karen Stollznow, a 21 year-old tertiary journalism student, seeking work experience. It seemed that this afforded an ideal opportunity to put to the test some of the alternative methods I had written about. Karen agreed enthusiastically, and we embarked on Project Alternative Consultations. She was reimbursed for her travel expenses and the fees charged by the practitioners, but she was not paid for her time.

Karen proved to be an excellent choice. Although she had heard about alternative medicine, she had no preconceived ideas, and proved to be very perceptive. In addition, she was accompanied to each consultation by her father, who has a background in the pharmacological and medical industries. His observations also proved to be invaluable, and he confirmed Karen's descriptions in every respect.

Prior to Karen's visits to the alternative practitioners, Dr Richard Gordon, a general practitioner, and the president of Australian Skeptics Inc, gave her a thorough checkup, to ensure that we were starting out with a healthy specimen. He gave her a clean bill of health. Karen also consulted an ophthalmologist, Dr Paul Tandy inspected her eyes with the aid of illuminated goggles, through magnified lenses, then inserted drops into her eyes to dilate the pupils to their full capacity, to enable a thorough inspection of the internal functions of the eyes. He then checked Karen's eyes for signs of disease states; cataracts, retinal damage due to disease or trauma, astigmatism and glaucoma. With the aid of a tonometer machine he measured the intra-ocular pressure of both eyes.

Having established that Karen's eyes were diseasefree, Dr Tandy then proceeded to test for myopia/longsightedness and her possible need for glasses. Using a range of testing facilities and charts, he determined that she was slightly long-sighted.

Satisfied that Karen was in good health, with no perceptible disabilities or ailments, we decided to present our patient to various alternative practitioners for a general consultation. Her story was that she was about to embark on a journey overseas, and wished to ensure that she was fit to undertake such a trip.

The practitioners were selected from the Sydney Yellow Pages and included an iridologist, a naturopath/homoeopath, an aura reader/spiritual healer and confirmation from another homoeopath.

The following sections describe the consultations with the four alternative practitioners.

The Consultations

Ted Hall, Iridologist
Mr Hall has a prominent listing in the Sydney Yellow Pages, and his advertisement also includes a Perth telephone number.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines iridology as the “diagnosis of the iris to detect pathological changes in the body”, whereas Mr Hall, rather simplistically and non-specifically, described it in a conversation with Karen as “a study of the eyes”. Iridologists claim that the iris represents the state of one’s health, its colours, tissues, fibre structures and patterns corresponding to specific organs in the body. They believe that analysis of the appearance of the iris can indicate apparent conditions so that appropriate treatment can be taken to ‘prevent’ major ailments in later life.

Karen reported as follows:

In Mr Hall's waiting room I did just that for over half an hour, before he emerged and bade me sit down before a table upon which lay camera equipment. He then proceeded to photograph both my right and left eyes, then led me to his small and unassuming office, meanwhile delivering a rapidly made diagnosis.

It would appear that a dark and very obvious spot located in the outer section of my right iris was indicative of a disorder and/or possible future difficulties with my liver, lymph glands and gall bladder.

Apparantly I was (or could be in the future) suffering from poor liver function and lymphatic congestion - a malfunction in the drainage of the lymphatic fluids. He requested that I feel the rear of my tongue with the tip of my finger where I would find ‘liver lumps’ that signified liver disease.

The offending spot in my right eye was not only an indication of the aforementioned disorders, but also held psychological implications that spoke of resentment towards a family member.

Mr Hall referred to the spot as a ‘Resentment Jewel’, and its existence in my right eye (Yang) conveyed hostility towards a male member of my family. Markings in the left eye (Ying) would indicate hostility towards a female relative.

He then reached for an iridology manual and showed me appropriate information attesting to his diagnosis. On my inquiring as to whether or not the spot would disappear after successful treatment and eradication of the problems, Mr Hall replied that the spot would remain, regardless. I wondered whether this would pose a problem if I were to consult another Iridologist in the future, after having rectified the condition - there would be no evidence of improvement and I would therefore be misdiagnosed.

My left eye featured a similar spot that allegedly revealed spinal problems, possible scoliosis (curvature of the spine). Mr Hall did not even attempt to personally check my back but suggested a friend do this for me. (Dr Richard Gordon had previously correctly assumed that this may be a focal point for iridologists, and had assured me...
of the correct alignment of my spine).

Mr Hall opined that the spots in my eyes were psychological and in conjunction with the disorders, and that my very thinking was causing the ailments. A person should “act on how they feel not what they think” and I should stimulate the right side of my brain by taking up creative pursuits, and by sleeping on the left side of my body.

Calcium rich foods should be avoided. When I objected to this advice, Mr Hall replied that my constitution did not require calcium, and that the entire concept of including calcium in the diet to avoid osteoporosis was unwarranted, in fact it was a fallacy. I could stimulate my lymph performance by indulging in curries and other spicy foods, and by wearing bright clothes. Sessions of lymphatic drainage would help, as would vertical jumping on a trampoline, and running a hair-brush over my limbs, to increase sluggish lymph performance, free up the glands, and promote circulation. He said my water intake should be increased - though not hot water because I am a ‘hot person’, suited to hot climates.

Telling someone to drink more water seemed sound enough, but I cannot agree that I am a ‘hot person’ suited to hot climates, warm coloured clothes and hot foods. (I have considered migrating to England more than once, because a hot climate is anathema to me.) Mr Hall finally suggested a liver tonic, made by himself, that would cure me “immediately” but was unpleasant and bitter tasting. It is interesting to note that Mr Hall never once questioned my medical history, nor asked if I had any specific complaints. His diagnosis was the most serious that I’ve ever received, yet it was delivered within five minutes of my appointment on the pretext of spots on my iris. The photographs that were taken were not developed, but would be by my ‘next appointment’. Surely he could not give me an accurate consultation without examining the photographs, but he charged me for them as part of the cost of my initial consultation.

Throughout the consultation Mr Hall’s hand hovered over a writing pad as he held a pen, poised to write, which he only once employed to draw an amusingly large sketch of a tongue with a lump signifying liver problems. At the conclusion of my consultation he stapled this sketch to my empty file.

Peter Berryman - Homoeopath

Homoeopathy is a branch of holistic medicine where the only diagnostic tool is the interview between patient and practitioner. Apparently the function of the homoeopath is not to diagnose a disease but to ask, nor to observe any signs that may indicate present or impending illnesses. Homoeopaths believe that a patient’s mental, physical and spiritual state must be addressed, before their overall health can be determined and suitable remedies, often inconsistent with traditional medicine, can be created specifically for the individual. Homoeopathic medicine is based on the principle that symptoms of illness are not the result of disease but caused by the body’s attempts to fight the illness. Karen reports:

The address of this practitioner appears to be a private home, but there is no indication that it also serves as his Homoeopathic clinic. The brass nameplate announcing his name and qualifications reposes on a flower bed by the front door. Mr Berryman led me upstairs to his office and ushered me to a chair.

I relayed the tale that had been devised for me by Harry Edwards - I would be travelling to Europe, via Asia, at an unspecified time in 1998, and was seeking (if deserved) a general clean bill of health to ease my mind. (I offered this lead to every alternative therapist I visited, but Mr Berryman was the only one to take advantage of it.) This became the focus for the entire consultation.

I should immediately embark upon a quest for “optimum health”, for this state would naturally immunise me from infection and disease. He discussed the preventative options open to myself, and then offered me both motherly advice and pure common sense.

I assured him of my intentions of being vaccinated against the diseases prevalent in the countries I would be visiting, which effectively struck a nerve. Mr Berryman does not advocate the use of vaccinations as they supposedly ‘do more harm than good’. Doctors ‘market vaccinations like sales people’ and are ‘proud of their high sales’. If I achieve ‘optimum health’ and am unlucky enough to contract malaria or suffer from a bout of cholera I will get over it quicker if in possession of that state. Vaccinations merely ‘assault the immune system’ and disturb the delicate constitution of a person.

Did Mr Berryman believe in the immunisation of children against childhood diseases? No. Why? Only recently he cured a hospitalised child of whooping cough by administering a dose of ipecacuanha which brought about recovery within three days. (An extract from the ipecac plant. It contains two alkaloids emetine and cephaeline that have an irritant action on the gastrointestinal tract and is therefore a powerful emetic. Used principally to clear the stomach of poisons also used in small doses as an expectorant in nonproprietary mixtures and proprietary tinctures and syrups).

Mr Berryman’s other advice included a programme of ‘overseas prophylactic health care’ - the taking of preventative homoeopathic preparations. My final option was to take out overseas insurance, which belies Mr Berryman’s confidence in one’s ability to attain ‘optimum health’ and utilise this state to avoid or greatly lessen the effects of disease.

It may be worth pointing out that a person following Mr Berryman’s advice might refrain from taking anti-malarials. Some types of malaria can kill within 24 hours.

Judith Collins - Aura reader/spiritual healer

Judith Collins’ practice is located at the Earthkeepers Natural Healing Centre at Thirlemere, NSW. Her glossy flyer informs us that:

People from all over Australia flock to consult with Judith Collins about their illness. Whether an affliction is physical, emotional or mental, she works with a divine source of spiritual healing to encourage relief or cure. She is a spiritual healer extraordinary. Healing a brain tumour in just one session and thyroid cancer in three sessions. She has been called a miracle worker, filmed by ABC Television, received the prestigious Advance Australia award for service to the community, and named during the bicentennial celebrations as one of Australia’s unsung heroines, and her life’s work is documented.

Another brochure extols Ms Collins’ virtues as an aura reader - “Judith is recognised as Australia’s foremost authority on the human Aura…” This claim, endorsed by a testimonial from Mr Norm Way of Queensland which says:
By simply looking at my aura Judith was able to diagnose every illness in my body, from a thirty year old knee injury, to more recent chest and asthma problems related to toxic poisons, which are still in my body from being gassed with methyl bromide.

Extraordinary abilities, to say the least, and modest too. As a bonus for the thyroid patient, during the treatment, an abscess on the patient’s tooth also miraculously disappeared! It pays well too. During Karen’s consultation Ms Collins volunteered the information that she treats 4000 patients a year @ $55 each. She also sells books ($22.45 ea), plus aura drawings and analyses ($120 ea).

Karen’s consultation was particularly enlightening as this practitioner seems to epitomise the ease with which individuals untrained in science-based medicine can fool the gullible, and even receive public recognition for doing so. Judith Collins motto is “Where there is hope there is joy” but surely hope is inherent or can be learnt, rather than bought for $55 an hour.

Judith Collins diagnoses her patients’ ailments by calling upon her abilities of Aura Analysis, subsequently ‘curing’ them by using Spiritual Healing techniques from the comfort of the Earthkeepers Healing Sanctuary in Thirlmere, NSW. Local residents and taxi drivers refer to her as the “Earth Doctor”. According to Ms Collins' literature, the Human Aura is a living field of energy which surrounds the mind, body and spirit. This art-form is apparently “recognised by scientists and physicians alike”. Spiritual healing is a connection between the healer and “the power of the Divine Source (God/Holy Spirit) that allows Divine healing energy to flow through the healer to the patient and bring about recovery from illness”. Karen reported:

While awaiting my consultation I was amazed at how much the field of pseudoscience had progressed as I noticed a poster offering:

**SKIN CANCER SELF-CURE**
**EFFECTIVE AND PAINLESS**
(ask at desk)

Ms Collins led me to her office where she purports to have cured patients suffering everything from ear aches to cancer. Ms Collins failed the first test-in my understanding, aura readers are supposedly capable of detecting positive and/or negative energy, but she was oblivious to my inner scepticism. As I related my reasons for the consultation - a European trip via Asia, the woman bellowed a hearty laugh. Why? Out of the 4000 people she has treated in the past year, more than half required her services because they had returned from Asia and needed ‘Spiritual Realignment!’ I quipped that my intentions were to nip possible diseases in the bud, which had brought me to her, and this was received with a wise nod.

Ms Collins asked me to stand and she then placed both of her hands around my neck, slowly moving them down over my chest and stomach, stopping at my thighs. Her hands were scorchingly hot! proof of the effectiveness of the treatment and of her powers some might say, but then it was a very hot day and so too were my hands. The whole process had taken less than a minute and now provided Ms Collins with her diagnosis. My liver (that naughty organ again!) had a build up of toxins, my thymus was not fully functional and there was congestion in the lymph glands. As she spoke Ms Collins doodled on a photocopied chart in front of her that featured sketches of both the male and female body. She proceeded to colour in the affected sections of the relevant form on this body chart, which slowly began to resemble a leopard.

Ms Collins gave me a referral to visit a Mr Alan C. Jones, homoeopath, who could supply me with numerous concoctions to ease my ailments and provide me with immunity to any diseases I may be subjected to in Asia. I was then swiftly ushered out of the office. “It was nice to meet you’s” were proffered all around and then it was all over - to be generous - within fifteen minutes.

The banality of my consultation with Ms Collins was reflected in her promotional brochures. Had I read these leaflets before my consultation I would have been sorely disappointed with its outcome, for she never revealed to me the extent of her considerable talents. Ms Collins can draw likenesses of a patient’s spirit guides, and can even teach the layman to see and read auras. Ms Collins healed Mrs Shawna McCoy’s thyroid cancer, but could not cure my toxin congested liver. She detected Mr Norm Way’s thirty-year-old knee injury, but did not detect my ten-year-old arm injury. Ms Collins healed one patient’s brain tumour in ‘just one session’, but did not relieve me of a dull headache that I arrived and left with. In a strange contradiction, Ms Collins purports to be able to heal the chronically ill, but also offers courses in preparation for the dying. Surely if ‘Spiritual Healing has no limits’ and can ‘treat all ailments’ there is no need for death.

With regard to Ms Collins’ alleged cures of ‘a brain tumour in just one session, and thyroid cancer in three’ it should be noted that to treat these conditions in New South Wales, persons are required to be registered medical practitioners under the **Medical Practice Act 1992 No 94.**

**Part 4. (1) of the Act states that:**

> ... a person is entitled to be registered as a medical practitioner if the person has recognised medical qualifications and has successfully completed a period of internship or supervised training as required by the Board.

**Part 4. (2) of the Act states:**

> ... a person has ‘recognised medical qualifications’ if the person is a graduate of a medical school ... accredited by the Australian Medical Council or has successfully completed examinations held by that Council for the purposes of registration as a medical practitioner.

Furthermore, Part 7, Division 2, 105 (3) states:

A person who is not a registered medical practitioner must not advertise or hold himself or herself out to be entitled, qualified, able or willing to practise medicine or surgery in any of its branches, or to give or perform any medical or surgical advice, service, attendance or operation.

To our knowledge, Ms Collins does not claim to have had any medical training and is not a registered medical practitioner. The treatment of a brain tumour and thyroid cancer by her, therefore, would have constituted a breach of the Medical Practice Act at the time.

**Shirley Mason - Homoeopath**
Shirley Mason was selected so that a comparison could be made between her approach and that of another homeopath, Mr Berryman. Karen reported:

I could quite easily summarise my consultation with Ms Mason as being uninformative and tediously similar in content to my first homeopathic encounter with Peter Berryman. Each practitioner utilised the patient/therapist interview as the sole diagnostic tool, although two factors differentiate Ms Mason from her occupational colleague.

Firstly, Ms Mason attempted a pat diagnosis, despite the lack of complaints from myself, and with merely superficial guesswork to substantiate her claims.

Secondly, Ms Mason recommended a herbal concoction to remedy my ills, without ever actually establishing a condition.

This consultation proved to be the lengthiest and least expensive - with good reason - I was not treated to a display of unearthly ‘abilities’, nor impressed with marvellous diagnostic equipment and devised terminology. Ms Mason exhaustively queried my medical history, that of my parents and even friends, whose physical and emotional states may influence my own.

My entire psychological and physical past was exhumed, and I was told to envision several scenarios put to me, and asked to describe how I might react under certain circumstances. I never voiced any minor health problems I may suffer from, and believe that I presented myself as being emotionally balanced.

Ms Mason concluded the consultation by declaring the possibility of my suffering from anaemia. I can only assume that this theory was based upon her astute observation of my naturally pale complexion, and was not derived by logical deduction, as I gave no cause for her to suspect that I was ill at all.

Iron tablets were recommended and the standards preached - a healthy diet, combined with exercise and, of course, monthly homeopathic visits until my ‘Asian/European’ sojourn. There were no passionate denunciations of vaccinations - in fact she assumed that I would undergo the gamut of advised preventative injections.

I was then sent off with the promise of an individually prepared homeopathic tonic to generally boost my constitution and ‘iron out the problem areas’, which were never pinpointed nor addressed.

The Follow-up

Being a sensitive and considerate New Age Skeptic, I considered that, as a matter of courtesy, the alternative practitioners should be given the right of reply. Accordingly, each was sent a copy of the following letter, with the part of the article appropriate to that practitioner.

A representative of the above association recently attended your rooms for a consultation.

In our opinion, confirmed by examinations by a general practitioner, an ophthalmologist and a pathologist, incorrect diagnoses and questionable recommendations were made during that consultation.

We propose publishing our representative’s report in the next issue of our journal, the Skeptic, but first offer you the opportunity to comment.

A copy of the report is attached.

The first response came from Mr Gary Nead on behalf of Judith Collins. He advised that Ms Collins was going to be in Victoria and New Zealand for a few weeks, and would like to know what was the deadline for her reply. I gave her six weeks.

A reminder was sent to Ms Collins a week prior to the expiration of that time but nothing further has been heard. Perhaps she was too busy in Adelaide in April, where she was in a radio broadcasting studio, reading callers’ auras over the telephone.

The letter to Mr Berryman, the homeopath, was returned unopened. A note on the envelope read, “No longer at this address”.

Iridologist, Mr Ted Hall, (in a letter replete with the personal pronoun), replied that he found the article “amusing and inaccurate” and indeed, in parts “misleading and defamatory”. He did not intend to respond in detail, and even had he wished to, was unable to do so as I had not named the person with whom he allegedly consulted.

I wonder if Mr Hall’s patients would find it amusing to know that they are being misdiagnosed and recommended unnecessary remedies.

Not to be put off quite so easily, I sent Mr Hall the name of the client with an invitation to reconsider. There has been no further communication.

There was no reply from homeopath Shirley Mason.

Review

Ted Hall, iridologist
*consultation -15 minutes, fee $45;
*relied on visual inspection and interview;
*not interested in patient’s past history;
*diagnosed four problem areas - liver/lymph/gall/ spine;
*recommended avoiding calcium;
*recommended hot foods and bright clothes;
*recommended trampolining and flagellation with a hairbrush.

Peter Berryman -homeopath
*consultation -15 minutes, fee $45;
*no examination;
*no questioning of past history;
*no diagnosis;
*rigorously opposed vaccination;
*recommended optimum health for natural immunity;
*recommended “preventative homeopathic preparations” to achieve this;
*recommended travel insurance.

Judith Collins -aura reader/spiritual healer
*consultation, less than 15 minutes, fee $55;
*broad running of hands down front of body, neck to thighs;
*diagnosed liver/thymus/lymph problems;
*no aura reading nor spiritual healing offered;
*recommended a visit to a homeopath.

Shirley Mason -Homeopath
*consultation 1hr 15 mins. Fee $45 (student), normally $55.
*relied on visual inspection and interview;
*very interested in patient’s past medical and psychological history;
*diagnosed lymph/gall bladder problems, “possible” anaemia;
*recommended herbal concoctions and iron tablets;
*recommended healthy diet and exercise;
*recommended monthly homeopathic visits.
Medical Follow-up

There was no consensus among the differing diagnoses of the alternative practitioners, apart from some vague references to the liver and lymphatic system. Karen was, according to an aggregate of opinions, suffering from a dysfunctional liver, anaemia, lymphatic congestion and scoliosis, had a zinc deficiency and an excess of calcium, plus a psychological problem. To check these diagnoses Dr Richard Gordon referred Karen for a Liver Function Test and a range of others - Full Blood Examination, Electrolytes Urea and Creatinine, Calcium, Albumin, Phosphate and Zinc. The pathology report gave Karen a clean bill of health, not just in respect of the liver, but in everything else. Biochemistry results indicated units all within the acceptable range, and the liver function test showed no abnormalities whatsoever. This despite two of the alternative practitioners singling out liver problems as matters of concern.

On the basis of this science-based report, some of the alternative practitioners gave incorrect or conflicting diagnoses, and recommended unnecessary medications. Some of their claims and methods were dubious, and their advice to those who patronise them is questionable. Because they are diagnosing medical problems, and recommending treatment, they may very well be practising medicine in contravention of the Medical Practise Act 1992.

Conclusion

This test may help to dispel the claim that practitioners of alternative medicine are more caring and spend more time with their patients. It is hard to understand why, in some of these cases, the authorities allow such practises to continue without any controls, regulations or safeguards.

As has already been pointed out, a pathology report indicated no abnormality in Karen’s liver using normal scientific testing.

Rather than a calcium excess (diagnosed by Mr Hall), Karen’s calcium and corrected calcium readings were both 2.16 (at the low end of the range of 2.10 - 2.65.)

The object of the exercise was to compare alternative diagnostic techniques with those of a general practitioner. The conclusions in Karen’s report were based on her observations, and the conversations with each of the alternative practitioners. Her reports have been attested to as true and accurate by her father who accompanied her on each occasion.

For those who may be concerned about Karen’s state of health, considering she is supposed to be suffering from congestion in the lymph glands, toxins in her liver, a dysfunctional thymus, gall bladder problems, anaemia, liver dysfunction, possible scoliosis, ‘a psychological resentment’, calcium excess and iron and zinc deficiency she is coping remarkably well.

Notes

The Skeptic proclaims on its front cover that it is “a journal of fact and opinion”. Karen’s reports, rightly or wrongly, express opinions based on her impressions. If the subjects of the report had taken umbrage or were dissatisfied with what has been said, then they were entitled to redress. We extended the courtesy of a reply or were prepared to publish their replies. Few responses were received, and these were not particularly relevant to our complaints.

We would like to thank barrister, Martin Hadley, and Dr Richard Gordon, for their invaluable legal and medical advice and reassurance.
A pox on your house

John Foley

Recently a small red lump came up on the quick of my left index finger. About a week later, my septum (the bit that separates the nostrils) had a small scab on it. Like people throughout history, when I was alone, I enjoyed picking it. Over some days, the scab got bigger and when I picked it, it bled profusely.

Some mornings later, a few itchy, red pimples came up on the back of my left wrist. Each day thereafter, more pimples came up on my hands, palms, legs, scalp and buttocks. I even had one in the crow’s foot beside the right eye, one under the left eye and several on my gums and bottom lip. Somewhat concerned, I rang my local GP and got an appointment for the next day at 3:30. As I needed to buy a shirt and trousers, I went to a department store and tried several on before selecting one of each. The rash was very itchy so instead of waiting for a day, I went to a GP at a 24-hour clinic. He couldn’t determine what was wrong, so he called his older colleague from the next room. He took one look and diagnosed chicken pox. I protested that I was nearly 50, and I had had chicken pox when I was a baby. I carry a pock mark on the forehead to prove it. He calmly stated, “Ah, yes. But the immunity can wear off. It’s not common, but that’s what has happened”.

There is no treatment. He advised calamine lotion and antihistamines for the itch, pat dry after showering and go into quarantine for a week. He told me that I was contagious through both primary contact, which is me touching someone else, and secondary contact, which is someone else picking up viruses from things that I have touched such as door knobs and furniture.

“Clothing?” I asked. “Definitely”, came the answer, and I winced at the thought of the infected shirts and trousers on the department store rack.

For the purpose of this article, the next day I saw the local GP and asked for both a blood test and swab test for chicken pox. He agreed with the diagnosis of the other two GPs, but sent the tests off to the laboratory of the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science for definitive proof.

Already researching how the health insurers come to pay out benefits on pseudo-medical practitioners, I made some phone calls and found that belonging to one of the Big Three associations, ANTA, (Australian Natural Therapists Association), CMA (Complementary Medicine Association) and ATMS (Australian Traditional Medicine Society) would automatically get a practitioner the all-important provider number. Various funds will issue a provider number to individuals, not being members of the Big Three, but they have to be satisfied by a more complex process. I looked in the Yellow Pages and found locality guides for the three organisations and rang to make appointments. I rejected some because I couldn’t get an appointment for a week or more. Another rejected me because she was recovering from reconstructive shoulder surgery. As she was telling me, I was wondering what happened to the preventative effect of natural medicine.

The Consultations

Melita Morrow

Ms Morrow is a member of the ANTA and works at Marni’s Naturopathic Clinic. It is a family business in a purpose-built facility with a herb garden, a well stocked shop, car park and consulting rooms. Several signs state that it is a naturopathic clinic -it is not a medical practice. Laboratory tours are also available. The air was filled with incense and New Age music. I was asked to fill in a general medical history form while I waited, then white-coated Melita showed me into a pleasant consulting room. I showed her my hands and wrists, and gave her an accurate description of the symptoms. She made several general enquiries about changes of diet, contact with new plants, and so on, but nothing that offered a clue. She didn’t look at my upper arms, legs, mouth or anywhere other than my lower arms.

With an illuminated magnifying glass, she leaned over the desk for a closer look at the pimples. As she did so, her long hair fell across my pimples. I wasn’t sure what germs I was getting from her hair, but I had a good idea of what she was getting from my infected skin. There were no ablution facilities in the room, and I have no reason to believe that she washed her hands before or after touching me.

Melita quickly realised that she didn’t know what she was treating, declaring that it was not folliculitis, (inflammation of the hair follicle) so she told me to go to a GP for a diagnosis, then she could treat it with natural remedies. She offered me carrot ointment for the itch, but I declined until after I had seen the GP. She didn’t charge for her services.

I returned a few days later and told Melita that the diagnosis was chicken pox. She was most surprised and declared that it was the furthest thing from her mind. I asked her if she had ever seen chicken pox before. “Well, I have, but in children. I didn’t think of it in an adult.”

This consultation cost $35, and included a followup appointment at another time. The three medications she prescribed totalled $38.40, plus Skin Mist, a spray for the itch at $13.50. Calamine lotion, with an Aust R number, and so proven to work, costs $3.50.

[Aust R numbers refer to therapeutic goods “Registered” with the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). Registration with the TGA is expensive and requires proof of efficacy and safety. Aust L numbers refer to goods which are “Listed”]

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Pamela Priadko
I arrived at the rooms of Pamela Priadko, a member of the CMA, and approached the counter, where two men were listening to a tape recording of a lecture against immunisation. When I told them that I had an appointment at 1 pm, they seemed confused, asked me who with, who was I, and generally put me in some distress.

A woman appeared from a consulting room so they gestured to her. I asked, “Are you Pamela?” She nodded assent, asked me to take a seat, and went back into the consulting room. On a shelf next to me sat three brown paper bags with people’s names on them. I wondered if they were medications waiting to be picked up, and thought of the security implications of leaving them in the open like that.

I listened to the tape about immunisation until Pamela asked the woman next to me to go in. As they talked, I could clearly hear their voices coming from the window at the front. I investigated and found that the building was a rented shop front with a long plate glass window. A Gyprock wall had been built for the purpose of separating the consulting room from the waiting room. As a fairly cheap job, it extended only as far as the sill, not reaching the plate glass, so letting all the sound out. A piece of foam rubber had been loosely placed into the 100 mm gap, but I clearly heard the story of the woman’s sporting injury caused by hockey, as well as her name and address, even over the anti-immunisation lecture tape.

Kerry le Rossignal
A second woman introduced herself as Kerry le Rossignal, and showed me into a second consulting room. As I looked around, I noticed that the room seemed to be adequately soundproofed, and that there were six certificates on the wall. Three of them were for a different woman, Bronwyn, and three for Kerry. One was for acupuncture and another was a Bachelor of Naturopathy.

Once again, I explained the symptoms to Kerry who was baffled. No changes in washing powder, diet, clothes, industrial situation or gardening. I had been told that naturopaths often blame unspecified tropical diseases and infections, so I tempted her by saying that I had been to Darwin a few weeks ago, but Kerry didn’t take that easy way out. After establishing that most of my time was spent in the city of Darwin, rather than out on safari, she didn’t mention it again. “Have you taken antibiotics recently?” Kerry asked. When I said I hadn’t, she said, “Good, because they will cause skin rashes straight away.”

Over the years, I have taken antibiotics on many occasions, but I don’t recall ever breaking out in a rash from them.

She took down a general history of my health, including past operations, hospitalisation, did I drink and how much, did I smoke and so on. When she asked if I’d had any childhood diseases as an adult, I wasn’t sure what to do, but laughing was one option. I thought to myself, “You are looking at chicken pox in a 49 year old man and you need to ask me that question?”

When she asked if I had ever had a seizure, I had to ask what that was. Kerry explained that it was like a fit, so I answered no, but asked her why. “I want to shine a light in your eyes, and we can’t do that if you have seizures”, she said. She took my blood pressure, and seemed to know what she was doing, and declared that it was a bit high, probably as a result of my pimples. She then looked into my irises with a magnifying glass and a torch, having a second look at the liver in my right iris. Having examined my hands, arms, tongue, fingernails and eyes, Kerry told me that I had a strong constitution, which is why I didn’t require much medical attention.

She said everybody has a weak spot, and both my tongue (Chinese medicine) and irises (iritology) showed that it was my digestive system. My stomach didn’t produce enough hydrochloric acid, so food tended to sit in the stomach for a long time before digesting. That may be true but I have never had a problem with it.

I asked about diagnosing by the fingernails, and was told that she looks for good half moons, a nice pink colour instead of white or blue, and could check anaemia by tapping the nail and watching the colour return to the skin below. “A lot of the stuff that we do is just practical”, I was told.

Kerry asked me to drink less coffee, three cups per day, and 1.5 litres of water per day using a sports bottle. “That will act like a hose, and wash whatever is out from under your skin.” I wondered about the chances of washing away millions of viruses. The main focus was on the preservatives in the Coolabah cask red wine that I drink in moderation. “The manufacturers change the amount of preservatives, but don’t tell us. Have a look for the code numbers on the labels, and pick the one with the least code numbers.” She advised me to drink Banrock Station casks, as a sales assistant had told her that they have the same level of preservative as the bottles. On a subsequent enquiry to BRL Hardy, the makers of Banrock Station bottles and casks, I was assured that 50 parts per million of preservative is about standard for all cask wines, and that all bottles, including Banrock Station, have less.

Kerry asked me, “Incidentally, why did you come to a naturopath instead of a GP?”

“I’ve been going to a GP for years but when I rang up, he had gone away to work in Asia. So I thought...”

“Well, we’re very glad that you did.”

Kerry explained that I would have to be a bit of detective regarding what I was eating, drinking and coming into contact with, to eliminate the cause. With traditional medicine, they liked to treat the cause rather than the symptoms, but, as she hadn’t found a cause, she could only treat the symptoms. “We don’t like doing that, but. . .”, she shrugged her shoulders.

She sold me a bottle of homeopathic water for $10 and told me to bump the bottom of the bottle before drinking one teaspoon twice a day. I was to put a teaspoon full into my sports bottle each day, so I had to bump the bottom of the medicine bottle before putting it into my sports bottle, and then bump the bottom of the sports bottle before taking each sip. When I asked about the bumping, I was told that with the TGA, is much less expensive and requires proof of safety, but not of efficacy. Ed]
it was called succussion. “When you shake a bottle of cough medicine, you do it like this. With homoeopathic treatments, you have to bump it for succussion.”

If I needed more medication, I could phone for it and she would leave it on the table at the front, in a paper bag with my name on it. My suspicions about the lack of security were confirmed. “Are you in a health fund?” Kerry asked. When I replied that I wasn’t, she said, “Well, I’m afraid that the government won’t give you any money back.” I was reminded of the efforts currently being made to get traditional healers onto the Medicare schedule and paid for by our taxes.

I was with Kerry for fifty minutes, but the invoice marked it down as half an hour, and I was charged $40. The homeopathic water was an additional $10, and the acidophilus would have cost a further $6.25. Total, $56.25.

Peter Farnsworth
Peter Farnsworth is a member of the ATMS. He has several rooms in an Adelaide CBD building, which also houses the Australian College of Tactile Therapies (of which he is Director of Studies), as well as his consulting room. As I waited, I read a brief article in an American publication, Alternative Medicine. A 59 year old man had been diagnosed as having a growth on the prostate, and the urologist had insisted that surgery was the only answer. The patient made further enquiries, and a naturopath recommended diet changes and exercise, which cured him in months. As someone once said, “If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is”. Ignoring prostate cancer is like playing Irish Roulette. (That’s like Russian Roulette, but you have five chambers full and only one empty.)

As Peter led me into his consulting room, he introduced me to his pet dog sleeping in the corridor. I noticed the iridology chart on the desk, and thought of the various tests that had failed to show it had any validity. The foot reflexology pamphlet and the chart for ear acupuncture tests that had failed to show it had any validity. The foot reflexology pamphlet and the chart for ear acupuncture were two other items that lessened my faith in the scientific credibility of the man about to look after my health. He had no formal qualifications in the subject, but picked up his information from reading newspapers and medical journals. Eventually it became apparent that he was the salesman of an electronic diagnostic machine, the Thermal Visualiser. Two volunteers in gowns had sensors put on either side of each vertebra, and the temperature of the muscles between them was measured. The resultant patterns were diagnosed for chemical, mechanical, emotional and trauma reactions.

I asked one of the assistants at the lecture if the machine was Listed or Registered with the TGA? “Oh, yes. It would have to be”, she replied. I didn’t pursue the matter with her. Either it is one or the other, and obviously she didn’t know anything about it. But the machine is neither Listed nor Registered, and so it can’t be used legally.

The chiropractor
In June, 1997, I attended a lecture by Tariq Faridi, who gave a long talk on the evils and dangers of medicine and how science was deceiving the public. He had no formal qualifications in the subject, but picked up his information from reading newspapers and medical journals. Eventually it became apparent that he was the salesman of an electronic diagnostic machine, the Thermal Visualiser. Two volunteers in gowns had sensors put on either side of each vertebra, and the temperature of the muscles between them was measured. The resultant patterns were diagnosed for chemical, mechanical, emotional and trauma reactions.

I asked one of the assistants at the lecture if the machine was Listed or Registered with the TGA? “Oh, yes. It would have to be”, she replied. I didn’t pursue the matter with her. Either it is one or the other, and obviously she didn’t know anything about it. But the machine is neither Listed nor Registered, and so it can’t be used legally.

The chiropractor who was hosting Tariq Faridi and also owned such a machine was Dr Glenn Worthington-Eyre. When I phoned Dr. Worthington-Eyre’s rooms for an appointment to see about my rash, I specifically requested that I be diagnosed by the Thermal Visualiser. The light and pleasant waiting room had pamphlets on the Thermal Visualiser, chiropractic in general, and a one-day seminar by an evangelist. A large poster on the wall offered free scoliosis screening and many other diagrammatic charts around the wall showed how each individual vertebra was directly linked to an organ of the body by the Sympathetic

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Ganglionic Chain.

I phoned the Women’s and Children’s Hospital and asked about the Sympathetic Ganglionic Chain. A doctor told me about ganglia, nerves, and so on, but stressed that there was no scientific evidence that the vertebrae were related to different organs of the body and that the vertebrae couldn’t be moved by hand anyway.

The assistant took me to a room, asked to strip to the waist and put on a hospital gown. She also gave me a pen and paper to write down all the medications that I was on. I explained that I wasn’t on any, and she questioned that several times. I asked, “Should I be?” “Most people are on something”, she explained. While I waited for her to return, I noticed the daily patient list on the table. The words “John Foley use Visualiser to check for rash” were clear for everyone else to read, as were the comments about the other patients.

The probes were put either side of each vertebra and clicked, recording the result on a laptop computer screen. A hard copy was then printed out, and after I had dressed, I was asked to sit in the waiting room at the front again.

As I waited, a man who appeared to be in his late 60s, and using two walking sticks, came in from the street. Barely able to walk, he asked if the chiropractor “could have another go”. He had been treated by Dr Worthington-Eyre shortly before, but when he got to his car, his right leg was so sore that he couldn’t drive. He did seem to be in a lot of pain, and I offered to drive him home after my appointment. Dr Worthington-Eyre examined the spots on my hands and forearms, and asked questions about changes in diet, touching plants, had I had a rash like it before and so on. Nothing offered a solution in terms of allergic reaction.

He looked at the print-out from the Thermal Visualiser and declared that my back was in good shape. Some of the vertebrae read 0, quite a few read +1 and the remainder read +2. None of them reached +3, a good result, I was told.

By marking the +2 vertebrae on a chart, he could read off a broad range of things that might be ailing me. It was very complicated and my guess is that it was designed to confuse patients so they just had to accept what he was saying. My best description of it was a mind reading act, where he asked me some questions, I nodded or shook my head accordingly, and he followed on down the appropriate path. By marking down the chart in the columns of chemical, mechanical, emotional and trauma and asking me questions, he was able to deduce that I have low self esteem, that I don’t feel that I am worthy of help my rash.

“I’m afraid not. Dr Mitchell uses a lot of alternative therapies and he is very popular. It is always like this”, I was told. I thought of the economics involved.

The medium is the massage

Some years ago, I was given some literature in which a chiropractor, Dr Reza Samvat, claimed great success using NOT, Neural Organisation Technique.

Part of the pamphlet stated, “Such conditions as TMJ/Whiplash Injuries, Head Injuries, Scoliosis, High Blood Pressure, Menstrual Disorders, Dyslexia, Immune Disorders and Downs Syndrome can all be improved and often corrected!”

To improve Downs Syndrome, he would have to get rid of the extra chromosome that causes the problem. To do this by manipulating the jaw, and using kinesiology, is dubious (to say the least). I phoned, said that I had a rash, and asked if Dr Samvat could help me. I was given an appointment with another chiropractor as Dr Samvat was the senior partner, but was assured that the junior could help my rash.

I arrived at the practice and filled in a name and address form. Seated in the consulting room with Dr Malcolm Hart, he looked at the rash on my hands and asked some general questions relating to changes of diet, industrial, allergies, smoking, drinking habits and so on. I told him that I had been to Darwin a few weeks earlier, and he took note of it. I was asked to lie face down on the massage table, my face resting on a piece of paper covering that area for hygiene purposes. He bent my legs up and did things like rubbing my tailbone, the nape of my neck, and got me to rub my collarbone while he pushed against my
foot, asking me to push back against him. The direction of his push changed considerably. When he started, he was definitely pushing against my ankle to get maximum leverage. As he massaged my tailbone, kidney area and so on, he changed the direction of the push along the bone towards the knee. This supposedly demonstrated that my leg muscles were getting stronger, but whether or not he was changing the direction of the push deliberately is open to question.

He asked me to roll over onto my back, where more massaging of various bits went on, testing my arm muscles for strength as he went. There is no doubt that in the early part of this treatment he was getting maximum leverage on the arm. As he massaged eye brows, ribs, groin and so on, he changed the direction of the push along the bone towards the shoulder. The most intriguing part was that I had to put my tongue into my right cheek, then left cheek, right cheek, left cheek numerous times while he massaged various opposed bits of my body. I also had to look up, look down, look right, look left numerous times, as he rubbed other bits, and went back to testing the strength of the arm muscles. Then there was eyes closed, open eyes, eyes closed, eyes open. Two foam wedges were put diagonally under my hips for about a minute before more muscle testing, and, with rubber gloves, he massaged points inside my mouth as well.

He took several labelled bottles from a cupboard and had me hold each one in turn as he tested my arm strength. On one, he pushed my arm down quite easily, so when he had finished, I asked what he had been doing. “They are homeopathic remedies. I was testing for allergic reaction to different things. The one that showed up so clearly was Ross River Virus, which fits with your trip to Darwin, but the rash doesn’t look like Ross River Virus.”

The closest that I have been to a Ross River Virus area in the last three years would be Gawler, and I doubt that the disease is rampant there, so I’m not sure why it showed up.

In further conversation he mentioned rubella and chicken pox, but he said, it didn’t look like either of them. When he had finished rubbing, prodding and muscle testing me, I lay back and relaxed. I really did feel better, but I’m sure that was because all the poking and prodding had finished. There was no indication that he washed his hands before or after touching me.

He made two further appointments for me, one with him, and another with the naturopath in the practice. I later cancelled those appointments. This visit cost me $59.

In summary

I found all these people to be sadly lacking in the training and rigorous adherence to the professional and ethical standards that are expected of members of the three professional bodies under scrutiny. The two chiropractors didn’t do any better. However, Qakatak is not concerned with quality, but pseudoscience so my only question at all times had to be, “Is this scientifically valid?”

Melita impressed me by sending me to a scientist to question.

The insurance companies this way? Accreditation. The insurance that such a high profile Adelaide naturopath couldn’t diagnose something as commonplace as chicken pox. Melita’s mother, Marni, founded the SA College of Natural and Traditional Medicine. Her sister Wendy is now the principal of that college while Melita is the Dean of Natural Medicine and the Senior Lecturer in Naturopathy. How can she teach others if she doesn’t know herself?

Kerry concentrated on the preservatives in the cask wine, and didn’t give a thought to my claim of having spent a week in the tropics, a hotbed for all manner of strange diseases. Kerry is also an employee of the SA College of Natural and Traditional Medicine, as both the Senior Lecturer in Iridology and Remedial Therapies, as well as Curriculum Development.

Feeling my pulse on either arm to determine if “the system is overheating” would leave me with serious doubts as to the scientific credibility of the person making the claim. For Peter to then sell me a homeopathic treatment would seem to put the icing on the cake. Even the man who invented homeopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, accepted that not one molecule of the original substance would be left in most of his preparations, after they had been diluted millions of times. Homeopathy doesn’t work, and there is no reason why it should. Glenn left me with more questions than he answered. He seems to have been trained by a salesman with no training. He did not pick up my scoliosis, nor diagnose chicken pox. The older man had just been treated, but was now so bad that he couldn’t drive home. He was given drugs for the pain, and was asking to be taken to hospital.

Glenn also advised me to go to a GP for diagnosis and treatment. Malcolm indulged in ritual. I have no reason to believe that my eyes open or closed are going to enable my immune system to overcome whatever was causing the rash. The tongue in cheek tests probably had the most significance, if only as an accurate commentary on how these treatments should be viewed. He didn’t notice my thoracic scoliosis either.

In retrospect, I was irresponsible to try on shirts and trousers while I had a rash. It has to be a worry though, that five people who call themselves health professionals didn’t warn me to go into quarantine because I had a communicable disease.

Bureaucratic controls on ‘alternative’therapies

I recently registered two business names for Molly Pointer. One is the Pointer Naturopath Clinic, and the other is the Nisiesha Academy of Eastern and Natural Medicine (Nisiesha is Japanese for “false doctor”). Molly is my pet dog, and she is a Pointer, so she can now sell you a Diploma of Naturopathy from her own academy, and it is just as valid as any other. Theoretically, I could get my friends to claim money from health funds on the strength of an invoice with the Pointer Naturopath Clinic letterhead on it.

So what stops people defrauding the insurance companies this way? Accreditation. The insurance

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Alternative medicine - alternative thinking

Richard Gordon

This is the text of a talk Dr Richard Gordon gave at the 1997 National Convention.

Alternative therapists believe they are the persecuted truthseeking minority fighting big science. Derek Freeman. Years of watching the growth of alternative medicine has shown me the increasing organisation of its proponents and a change in the claims from being alternative to complementary to (the latest) “integrative”, and, in some cases, scientific. Also increasing is the number of doctors who use alternative methods - despite the lack of evidence in their favour. This is of great concern because it is symptomatic of a lack of critical thinking skills in members of my own profession, especially general practitioners.

There are at least eight associations and societies to which practitioners of alternative treatments can belong (see Choice, July 97). These organisations seek to set and maintain standards of education and ethics. Some groups are trying to prove their methods scientifically, however, others claim that the nature of their methods is not testable scientifically ie, their methods are based on a new “paradigm”, while the remainder are somewhere in between. Too often so-called research tries to justify some of their claimed “successes”, rather than studying the validity of the underlying principles on which the apparent successes are based.

Scientific medicine is not governed by exclusive dogma, but consists of many methods of treating and preventing disease, all of which gain validity by being subject to scientific testing. Hence the stated position of the Australian Medical Association (1992):

The AMA maintains that a medical practitioner should at all times practise methods based on sound scientific principles and accordingly does not recognise any exclusive dogma such as homoeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic or naturopathy

It is these, and similar dogmas, that I wish to address.

Homoeopathy

The name of this system was coined by Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) and derives from two Greek words - homoios = like and patheia = suffering.

When this system was developed in the early 19th century the existing orthodox therapeutics was in a sorry state, using methods such as bleeding, purging, cupping, etc, such that the great physician Oliver Wendell Holmes was moved to say in 1842, “If all the medicines were thrown into the sea it would be all the better for mankind and all the worse for the fishes.” Homoeopathy offered a system which, at worst, had no side effects and thus was more acceptable.

The basic principle of homoeopathy is The Law of Similars -“Similia, similibus curentur” = like cures like”. That is, if a substance causes a symptom then a dilution of that substance will cure that symptom.

Hahnemann and his disciples set about finding substances which caused all the symptoms of which patients might complain. Thus they had to find substances which not only caused symptoms such as headache, but each different kind of headache. This they did! The Materia Medica was produced which consisted of a list of approximately 2000 substances, all carefully evaluated and tested, which among them, they believed, could cause all the symptoms of which patients could complain. Hahnemann then set about diluting these substances by mixing them with either water, alcohol or lactose powder in increasing dilutions.

This process of dilution, he claimed, would increase the potency of the effect even when the point of dilution was reached (greater than 1: 10 to the 24th power ie. >Avogadro’s number) where it is unlikely that any of the original substance would be present in the mixture. The current explanation for the effectiveness of a nonexistent substance is that the diluent has been “imprinted” with the molecular shape of the active substance. This explanation is extremely useful, as it renders the mixture totally safe (contains nothing but alcohol, water or lactose powder), and impossible to be analysed by regulating bodies, thus avoiding any sort of regulation. Also adding to the “potency” of homoeopathic preparations is the process of “pounding” or “shaking” which is done at each step of dilution, by either vigorous shaking, or pounding of the container hard against the hand of the processor.

Modern day homoeopaths attempt to justify their method by likening it to immunisation or allergy desensitisation. Nothing could be further from the truth, as these two methods use either full strength mixtures or dilutions of no more than 1:10,000, as opposed to homoeopathy’s typical 1:10^30. Evidence for the effectiveness of homoeopathy is anecdotal and most likely to be explained on the basis of the placebo effect.

Despite all the above, homoeopathy has one big advantage -no side effects. It doesn’t matter if you take the wrong treatment, so why not dump a truckload of “provings” into Warragamba Dam and solve Sydney’s...
Chiropractic

The principles of chiropractic were set out by Daniel Palmer, based on an experience he had when his servant’s hearing recovered following a neck manipulation. From this he concluded that all disease was caused by pressure on spinal nerves. This pressure was caused by changes in the alignment of the spine; “by subluxations”. The flow of “innate” ie., the body’s life force, is affected by these subluxations and this then causes malfunction of the various organs.

Thus all of us require regular spinal “adjustments” to prevent and treat disease. Recently chiropractors have suggested that they should be given access to newborn babies immediately after birth, so manipulation of these babies’ spines and skulls can be done to prevent later health problems. Not only is there no evidence to support such an action, there is no rational reason to try it.

Attempts by chiropractors to demonstrate subluxations, not only to radiologists but to each other, have failed. The connections they describe between organs and nerves simply do not exist and no-one has been able to detect the flow of the so-called innate (life)force.

What I have described above are the principles of chiropractic, which is what one must refer to if asked the question “do you believe in chiropractic?” However, there are many chiropractors who practise similarly to physiotherapists, and in the USA there is quite a marked division between the two groups, based mainly on the theory of subluxations. Medicare in the USA will pay for chiropractic treatment if there can be demonstrated on X-ray the existence of a subluxation. This was not a problem until these subluxations had to be independently verified and when given unreported X-rays to read chiropractors were unable to find the same subluxations found by their colleagues.

There are now a number of universities offering degrees in chiropractic. I was initially hopeful that incorporation within such institutions would have some effect on the graduates and their belief in the principles of chiropractic. Unfortunately I have seen no evidence of this.

Acupuncture

I will confine my comments here to the principles behind the practice of acupuncture, but if the reader would like more detailed discussion, then see Stephen Bassier’s excellent article in the Skeptic (13/2).

Proponents of acupuncture claim that our wellbeing depends on the ebb and flow of the “life-force” [there it is again] known as Qi, which maintains a balance between Yin and Yang (light and shade). This lifeforce flows along channels called meridians which join the surface of the body with the various internal organ systems. They claim that there are points (“acupoints”) along these channels which may be accessed to affect the flow of Qi. Thus, if a person has a symptom or symptoms which indicate disharmony in the flow of Qi, this may be corrected by the needling of the appropriate points. So far no scientific test has been able to establish the existence of the channels, the points or the flow of Qi. There is no evidence that stimulating the specified points by needling, pressure, laser or moxibustion (heating) has any effect on disease or symptoms greater than placebo, or other forms of pain infliction, such as transcutaneous nerve stimulation (TENS). Claims for use as an anaesthetic have also not been substantiated.

Recently in the SMH there was a report of an acupuncturist decrying the growth of body piercing as a form of decoration. Apparently he was concerned that the flow of Qi might be inadvertently diverted with disastrous consequences. The answer from the body piercers was that body piercing had been in existence for as long as acupuncture, and that evidence for its safety was as strong as that for acupuncture.

An article in the magazine of the NSW branch of the AMA under the heading “An open mind”, devoted a whole page to scientific evidence for acupuncture, detailing the various substances released in response to painful stimuli. However nowhere was there any mention of the meridians, acupoints or flow of Qi. In fact the article could have been written to support the use of TENS as a treatment for pain.

Chinese Herbalism

In recent years there have been stories of miraculous cures involving Chinese herbal medicine, not the least of which was written by a prominent officer of the RSL, claiming cure of his prostate cancer. He glossed over the fact that he had undergone radiotherapy and chemotherapy as well, and chose to attribute his wellbeing to the herbs.

The principles underlying Chinese herbalism are carefully detailed and explained in the Choice (Australian Consumer’s Association) publication “Traditional Chinese Medicine” written by Rey Tiquia, who is a leading practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in Melbourne. In this book Tiqia describes the method of diagnosis and prescription of herbs that are used by practitioners of TCM. For rational thinkers this book is a real eye-opener, as Tiquia describes the basis of disease as being a balance of Qi, which depends on the attributes of hot, cold, warm, cool or bland and the five basic elements -wood, fire, earth, metal and water. What could more scientific than that?

That concoctions of herbs have some effect on disease is often more by good luck than good management, as there is little or no connection between the diagnoses made by TCM and scientific diagnosis. There is, however, good scientific evidence that there are active chemicals in herbal concoctions and that these chemicals may have both therapeutic and harmful effects. Unfortunately there is little in TCM to guide us in our investigations.

Naturopathic Herbalism

Herbalism developed in the western world is similar to Chinese herbalism, in that the evidence for the use of various herbs is, at best, anecdotal but differs by not having the same complex methods of diagnosis. Western herbalism aims mainly at the symptoms of which the patient complains which are usually couched in the sort of terms commonly used by westerners such as headache, malaise, abdominal discomfort, dizziness etc, but also has a few if its own such as “liver congestion”. Thus naturopathic herbalism also risks missing any underlying
The proponents of naturopathic herbalism argue that they are unfairly treated by the scientific community, citing the following points:

(i) There is a conspiracy by the medical/pharmaceutical industry to suppress the use of natural/herbal medicines because there will be no financial gain. This ignores the herbalist’s own argument, that many modern medicines are derived from plants and all are potentially lucrative, if found to be effective. It is also hard to imagine that individuals working in these industries would wish to suppress the progress of science, from which all of us can benefit.

(ii) Herbs cannot harm, only cure. A chemical is a chemical whether produced by a plant or a laboratory. Plants can produce extremely toxic chemicals.

(iii) Whole herbs are more effective than their isolated active ingredients. Herbs contain a complex mixture of chemical compounds. The only way to ensure safety is to isolate the active compound or compounds, so that it or they can be evaluated for efficacy and safety.

(iv) Natural compounds are better than synthetic compounds eg. Vitamin C. There is no evidence for this whatsoever.

(v) The doctrine of signatures: “The form or shape of a plant determines its therapeutic value” eg rhinoceros horns lend potency; mandrake root is best if shaped like a man, when it will fetch the highest price. There is no evidence to support this argument.

(vi) God created herbs to cure human illnesses and we only need to search our gardens to find the cure for everything. This strange belief is well illustrated by Bach flower remedies, where all the necessary flowers to treat all known illnesses were found within a few miles of Bach’s garden if not actually in it.

Iridology
The belief that the anatomy of the body is fully represented in the pattern of the iris of the eye. Similar beliefs are held about the ear and the sole of the foot where this is established the neuro-optic reflex. I have been unable to find any evidence to support the existence of such a reflex or to support any of the other claims made for iridology. In fact studies have been done which show no connection between changes in health status and patterns in the iris. Iris recognition is even under consideration as a substitute for PIN and finger print identification, because it is one of the most stable physical traits throughout life!

Iridology is used by naturopaths, chiropractors, herbalists and even some medical practitioners. The fictitious diagnoses point to illnesses that can be cured with herbs, acupuncture, vitamins, etc and the cure confirmed by further iris examination - brilliant!

This article aims not to give an in-depth description of all forms of alternative diagnosis and treatment, but to describe the kind of woolly thinking that underpins these practices. The current move to promote evidence based medicine may help to counteract the trend toward consumer driven treatments, which see doctors offering alternative medicine because it is “good for business” even though it is non-science.

There are no greater liars than quacks, except for their patients. Benjamin Franklin

Further reading
Barrett and Jarvis (Eds), 1993 The Health Robbers, Prometheus
Tiquia R., 1996, Traditional Chinese Medicine
Raso J., 1994, Alternative Health Care Prometheus
Edwards Harry - new book, soon to be released.

... a pox on your house from p 19

companies look at the pedigree of the practitioner, and have to be satisfied that the qualification did not come from a bogus institute such as Nisiesha. The simplest way to do that is to be sure that the practitioner is a member of one of the Big Three professional bodies.

To be a member of one of those bodies, you have to produce a certificate from a training facility that has a government accredited course. I would have a hard time getting my dog’s academy past that one, and so would any other organisation who wasn’t fair dinkum, right?

Wrong! State governments are the authorities that give accreditation to the natural health colleges, and they have two areas that they look at. One is the number of fluorescent tubes, whiteboards, air conditioners, business plan etc. The other is the comprehensive range of the curriculum.

Nisiesha Academy would have to submit its curriculum to an ITAB (Industry Training Advisory Board) which is set up by the Department of Employment, Training and Further Education. The 19 people on the board in South Australia are representatives of the teaching profession, the trade unions, Public Service and so on. There are no scientists on the board, they don’t question efficacy, and apparently little effort is made to validate the medical claims made in the various subjects being taught. It would be a lot of trouble, but not impossible, to get my dog’s Nisiesha Academy through the whole process, including the ITAB, without knowing anything at all about health.

So where does the responsibility for the five people who couldn’t diagnose my chicken pox fall? At the feet of the state Ministers for Education.

Once the Nisiesha Academy gets state government accreditation, the federal government automatically gives Austudy and Abstudy to its students. The Big Three natural health professional bodies would accept your goldfish as a member, and the major health funds would issue it with a provider number.

You then just keep mailing bogus bills to them, and they keep sending money to your goldfish.

Who needs to work?
The contemporary Skeptical movement may be said to have been initiated with the founding of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in 1976. This movement is now growing worldwide and it provides a much-needed antidote to the persistence of irrational, paranormal, and occult systems of belief.

Skepticism is an ancient philosophical and scientific outlook that traces its origins to Greece and Rome. Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrho, Carneades, and others advanced the skeptical outlook in the ancient Graeco-Roman world. Skepticism went into eclipse in Christian Europe for over a thousand years, but it was revived during the modern period when thinkers as diverse as Bayle, Descartes, Montaigne, and Hume advocated it. Indeed, in no small measure the revival of modern skepticism led to the development of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth century. Scientific discovery rapidly advanced when men and women were liberated from the blind hold of authority, faith, custom, revelation, and mysticism, and when they sought to appeal to inductive evidence and experiment to test hypotheses and deductive reason and mathematics to develop more comprehensive theories.

There are at least three kinds of skepticism that may be distinguished; the first in its extreme form is negative and nihilistic. It has had both classical and modern defenders. It holds that no knowledge is possible, and this applies not only to scientific and philosophical theories, but to any kind of moral or political principles. This form of skepticism is totally unreliable; a person cannot hope to function in the world if he or she is in a state of utter doubt and indecision. A second form of skepticism, which developed in ancient times and came to fruition in the modern world was called by David Hume, “mitigated skepticism”. This approach said that we needed to act in the world and to formulate beliefs about it. Yet it still presupposed an underlying gnawing skepticism about the reliability of knowledge. Still a third form of skepticism went into eclipse in Christian Europe for over a thousand years, but it was revived during the modern period when thinkers as diverse as Bayle, Descartes, Montaigne, and Hume advocated it. Indeed, in no small measure the revival of modern skepticism led to the development of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth century. Scientific discovery rapidly advanced when men and women were liberated from the blind hold of authority, faith, custom, revelation, and mysticism, and when they sought to appeal to inductive evidence and experiment to test hypotheses and deductive reason and mathematics to develop more comprehensive theories.

The kind of skepticism which the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal presents is continuous with the third kind above. I have called this “the new skepticism” in my book by that name1. This form of skepticism is based on the realization that the progress of science is the result of the continuing application of the methods of science, and that skepticism is an intrinsic part of the process of inquiry.

Permit me to say something about the reasons why I decided to create such a movement. I had long been a critic of paranormal (and supernatural) claims that could not be supported by the evidence. I was astonished that many or most of the claims continued to enjoy widespread public support, even though they had been refuted. Moreover, the mass media latched onto paranormal claims, which they discovered was profitable at the box office. Uri Geller, Jean Dixon, and others were enjoying a huge following with nary a dissent. This was in spite of the fact that scientific inquiry, which investigated their claims, had rejected them because of a lack of evidence.

Astrology is a good case in point, for it was refuted by astronomers, physicists, statisticians, psychologists, and other scientists. There is no empirical basis for horoscopes or sun-sign astrology; its cosmology is based on the discredited Ptolemaic system; moreover, it is possible to test its predictions and forecasts; and the results are invariably negative. Yet very few in the general public are aware of these criticisms, and indeed often confuse astronomy with astrology. With this in mind, I helped to draft and issue a statement, “Objections to Astrology”, with the help of Bart Bok, a noted astronomer, and Lawrence Jerome, a science writer. This statement was endorsed by 186 leading scientists, including 19 Nobel Laureates. It received immediate worldwide attention, especially after the New York Times did a front-page story.

It seemed to me that the success of this effort, especially within the scientific community, called for the need for a more organized response by the academic and scientific community. I decided to create a new coalition comprised of scientists, skeptics, philosophers, magicians, and others. Hence, I invited several dozen critics of the paranormal to Amherst, New York, to an open conference to develop an organized opposition to the uncontested growth of belief in the paranormal. These included some well-known popular critics, such as Martin Gardner, Milbourne Christopher, Marcello Truzzi, Ray Hyman, James Randi, and others. I also invited some distinguished philosophers and scientists, such as Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook, and W. V. Quine to endorse the statement of purpose which I
had drafted. The conference was held at the new campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo, in Amherst, NY. At that time, I was editor of The Humanist magazine, one of the leading journals critical of religion. At the inaugural meeting of CSICOP, in my opening address (“The Scientific Attitude versus Anti-Science and Pseudoscience”), I said that there was a long-standing conflict in the history of culture between religion and science, but that today a new challenge to science has come to the fore because of the growth of pseudoscientific and paranormal claims. The apparent popular belief in exorcism, nouveau witches, and Satanism were symptomatic of the Aquarian consciousness then being proclaimed. The mass media also presented as true and usually without any dissent accounts of Kirlian photography, the wonders of ESP and psychokinesis, UFO sightings, the Bermuda Triangle, Bigfoot, von Daniken’s Chariots of the Gods?, etc. A great number of quasireligious cults had emerged at that time, including Hare Krishna, Reverend Moon, and the Scientologists. These were symptomatic of a countercultural opposition to science that had begun to appear, and it needed, in my judgment, to be responded to - for the public had a right to hear the scientific critique of the pseudoscientific and fringe claims.

I raised the following questions:

Should we assume that the scientific revolution, which began in the sixteenth century, is continuous? Or will it be overwhelmed by the forces of unreason?

And I replied:

We ought not to assume, simply because ours is an advanced scientific-technological society, that irrational thinking will be overcome. The evidence suggests that this is far from being the case. Indeed, there is always the danger that science itself may be engulfed by the forces of unreason.

Since that time, postmodernism has emerged, denying the possibility of scientific objectivity, and considering science one mythic narrative amongst others. And much to everyone’s surprise there has been widespread attacks on the Enlightenment and the ideals of the scientific revolution.

Today these anti-scientific protests are accompanied by a resurgence of fundamentalist religions. So the challenge to science is not simply from propagandists for the paranormal, but also from the disciples of many religions. I should point out that although I personally believe that skeptics need to deal with religious claims as well as with paranormal claims, I recommended that CSICOP concentrate on paranormal and pseudoscientific claims. The British and the American Societies for Psychical Research, founded in 1882 and 1885 respectively, were basically made up of those committed to the psychical point of view, as was J. B. Rhine’s laboratory founded at Duke University in 1927. Hence, CSICOP would concentrate on paranormal investigations, though hopefully from a neutral and impartial framework, and it would examine religious claims only insofar as they were testable. I founded Free Inquiry in 1980 explicitly to deal with religious claims, for the new skepticism needs to be applied across the board. As is well known, the first meeting of CSICOP had an enormous impact. There was extensive press coverage from the Washington Post and New York Times to Le Monde and Pravda, with virtually all of the major science magazines welcoming the formation of CSICOP. We had crystallized a perceived need that both the scientific community and many in the general public thought had to be satisfied: a response to the growth of paranormal claims. Within a year our new magazine was launched, at first called The Zetetic (under the editorship of Marcello Truzzi), and thence the Skeptical Inquirer (under the editorship of Kendrick Frazier, who had been the editor of Science News). Much to our pleasure, skeptical groups began forming all over the world, so that today there are over 75 such groups from Germany, England, and the Netherlands, to China, Russia, Spain, Mexico, and Australia; and there are networks of such groups in Europe (“EuroSkeptics”) and Latin America. Moreover, some 50 magazines and newsletters have appeared. Indeed, we have worked closely with national groups to help get their organizations and magazines started.

All of these developments have contributed to the formation of a worldwide New Skepticism Movement. There is now a vibrant and growing International Network affiliated with CSICOP and the Skeptical Inquirer. We are all committed to the scientific program, we are skeptical of paranormal and occult claims, unless they have been corroborated and replicated by independent investigators.

One may ask, “After more than two decades of inquiry, what can be learned about this entire phenomenon?” In the rest of this article I wish to sum up many of the basic findings and conclusions that the skeptical movement has reached about paranormal belief claims.

First, that the term paranormal itself is highly questionable. We decided to use the term only because proponents (such as J B Rhine) had used it. We doubt that it is possible to find a paranormal realm separate from or independent of the natural universe. We are seeking normal and natural explanations for phenomena. The best meaning of the term paranormal is that there are sometimes bizarre, unexpected anomalies that we encounter (as Charles Fort describes them), and we are willing to examine them with an open mind, and do not wish to reject them a priori and antecedent to inquiry. Murray Gell-Mann, Nobel Prize-winner and a Fellow of CSICOP, at a conference at the University of Colorado in 1986, observed that in one sense we deny the paranormal entirely, because once we find that phenomena can be explained by reference to prosaic causes, then these explanations are incorporated into the natural scientific worldview, and are not separated from it. I reiterate, we have an open mind and are willing to examine anomalies.
without prejudgment, providing that the claims made by the proponents are responsible. Anecdotal reports: What we have found is that many reports of anomalous events are based on anecdotal accounts. While these reports cannot be dismissed out of hand or without a fair hearing, especially if they are seriously offered, skeptics hold that inquirers go beyond mere anecdotes to a more systematic examination of the phenomena. Many anecdotal narratives are based upon private experiences, subjective and introspective in character, or upon memory of past events, which may be unreliable, or upon second-or third-hand hearsay.

It is important that all such reports be carefully sifted through, if possible, before they are accepted. Anecdotes may have a grain of truth and they may bring new and important data, otherwise overlooked. On the other hand, they may involve serious misperception or faulty memory; they may involve stories embellished upon beyond their original meaning; or incidents blown out of proportion to what actually happened, or the deception of the senses coloured by suggestion. Many of these alleged anecdotes, if reported second-hand, take on the character of gossip, folk tales, or urban legends. There is a tendency for people who believe in the occult to read in mysterious nuances to otherwise prosaic experiences, or to exaggerate the significance of random events. This commonly occurs, for example, in reports of ghostly apparitions, crisis premonitions of death, visitations by extraterrestrial beings, or the accuracy of psychic prophecies. Skeptics ask: Did the event occur as the person states, and is the interpretation placed on the event the most likely cause?

Unless an anecdotal account can be corroborated independently, investigators urge caution about its authenticity. This not only applies to the truth of the event alleged to have actually occurred, but on the occult explanation that is imposed on it because of ignorance of the real causes.

The skeptic says that the report may or may not be true and that if it did occur there may be alternative causal explanations to be made of it. Are we dealing with a real event, or a misperception, hallucinatory experience, fantasy, and/or a misinterpretation of what happened?

Eyewitness testimony:
The appeal to eyewitness testimony is the bedrock of our knowledge about the world and ourselves. The data is drawn from direct first-hand experience. It is important, however, that such testimony not be accepted on face value without careful inspection. This is especially the case when the testimony is about anomalous, unexpected, or bizarre events. If a person reports that it is raining heavily outside and he supports the claim with the fact that he is soaking wet, and if this report does not conflict with our common knowledge about the world, it need not demand weighty evidence (though he may have been squirted with a hose or had a bucket of water dumped on him.) We can corroborate such claims by looking outside and/or receiving reports from other bystanders; and/or consulting the barometer. If, on the contrary, a person reports that it is raining pink fairies, skeptical inquirers request that his extraordinary account be corroborated by independent and impartial observers. Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington (Fellow of CSICOP and a speaker at its 1994 convention) has performed numerous experiments to demonstrate the often fallible and deceptive character of memory. She found that many bystanders at a robbery or accident often offer conflicting reports, especially where the incident is emotionally charged. This tendency to misperceive may be compounded when someone claims to have seen a statue of the Virgin Mary weep or a miraculous cure by a faith healer. Not only must the report of an observer be carefully analysed, but the interpretation that is placed upon it must be evaluated. Thus skeptical inquirers ask that wherever possible there be two or more witnesses to an event, that these witnesses be careful observers, and that what they have said can be independently corroborated. Reports of UFO visitations are common throughout the world, and these reports often come in waves, often depending on sensationalistic media exploitation. The investigator asks, What did these people really see; can these interpretations be verified? Skeptical inquirers have sought to provide prosaic explanations for unidentified flying objects, which are often identified as planets, meteors, weather balloons, terrestrial rockets, aircraft, or other phenomena.

Extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence:
This principle has been adduced for anomalous accounts. If it is the case that a paranormal event, if confirmed, would overthrow the known laws of science, then one would need abundant evidence to accept it. The evidence must not be skimpy or haphazard, but so strong that its denial would require more credulity than its acceptance. A good case has been made about psychokinesis, that the mind can move matter without an intervening physical object or material force, or that precognitive events can be known before they happen. Helmut Schmidt has claimed experimental evidence that persons in the present can retrogressively affect past events in a random number generator. This unusual anomaly would seem to violate the laws of physics, and/or it would require that physics be revised to account for it. We would need several lines of independent replication before we can accept the claim.

Burden-of-proof argument:
Some parapsychologists, such as John Beloff, have argued that the strongest evidence for paranormal events is in the historical cases of famous mediums and psychics. Eusapia Palladino was tested by numerous scientific bodies. Many found that she had cheated in some cases; others could find no evidence of cheating -hence they attributed the event to paranormal causes. Similarly, it is claimed that D. D. Home, a well-known medium, allegedly floated 75 feet above a London street and performed other strange feats, and that those feats could not be accounted for in normal terms. Beloff maintains that unless skeptical
inquiring can explain how these mediums performed what they did in all cases, then these accounts should be accepted as veridical. The skeptical inquirer responds that the burden of proof rests upon the paranormal claimant. It is he who must be able to account for such cases with sufficient evidence; unless this is done, one should suspend judgment and remain skeptical. This is particularly the case in regard to historical claims, where it is difficult to reconstruct the situation under which the alleged effect occurred. That is why skeptics ask for replication in the present before they can accept the phenomenon.

The burden-of-proof argument has been used in religion. Is a believer entitled to believe whatever he wishes about God, unless the skeptic can disprove His existence or demonstrate that the properties attributed to Him do not exist? The skeptic criticizes the logic of the argument in the following manner: If someone were to claim that mermaids exist, the burden of proof is upon him, not the skeptic to disprove the fact.

Fraud:
The resort to fraud is notorious in human affairs, including cases in orthodox science (for example, the Piltdown Man hoax). It is especially widespread in the paranormal area. Many mediums and psychics have been found cheating. Although some of the deception might be unconscious, considerable intentional trickery has been uncovered. It is thus important that every precaution against deception be used. In the design of an experiment, safeguards ought to be built in so that the subjects under study cannot fudge the data, whether inadvertently or consciously. C. E. M. Hansel has pointed out that many of the earlier experiments of J. B. Rhine were suspect, since the conditions of the experiments were loose. In the famous Pearce-Pratt experiment for telepathy, Pratt could easily have peeked at the Zener cards by sneaking out of the library to the sender’s office, or by using an accomplice. Many scientists have been especially deceived by children. For example, physicist John Taylor, when observing children through a two-way mirror, found that they were bending spoons and forks manually, and not by paranormal means as was claimed. Susie Cotrell was shown to be using the Shulein forced card trick to deceive observers. In a clever test of her powers, conducted by Fellows of CSICOP, she was seen on a hidden camera to use sleight of hand in shuffling the cards and to peek at them when no one was observing. It is also important that experimental fraud not intervene. A notable case in J. B. Rhine’s parapsychology lab dramatizes the problem. Walter Levy was said to have tampered with the evidence for precognitive tests of chicks by altering the data. There have been blatant illustrations of cheating in the UFO field: for example, Billy Meier in Switzerland and Ed Walters in Gulf Breeze, Florida. The hoaxing of crop circles as evidence of extraterrestrial visitations in Great Britain has been exposed. Similarly for the unmasking of Philippine psychic surgeons and evangelical faith healers by James Randi and the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion.

A key point that has been made is that scientists who are accomplished in their own disciplines are not necessarily the most careful observers in other domains; and they can often be deceived by clever conjurors posing as psychics.

**Experimenter bias:**
The role of unconscious bias by an experimenter poses a problem in virtually all fields of science. Those who propose a theory are often not the best or most competent judges of the evidential basis in support of it. Experimenter bias may be conscious or unconscious. It may creep in by inadvertent sensory leakage or in grading techniques. A good case is Michael Gauquelin, who was hailed by many as the founder of a new science of “astrobiology.” Gauquelin claimed to have found a correlation between planetary configurations and professional achievement. He said that when Mars was in certain portions of the sky (key sectors 1 and 4) there was a tendency for greater sports champions to be born. There is considerable evidence that Gauquelin selected his sample based on prior knowledge of whether they were born with Mars in key sectors. Hence there was not so much a Mars effect as Gauquelin’s bias. Independent scientific inquiries were unable to replicate the efforts.

Noted parapsychologist Gertrude Schmeidler has said that there is a difference between sheep (believers) and goats (skeptics); and that the former are more likely to believe than the latter. Whether sheep can consistently show the existence of ESP is questionable. It is the case, however, that experimenters who are sheep may be more disposed to accept as positive any nuances in the data. On the other hand, the reverse may be the case and experimenters who are goats may dismiss evidence because of their antibias. In a debate with Charles Honorton, Ray Hyman has pointed to the need for tightening the experimental design in the Ganzfeld tests by the proper randomisation of trials and careful grading techniques. Others have pointed to the questionable grading techniques in the remote-viewing tests by Targ and Puthoff at the Stanford Research Institute.

**Demand for replication:**
The key argument of skeptical inquirers not only in the paranormal field, but in orthodox sciences as well, is the need for replicable experiments. Until psychical researchers can specify antecedent laboratory conditions under which an effect can be observed by independent observers, skeptics have the right to be cautious. The great controversy in parapsychology is precisely on this point: is there a standard replicable experiment, which can demonstrate the existence of psi to the neutral investigator? Unless that condition is satisfied, skeptics remain dubious about the reality of the phenomena.

**Magical thinking:**
Many skeptical inquirers have been puzzled by the ready tendency of many human beings to resort to magical thinking, ie, to accept without sufficient evidence contracausal explanations. This includes the capacity for adopting paranormal interpretations and/or reading into nature occult forces. There is a tendency to attribute to some individuals miraculous powers. Historically, this applies to the prophets who claimed to have had revelations from on high and to be endowed with supernatural abilities. This also applies to gurus, shamans, medicine men, psychics, and faith healers—who are believed by some to be possessed of magical powers. The person who resorts to magical thinking is more likely to accept the occult and/or psychic explanation without critical skepticism. The miracle worker is taken as an authority and the facts are stretched to validate the healing claim.
Psychological interpretations of the paranormal:
Many skeptical inquirers maintain that the key to understanding paranormal phenomena is in human psychology and human nature. This has many dimensions: being amenable to suggestibility, fantasy-prone, given to magical thinking, and the general tendency to allow one’s personal propensities, desires, and hopes to colour the data. Ray Hyman has demonstrated the power of “cold reading” in regard to palmistry. But this can be generalized to many other paranormal field.

The popularity of astrological horoscopes provides considerable support for a psychological interpretation. There is little or no evidence to support astrology, and it has failed virtually all the tests adduced to prove it

The transcendental temptation:
Why is this so? I have postulated a “transcendental temptation” in human culture and human nature as a possible explanation for the tendency to accept a paranormal or occult universe. This perhaps has its roots in the long evolutionary history of the species and it may have even a genetic basis. Some, such as E. O. Wilson, have claimed sociobiological roots for religiosity; though many skeptics have criticized this theory as not being sufficiently tested. John Schumaker, an Australian psychologist, believes that some illusions are necessary for sanity; and that “the corruption of reality” is an essential ingredient of mental health. To face death or existential nothingness, he said, is difficult for most people, and so they achieve consolation by reading into nature hidden meanings, including belief in the afterlife or the ability to communicate with dead persons. The same explanation can be applied to many other areas of the paranormal. Gullibility is thus fed by the hunger for transcendence.

Hypnosis:
One topic that has aroused considerable skeptical controversy concerns the reliability of hypnosis as a source of knowledge. Is hypnosis a special “trance state” induced in a subject, or is he or she simply acting out the suggestions of the hypnotist? It is clear that hypnosis is a useful technique in many areas of practice. It does have its pitfalls, however, concerning a whole range of paranormal phenomena, allegedly verified by hypnotic regression. This is the case in regard to “past-life regressions” used by some researchers as evidence for reincarnation. Budd Hopkins, David Jacobs, and John Mack have introduced hypnotic regressions as evidence for abductions by alien beings, who are allegedly engaged in sexual-genetic experiments. Skeptics have argued that a more likely explanation for such bizarre tales is that the evidence is contaminated by the hypnoterapist, who, using suggestion, tends to implant the ideas in a person and/or assists in conjuring fantasies. The skeptic maintains that we need not postulate prior lives or extraterrestrial abductions in the paranormal realm; for there are still other possible alternative explanations. For example, some otherwise normal fantasy-prone individuals are likely to weave out tales from their imaginations. Often cryptomnesia is at work and ideas or experiences deeply embedded in the unconscious are embellished upon and taken as real. The skeptic is highly dubious of such uses of hypnosis.

Pseudoscience versus protoscience:
It is important that a distinction between pseudoscience and genuine science be drawn. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to find a clear demarcation line; and sometimes what is labelled as “pseudoscience” may really be a new protoscience. Marcello Truzzi has pointed out that there is some danger that skeptical inquirers will reject new ideas - protosciences - because they do not fit into the prevailing paradigm scheme. Some criteria for distinguishing a pseudoscience are available; for example, are its concepts clearly defined and noncontradictory, are its many theories falsifiable, are there any tests that would enable us to ascertain whether the hypotheses and theories are warranted. Phrenology and biorhythms were two alleged sciences which, after exhaustive testing, were found to warrant the label “pseudoscience”. One has to be careful since many new fields of inquiry have often had an uphill battle against the scientific establishment. Similarly for many established disciplines. Critics point out that psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science are riddled with inadequate experimental designs and questionable studies. The better part of prudence is for skeptics to be skeptical not only of pseudosciences, but of orthodox science as well, and to be willing to revise even the most revered principles if they do not succeed under criticism by the community of inquirers. The key point of skepticism is not doubt, however, but inquiry; skepticism is only one element in the process of inquiry. It is not the belief or disbelief that is the main issue, but the facts, theories, and methods of verification.

Ridicule:
Many of those whom skeptics have criticized resent what they consider to be unfair ridicule. Martin Gardner has pointed out that “a horse laugh may be worth a thousand syllogisms,” and that skeptics may rightfully debunk or lampoon outlandish paranormal claims. In the public domain, particularly in the mass media, paranormal claims are most often inflated all out of proportion to the evidential basis. The claim is sensationalized and the public is led to believe it has been verified or documented.
by scientists, when this may not be the case. In such situations, a dispassionate appraisal may not get public attention, and an outrageous claim may need to be deflated by skeptics by some kind of humorous debunking. Here skeptics have entered the domain of rhetoric and persuasion. It is clear that ridicule is not a substitute for genuine inquiry and that such a resort can only occur after an extensive process of investigation. For skeptical inquirers, their commitment is to objective standards of responsible inquiry. How to convince the public that there is insufficient evidence for a claim and/or that they ought to suspend judgment, or that the claim is improbable, is an important question for those committed to advancing the program of science. All skeptics concede that their first obligation is to inquiry, and that any debunking must come as a conclusion to their investigations.

Alternative causal explanations:
The ultimate goal of all scientific inquiry is not only to describe what was or is happening (descriptive knowledge), but to interpret phenomena by means of causal explanations. Here the best talents and creative ingenuity of inquirers must be brought to bear. It is often the case that an anomaly can best be explained in prosaic terms. Events that seem inexplicable may be due to coincidence; a miraculous cure may be due to the power of suggestion or the placebo effect; a statistical correlation may only be an artifact of the data, etc. The program of science can proceed only when someone is sensitive to “the damn facts.” One need not deny that anomalies exist; the challenge is to search for deeper causal correlations in order to account for why the facts are occurring. There is continual scientific success in this latter regard, for that which appeared at one time to be mysterious or inexplicable may be explained by reference to general principles or unique historical circumstances. Thus skeptical inquiry is related to the ultimate goal of all scientific research: to adequately describe and account for data and to explain, where possible, how and why they have occurred.

The unsinkable-rubber-duck syndrome:
After more than two decades of investigation by skeptical inquirers, we are continually astonished by the fact that no matter how often we criticize paranormal belief claims, they still persist. Indeed, even if they are thoroughly examined and refuted in one age, they seem to re-emerge within the next and people will continue to believe them in spite of evidence to the contrary. This is what I have called the unsinkable rubber duck syndrome. No doubt many are familiar with a carnival shooting gallery, where customers are induced to shoot down moving ducks. Here, even if the ducks are successfully knocked down, they pop right back up again.

Given the tendency for “magical thinking,” the “transcendental temptation,” and “gullibility,” skeptics have their work cut out for them. We cannot silently steal away once we have investigated and debunked an outrageous claim. There will always be a need for skeptical inquiry in society. Not only do the old myths crop up to entice a new generation and need responses, but new, often fanciful claims may be introduced and become fashionable. Thus, I submit that there is a continuing need for skeptical inquiry, and skeptics will always serve as the gadflies of society. Standing in the wings of the theatre of life, unable to accept the prevailing nonsense on stage, the role of skeptics is to keep alive the spirit of free inquiry and to ask probing questions—even if those they criticize are deeply offended, and/or in spite of the calumny that may descend upon the skeptics for their criticisms.

The New Skepticism Movement thus has an ongoing positive and constructive task in society; and as long as human credulity persists there is a need for skeptics to raise unsettling questions about it. We should continue to provide responsible explanations for paranormal and occult claims; and whatever our findings, to publish our views and make them known to the general public. We should not despair at the tidal wave of irrational beliefs that sometimes confronts us. We are committed to the quest for knowledge and truth. In the last analysis, our main goal is inquiry, not skepticisn, and in this regard the skeptical movement will always have a vital role to play in human culture.

Notes:
2. This was no doubt stimulated by The Exorcist, by William Peter Blatty, and later by a film by that name. 3. “The Scientific Attitude vs. Pseudoscience and Antiscience.” The Humanist 36, no. 4 (July/August 1976), p. 131.

Paul Kurtz
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The author of many books and papers on philosophy and skepticism, Paul Kurtz is widely recognised as the founder of the modern Skeptical movement. He was also instrumental in establishing Prometheus Books, as the publisher of skeptical and other books concerned with the dissemination of critical thinking.

Professor Kurtz visited Australia in 1986 to attend the Australian Skeptics National Convention, and plans to revisit in 2000, when we plan to be hosting the Third World Skeptics Convention.
Challenging odds
Roland Seidel

We have a letter from Michael Vnuk of the Queensland Skeptics, which asks:

I was intrigued to see in Bob Nixon’s “Testing a strange claim” (18/1, p41) that the tested subject had to match 14 out of 20 images to be considered successful. Would Bob care to explain how 14 was chosen?

I cannot tell a lie, I did it. And I just love babbling on about numbers, so thank you for the opportunity. Usually, people at parties just go glassy eyed and move away. To quote Bob:

It’s precisely because you can baffle me entirely with large numbers and decimal points that I accept your judgement on all things having to do with numerals. (‘Numerals’, by the way is as big a mathematical word as I know - other than “mathematical”, obviously). As far as I’m concerned a binomial is a perverted statue that lives in a garden.

Before I get to the technical stuff it’s important to answer this simple question: How do you test these things? This itself is a fairly non-intuitive area and I was somewhat bamboozled, until I got to chat with Susan Blackmore who, in my humble opinion, is the world champion at figuring out how to test things. And it actually turns out to be so easy once you recognise you can’t test a thing or an idea, you can only test a claim. So step one in every Challenge should be clearly identifying the claim, and then the test becomes obvious: that’s an interesting claim, how can I tell it from make believe?

For a Telepath example, Jason’s claim was that he could transmit pictures telepathically into people’s brains. We show Jason a random picture from a set, he transmits to a subject, the subject looks at an identical set of pictures and picks the one that strikes them. The odds are easy to calculate, in twenty trials you beat million to one odds if you score fourteen or better.

For an Astrology example, astrologers claim that given someone’s birth information, they can derive special knowledge about that person. They agree that a subject will be able to identify their own reading from a number because it contains special information the subject will recognise. So, we get a number of subjects, give their birth information to the astrologer, the astrologer produces a reading for each (avoiding clues like mentioning the star sign), we show all readings to each subject privately and the subject picks one. With twelve subjects you beat million to one odds if eight or more subjects pick the right reading.

For a Water Divining example (it’s hard to figure out tests that don’t involve digging), diviners claim they can identify the location of water beneath them. We have a shallow box eight feet by four under which we place a short piece of pipe full of water. The top is marked with six divisions. We put the pipe randomly under one of the divisions and the diviner selects one by exercising their divining tools. In twenty trials you exceed million to one odds if you score fourteen or better.

For a Reiki example, practitioners claim they can sense body energies. There’s an eleven year old in Colorado who has already solved this one for us. The practitioner puts their hands through two holes in a baffling, you put your hand randomly over one of theirs (toss a coin) and they tell you which hand feels your body energy. In twenty trials they beat million to one odds if they get them all right, in a hundred trials they need seventy four right.

For a Homoeopathy example, homoeopaths claim that water is changed by the way they do in preparing remedies. We get twenty remedies prepared, match them with twenty unprepared water samples, toss a coin for each to determine if we use the prepared or unprepared sample to end up with twenty samples some of which are remedies. We give these to another homoeopathist and ask them to identify which are the remedies. To beat million to one odds you need to get all twenty correct, in a hundred trials they need seventy four right.

I might point out that every test ends up being different because every claimant seems to have a different slant on the theory behind their skills. Also a very important part of a test is a calibration session. For instance, with diviners we tell them where the water is and they confirm that their tools are working properly.

OK, I apologise for being a bit technical but, geez, you’re an intelligent audience and the only thing you have to keep in mind is that probability is not intuitive (look for the bonus amusing stuff at the end of this article). There are only two exact probability distributions: the Binomial and the Hypergeometric. The Binomial describes tossing coins, rolling dice, roulette wheels, where the odds don’t change from one trial to the next. The Hypergeometric describes dealing cards, TattsLotto and sampling where the odds change every time - once you deal an ace there are only three left.

Jason’s test was binomial. He had a one in twenty chance for each trial and there were twenty trials. What is the chance of him getting, say, five correct? Which five? Any five. The binomial says the chance is 1/20 five times, and 19/20 fifteen times, multiplied by the number of different sets of five - the number of different five card hands you could deal from a pack of twenty, if you like.

Jason’s test was actually cumulative binomial because we’re interested in the chance of getting, say, five or more correct. You get this by calculating the chance of getting
Chances, Some bits from, by James Burke, 1991, Virgin Books, London. Chance of being struck by lightning: 1 in 600, 000. [Chance of winning Tattslotto, one set of six: 1 in 8, 145, 060] You are six times more likely to die from falling over than from flying in a plane.

It is 75% riskier to drive in Japan than the USA. The chance of getting married between age 15 and 19 is 13. 8% in Greece, 8. 9% in Portugal, 8. 8% in the USA, 4. 5% in the UK, 0. 8% in France and 0. 7% in Denmark. Only 33% of people who buy waterbeds say sex is better on them. Where are you safest from circumcision? In Britain 98% of male infants escape intact, 78% in Australia, 76% in Canada and 60% in the USA. Boys have 25-30% greater risk of dying in the womb. You are 30 times more likely to die from heart disease than from a road accident.

What is my chance of getting polio? In 1950 it was 22%, today it is virtually zero.

In the UK, 26% of people over 16 have no natural teeth. Flu still poses a far greater threat than AIDS to the general population.

From 1981-91 AIDS killed 500,000 worldwide: measles killed 16 million. In the US there are 13, 000 astrologers and only 3, 000 astronomers. Baptists are much more likely to be alcoholics than Orthodox Jews. When will The Big One hit California? 50% chance in the next 25 years.

And some quotes from John Allen Paulos in Innumeracy, 1988, (Penguin), Richard Clay, Suffolk. This is a brilliant little book with lots of great stories about chance, coincidence, statistics and how they confuse and lie.

A tendency to drastically underestimate the frequency of coincidences is a prime characteristic of innumerates, ... [I note that Jung was a self-confessed innumerate. ]

Innumeracy and pseudoscience are often associated, in part because of the ease with which mathematical certainty can be invoked to bludgeon the innumerate into dumb acquiescence.

Answers to problems:
Among 23 randomly selected people the chance that two will have the same birthday is about 50%. This is not the chance that, if you were in the class, someone would have the same birthday as you. Don’t confuse the particular and the general. And for the game show, you double your chances of winning by accepting the host’s offer to change. This is so non-intuitive it takes most mathematicians a week to convince themselves of its truth.
In 1976 a Viking spacecraft orbited above the tenuous atmosphere of Mars, its instruments scanning the Martian terrain, gathering data. These data, encoded as electronic impulses, were transmitted back to Earth, to be studied by the boffins in NASA and JPL, and to be translated into pictures for a public, ever hungry for more images of our celestial neighbours.

Among those looking at the pictures were geologists from the US Geological Survey, one of whom noticed a rock formation that bore a resemblance to a giant human face staring upwards into space. Michael Carr, then leader of the Viking imaging team at USGS, thought it would be an amusing thing to show to the press, which he duly did. Since then the geological formation in the Cydonia region of Mars, an area of approximately 40 by 10 kilometres, located at 41.0° North, 350.5° East, has become one of the most widely discussed pieces of real estate in the Solar System. Dozens of books, articles, web sites and video tapes have it as their subject, coupled with many thousands of mentions on the Internet. Little did this geologist realise it at the time, but his kindly act was to be the genesis of “the face that launched a thousand cranks”.

Hardly had the first newspaper images of the face-like formation appeared, than a stream of articles began to appear, each giving more fanciful interpretations of what it might mean. Ancient Martian civilisations jostled with galaxy-faring super-species as the responsible agency, with those of a more spiritual disposition citing God and the Universal Spirit. Not content with this, other images from Viking were pored over, and pyramids, cities, roads, buildings, machinery (though not golf courses, as far as we can determine) were located in the region. Parallels with Ancient Egyptian and meso-American civilisations were drawn, with learned treatises postulating similarities in layout between the hypothesised Martian pyramids, and their very substantial Earthly counterparts. Even scientists and other Skeptics joined in the fun, finding images that bore startling resemblances to a “smiley” face, and Kermit the Frog.

Drawing an extended bow far beyond the limits of its elasticity, some “researchers”, not content with merely finding “evidence” of civilisation on Mars, now sought to speculate on what may have happened to it. Wars and seismic catastrophes were cited as among the possible causes of their demise, which some Skeptics thought was attenuating the tenuous into the ephemeral. What’s wrong with mass suicide after the Martians had become addicted to junk philosophies that rotted their critical faculties, or mass starvation after the entire population became addicted to cricket (a popular Martian ball and bat game) and stopped growing their staple foodstuff, turpins? In this sort of game, surely any fantasy is as valid as any other?

And all of this speculation stemmed from a few bits of data taken from a camera capable only of distinguishing features larger than 10 metres across.

This industry could have gone on forever, with ever more fanciful “computer enhancements” of the existing (very sparse) data, until along came Mars Observer, a probe that was designed to be the first mission to return to Mars since 1976. Launched in September 1992, and reaching the Red Planet in August 1993, this was to be the forerunner of a whole new programme of exploration of Mars. Planetary scientists were excited; conspiratologists began planning their fall-back positions.

But, by one of those incidents that tend to happen when one is dealing with an object tens of millions of kilometres removed from base, just as the orbiter’s signalling equipment was turned on, its signal was lost. A disaster
for the controllers on Earth, this was an answer to the conspiratologists’ prayers. Clearly, this was evidence that the “people in the know” in NASA had sabotaged the mission before its data could reveal the TRUTH about Mars (although why they needed to spend a billion dollars on the mission, before sabotaging it, has never been satisfactorily explained by Conspiracy, Inc). This conspiracy was given added punch by the concurrent failure of the Russian Phobos probe to one of Mars’s small satellites shortly after arriving in the vicinity. What more evidence was needed that the Grand Conspiracy was international in scope?

However, NASA had a rethink and decided to push ahead with its exploration of our planetary neighbour, using much lower cost equipment than they had used hitherto. Pathfinder reached Mars in 1997, and successfully landed its clever little robot, Sojourner, which then proceeded to investigate rocks. Geologists found the rock information invaluable: conspiratologists, seeing all sorts of artefacts in the rocks, found evidence of another conspiracy.

Then, in late 1997, Mars Global Surveyor reached the planet. It was designed to map the whole surface of Mars, with instruments whose resolution was ten times as effective as those on Viking. As the orbiter went through the complex manoeuvres needed to place it in an orbit suitable for its purposes, one of the first targets for observation was the Cydonia region. The clamouring voices from those whose fantasies had, for two decades, populated Mars with all sorts of civilised beings (all based on one photograph, remember) had been heard. NASA had bowed to popular mythology and had planned the mission bearing this in mind. Once and for all, they would reveal the TRUTH about the mysterious “Face on Mars”.

Alas! As the first pictures came in (in April 1998) the face appeared to be much less face-like than had been previously speculated. In Cydonia there appeared to be a mesa, about 2km by 1km that looked nothing like an Egyptian Pharaoh, nor a great sky god, nor even Prince Valiant (my favourite). Rather, it resembled a discarded sandshoe, or a cockroach after being treated to the attentions of a sandshoe. If the Face on Mars was supposed to represent a real face, then it was one that was in serious need of the skills of an expert cosmetic surgeon (Dr Cholm Williams please note).

However, if conspiratologists can use computers to enhance images, why should Skeptics be denied access to this useful technique? Our extensive team of experts have mined the pixels of the Surveyor image and have produced the startling picture you see here. Proof positive, we suggest, that the ancient Martians knew a thing or two when it came to scaring off unwanted visitors.

You may well ask if you can at last discard all those books and references to faces on Mars, content in the knowledge that the evidence is in, and that the conspiracy has been finally debunked? Come, come, dear reader, get a grip on yourself. You must be aware by now that in the land of conspiracy, no evidence is negative - everything is evidence in favour of the conspiracy. In the following article, Shaun Cronin (who has a stronger stomach than I do for such things) will take you through the first tentative responses of Conspiracy Inc, as it seeks to keep its delusions intact.
Recently, interest in Mars has been high since the announcement that scientists had found evidence that suggested early life on Mars in a meteorite fragment found in Antarctica, and with the success of the Pathfinder mission.

However, along with scientific speculation have come far more fanciful interpretations based on very limited data. While we have been entertained in recent years by speculations about the supposed “face” in the Cydonia region, by self-promoting “experts”, this is by no means a new phenomenon. In the last half of the 19th and early in the 20th centuries, distinguished observers such as Giovanni Schiaparelli, Camille Flammarion and Percival Lowell made much of the “canals” of Mars, and speculated on what they might say about Martian civilisation. Later, more careful research, with better equipment, indicated that these canals were artifacts of the telescopes used, filtered through impressionable minds.

The first interplanetary probes to Mars drove the final nails into the coffin of the canals (they just didn’t exist), but raised even more speculation with the discovery of an object that resembled a human face. If we hope that better evidence will dispose of these speculations, we reckon without those who hold to their conspiracy theories with a persistence the most fundamentalist religionist would envy.

Global Surveyor was sent to Mars to map the planet, with no specific mission to photograph the “Face” and other alleged “artificial structures”. However, NASA did decide that if the opportunity arose, it would use the chance to re-image the Cydonia area, where the alleged Face is located. The chance did arise and early on April 6th, NASA released the raw image from Cydonia that showed the formation that was the Face. Skeptics and True Believers (TBs) waited for the processed image to determine, once and for all (it was hoped), the validity of the claims that considered the Face to be artificial.

As soon as clear pictures based on the raw data were released, it was evident that the Face was nothing but a large mesa. No discernible artificial features could be seen from the photographs, at a resolution 10 times greater than the original Viking photographs. The skeptics had been vindicated. Yet another important section of UFO mythology had been shown to be without basis. It appeared that the True Believers would have to concede this issue at last.

While in a rational world, this would appear to be the logical sequence of events, one cannot underestimate the power of the willingness to believe. Instead of admitting that there was no Face, those with a vested interest in the validity of the Face, as well as your standard UFO TBs, cried “Cover up!” Apparently, the skeptics had been duped by the Great Conspiracy To Hide The Truth. NASA had doctored the photographs so as to make the face appear natural. The real image showed unmistakable proof that there are artificial structures on Mars.

The leading proponent of artificial structures on Mars has been Richard Hoagland, who has written books and lectured extensively on the artificiality of the Martian structures. He even claims to have developed a whole new field of physics, called Hyperdimensional Physics, from his investigations into the Face, pyramids, howitzers, Nazi insignia and other Martian anomalies. Since the new photos were released, Hoagland has been crying “Cover Up!” His web site:

http://www.enterprisemission.com features the reaction of him and others, to the new photographs. It can be summarised by the entry dated April 8th, 1998, entitled “It’s a Face!” Although looking at the picture, one would be hard pressed to see anything like a face. Since then, Hoagland’s site claims that he has found feline and sphinx like features in the original Face, a second face, a castle, Giza like geometric patterns, tetrahedral ruins, a city square and lawn furniture.

Consequently, Hoagland has appeared on The Art Bell Show (a late night American syndicated radio program that deals with the paranormal) to further his claims and to expose the Great Cover Up.

Recently, a caller to Art Bell claimed to have been a courier at the Jet Propulsion Laboratories, and to have seen the original photographs. These were the original unretouched photographs that were not released to the public, and they showed what really was on Mars. The smoking gun! The caller, who gave his name as Kent, claimed that he had the necessary security clearance needed to enter in sensitive areas of JPL, and that he had been mysteriously fired the day after seeing the photographs. The Internet rumour mills were soon abuzz with the news. It seemed that the Conspiracy was breaking apart.

A few days later “Kent” called Art Bell again and admitted it was a hoax. Hoagland had already deduced that Kent was a fraud. Not by common sense, but by using
the techniques of Reverse Speech guru, David Oates. Bell and Hoagland claimed that a reverse speech analysis of Kent had exposed his deception. The sweet irony here is that Hoagland is now hearing things as well as seeing them.

Reverse Speech proponents claim that by listening to conversations backwards, one can hear messages that betray the speakers’ subconscious thoughts. As noted in the *Skeptic* (17/3) it is a theory with little validity. Disturbingly, an article that appeared on the MSNBC website (in relation to Hoagland, Bell and Kent), alleges that there are now 30 therapists using this technique in the United States.

Since the exposure of Kent, further Reverse Speech analysis of statements by NASA spokespersons is said to provide more evidence that NASA is hiding something. Here is a transcript of part of Kent’s “confession.”

Kent: Yes but there is a bigger picture and I think some of your listeners may know what the bigger picture is.

Art: Well try us! Some listeners may know. I don’t.

What is it?

K: I think the truth really got out, the Christian fabric of our nation would be unravelled. The beliefs of the bible would be totally... Everything, like everything you have been raised up and taught to believe was sheer hogwash.

A: I’ve always embraced that possibility

K: The human mind can’t take such change. The organisation that is involved... we... me and runs me and my team is a very powerful one, and has unlimited resources and as far as anyone is concerned out there in Art Bell’s world, the truth will be known, but not in your lifetime, but in our lifetime and I can tell you beyond a shadow of doubt that what you are about to expose to the world. I do want to say this though. My superiors were very surprised, very surprised that you caught on so fast. The timeframe didn’t work out too well. I can tell you that.

One wonders why Hoagland needed help from Oates to find out that Kent was a fraud, when it seemed quite apparent from the beginning. If Kent is from some shadowy organisation whose superiors are surprised that they were exposed so quickly, then the Great Conspiracy is indeed in trouble.

The motif that the public “can’t handle the truth” is one of the persistent mantras that circulate in the UFO community. The reason for the cover-up is to prevent the collapse of civilisation that would occur if The Truth were revealed.

Not mentioned in the transcript above but an important part of Kent’s confession was the revelation that he was a “disinformation” agent. A current buzzword in Ufology, disinformation refers to false material that is circulated around as being evidence of the Greater Truth. Disinformation has sinister overtones that imply that there are organisations (basically the government) that are actively working to discredit the intrepid seekers of The Truth. Disinformation does refer to a cover-up but the cover-up is of the gullibility of the TBs. By smearing the hoaxers and tricksters as being part of a “disinformation campaign”, the gullible avoid having to accept that they were stupid enough to fall for the story in the first place. It conveniently allows personal responsibility for their gullibility to be sidestepped. Furthermore, the tagging of the false information as “disinformation” helps propagate the myth that the government is actively involved in hampering those involved in Ufology.

One researcher into the Martian anomalies, Mark Carlotto, has cautiously stated that the object “appears natural” (http://www.psrw.com/~markc/MiscArticles/ April5anal/index.html). However, Carlotto left open the possibility of artificiality with some sections of his statement. But his was the only statement by a prominent figure in that field of Ufology that more or less agreed with NASA. A recent look at his website: http://www.psrw.com/~markc/marshome.html shows that hope springs eternal. He seems to still be exploring that idea that there may still be artificial structures on Mars. In fact, fringe author, Graham Hancock, will soon release a book that claims that the recent photographs do indeed show artificial structures on Mars. Carlotto is cited to have found “nostrils” on the face via further computer enhancement.

At the time NASA released the photographs, I subscribed to two very pro-UFO Internet mailing lists. One list, a support group for those that think that they have been abducted by aliens, came to the near unanimous conclusion that NASA had faked the photographs and/or engaged in some dastardly cover-up. The evidence for this was the fact that the new photographs didn’t show a face! Someone even suggested that NASA had bombed the face into rubble and that recent photographs were evidence of such an incident.

On the other mailing list (concerned with UFOS and government cover-up), reactions were decidedly mixed. Some of the TBs held fast to the claim that NASA was hiding the truth. Some admitted that the “face” was natural, and it was time to move on. Others sat on the fence. As for Skeptics, let’s just say that while it was hard not to say “We told you so! ” we tried to conduct ourselves in a dignified manner.

Websites have also sprung up around the Internet that, by distorting the photographs through various forms of digital manipulation, show that there are strange artificial structures on Mars. Needless to say, when one looks at these so-called cities, pyramids etc, all one sees are large piles of rocks.

A criticism often levelled at Skeptics by true believers is that we have closed minds and refuse to examine the evidence. Yet, in this case, when confronted by evidence that suggests that they are wrong, the TBs dig in deeper, and perform complicated acts of rhetoric and self-deception to enable them to cling to their beliefs. Whatever hope skeptics may have had for an end to the controversy concerning artificial structures on Mars, these have been replaced by frustration in some cases, amusement in others. One wonders whether, when faced by the unreason as shown in this incident, it is ever possible to have a sensible dialogue on the issues concerning Ufology. The end result is that when the True Believers were confronted with a situation in which they could have showed that they were concerned with objectivity and credibility, they failed to exhibit either, and, what is worse, failed cheerfully and willingly.
The great 1997 Mexican UFO video

Steve Roberts

Mexico City has been the location for a UFO flap since 1991, when expectations of UFOs were fulfilled by sightings of Venus and Mars during a total solar eclipse. Hysteria has continued ever since and videos of this and other events are commonplace. UFO fans presumably roam the streets, armed with video cameras. The local TV station has been inundated with shoddy reports and pictures. The best of a bad bunch can be downloaded from the Internet

http://personal.netwrx.net/xalium/chapterhouse/mexico/mexico.htm

This file of 1.8MB shows a 24-second extract from a slightly longer home movie of a UFO hovering directly over an expensive part of Mexico City. Spinning and wobbling slightly, it suddenly takes off to the right and passes behind a tall block of flats, re-emerging above it. The film was apparently taken from another very high building, maybe 20 or 30 levels above ground. The viewpoint of the camera shakes and moves about. Four stills from the video (6 August 1997) are shown here.

Impressive by UFO standards, the quality of this film pales beside modern cinematic efforts such as are seen in the film Men in Black. (The first question I ask UFO fans these days is whether they have seen this film, or seen stills from it, and did they believe that the alien creatures shown were real, and if not, why not). Although it is not a bad try for an amateur with a video camera, basic studio and editing equipment, the following features show that this film must be a hoax.

1. The body of the UFO is generally featureless (no windows? no door?) but some indefinite markings show that it is spinning about twice per second. If this was a real object say 20 metres across, imagine the g-forces at the edge! If space aliens do eat food, vomit bags would come in handy.

2. The UFO wobbles, with a frequency about once per second, which is consistent with a small model, about 30cm diameter. If this was a large object, alarming levels of thrust and continuous input of energy would be required to drive this wobble at an unnatural frequency. The spin and wobble occur about a fixed point at the top of the UFO. When the UFO starts to move to the right, it does not tilt and the spin and wobble do not change. Also it appears to accelerate at an infinite rate -it’s stationary in one frame and moving at full speed in the next.

3. The camera shake occurs in an unnatural style, equal in vertical and horizontal directions. Although much vertical and horizontal motion occurs, the picture never tilts, even by the slightest degree. This would be almost impossible to achieve with either a fixed or a hand held camera. Also, there is too much moving about, even for a hand held camera.

4. If this was a real object hovering and flying, noise would have resulted from drive and thrust effects even if the craft itself had silent propulsion. It must have arrived on the scene and slowed to a hover somehow, or may have materialised from another dimension etc, but either way there would have been major disturbances of the hazy air above a city of 17 million people. It flew at eye level past a block of flats and a whole hillside of houses. TV and radio reception would have been severely disrupted. How come there were no corroborating reports?

5. The film starts with everything in place - no signs of frantic setting up, alignment or zooming in, and ends abruptly after 24 seconds. The UFO was going along just nicely in full view, what happened next? Did the cameraman wish to save videotape?

6. Finally the UFO does pass behind a block of flats, emerging neatly over the top, but this is a well-known trick accomplished in studios since the invention of colour film (and done far better, for example in the latest re-make of The Man in the Iron Mask). What has clearly happened is hat someone suspended a model UFO in front of a blue background, spun it up in order to blur some rough details on the model, and filmed it. This film was then merged with footage of the block of flats against a blue sky from another stationary camera, and finally the composite picture of UFO going behind the flats was edited to add apparent camera movement, or screened indoors and re-filmed from a hand held camera.

The Mexican TV station that screened this film said it was the best of the 5, 000 videos they had received so far. Imagine what the other 4, 999 must be like? No wonder there has been no scientific analysis of the video, even by UFO groups.
The rogue bore

Michael Creech

In August last year, the mining company I work for (Powercoal) had 13 drilling rigs of various sizes operating on its leases across NSW. Of these, 12 were drilling with the company’s knowledge and under its jurisdiction, but this is the story of the 13th, which involves deception, intrigue, dark mysterious foreigners, religious mysticism, as well as geology, all set in downtown Charmhaven on the Central Coast of NSW.

I was returning from a visit from one of the known drilling operations and spotted what looked suspiciously like the mast of a drill-rig poking above warehouses in an industrial site off the old Pacific Highway at Charmhaven.

I drove in, unannounced, and found it was indeed a drill-rig owned by a respected contractor in the area. I enquired of the driller what was going on, and was informed that the hole had started a month ago, had reached 360 metres in depth, and was targeted to drill to 1000 metres. I found the core (the long sticks of rock which are recovered) lying out the back, uncovered, and degrading rapidly. This core included the seam which nearby Munmorah Colliery was mining, at a depth of approximately 250 metres. I took some photos and measurements and, before leaving, advised the driller that he may soon be hearing from the Colliery and the Department of Mineral Resources regarding his operation.

Within two hours this was indeed the turn of events, with the District Inspector of Mines ordering the operation to cease immediately. Upon surveying the hole it was found that it was located only 150 metres away from an active extraction panel of Munmorah Colliery. This same colliery undermined the site in March this year, so this illegal drilling operation was close, not only in space, but also in time, to endangering the lives of those working underground.

It was revealed that an Indonesian company was responsible and it had applied for a mineral lease but, before receiving a reply from the Department of Mineral Resources, had commenced drilling. This company also held the freehold. The drilling contractor had enquired of the operator if all was in order, and commenced drilling on their assurances. There was a rumour around the locality that the operator had used the services of a fortune-teller, who had predicted a precious stone existed a kilometre under the property.

I subsequently lobbied the Colliery Manager to allow them to continue their drill hole under our guidance (but at their cost) as we had scant information regarding deeper seams in the area (and besides I could see a Skeptic article in the making). After a month of negotiations, and various safety requirements being implemented, drilling recommenced in September. During these negotiations we were informed that the aim of their operation was to train Indonesian nationals as drillers, and to test the contractor’s drill-rigs before their purchase and utilisation back in Indonesia. These stated aims, however, sat uncomfortably with their oft-stated 1 kilometre target, though this was initially assumed to have been part of the testing programme on the capacity of the drill-rigs.

So the hole went deeper, intersecting the remaining seams of the Newcastle Coal Measures, and into the underlying Tomago Coal Measures. At 935 metres they intersected the Kulnura Marine Tongue, which comprises dark grey marine shales. They were still in these shales at their target depth, which was unfortunate as these shales would be the most boring of strata in which to be looking for precious stones. Embedded in these shales were occasional glendonites, which are crystal structures that grow on cold sea floor muds. Three of these were present near 1000 metres, but when I came to record them some days later, they had disappeared.

The following week it was revealed that the operator had decided the “target” must be deeper, so the hole’s depth would now be extended to 1200 metres. Target? This target was taking on a mystical quality. So they recovered another 200 metres of dark grey marine shales with occasional glendonites. They then had the hole surveyed to find that it had deviated by 12 metres to the NNW. Now this is an excellent result, representing a deviation of one degree or less, and well within normal drilling expectations.

However they had missed the target. In December 1997, they cemented back up to 600 metres, deviated the hole and used a downhole tool to try to straighten the hole. At 1000 metres they were still in dark grey shales, with occasional glendonites. A resurvey of the hole found that it had now deviated by 10 metres to the NE. They had missed the target again.

It was now February 1998 and the imminent undermining of the site meant that drilling had to cease, and the hole cemented. After seven months and, say, $200,000, exploration had failed to recover anything precious, though they had indeed found plenty of coal (not so precious lately). In the latter stages, not much training was seen to be done and, indeed, the driller and his offsider were generally found by me to be working on their own. Curiosity reached a point where I just had to ask the burning question. I found my opportunity one afternoon during a synopsis of events. After some hesitation, I was told they were looking for pink jade which allegedly has religious significance for Muslims. They had a model for its occurrence at 1000 metres depth, with its lateral dimensions being less than 10 metres in either direction (hence the concern about deviation).

I suggested that a more scientific approach might find...
The hoax is on us
Glenn Cardwell

Rumours often take on a life of their own, especially if they have a nasty streak. Some have attempted to achieve underground fame with their own brand of rumour: the nutrition hoax. The nutrition hoax should not be confused with the nutrition rip-off. The hoax is designed to create fear and confusion without direct financial gain. The rip-off merchant is in it only for the money. Permit me to describe some examples.

World’s No1 carcinogen
Despite being approved as a food additive in many countries, citric acid has occasionally been accused of causing cancer. Why? The story all started back in 1974, according to Arnold Bender, Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of London. A letter, allegedly from a Paris hospital, listed 139 food additives, with citric acid being described as the most dangerous carcinogen of all.

The letter received media attention, and public concern spread so rapidly that the French Minister of Agriculture had to make a statement to the Senate in July 1976, to explain that citric acid was perfectly harmless and they were trying to find the perpetrator of the hoax. The story persisted and spread through Europe and Australia, making regular resurfacings over the last 20 years.

Citic acid (additive code 330) is a food additive occurring naturally in many fruits such as oranges, lemons, strawberries, pears, pineapple, tomatoes and bananas. Its tartness counterbalances the sweetness of sugar, and enhances the natural flavours in a variety of products, such as fruit-flavoured soft drinks.

Citic acid is widely used in such food products as soft drinks, toppings, confectionery, cordials, jams, marmalade, dessert products and pickles. It works synergistically with other antioxidants to stop food from going rancid and spoiling. The amount added to food is generally less than the amount consumed as fruit.

“Considering the amount of citric acid consumed from natural resources, it is unlikely that its use as an additive will have any significant effect on health” says Mark Wahlqvist, then Professor of Human Nutrition at Deakin University, in his book Eating Matters. Professor Bender agrees. “Of all the substances that can be described as ‘natural and harmless’, the one that most merits these titles is citric acid. It is not only present in most fruits, especially the citrus fruits from which it gets its name, but is also produced in every cell in the human body”.

A reminder here that citric acid is a metabolite in the body’s process of converting glucose to energy. Indeed, Hans Krebs (1900-81) received a Nobel Prize in 1953 for describing the Citric Acid Cycle, now often referred to as the Krebs Cycle, underlying citric acid’s essential role in life.

Chemical disaster
Dihydrogen monoxide (DHMO) is another chemical that has produced a recent scare. DHMO is described as a legal industrial solvent and coolant, fire retardant and a major component of acid rain.

There is no scientific doubt that accidental inhalation of DHMO causes many deaths each year. The argument for banning DHMO became quite emotional, when it was revealed that even young children had died when they had inhaled or had been burned by DHMO.

Dismissing the compelling evidence of deaths directly attributable to DHMO, both the US and Australian governments refused to ban or restrict it, allowing its continued use in food preparation and as a food additive. It is still used in animal experiments and waste management plants.

This was another hoax, but a hoax to remind us how easy it is to be a victim of hoaxes. In this case, everything claimed about DHMO was absolutely true. It was the deliberately fearful tone of the information that threw everyone off. DHMO is, as its name implies, a compound of two hydrogens and one oxygen, otherwise known as H2O, or just plain water. It created enough fear for concerned US citizens to petition their congressmen demanding the banning of DHMO.

Three days of misery
My last example is the hoax diet, of which there have been two spectacular specimens. I was first asked to comment on the Heart Foundation’s Three Day Diet program in a radio interview in October 1986, I then being an employee of the Heart Foundation. This photocopied, 900 calorie a day, plan had already done the rounds of the US and Britain as the Miami Heart Hospital 3 Day Diet and the British Heart Foundation 3 Day Diet, with both institutions pronouncing it a hoax through their media.

It claims to shed 10lb in three days, something usually only achieved by visiting the subcontinent. (Note: weight loss should always be expressed in pounds, while weight gain feels more comfortable when expressed in kilos). This diet sheet is still photocopied and distributed between friends, twelve years later. Every copy I have seen has been poorly typed or formatted with no letterhead nor contact details, yet people express great surprise to learn it hasn’t been produced by the Heart Foundation.

“But it works” declared Mr J Public at a seminar. “So will a six pack of beer daily (900 cal), providing you don’t eat any food” is my unimpressed reply.

It is still a difficult concept to most that weight loss comes from permanent healthy changes to food choices, rather than becoming the occasional devotee of some WWII prisoner-of-war menu.

Unlike the Three Day Diet which seems to be
The physics of smashing bricks on a body, on a bed of nails

Dave Wheeler

In the last issue (p43) we showed a picture of Dr Dave Wheeler being subjected to an assault by hammer, while lying on a bed of nails. In the item, we referred to the wielder of the hammer as “her”, but Dave assures us it was a male Thai radio programme host doing the hitting. We apologise for this error. We have also received some questions about how Dave achieved his feat of remarkable stoicism, and here is his response.

Physics problems often start “A body of mass m is . . .” except in this case the body is yours, so it makes the problem much more interesting.

There are three issues here:

*the bricks are (relatively) heavy - so they don’t move much when hit by a fast moving hammer, even if they don’t break.
*the (human) body is a (relatively) soft, spongy thing - so there is a natural “cushioning” effect, meaning the bricks take a longish time to stop moving, so less force is needed to stop them moving than to start them moving.
*there are many nails - so the contact area is fairly large - which means the pressure is (relatively) low and so you feel low pain.

So you don’t need years of practice/meditation/ good living, etc, but you do need:

*heavy bricks [adding more looks bad, but actually is better for you.]
*lots of nails [too few and you’ll get skewered - again more looks bad.]

In more technical terms, with equations,

*heavy bricks mean low brick acceleration (a):

\[ a = \frac{F}{m} \]

or, in words,

\[ a = \text{the force (F) supplied [by the hammer] / mass (m) of bricks}, \]

so the larger the mass of the bricks, the smaller is “a” and hence the smaller the momentum build up that your body has to stop.

*a non rigid (human) body means it takes a longish time to stop the moving bricks and therefore the force needed to stop the bricks \([f, \text{ not the same as F}]\) is low:

\[ f = \frac{d(mv)}{dt} \]

or, in words,

\[ f = \text{change in momentum /time taken to stop the bricks moving}, \]

so for a given amount of momentum [supplied by the hammerer], biggish t means smallish f.

*the more nails you have the bigger the effective area to supply the force (f) to stop the bricks moving and so the lower the pressure on your body:

\[ P = \frac{f}{A} \]

or, in words,

\[ \text{Pressure} = \text{force/area} \]

It is the pressure that makes the difference. Pressure causes you pain. Try pushing your index finger as hard as you can into the palm of your hand. Now again push as hard as you can, but this time push on a needle. Both forces were the same, but the pressures were different.

So there you have it - the full long winded version. Hope it helps!

...Hoax from previous page

perpetually available, the Cabbage Soup Diet has cropped up in a photocopy frenzy only twice to my knowledge. Its last airing, in 1996, received media attention because Arnie Schwarzenegger was said to be on it (‘Flatus the Barbarian’?). It was even published in the West Australian newspaper. My letter accusing the newspaper of nutritional irresponsibility and misogyny (it was in the ‘women’s section’) drew no response from the section’s female editor. This magical fat-burning soup had no link to the Sacred Heart Memorial Hospital Diet in the US, as was claimed. In fact, the hospital got a little peeved with the constant requests for the diet. “I don’t know why it won’t die. I guess because it sounds like a miracle” said their head dietician, Elaine Reid.

It is comforting to know that there is enough silliness in nutrition to keep me both amused and employed.

...Rogue bore from p 36

more attractive targets (outside colliery workings), however, on reflection, the operator said that he believed the precious stone was located directly below the drill-rig. This belief tended to confirm the rumour that the target site was selected by some mystical process.

Our intrepid explorers are proceeding with their mineral claim, and appear willing to wait for the colliery to close to enable them to continue drilling.

The kindliest interpretation that can be placed on the whole episode is that they had several sites for a drill training programme, and that the fortune teller merely assisted in site selection. However other conclusions also spring to mind. I have suggested to the Colliery Manager that we explore for jade, as it would appear far more lucrative and fashionable than coal mining!

My question. Can anyone out there throw more light onto the religious significance of such rocks?
The Lead balloon

Richard Lead

A new feature in which tax expert, Richard Lead, discusses “get rich quick” and other financial schemes, that have little or no paranormal content, but which rely on similar levels of gullibility. Richard hopes to start some arguments in these pages.

Kiss your money goodbye

Readers may have heard the expression “Ponzi Scheme”, but perhaps do not know its origin. Ponzi Schemes pop out of the woodwork on a regular basis. It seems inconceivable people still fall victim.

Charles A Ponzi (1882 - 1949) was a penniless Italian immigrant to Canada in 1903. He was soon jailed for three years for forgery. In 1910 he travelled to the United States and, within ten days, was charged with smuggling illegal immigrants and was jailed for two years in Atlanta.

On his release he acted in various humble jobs - dishwasher, waiter - until drifting to Boston in 1920. Here he commenced a get-rich-quick scheme which, although by no means original to him, now bears his name.

A Ponzi Scheme is simplicity itself. Simply pay investors preposterously high returns. In his case, he paid 50% on invested funds every 45 days, at a time when banks were paying around 3% per annum. How is this possible? The early investors tell their friends of their smart and lucrative investment, and the friends themselves become investors. The deposits of the second group of investors become the interest payments of the first group of investors. The deposits of the third group ... (readers of the Skeptic will intuitively predict the sequence). If the victims understood basic accounting principles, and could distinguish a purported monthly income stream from the reality of a partial monthly return of capital, Ponzi Schemes could not happen. Physicists will recognise a Ponzi Scheme as the financial equivalent of a perpetual motion machine.

The hook is always disguised with tasty bait, and to justify the high returns a plausible story must be concocted. In post World War I Europe, currencies were in turmoil. All had depreciated against the US dollar. Ponzi advised potential investors he was using investors’ funds to buy depreciated European currencies, and using those currencies to purchase postal reply coupons. When those coupons were transferred to America they were then redeemed at face value, producing an annual profit of 400%. Nice bait - but any potential investor who undertook the most basic due diligence would have discovered this was simply impossible. Forty thousand people failed to undertake this due diligence and lost US$15 million (and what this is worth in 1998 Australian Pesos doesn’t bear thinking about). The only whimsical thing about this scam is the single factor which slowed it down - in the technology-deficient 1920s, Ponzi’s 35 employees literally couldn’t count investors' cash fast enough to keep the scheme growing.

Ponzi’s supporters claimed he was the greatest Italian in history: “Columbus discovered America, Marconi discovered radio, Ponzi discovered money.” As they always do, this Ponzi Scheme collapsed. Ponzi was jailed until 1934. He died in 1949 in the charity ward of a hospital in Brazil. The man who was photographed, surrounded by tables literally stacked high with money, left an estate of $75 - a sum insufficient to pay even his own funeral.

And what, the reader may well ask, does this have to do with Australia in 1998? I was hoping someone would ask that question.

In my profession I see new Ponzi Schemes regularly. They pop up in unexpected places, and a future article for the Skeptic on the Australian life insurance industry will illustrate how easily this scam is implemented.

In January this year a firm of accountants instructed me to investigate the Wattle Group. I had not previously heard of such an organisation. This accounting firm has a client (a 59 year old widow) who invested $25,000 in the Wattle Group. Her 16 year old son invested his savings of $10,000, plus borrowings (from his mother) of a further $10,000 into the Wattle Group. These investments were made following the recommendations of a Licensed Investment Adviser. The investment carried a promised interest of 50% per annum. When the hair on the back of my neck resumed its previous position, I phoned the Licensed Investment Adviser and listened to representations of the business activities of the Wattle Group, which make the “postal reply coupons” bait in the original Ponzi seem plausible in comparison.

I was told by this Investment Adviser that the Wattle Group borrowed money from the public at 50% per annum. It then used these funds to lend to (among others) borrowers who needed to pay the stamp duty on their recent property purchases - borrowers willing to pay 15% per month on the loan. I mean, we have all done this, haven’t we? Borrowed money from loan sharks to pay the stamp duty on the purchase of our homes. The Adviser did admit to me he is familiar with the expression “this investment is unsuitable for widows and orphans.”

Recent media reports indicate the advisers who secured investors to the Wattle Group, received commissions of up to 50% of the funds invested. This commission was not disclosed to the client. Accepting a secret commission is a breach of the Crimes Act and carries a custodial sentence.

It is obvious a 50% commission paid on borrowed...
funds, followed by a 50% annual interest payment on the remainder requires an underlying profitability of 100% per annum to break even.

My advice was for the widow to immediately attempt to withdraw her investment. The Wattle Group collapsed before she could do this, and before she and her son had received a single monthly interest payment.

The person behind the Wattle Group is a character named Geoffrey Dexter. To circumvent the consumer protection provisions of our corporate laws, which among other requirements oblige companies to present potential investors with a prospectus, investors in the Wattle Group were persuaded to make unsecured personal loans to Geoffrey Dexter. Would you lend money - unsecured - to a person who spent 8 months in jail in 1980 for fraud, who became a bankrupt in 1989, and whose 1989 bankruptcy Statement of Affairs showed a liability to the Department of Social Security of $10,000 for overpaid benefits? Some 2,700 trusting souls did this very thing, to the tune of $155,801,495. Preliminary estimates of assets available to repay these investors range from $36.4 million (best case recovery) to $6.3 million (worst case). Investors’ funds were not lent to the public at 15% per month as claimed but were lent unsecured and undocumented - to entities associated with Geoffrey Dexter. The money has simply evaporated.

It seems many of the 2,700 investors are members of the Australian Federal Police, a group who, of all people, should be skeptical of anything promising a 50% return. Like Ponzi’s victims, none of Wattle’s investors felt the need to undertake a due diligence and can now kiss their money goodbye.

Why do people fall for Ponzi Schemes, Nigerian letter scams, and similar financial flights of fancy? Perhaps the noble Editor can coax one of our psychologists to write a paper on the psychology of money. Or perhaps the aphorism A Fool And His Money is adequate explanation.

A Multi-level tax rort

The life of a tax consultant is hardly exciting. Day after day spent reading impenetrable legislation and turgid Court reports. It is a life of piles and ruined eyesight, but the daily shilling makes it worthwhile. Occasionally something of interest pops up to brighten my day. This happened in 1977, and again this year, when I stumbled upon the following Amway case. (In 1977, if I recall correctly, my amusement was triggered by a superannuation fund trust deed containing a spelling mistake).

In 1996 the Administrative Appeals Tribunal assessed the claim by an Amway distributor that he was engaged in a business. In the financial year concerned he purchased Amway products for a total cost of $2, 944.70. He claimed a tax deduction for his Amway losses totalling $10,454. His original claim was higher but he withdrew before the Tribunal a claim for overseas travel! And what was his total Amway sales for the year in question? $9.15.

For reasons which I can only speculate upon, Amway of Australia does not agree with the ATO’s stance and the ATO is being forced to take test cases before the Administrative Appeals Tribunal and possibly the Federal Court. This may take years and in the meanwhile the erosion of Australia’s exhausted tax base continues. I am not aware of any other multinational company taking a personal interest in the income tax status of its associates. Could the promise of inflated tax refunds form part of Amway’s recruiting spiel?

Post Script

After completing the above article for the Skeptic I heard the Chinese government (in late April 1998) has banned Amway in that country. It seems a large number of people in China lost money they could scarcely afford to lose.

Notes

1 Case 47/96, 96 ATC 463
2 Dangerous Persuaders - An expose of gurus, personal development courses and cults, and how they operate in Australia. Louise Samways, (Penguin Books). The author devotes two pages to the Moonies and four pages to Amway.
3 As advised by a letter to all Tax Agents
4 ATO’s Tax Agent Circular, November 1997
Back in 1994, biologist Paul Gross and mathematician Norman Levitt wrote a ferociously critical book on what they regarded as a dangerous tendency in academia. Titled *Higher Superstition*, the book alleged that large numbers of left-wingers in academia had abandoned the idea of a search for truth. Instead, they were pushing the idea of ‘perspectivism’, the assumption that truth is not absolute, but varies from person to person. So women might have different truths from men, blacks from whites, non-western people from westerners and so on. This idea appears under many different titles, including ‘alternativism’ and ‘post modernism’.

The perspectivist approach was well meant, and sounds democratic, but Gross and Levitt pointed out some of its horrific consequences. Science, with all its experiments and observations, becomes merely one truth among many. People knowing little or nothing about science -or any field -can pontificate about it without fear of challenge. After all, their views are their ‘truth’. In addition, any sort of sceptical or critical thought disappears: if you and I have different truths, there is no way to decide who is right and who is wrong. Finally, there is no universal concept of reason: what is rational for one person may be nonsense for another.

*Higher Superstition* had quite an impact, and this volume represents the logical next step. At a conference in New York, academics and experts from a range of disciplines explained and criticised the impact of this ‘flight from science and reason’. This large volume is the proceedings of that conference, plus some extra papers and an introduction by Gross. There are 42 papers, organised under headings like Health, Environment, Feminisms, Religion and Education. The authors form a distinguished group, included among whom are a Nobel Prizewinner and CSICOP founder, Paul Kurtz.

A collection like this has some big advantages. The reader can see how, across the board, ideas of ‘many truths’ are affecting our intellectual life. Medicine is the area under strongest challenge, with whole industries of ‘alternative’ and ‘complementary’ practitioners seeking equal status with doctors. In the humanities, the many truths doctrines are now predominant. This has had bizarre consequences in some unexpected areas. Consider Shakespeare’s masterpiece *King Lear*, for instance. No original manuscript of the play exists. There are two early versions, with roughly equal claims to be considered ‘the’ *King Lear*, but they differ by several hundred lines. Scholars have laboured for centuries to reconcile the two into a single best version. The new doctrines, though, have led to an unexpected result: the Oxford University Press collection of Shakespeare’s works has two *King Lear*s! (many truths, many versions . . .)

Many of the contributors stress that the new doctrines are unprecedented. Marxists and creation scientists certainly criticise our current concepts of science and reason, but they do not want to dispose of them. They believe that their ideas are better. By contrast, under the new view, science and reason are ‘de-throned’ in a Babel of incommensurable viewpoints. This collection gives a broad view of these alarming developments.

The book also has drawbacks. Some are unavoidable given the format, others should have been addressed. A major irritation is the very uneven standard. Some pieces are well-written, with valuable ideas and findings. Others are vague summaries of major works, or odd thoughts loosely strung together. Yet others are dense technical pieces where the non-specialist simply will not understand what is being said. The style varies too: philosopher Mario Bunge refers to these new thinkers as ‘intellectual slobs and frauds’ and wants them expelled from academia. Other writers are restrained and polite.

Another problem is that some of the papers are simply not on the topic. Theologian Langdon Gilkey attacks fundamentalism as the major threat to America today, while Eugenie Scott points to the latest tactics by fundamentalism’s ‘scientific’ arm., creation science. Both papers are well-argued, but off the issue. Fundamentalists do not believe in many truths. In their view there is exactly one truth-theirs!

Finally, for Australian readers, parts of the book are not relevant simply because they relate to America. We have no counterpart to the African Studies theory that Western civilisation is founded upon African culture. (Why? Because the ancient Egyptians were black Africans, and the Greeks stole their knowledge. Or so it is claimed. ). Nor are the arguments over American museum exhibitions and school syllabi likely to be of much concern. On the other hand, if you are at all interested in the academic battles over science and reason, you will certainly find at least a few papers of interest, and maybe a large number. I especially enjoyed Martin Lewis’s vigorous attack on environmental radicalism, and also Janet Radcliffe Richards’s elegant demonstration that there can never be enough reasons to switch to a feminist epistemology.

I suggest all Skeptics should look at this book and, if there seems enough in it to interest them, buy it.
The bulldog breed
James Gerrand


Thomas Huxley’s “bark” through his popular lectures and “bite” through his articles, propagating and defending the theory of evolution, earned him the title of “Darwin’s bulldog”. Desmond’s biography details this, but also much more.

Of particular significance to Skeptics was how, in Huxley’s lifetime (1825-1895), science and technology not only developed England as the world’s leading industrial power, but also developed its democracy culminating with the Reform Bill of 1867.

Another revelation is the part Australia played in Huxley’s life. He met his wife to be in Sydney whilst assistant surgeon on HMS Rattlesnake, the ship sent to survey the Barrier Reef and East New Guinea waters, to make them safe for British shipping. Whilst so employed the Rattlesnake carried the explorer Edmund Kennedy and his party to explore Cape York Peninsula. Huxley was tempted to join this ill-fated expedition, whose members were later killed by an Aboriginal tribe.

Born into an impoverished family -his father’s school failing when ten year-old Thomas had had only two years of schooling -he, at an early age, decided the way to rise out of poverty was through education into a scientific career. England in the 1840s was beginning to apply science to industry, to become the world’s industrial leader.

It was the age of steam power in factories and transport. Thomas sought a medical career by starting as a drug-grinder’s apprentice. At 15 he was selling his medicinal drugs to the poor in the London dockside, but realised the drugs were useless to people suffering from slow starvation. Welfare and education were needed to overcome the terrible conditions.

Huxley set his sights on entering University College in London, the Dissenting alternative to Oxford and Cambridge. At nights and weekends, reading textbooks, he educated himself to such an extent that he enrolled at 16. At 17 he won a free place at Charing Cross Hospital. Here he developed his scientific skills and interest in the all-pervading unity of life, and published his first scientific item. The Medical Gazette reported his discovery of a new membrane in human hair. On graduating at 21, he joined the Royal Navy as an assistant surgeon, where he could get paid, practise his medicine in the sickbay, and his science in his spare time.

Somewhat parallel to Darwin’s use of his three years life on HMS Beagle to collect evidence for evolution, Huxley spent four years aboard HMS Rattlesnake as Assistant Surgeon, dissecting jellyfish and related ocean fauna, to establish scientific knowledge and promote his career.

He found his love, Henrietta Heathorn, in Sydney, but it would be eight years after their engagement, including five years of separation after Huxley’s return to England, before he was in a financial position to marry.

In these five years, building on his reputation from his scientific work aboard the Rattlesnake and working incredible hours, he became a leading science lecturer, was awarded a Fellowship of the Royal Society, a paid writer for journals and books, appointed lecturer at the Government School of Mines, and the paid Naturalist to the Board of Trade to assess Britain’s marine resources.

His public lectures drew crowds of a thousand or more, many from the working classes, whose interest in science and technology had been developed by the Mechanics Institutes of the time. We could do with such enthusiasm for science in our modern world.

The Huxleys had five children but lost their first born at three to scarlet fever, putting Henrietta into depression for five months, and making Thomas hope for a future day when medicine would find a cure. Darwin’s parallel loss of his first-born daughter at nine made for his final loss of any religious faith -“How could a benevolent God destroy such a perfect child?”

Huxley took some time to accept Darwin’s theory of evolution when it was first published. Darwin’s thoughts on how pigeons had been developed into many strains by bird fanciers was queried, Huxley pointing out that they were all still of the one species. The idea of evolution, instead of creation, had been under discussion for some decades, particularly amongst the Lamarkians (evolution by acquired characteristics), Dissenters and deists. It took the detailed observational evidence of Darwin and Wallace to establish the theory of evolution. Darwin regarded Huxley as a “wonderful man”.

Darwin was so worried about the reaction of the religious establishment to his theory of evolution that he made no claim for man being descended from apes in his first book The Origin of Species. Huxley had no such qualms, and became the chief promoter of evolution. He received lasting fame for his rejoinder, at an Oxford debate, to Bishop Wilberforce’s sarcastic query whether the apes were on Huxley’s grandfather’s or grandmother’s side. Huxley replied; “…would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather, or a man . . . who employs (his) faculties and influence for . . . introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion, then I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape”.

continued p 45...
Costly upsets about next-to-nothing

Colin Keay


Here is an enjoyable read for Skeptics, those who place a high value on critical thinking, and like to apply it to the many controversial issues of our time.

Of course *What Risk?* can’t deal with all the pressing issues - it’s not an encyclopaedia. It focuses a critical analysis on some of those hazards to humankind that have been blown out of all proportion to the actual level of the danger they present.

In purely economic terms it makes little sense for legislators to pass laws requiring the expenditure of as much as $2.5 billion per life saved, when that same sum could save tens of thousands of lives if spent more wisely. It is the politics of fear, driven by a grossly distorted public perception of risk. And that, according to Michael Dobbs (*Times*, 13. 9. 95), is because “Militant pressure groups . . . rush to judgement, exaggerating their case, and expressing themselves in simplistic terms designed for easy headlines. They undermine both balanced decision-making and parliamentary democracy.”

The editor, Roger Bate, is the Director (and one of the founders) of the European Science and Environment Forum, an independent, non-profit alliance of scientists, established in 1994 to inform the public, in a nonpartisan manner, about scientific debates. A primary role is to provide balance on scientific issues through an independent voice to the media, the general public, and educators. Twenty members of ESEF (including the editor) have directed their expertise to a penetrating evaluation of the actual hazards presented by the headline-grabbing topics, where public debate has been crippled by misinformation and unjustifiable extrapolations of danger.

This last point is made time and again throughout *What Risk?* In their chapter on asbestos, Etienne Fournier and Marie-Louise Efthymiou bluntly state “Linear extrapolation to zero is an unscientific methodology whose social consequences are so immense that it warrants unconditional elimination.” They argue that, in clinical toxicology, induced effects diminish as dose is reduced until, ultimately, a dose is reached where no effect can be detected (this, of course, is the exact opposite of the junk science of homeopathy). It applies in the case of low exposure to asbestos fibres, where medical observations were often distorted. In consequence many companies, institutions, and government agencies spent enormous sums of money mitigating a very unlikely hazard. In their penetrating examination of the hazards of asbestos exposure, and the medical research which magnified the dangers, Fournier and Efthymiou head a section of their chapter with a cautionary “. . . we must avoid publishing in medicine that which is medical nonsense.”

This is not only true in medical publishing. The next chapter by Joan Munby and Donald Weetman, on Benzene and Leukaemia again draws attention to the perils of linear extrapolation to zero of real high-level dangers. This theme recurs in chapter after chapter, on topics such as dioxin, environmental tobacco smoke, pollution, pesticides, and cancer, mad cow disease and of particular interest to me, radiation.

Professor Zbigniew Jaworowski from Poland examines the effects of radiation exposure on living organisms and notes that the by-products of normal metabolism - superoxides, hydrogen peroxide and the hydroxyl radical - are the same oxidative mutagens as produced by radiation. The human body copes with these in its stride, through such antioxidants as vitamins C and E in amounts provided by a reasonable diet of fruit and vegetables.

In another chapter, James Wilson points out that DNA repair mechanisms deal with as many as 10, 000 defects each day, in every cell in our body! Professor Jaworowski discusses the mounting evidence for radiation hormesis effects, which show that, within the range of natural global exposure to radioactivity, the effect is beneficial. He even cites research that indicates that shielding an organism from ionising radiation is detrimental to health. I must say I’m not surprised: deficiency diseases have been known for some time in the case of essential elements, such as selenium, cobalt and arsenic, which are highly toxic in large doses. Professor Jaworowski concludes with data showing quite clearly that many so-called radiation victims are in fact healthier than those not exposed. In the case of the Chernobyl evacuees, their forced relocation may have caused more medical ill-effects than their radiation dose.

In addition to discussions of specific hazards, *What Risk?* has some enlightening essays on topics such as biases in exposure assessments, coping with medical disasters, decisions by governments on environmental issues, and the perception of risk by the public and the media. It is a most timely volume (some would say overdue) and should be on the shelves of every serious library. At all levels of government, for both politicians and civil service advisers, it should be required reading. Then, and only then, might we see the dawning of healthy scepticism in the ranks of those who govern us.
.... to the brink of destruction

Colin Keay


“For some people . . . the highly technological world in which they find themselves represents a threat of monumental proportions to human health.” This is the dire warning to readers on the first page of the preface, setting the tone for the chapters that follow, in which the authors point sinister fingers at many of the advances in science and technology alleging, when they reach their concluding paragraphs, that “by blindly implementing changes in nature whose disruptive consequences we have failed to anticipate, we have brought ourselves to the brink of destruction.”

Although the authors acknowledge that the “average-income person of today is probably surrounded by more comforts, conveniences and luxuries than most of the kings and queens of previous centuries” the “price paid for some of these conveniences is not only high, but also a well-kept secret.” These quotes from the introduction say a great deal about the approach maintained throughout this book: pandering to paranoias about our lifestyle, alarming hypochondriacs and suggesting conspiracy theories that conceal deadly hazards from those of us silly enough to enjoy our high standard of living.

Each of the seventeen chapters of gloom and doom are bolstered by pages of references, 51 in all, which cite countless studies, surveys and reports chosen to be persuasive to lay-persons not aware of contrary findings, which don’t get much of a mention. Of course some of the matters raised are recognised as harmful to health, such as the use of leaded petrol which is being phased out otherwise. However the number of technological advances which ultimately prove to be hazardous -despite for that reason. However the number of technological advances whose disruptive consequences we have failed to anticipate, we have brought ourselves to the brink of destruction.”

How many times do Institutes of Physics, National Science Academies and even Chemical Societies have to conduct extensive investigations of putative dangers from electromagnetic fields, to find instances of harm either irreproducible or flawed, and to issue considered verdicts that there is no hazard, provided recommended safety levels are not exceeded, before this bogey is finally blown away? Of course the magnificent irony here is the plethora of alternative health merchants claiming electromagnetic treatments at this frequency or that will cure all manner of ailments!

The next two sections deal with food (5 chapters) and water (2 chapters) technologies. I have little expertise as a chemist (one of the authors, John Ashton, is chief chemist for a major Australian food company) so I would be severely disadvantaged as a reviewer if it were not for a splendid prize-winning book *The Consumer’s Good Chemical Guide* written by a fellow chemist, John Emsley, who four years ago compiled a nearperfect antidote to the *Perils of Progress*. Practically every alarmist pronouncement by Ashley and Laura is neutralised, or at least blunted, by Emsley’s easily readable account of the remarkable benefits chemistry has brought to humanity. There were times, in fact, when I found myself wondering if the two books were dealing with the same chemicals, especially where pesticides and herbicides were under discussion. Also, a worthy rebuttal of the hazards of low levels of radiation and toxic chemicals is to be found in *What Risk? Science and Politics of Public Health*, edited by Roger Bate (see review previous page). It should be in all good libraries to counter scaremongering books such as the one under review.

When it comes to dangerous chemicals, the authors seem unaware that a great many, including organochlorides and dioxins, have always existed in nature. Plants produce their own pesticides to help protect themselves. We consume them every time we eat our vegetables. Human beings evolved in the presence of chemical and radiation hazards and have developed exquisite defensive mechanisms for cell repair and replacement when faced with them. We are not as vulnerable as Ashton and Laura would have us believe. If their doleful assertions are true it is hard to see why we
don’t all perish early in our lives.

The 3-chapter section on environmental technology is a mixed bag. The chapter on the hazards of air-conditioning makes some useful points. It took an outbreak of legionnaires disease to alert authorities to problems with recirculating systems. However the spate of warnings seem rather extreme: not to read fresh magazines indoors (because of toluene release), nor use waterbased paints (which release nasty volatile organic compounds, and for good measure the authors believe that wrong colours can cause health problems which are “not negligible” ), nor shower in a closed bathroom with chlorinated water (due to chloroform release). I ask you? Next the authors reveal the perils of artificial lighting. They make it appear that only pre-historic cavedwellers were safe from the biorhythm upsets caused by unnatural lighting.

Then follows the only chapter in the whole book where I thoroughly agree with Ashton and Laura. Titled the Sounds of Technology, the chapter says little that is new, because loss of hearing (boilermaker’s syndrome) has been well-known for decades. There is no doubt about it: following continuous exposure to high sound levels, loss of hearing is permanent.

The concluding chapter in The Perils of Progress is nothing but doom and gloom. “The crisis in health and the environment confronts us starkly. Despite the best efforts of medical and scientific technology, the increasing incidence of chronic diseases such as cancer, along with the accelerating deterioration of our environment, stand as reminders that the Utopia envisioned by our scientist forebears has not been achieved.”

Never mind that Australians are living longer. Never mind that science has doubled or trebled the productivity of our soil so we can feed more people. Never mind that a considerable fraction of the world’s population are convinced that Australia is Utopia, and would dearly love to come here.

Help to spread the Skeptics message. Use the enclosed subscription form to sign up a new subscriber.

... Bulldog from p 42

Huxley’s other claim to popular fame was to coin the word “agnostic” (not knowing) for his belief. He portrayed agnosticism, not as a rival creed, but as a method of inquiry. The sciences “are neither Christian, nor Unchristian, but are ExtraChristian”, in a word “unsectarian”. Huxley’s social conscience made him friends with Christian socialists such as Charles Kingsley and he did not want controversy between atheists and the religious to distract attention from science.

Huxley became a leader in overthrowing the culture of appointment by patronage of the landed gentry and the Anglican establishment in favour of appointment by merit.

He was in the forefront in promoting science to replace religion as the basis of understanding. He rose to become, in 1869, President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Desmond’s biography stops at this peak of Huxley’s career, but Huxley had another 25 years of peak performance, including two leading professorships and presidency of the Royal Society. Perhaps Desmond is working on Vol 2.

The Perils of Progress is essentially anti-science, written in an alarmist tone to denigrate the work of scientists, turn young people away from science and alienate the general public. With such attacks becoming increasingly common it is no wonder that the status and esteem of chemists and physicists in society has diminished in recent times.

This brings me to some other worrying aspects of The Perils of Progress. For example the authors misunderstand feedback processes and distort the intent of scientists (like Fred Hoyle) whose research they fail to grasp. I also disapprove of the disgraceful way a university publisher is pandering to market forces by publishing such a work - one expects better from a university publisher. And I am deeply disturbed that one of the authors, Ron Laura, is a Professor of Education, responsible for training school teachers who, in their turn, influence young, impressionable minds. No wonder anti-nuclear sentiment thrives, parents become unduly upset by mobile phone towers, and high-voltage transmission lines are falsely seen as initiators of childhood leukemias.

Don’t waste your money on The Perils of Progress. And I hope your child’s school librarian won’t waste money on it either. There are vastly better books available (such as Emsley’s) but they can be rather hard to find amid the trash. It is unfortunate that a gullible public seems to prefer scares rather than facts.

Recommended reading:


God and Mammon revisited

A response to Richard Lead

Is religion really the oasis of financial privilege that Richard Lead believes it to be? Is it really, as he suggests, a minority pastime? Despite his declaration that he is not trying to set up straw men, Lead manages to do just that. Before we look at the imaginary scene we will look more closely at his statistics, take another look at his straw men and in the process replace both with a more realistic view of the ‘Oasis’ called religion.

Lead repeats the line throughout his paper that the majority of Australians are subsidising a religious minority. He writes;

-there are lies, damned lies and statistics, to new

-Is religion really the oasis of financial privilege that

-Thereby we have a demographic landscape in

-Lead focuses on ‘weekly’ church attendance figures and

-A fundamental problem with his figures is that their

-Also some of the 8% of people who describe

-Also of Australians place themselves in the “Other

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-Some of the 8% of people who describe themselves as “no religion” should be included in

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-• 4% of Australians place themselves in the “Other Religion” category and probably attend other places of worship such as synagogues, mosques, Temples etc and should be added to this figure.

-• A proportion of people who for various reasons can’t get to places of worship because of isolation, infirmity or religious belief should also be included.

-• Also some of the 8% of people who describe themselves as “no religion” should be included in the figure on the basis of the Taxation departments definition of religion. People who use New Age Centres or Clairvoyants rooms etc. and yet describe themselves as having “no religion” should be part of these attendance figures.

-If that is a minority then I’m a creationist’s worst nightmare (a monkey’s uncle). Mr Lead’s use of these figures is not a reflection on a decline of religion in Australia because many in Australia who would call themselves ‘a Christian’, and have done so in the census mentioned above, don’t attend houses of worship because of isolation, infirmity or conviction. People who live in isolated areas of Australia, people who are bed ridden because of age, illness or disability and people who see Churches as ‘agents of the Devil’ yet consider themselves to be ‘the real Christians’ are not included in this survey. Also some church denominations didn’t contribute to the CRA figures.

-A fundamental problem with his figures is that their

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-So a quick ‘accounting’ of the figures reveals that,
Where does Lead go from there? In one sense I need go no further, as his whole argument is based on the erroneous assumption that a majority is financially supporting a minority. Plainly it is not the case. Religion is not a minority activity in Australia. Lead however goes on to make some very shallow and ill informed statements about “massive” taxation subsidies and therefore some correction and balance needs to be given.

I have already pointed to the way in which Lead uses the beliefs and practices of Scientology (whose membership is in the 100’s and whose economic dealings are renowned worldwide as suspect) to demonise all religious groups. He ignores Christian denominations whose affiliates make up to a quarter of the Australian population (Roman Catholics affiliates number 4,799,000) or groups like the Salvation Army, whose contribution to the general community is well known. Still such exploration would require real research. He also ignores the fact that the community generally accepts that churches and its education, health and welfare agencies are reducing our taxes by providing services which otherwise would have to be fully funded by the taxpayer. If these tax exemptions were taken away and those services reduced then plainly the taxpayer would have to foot the bill completely. The Australian government has always recognised that since 1788. Rather than moving away from this the current government is actively reducing government based welfare agencies and tendering out the services to various organisations, usually church based agencies. Thereby the cost to the taxpayer is actually reduced because of religious communities.

Lead justifies his attack on the Churches on the basis of “wealth”... “Avaricious wealth” even. A wealth he cannot (or rather hasn’t bothered to) substantiate. Instead of asking the Churches themselves for financial statements Lead uses “media reports”, dating back some 5 years (he couldn’t manage to get hold of tabloids during the reign of Nero) in order to justify his claim that the churches have money to burn. Hardly a case for avaricious wealth. He claims that “they (the churches) are not accountable to anyone.” Had he bothered to ask someone within the churches, he would have discovered that, all churches and church agencies are accountable in various ways. I would argue that they are more accountable than the government, any business and non- church based charities. All church Treasurers provide detailed Statements to the members of the church. In the case of the Uniting Church this is done on a Congregational, Parish, Presbytery, State Synod and National Assembly level. The reports are detailed and precise. Financial statements have to be tabled and accepted by the members of the Church at each level. The churches accounts are not only able to be scrutinised by the 1,334,000 affiliates and members of the Uniting Church but are also accountable to those who choose to use the services, the general public, not to mention the ultimate Accountant Him/Herself. Had Lead bothered to research his ‘story’ in a more noble fashion (ie, ask the Churches themselves) those figures would probably have been made available to him as well. The suggestion that secret Trusts have been formed is ludicrous. Burnside, which Lead refers to as a ‘neutrally’ named Trust, is in actual fact an agency of the Uniting Church and one of the largest child and family welfare service groups in NSW. Again, some basic research would have found this out.

Lead then goes on to suggest that members of churches should pay two lots of income tax on money donated to a Church. All of the twelve and a half million adults who claim some affiliation with churches in Australia and who presumably contribute in some way to church accounts, pay income tax on money that they earn. Lead suggests that the money which, having had income tax withdrawn on it once and then put in an ‘offering’ should then be taxed again as income earned by a church. That is an economic irrationalism.

Lead gives the impression that church ministers, priests etc. are living in tax funded opulence. He suggests that there is a culture of secrecy and subterfuge around ministers’ wages however if he had bothered to research his article by actually contacting the churches he would have found out that ministers, deacons and church employees all pay income tax. In the Uniting Church stipends (wages) are set for Ministers, Deacons, Youth Workers, Hospital Chaplains, Prison Chaplains and School Chaplains at around $35 - 45,000. On the basis of those figures and my discussions with a number of ministers, no cleric in the UC avoids paying income tax despite Lead’s insinuation that they do. All other church workers, in schools, nursing homes, social welfare agencies etc, and workers across the churches, all pay income tax! So much for the “massive” taxation subsidies.

Lead’s basic problem is that he believes that the churches are essentially about wealth accumulation. He sees the church through an accountant’s eyes and therefore sees a business. No doubt there are some churches that are run like a business and individuals within the church who see the church as a business, even some who have slipped through the very stringent ordination process designed to assess spirituality or others who have lost the plot along the way. However accountability within and outside the churches should mean that ultimately these people will be identified and dealt with accordingly. Essentially Christianity is not about wealth accumulation but about wealth distribution (not just financial wealth either). Christianity is essentially anti- individualistic and anti- materialistic despite its abuses and appearances otherwise. Its founder summarised the Ten Commandments in two simplified commandments;

Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Therefore the focus for the church remains and will always remains constant. The focus is not on self but on God and others. If Christianity or any other religion were essentially about wealth accumulation then it would be a good enough reason to be taxed in exactly the same way as any other business is with no exemptions or subsidies. But they are not, and the taxation system recognises that fact. Having known many church ministers over the years I know for a fact that none are ‘financially wealthy’ people as a result of being in the ministry. Quite often however the opposite is true. A vow of poverty by a priest does not help them on the road to making their first million. More often than not ministers having given their lives in ways which would embarrass accountants, retire with very little
Richard Lead replies

Within this logorhea Matthew seems to present the following arguments:

1. Religionists are not a minority.
2. A tax on church income will reduce their community services.
3. Churches are accountable.
4. Taxing church income is double taxation.
5. Church employees pay tax.

I hope I haven’t left anything out.

1. Are religionists the majority?
Matthew’s statistics might be less hilarious if they didn’t total 106.1%. I can’t be the only aging reader of the Skeptic now taking a more sanguine view of his love life following the unilateral redefinition of “regularly” to once or twice a year. This is, of course, our old friend “Argument by Redefinition of Terms” and, by using it, we can prove absolutely anything. Why not take it one step further and define a regular churchgoer as anyone who attends a church for a wedding, a funeral, or a babybranding ceremony, and claim Australia’s 100% religious affiliation? The churches themselves defined the word to mean “at least once per month” (itself an extremely loose definition, in my view) so Matthew’s inclusion of the C&E (Christmas &Easter) brigade is transparently self-serving.

Readers are invited to take a short break to examine the attached table extracted from the ABS Census of 1991 and 1996. The third column shows the percentage movement over the five years and in my view shows the major religions to be moribund. Those religions showing any significant percentage growth do so from a low base, with the absolute numbers of their new adherents being small. The fourth column shows the percentage movement adjusted for population growth, and it is all bad news for the mainstream Christian denominations. The fastest growing identifiable religion from this table is Hinduism. I submit this growth is a creature of Australia’s immigration program rather than any emerging desire by Australians to worship cows.

Whilst the declining percentages of the mainstream Christian denominations tell a story, it is the demographics of the believers which prophesy their future. An amazing 25% of the 3.9 million Anglicans are aged 70 and over; 40% are aged 60 and over. We don’t need to be chartered actuaries or unchartered psychics to predict this denomination’s impending implosion. Does any reader doubt the Anglican Church’s wealth - the office buildings, the stock market investments - will prove more durable than its congregations?

Almost three million Australians claimed to be without any religious beliefs, an increase of 30.1% (population adjusted) in just five years.

In my paper “An Oasis of Privilege” I submitted: “... this census arguably inflates the real measures of religious affiliation.” Matthew has quoted this back at me, but by suppressing the emphasised word has totally changing the tenor of my claim. It is my submission that church attendance is the better measure of religious affiliation than is the ABS Census. I know dozens of people who, when asked their religion, automatically name the religion of their parents. When pressed they admit to having nothing whatsoever to do with the named religion nor do they profess any belief in its doctrines.

Readers of the Skeptic are fully capable of forming their own view on which is the better measure of religious affiliation.

If Matthew wishes to count in his team those who identify with a religion in a non-participatory manner, he is more than welcome to them. Because it is totally irrelevant. Tax concessions are granted to religious institutions, not to those who passively identify with such institutions. When churches finally start paying council and water rates and land tax, it is their parishioners who will need to dig deeper to pay for the buildings’ outgoings. And these burdens will, not before time, be lightened for the rest of us.

Church attendance is very much the issue. It is church parishioners - the minority - who benefit from the existing religious property tax subsidies.

2. Tax and Good Works
Following Matthew’s previous letter, where the claim “churches provide schools” was tendered, I invited him to advise the Skeptic the percentage of the income of Knox Grammar (“a Uniting Church School for Boys”) provided by his Uniting Church. One can only speculate from his silence that this percentage oscillates between zero and nil. Readers may have noticed this claim has reappeared in his latest letter, so once again, Matthew - what percentage of your school’s income comes from student fees, government subsidies, and the Uniting Church? Don’t forget to include in the government’s percentage the tax savings accruing from tax deductible donations made to the school building fund, a Parliamentary sanctioned concession whereby taxpayer funds add to the property assets of wealthy church schools.

Matthew’s “good works” argument is so specious it only has to be repeated to see its flaw: “... churches and its (sic) education, health and welfare agencies are reducing our taxes by providing services which otherwise...
would have to be fully funded by the taxpayer. If these tax exemptions were taken away and those services reduced then plainly the taxpayer would have to foot the bill completely. Because income tax is only ever levied on profits - on the bottom line - it will only apply to that part of church income which is not spent doing these very things. Let me repeat this for any reader who is dim - an income tax can only ever apply to unspent income. How can income tax possibly reduce church expenditure - it will, if it has any behavioural effect at all, only encourage such expenditure to reduce tax otherwise payable.

Asset accretion by religious institutions is axiomatic evidence they are not spending 100% of their income on good works and administrative costs. In 1997 the largest rural property sale in NSW - 43,386 hectares of prime Riverina pastoral land - was acquired by the Mormon Church for between $60 million and $70 million. In the AFR report a spokesman for the Church stated that in 12 years the Church had contributed $230 million “in food and other types of aid to charitable causes worldwide.” In private correspondence his spokesman confirmed to me this $230 million is an Australian dollar equivalent and came from the Mormon Church worldwide, not just the Australian subsidiary. Now, $230 million is an impressive charitable contribution, but over 12 years this comes back to $19.2 million per year, still an impressive number.

The Mormon Church holds net assets totalling US$30 billion (approximately A$46 billion) so its annual charitable contributions equals some 0.04% of its wealth. Readers are invited to find the back of an envelope and do a quick tally of their own net worth. Multiply this sum by decimal zero zero zero four. For a reader with net assets of $100,000 this sum is just $40. It is trite to ask whether readers would donate this sum annually to enjoy the tax exemptions enjoyed by the Mormon Church (and every other institution in Australia with the good sense to call itself religious).

One third of Australia’s corn is now grown by the Mormon Church. This does not concern me in the least, but the fact that one third of Australia’s corn is now grown in a tax haven most certainly concerns me. Commercial farming seems an odd activity for a religious institution to pursue, and 43,386 hectares of prime Australian pastoral land should not be allowed to simply vanish from our tax base.

Sometimes Australia, you are a very unclever country.

### 3. Church accountability

My use of the term “avaricious” was, of course, intemperate. Wealth is not an abstract concept requiring a modifier. But the term “secret trusts” was not used by me, nor will it be while the laws of defamation remain on the books. No honest intellect can stretch my words “... their wealth is held in numerous trusts with neutral names such as Burnside (Uniting Church), Glebe Administration Board (Anglican), making data collection laborious” into an accusation of (very illegal) “secret trusts.” Readers are invited to discern which of the following - Rotherham Nursing Homes, Edina Retirement Centres - is owned by the Uniting Church and which is owned by a private investor? I mean, the religious link positively jumps at you, doesn’t it? So when you are at the Land Titles Office following the trail of church property, which of the two will you pursue? I do not resile from my earlier writing; data collection is indeed laborious.

It is my submission that all bodies granted taxation
exemptions should be compelled to file consolidated audited accounts with the government each year. These accounts should be available for public inspection. In this manner, anyone considering making a donation to (say) the Uniting Church would be able to determine whether an institution sitting on investments totalling $340 million (85% of it in the short term money market) is an appropriate destination for alms. Matthew informs us that churches are accountable to their members. Oh yes, and to God, although Matthew seems unsure about the gender.

4. The double taxation chestnut
This old canard does not survive the most superficial scrutiny. It is a silly argument and I hear it all the time.

My lunch is purchased with tax-paid dollars. Are restaurants exempt from income tax to avoid double taxation?

Church donations come from tax-paid sources. Under the current regime, they pass through a tax exempt church and are used to pay (among other things) church salaries. These salaries are then taxed. When churches are no longer exempt from income tax, donations will be received as assessable income but will be allowable deductions when paid as salaries. There is absolutely no difference between the two systems as far as spent funds are concerned.

How many times must I repeat - it is only the unspent income of religious institutions which can ever be subject to income tax - before this simple fact sinks in?

The term double taxation is a misnomer. If we follow the path of a $50 note through the economy we see it is taxed hundreds of times as it passes from person to person, business to business. If our polymer friend is to only ever be taxed a single time, pray tell me the characteristics of the single transaction which triggers this taxing event. Perhaps we can then mark the $50 note with some of Harry’s famous Nigerian money dye to signal all subsequent transactions they are tax free.

A silly argument, trotted out like clockwork.

5. Church employees and taxation
If Matthew believes church employees have no taxation advantages, he cannot proffer objections to the repeal of their Fringe Benefits Tax concessions - the complete exemption for church Ministers and a concessional FBT rate for all other employees of religious institutions.

In private correspondence with the Uniting Church, a spokesman advised me that the Church has a policy of limiting the fringe benefits component of their ministers’ salary packages to 30% of the total. When queried how this is possible in Sydney, where the taxable value of a rent-free manse will easily exceed $20,000 per year, no reply was forthcoming.

Readers are invited to calculate how much their own pay packet would swell if 30% of their salary could be drawn tax free.

Using Matthew’s figures, a Uniting Church minister on a $45,000 salary plus a rent free home in Sydney is on a secular equivalent package of at least $85,000 per annum (ignoring any other fringe benefits received by the minister). This is almost three times the Australian average annual income. And yet I am supposed to feel sorry for them if they end up retiring into a (tax exempt) church home? I regularly counsel the financially feckless - send them along.

For over a decade, when the children were young, I regularly (every month, without fail) took them to a local nursing home to visit the “sick and elderly” (to use Matthew’s expression). The old folk loved watching them grow and I only stopped making such visits when the children ceased being human (generic name: teenagers). On these visits I would occasionally bump into ministers of religion performing the duties they were paid to perform. I doubt if spending a week with one of them will change my views - their role as community social workers does not justify their taxation concessions.

Bring on the GST without delay.

Notes
1 Australian Financial Review, 26 November 1997, at page 42
2 Time, August 1997
3 Heavenly Billions - Church assets soar . . . . so why do they still cry poor? The Bulletin, 14 April 1998 at page 24
4 I have yet to examine the accounts of an unprofitable nursing home. The churches like to portray their nursing homes as charitable activities. They are no such thing - they are profitable investments and a growth industry.
5 Heavenly Billions, ibid.

Richard Lead
Pymble NSW

Another view

Indeed, where to begin, Mr Lead. You are mistaken to believe that I am in favour of tax breaks for religions. The difference we have, I think, comes from your suggestion that the churches are somehow co-conspirators in creating and maintaining the tax regime which supports their subversive wealth accumulation. It is a fundamental principle of taxation law that individuals, organisations and businesses are perfectly entitled to arrange their affairs so as to minimise tax liability. Like Christ, the churches do cheerfully pay the taxes that are due. They do not voluntarily pay taxes that are not due. Nor do they march in the streets to bring higher taxes upon themselves. Nobody does these things; and even if they were clearly the right things, the churches themselves probably have higher priorities.

A private correspondent has suggested to me that property issues are a burden to the churches, and that complete divestment would be the best option. Surely that is an issue for each group to resolve for itself; but it is true that the various subsidies have a distorting effect because they are linked to particular parts of the system.

I will never fathom the depths of accounting and taxation which are Richard’s speciality - I defer to his wisdom in regard to the mistakes I made. Conversely I think he needs to accept that an insider’s view of the church will not tally with his. I don’t deny church wealth (although wealth is a rather subjective term), but my experience of several mainstream denominations up to state level casts wealth accumulation as highly unlikely; moreover, the suggestion that wealth accumulation is the prime objective would not find any credibility in all of my experience. An organisation that enlists little old ladies to sell cakes on the street to raise a few hundred dollars to repair the roof is hardly one that smacks of spiralling profits.
Churches do not file tax returns or publish accounts. However, budgets and accounts are produced and are circulated internally from time to time, and generally speaking these documents are not kept confidential. Most parishes have a hard time balancing their books. In some denominations, a proportion of funds go to regional or state bodies, but a large part of that is returned in other forms. There is simply not the capacity for rampant profits; nor is it possible that such amounts could be hidden in the figures.

I could have made my mention of the Salvation Army clearer. No doubt Richard is a long way from the dole queue, but perhaps he should try to formulate a household budget on the amount he would get. Living on the dole is definitely below the poverty line! But under Howard’s strict new measures, those who don’t clear the hoops as regards active and continuous seeking of work, can have their payments completely cut off for several weeks. If these people were destined to be thrown on to the streets without a crust to eat, even our present government could not countenance such immoral treatment. As it is however, Senators Newman and Vanstone et al. can sleep well at nights after all, because the Salvation Army (among others) provides emergency food and accommodation. So the existence of the Salvation Army and the services it provides are part of the framework of government policy - even though the government makes no direct contribution for its establishment or operation but merely finds it convenient to depend upon. The number of Salvation Army members is irrelevant.

Another more current example may be found in nursing homes. A not insignificant portion of church capital is tied up in nursing homes, and the government has made good use of it, thank you - only recently has the government looked for ways to share the burden of that capital cost across the community.

I think that the fringe benefits tax exemption for clergy was introduced so that church housing and the gift leg of lamb from a rural parishioner would not be taxed. Use of the exemption has gone much further, but reining it in to the original intention would achieve much.

I have often wondered how much land is rate exempt. I would need to appear in the Act.

Under the Victorian Local Government Act all land is rateable except for . . .

“S. 154(d) land which is vested in or held in trust for any religious body and used exclusively
(i) as a residence of a practising Minister of Religion; or
(ii) for the education and training of persons to be Ministers of Religion; or
(iii) for both the purposes in sub-paragraphs (i) & (ii).”

Note that Ministers of Religion need not be full-time Ministers nor is “religion” defined.

This has been tested in court. In 1987 the City of Doncaster and Templestowe issued a summons at the Melbourne Magistrates Court for the recovery of rates.

The respondents defended the action relying on the then S. 251 of the 1958 Victorian Local Government Act. This section is similar to the current Local Government Act. The matter went before the Melbourne Magistrates Court on 28 August 1987. The Magistrate dismissed their action. He found there were two people training to be Ministers of Religion on the property, the property is held on trust with a trust deed, the Society of God held regular congresses, have a constitution, a manual and found that the first named respondent held sincere religious beliefs.

The Municipality clearly did not accept the privileges of Ministers of Religion and religious bodies. They apparently took the view that every citizen owning property in their municipality was equally using the services of the municipality and should therefore pay their share of rates and so appealed the decision to the Victorian Supreme Court. The matter was heard on 31 May 1988.

At the Supreme Court, the municipality pointed out that the respondent worked as a public servant 37 1/2 hours per week. His Honor Mr Justice Crockett observed that;

It is not to the point that a Minister of Religion also does something else with his time other than practice as a Minister of Religion. If Counsel’s argument is correct that would need to appear in the Act.

The judge dismissed the municipality’s appeal and thus the respondents do not have to pay rates.

I have often wondered how much land is rate exempt. I therefore appeal to readers to write to the Chief Executive Officer of their municipality and ask for a list of the non-rateable properties in their municipalities and the amounts lost from rate revenue on each property. When you have a reply please mail it to me at Box 223, East Melbourne 3002 for tabulation.

Mark Plummer
East Melbourne VIC

Rather than risk the entire magazine being given over to this somewhat off-topic issue, we beg correspondents to précis any future comments.

Lindsay Brash,
Armidale, NSW
In defence of Humanism

John Snowden’s colourful diatribe against “secular humanists and other atheist groups” (Letters 18/1) is full of bangs, flashes and smoke, but seems short on numbers and hard evidence.

Mr Snowden has for years “observed local humanist groups” and has “formed the conclusion that the members tend towards depression and obsessiveness”. Just how many humanist groups and members are there in Queensland - and how representative are they?

I would, in theory, expect there to be a higher than normal incidence of depression among atheists, as Professor Martin Seligman, the American psychologist, claims that “realism . . . is a risk factor for depression”, and Edwin Schneidman (The Suicidal Mind (1996) has observed a slight correlation between suicide and disbelief in an afterlife.

In practice, however, after being involved for more than thirty years in humanist and atheist organisations in England, Northern Ireland and Australia - and visiting others in Scotland, South Africa and New Zealand - about the only chronic depressive I have knowingly seen, apart from Sir Julian Huxley, has been when I have looked in a mirror.

Yes, I have come across a minority of lonely dysfunctional, egotistical and even paranoid personalities in secular humanist organisations - as in other clubs and societies. Disturbed and depressed people very probably crop up in secular humanist groups, because they are tolerated and accepted there. I cannot imagine that Mr Snowden’s harsh brand of religion would be any more welcoming towards, say, depressives and schizophrenics, than it evidently is of homosexuals, but I concede that other religions may be more accepting. When I was in the London Young Humanists in the late 1960s, the active members made a point of trying to help and “carry” a member who had social and emotional problems. In another organisation, one of the “crosses” we had to bear was the waffling of an egotistical windbag who was forever denouncing the Church of Rome. In the fullness of time he converted to Catholicism.

Mr Snowden mentioned an atheist or humanist society whose members failed to organise hospital visits and suggests that, perhaps, “lacking the efficient defence mechanisms of religion against the idea of death, they could not readily cope with others on the brink”. I have not known humanists, rationalists, secularists or atheists to be slow in visiting people who are sick, nor in organising secular funerals. Freethinkers do not need a “defence mechanism against the idea of death”: we know and accept that we will die, and do not wish to pretend that death is not final.

During the last months of his life, I regularly visited the home and later the bedside of Harry Hastings Pearce, poet, bibliophile and lifelong writer of rationalist polemics. He was, if anything, pleased to have several months' warning of his death, as this enabled him to put his affairs in order. (His large hoard of freethought and radical publications and manuscripts is now a special collection at the National Library of Australia, Canberra).

Only once during this time did I see him distressed about himself, when he reported strange and bewildering experiences at night. An investigation revealed that he was hallucinating because his morphine dose had been increased. Once this was explained to him, he was reassured. His only other concern was that he should have a non-religious funeral: he got one (I conducted it). He died with dignity, calm and courage.

I suspect that John Snowden overestimates the “inertia and lack of involvement of depressives”. Depressives often feel lethargic and withdrawn, but Buzz Aldrin, Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Julian Huxley, Abraham Lincoln, Spike Milligan and Virginia Woolf were hardly low achievers. The best book I’ve read on depression (Speaking of Sadness) runs to 240 pages, and was written by Prof David Karp, a chronic depressive.

Mr Snowden’s attempt to link secular humanism with depression and delusion is reminiscent of what happened in the former Soviet Union, where the authorities, backed by compliant psychiatrists, would diagnose dissidents with strong religious convictions as “schizophrenics”. I am also reminded of the nineteenth-century allegation that atheism invariably leads to suicide. This old bogey rather unravelled when George Jacob Holyoake, a leading freethinker (and one of the founders of the co-operative movement), received a bequest from an atheist who had indeed committed suicide. Holyoake became curious and found that Bombardier Thomas Scott of the Royal Artillery had killed himself after prolonged harassment (including a court martial) by his military superiors (including a doctor and a chaplain) who had found him in possession of “infidel” literature. Scott’s death had been encouraged by a gross abuse of authority.

I enjoyed John’s squib about the “scientific theory of universal patriarchy”. The angels do not seem to have told the matriarchal elephants about it.

Nigel Sinnott
Alexandra VIC

Further defence

John Snowden (Letters, 18/1) in criticising my review of Wendell Watters’ book, Deadly Doctrine, (17/3) had difficulty in distinguishing between the reviewer and the author. But that’s one small point among John’s jumble of “insights” into the psyche of secular humanists, and his plethora of half-baked theories intended to prove that religion is right and humanism wrong.

He describes humanists as delusion prone, obsessive and paranoid and having “the mental problems typical of the aged” which, to my mind, much better describes the strident religionist than any atheist or humanist I have met.
John’s condemnation of homosexuals, feminists and even we relatively innocuous Skeptics, and his support of patriarchy, leads one to believe that he is a Christian of fundamentalist bent. At least his tactics are typical of fundamentalist Christians everywhere who, without much in the way of fact to substantiate their claims, blame everyone but themselves for society’s problems. His defence of Christian virtue is to argue its case by loudly proclaiming Christian intolerance. Perhaps deep down John is aware and concerned that those of us who remain impervious to Christian myth, and who can clearly hear the tapping hammer of reason, are winning the battle against Lord Bertrand Russell’s (by now feeble) dragon (religion) guarding the door to the golden age.

John refers to “the efficient defence mechanisms of religion against the idea of death”. Does he mean that Christians, because they believe in life after death, make better counsellors, doctors, police, ambulance attendants, morticians - maybe even grave diggers? Surely not! Might not atheists, knowing that death is merely the biological ending of a life, and not the beginning of some fanciful afterlife, be more pragmatic, and thus better equipped to deal with its inevitability? A view perhaps open to further debate.

I doubt John’s claim that “...the ranks of helpers in the wards of the dying seem to attract Christians rather than secular humanists.” but, if true, it has more to say about the believer’s quest for brownie points to ensure entry to the hereafter, than a true concern for their fellows. Christian philanthropy is seldom altruistic. How can the so-called caring Christian claim to love his fellows, and at the same time visit opprobrium, and worse, upon certain minorities? One such minority, homosexuals, makes up a large percentage of workers in the high service occupations such as homes for the retarded, hospitals, etc, but I suspect that Christian homosexuals are in the minority there.

John offers some “examples” of what he calls the partisan ethics of secular humanism. How does he come by these examples, and how can he be so certain that we don’t condemn, for example, the fire bombing of African American churches, or the persecution of Christianity under communism? On that latter point I can only say that it’s often the Christians doing the persecuting, so it’s not always easy to enthusiastically condemn those that turn the tables on the Church, except that the common believer more often than not bears the brunt of such persecution, rather than the Church hierarchy. At least John gives us a guernsey for “whining about the Inquisition”. The Inquisition, the most shameful episode in the shameful history of Christianity, and arguably as great a crime as the Holocaust (it certainly killed more innocent people) is well worth whining about. Rather than exposing secular humanism’s shortcomings, John’s examples effectively demonstrate to me the hazards of religion.

Christian apologists are myriad, and, although the Wendell Watters of the world are rare, his hypotheses cannot simply be ignored. The arguments are a bit like the one we use to counter creationists’ claims that evolution has not been proven - we know it occurs, but are not yet certain of the exact mechanisms by which it occurs. In the case of Christianity and health, we know Christianity has some deleterious effect on the well being of society, but we have yet to determine the full extent of that effect.

John Stoner
Coombabah QLD
PS I would have addressed John’s reference to the “dhimmite [of Christians] under Islam”, but neither my Oxford, Webster’s, Chamber’s, or any other dictionary could lay my hands on, could reveal the meaning of “dhimmite”. Perhaps our worthy Editor was having a bad day and succumbed to the gremlins, in which case I apologise to John and withdraw any suggestion that he is overly fond of big words.

More defence

John Snowden’s letter (18/1), was merely unsubstantiated mud slinging. He said he could not answer the questions he himself raised regarding mental health, prejudice and stereotypes among secular humanists and atheists, and then goes on to claim he has “some clues”. He contrived fanciful material which he first established he did not have, then built a picture of secular humanists and atheists as aged, senile and gay, suffering from mental health problems and sociopathy.

Now I offer a challenge.

I am an atheist, neither aged, senile, nor gay. I have donated to World Vision for over ten years, presently sponsoring two children, one in Thailand, the other in India, at $744 per year. I challenge John Snowden to produce evidence that several hundred Negro churches were torched, and that secular humanists and atheists are typically aged, senile or gay! If he does not respond with either evidence, or an apology for making unsubstantiated claims, I will end my association with World Vision from the next issue of the Skeptic!

John’s dirge on why secular humanists and others denounce paedophile priests is easily explained. Firstly, as priests have spent several years studying the Bible, they (are they allege) God’s earthly spokesmen. If several years of religious education leads to a more moral society, all priests should be leaders in morality, none should be perpetrators of crime. Let’s not forget the humbug of the Christian religions which, when “Piss Christ” was on display, quickly sought legal redress; yet when clergy were reported as having molested children, offenders were merely moved to other parishes. Paedophile priests give a new meaning to the term “turn the other cheek”!

An OUP publication, The Christian World Encyclopaedia records in 1980 that Christians numbered 1,433 million and were divided into 20,800 denominations; to which of these sects does Mr Snowden belong? As an alleged sceptic, how does he justify his Christian belief, if he hasn’t investigated the other 20,799 schisms?

As Edmond de Goncourt (1822-1896) said “If there is a god, atheism (and secular humanism) must strike him/her as less of an insult than religion”

Ron Bernardi
Boolara VIC
While Dr. Sydney Bockner’s “The rise and fall of psychoanalysis” (18/1) is valuable because it raises the issue of the current status of psychoanalysis, the four critical points he makes about psychoanalysis as therapy in his summary are rather less so. The practical consequences of the length and expense of psychoanalytic therapy, its effectiveness, the lack of correlation between effectiveness and the time to train therapists, and the superiority of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) are certainly not unimportant but none is of other than minor consequence to the truth of psychoanalysis as a theory. This slight importance is a matter of fact as well as of logic. First, we may have an absolutely correct understanding of what causes a disease but be therapeutically powerless. The point is well illustrated by what we once knew about tuberculosis and what we know currently about HIV/AIDS. Second, even if it is logically possible to deduce a therapy from a given theory of pathology (physical or psychological), the success of the therapy can never do more than confirm the theory as possibly true. No theory is ever proved through the successful tests of the hypotheses that can be derived from it, and it is the case that in psychopathology at least, that sort of deduction is rarely possible. Further, the details of the changes that different psychological therapies bring about are usually not unique or specific enough to be able to differentiate on those grounds between the theories from which they derive.

I also believe the cogency of Dr. Bockner’s points about the superiority of CBT and the time to train therapists are not as great as he represents them. In a recent clinical comparison of CBT for depression with other therapies, CBT was initially superior to psychoanalytic like therapy (not real psychoanalysis) but this difference gradually disappeared as the follow-up period increased. And, if we take a 66% recovery rate as giving something like a baseline for unsystematic treatment of neurotic conditions, there is not a lot to shout about in the higher recovery rates of 85% produced by CBT. The importance of the training of therapists depends on the kinds of patients in the studies. There is a world of difference between the usual run of students whose benefits from counselling make up the bulk of those compared with those treated by untrained or minimally trained therapists and those with more deepseated problems. Note that I am not making the claim, often made by defenders of psychoanalysis, that there is a particular subset of very difficult problems that are only responsive to psychoanalytic therapy. In fact, I believe that we do not know why therapy works and that we will not do so until we focus on the bases of the changes that untreated ‘patients’ bring about in themselves. Clinical trials, in their very nature, can by themselves throw no light on the mechanisms that bring change about.

I wouldn’t want to disagree much with the fifth of the points Dr. Bockner lists in his summary, that psychoanalysis is based on “highly speculative doctrine and dogma, not scientific studies,” but do want to point out that he advances no real evidence for it and that he misses the main point. On the evidence, even were Mead’s descriptions true, they have little bearing on any of Freud’s theories. The real criticism to be made of Freud’s work is not of the end product of the concepts (here inaccurately termed ‘neologisms’) and the conclusions, but of the faulty deterministic assumptions underlying his observational method of free association and the interpretive looseness through which he arrived at both theoretical terms and conclusions. There is a considerable body of experimental and clinical evidence demonstrating that what patients generate in therapy is determined very much more by the subtle interests of the therapist than by the patient. This is especially true of psychoanalytic therapists “the patient’s supposedly unconscious mental processes are hardly to be seen as having an independent existence. In a very real sense, the data of psychoanalysis are generated by the method (all this is quite apart from fairly recent charges of data fabrication by, for example, Cioffi, Esterson, Mahony, Schimek, and Scharnberg).

There is also a number of apparently minor errors that are really very important. First, Popper did not conclude that psychoanalysis was a pseudoscience because psychoanalysts “resisted or dismissed” clinical trials. His argument was based on what he saw as the impossibility of establishing which of mutually exclusive psychoanalytic explanations of the same behaviour might be true. From this indeterminacy, he went on to propose that the main way to separate real science from pseudoscience was through the potential of the former for falsification. His estimate of the pseudoscientific status of psychoanalysis has been vigorously attacked by many critics of analysis (e. g. Grunbaum, Glymour), and it may also be worth noting that nowadays there are few people who, whatever they think about the testability of psychoanalytic hypotheses, believe that Popper’s criterion successfully separates the real from the pseudo (e. g. Cioffi).

Second, Freud did not deny the relevance of all experimental tests of his hypotheses. In fact he appealed to Jung’s word association experiments and Poetzel’s perceptual experiments, especially the former, to support some aspects of his hypotheses about unconscious mental processes. I think any fair reading of the experiments to which Eysenck refers shows them to be very marginal to anything that Freud wrote, and that Freud’s negative appreciation of that sort of evidence was justified.

Third, Dr. Bockner says that Freud “described the methods of his therapy” in The Interpretation of Dreams and The Introductory Lectures on PsychoAnalysis. But both critical and favourable opinions are unanimous that...
an especially noticeable feature of precisely those two works is the absence of therapeutic and interpretive rules. Actually, as Sulloway brings out so strikingly, as compared with normal scientific practice, Freud nowhere specifies his procedures in a way that a reader can be sure that he or she is following, even more or less accurately, in his footsteps. This absence helps us to understand why psychoanalysis is so resistant to criticism, scientific or otherwise. It is not an oversight, but a fundamental consequence of Freud’s attempt to translate from the language of the conscious into the language of the unconscious without knowing either the lexicon or grammar of the latter (someone else has said it is like trying to solve a single equation with two unknowns). Now, no rules means an infinity of interpretations and therapies, which is precisely what one observes. It also means that equally satisfying histories of one’s own past or those of others can be constructed without danger of them being falsified. So, “Whatever you say about Freud, my use of his methods has explained a lot about myself to me and/or about others to themselves.”

To gain some idea of the complexities of many of the issues underlying Dr. Bockner’s points, Skeptics may like to look at the materials posted on the Burying Freud and Seduction Theory sites at:

http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/gpp/burying_freyd.html
http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/gpp/aesterson.html

Anyone who does so, might like to consider reading Frederick Crews’review of the 1991 edition of my Freud Evaluated: The Completed Arc on the former site. I am immodest enough to think that the much improved and cheaper paperback edition of this work issued last year by MIT Press (ISBN 0-262-63171-7) will answer almost all of their questions about psychoanalysis and the criticisms that ought to be made of it. The works by the authors mentioned in this letter are included in its list of references.

Malcolm Macmillan
School of Psychology
Deakin University VIC

A reply from Dr Bockner

I am obliged to Dr Malcolm Macmillan for his interesting and thoughtful comments on my article. However the truth of psychoanalysis as a theory was not my main point. My criticism was of psychoanalysis as a method of psychotherapy. However, the theory of psychoanalysis is also questionable. One of the basic principles of psychoanalytic therapy is the theory of repressed sexual material in infancy as revealed in dream analysis. This concept is now disproved by advances in our understanding of brain physiology, and the physiology of dreaming. Thus one of the basic pillars of psychoanalytic therapy is faulty.

The word neologism means coining of new words. Far from being inaccurate this precisely describes Freud’s terms superego and id.

The definitive Skeptics library

The Skeptics Booklist of the 100 best skeptical books is drawing naturally to its conclusion. I feel confident that most of the list is reasonably stable to begin writing something cogitable about at least the most highly recommended books. But, I am sure there are still books out here that I know not wot of, but should be recommended.

About two months ago I bought a book that impressed me with its author’s understanding of the case for science as the means of enabling us to face the future. At the time I first read it I had considered that it should be included in the list, but what if I were the only one to think so? Was I justified in putting it on the list on my say-so alone? I have since received three extremely favourable recommendations for that book. When someone tells me that hey consider it a better book than Sagan’s Candle, it makes my decision to include it so much easier.

So in a few weeks this book went from totally unknown to one of he top ten Skeptical books. So even at this late date your recommendations can make a difference to he final list. I am holding the list open for a short while longer to give any new 1998 subscribers (and others) a chance to make their suggestions.

Categories for which there have been no suggestions presently include: Satanic Ritual Abuse/False Memories, Post-modernism, Feminism, Witchcraft, Greenhouse, Environmentalism, New Age, and Technophobia.

So keep those faxes, letters, e-mails rolling in. I feel confident that the final listing can be a fair representation of the best of skeptical resources, but the more nominations, the better the final listing will be.

Try to give me as enough information for an adequately described entry.

Title, Author, publication details, what it’s about, and a word of three why you think it should be on the list. Could you send your listings to

Allan Lang :
by fax to: (08) 8277 6427
by e-mail to: lakes@senet. com. au
by literal mail to:
PO Box 377
Rundle Mall SA 5000

Popper suggested that scientific knowledge can only be gained by the testing of hypotheses. Popper proposed that psychoanalysis, Marxism and astrology were pseudosciences because none presented testable hypotheses.

With respect, the example that Dr Macmillan gives of depression treated by psychotherapy is a poor one. Psychotherapy is of minor importance in the treatment of depression. If he had said “Depressively coloured anxiety state” I would accept his suggestion. Perhaps his concept of depression and mine are not the same. Failures of recovery from depression are often due to the use of psychotherapy (of any type) rather than the prescribing of the effective antidepressive drugs now available.

Incidentally, this correspondence is a good example of how science works. It is by exchange of ideas that science advances.

Sydney Bockner
Crafers SA
In 1983 Barbara & Walters identified a group of skeptical people who differed significantly from the population at large. Their subjects, culled from various Internet discussion groups were self identified “skeptics.” These skeptics showed an interest in science and technology, and were not shy about sharing their views. Within this group Barbara & Walters identified a subgroup of 28 people who showed a series of intense skepticism including rejection of traditional social structures, references to a common set of arguments, and an inability to bring a line of argument to an end.

These 28 were given a battery of tests to determine their ability to image, visualize, make abstractions, and socialise. Of the 28, 27 showed a strong cluster around a set of traits. What stood out as unusual, was that this group of 27 really seemed to “believe in rationality” above all else, and could not understand why anybody would disagree. For this reason, Barbara & Walters dubbed the cluster Imagination Deficient Personality (IDP).

Black & Decker (1991) reviewed the Internet postings of 136 skeptics undergoing treatment for high blood pressure. In this group, they found that 111 scored positive on at least one of Barbara & Walter’s criteria for IDP. They recommend that IDP should be added to the list of criteria examined, when seeking a psychogenic cause of high blood pressure, ulcers and other physical illnesses.

In 1993, Brothers divided 74 skeptical volunteers into two groups. The first group consisted of 50 incidental skeptics (eg, have read the Skeptic or argued with their mother about the evils of religion) and 24 lifestyle skeptics (eg, written skeptical books, been on more than one talk show or moved to Buffalo, NY). Interestingly, Brothers found IDP was no more common in either group than in a control group, but the lifestyle skeptics had a more intensive and vivid skeptical experience. This included a marked elevation of physiological measures including blood pressure, voice stress and skin conductivity.

In this study, the written works of ten well known skeptics are compared to seven criteria from Barbara & Walters (1983)Imagination Deficient Personality (IDP) scale. In eight cases the skeptics scored seven out of seven and the remaining two skeptics scored six out of seven for these traits. The traits selected from Barbara & Walters are:

1. Lack of meta-awareness:

   Imagination Deficient people show a lack of awareness of the motivation or value systems of others. Often they will make assumptions regarding “right thinking” which fail to take into account the unique circumstances or social structure in which other people live. For example, they may argue with people about religion or other unprovable metaphysical beliefs. Low meta-awareness may also be shown by disregard, or in the case of subject 7, hostility towards minorities or disfranchised people.

2. Curmudgeonality:

   A person with IDP is often suspicious of or hostile towards new social trends. Note, this is not the same as complaining about progress (95% of IDP were strongly for progress in Barbara & Walter’s study), it is instead a sense that values are slipping, or the world is suffering from spreading disrespect, irrationality or lowered standards. Subjects 1, 7, 8 and 9 frequently made remarks regarding a decline in society; all 10 subjects made at least passing reference to spreading irrationality.

3. Transcendental Substitution:

   The Imagination Deficient person tends not to participate in traditional social institutions which promote brotherhood, tribal union or spiritual values, so many of them substitute non-traditional institutions they find acceptable. For example, the IDP may take up an interest in magic, or science, or they may join a library. 64% of Barbara & Walter’s IDP subjects subscribed to three or more science magazines. Again, all 10 subjects were positive on this indicator, 2 going so far as to setup temple like structures in which to meet.

4. Hyper-realistic representation:

   This is a tendency on the part of the Imagination Deficient to expect a realistic or rational representation in all aspects of life. For example, the IDP may engage in nit-picking about plot lines in TV programs or books, or complain about contemporary linguistic usage which conflicts with a technical term. Eight of the 10 subjects scored positive on this measure. Subjects 8 and 9 wrote books substantially about correct usage of scientific terms.

5. Fictional miss-identification:

   Often an IDP will react to fictional representations as though they are real. For example, they may complain about how a popular fictional TV programs portrays the paranormal, or get irate if books they are reading invokes a ghost or spirit, or has a character convert to a spiritual outlook. Some write letters of complaint to newspapers that, for example, carry an astrology column. Once again all subjects were positive on this measure (Subject 5) even refusing to fly on an airline whose travel magazine included an astrology column.

6. Delusions of superiority:

   In many cases the IDP will believe that they have special traits or talents not shared by other people. Usually these are confined to a narrow range of human abilities, and tend to centre around issues of intelligence or education. In the mildly IDP this may simply come off as immaturity, arrogance or elitism.

Subjects 1, 8 and 9 actually organized conferences dedicated to correcting the thinking of non-skeptics.

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Subjects 1, 8 and 9 actually organized conferences dedicated to correcting the thinking of non-skeptics.
Subject 3, however, consistently referred to others as “Delusional” or made references to “Elevator [s] not going to the top floor”, and subjects 7, 8 and 9 dedicated substantial time to denigrating the works of some obscure scholars.

7. Mission directed outlook:
The Imagination Deficient frequently believe that hey serve a higher cause, or that some necessary actions must be taken to avoid disaster. All ten Subjects, for example, make reference to a “rising tide of irrationality”, and subjects 1, 3 and 5 invoke this before all public gatherings. In extreme cases this may involve actions that resemble attempts at conversion or missionary work.

The category Imagination Deficient Personality is not offered as a mental illness, or scientifically proven personality trait. It is instead a category which helps to organize and understand what is happening in cases of skepticism. Instead of dividing skeptics into the usual two categories of “negative nay-sayers” and “atheists”, we can instead see that many of them are really just imagination deficient.

The results of my study show high Imagination Deficiency among 10 selected skeptics. Whether or not the same results would be obtained with additional skeptics remains to be seen. Nevertheless, my study does support the earlier opinions of Barbara & Walters that alleged rational people tend to be Imagination Deficient Personalities. Certainly, that is the evidence from the very best skeptics as represented by the popularity of their publications.

References:


David Quinne
David Quinne is a Certified Public Psychic. He is a graduate of Maharishi International University where he studied quantum metaphysics with a minor in political science. In the past he has worked as an aid to police officers, a private investigator and covert operator for unnamed government agencies. David’s current projects include a book about his work as a police psychic, and a line of selfhelp pamphlets on the paranormal. David, who is a close personal friend of Sir Jim R Wallaby, lives in Lowvill, in Upstate New York.
I have been a subscriber to the Skeptic for more than a
decade. Being an irreclaimable cynic as well as a Skeptic,
I have always wondered how the Skeptical fraternity
would cope with a real, massive challenge to the scientific
paradigms of the twentieth century. Would Skeptics
genuinely struggle to come to grips with the new,
unexplained, unreal, frightening phenomenon, or would
they simply do what their opponents, the intellectually
disenfranchised, always do; close their minds and refuse
to believe?

The recent discovery of the Great Pyramid of Tiwkuf
at Guacamole (New Scientist No 2120, p 68) has finally
provided an opportunity to test the solidity of the
foundations of Skepticism. Consider the following
facts:
1. If a line perpendicular to the north face of the pyramid
is projected from the exact centre of the pyramid through
the exact centre of the face into space and a
perpendicular from that line is dropped to earth it passes
through the North Pole. And I mean exactly; to within
thousandths of a millimetre. What is more, the angle
 subtended by this perpendicular is exactly the same as
that defined by the intersection of any of he sides of the
basal polygon of he pyramid. How did the Tiwkuf gain
such master over trigonometry? How could they locate
the North pole from space?
2. A line projected through the apex of the pyramid
parallel to the gravitational field of the earth at the centre
of the pyramid is, on a certain day of the year
(undoubtedly an old religious festival), exactly in line
with the star known to the Tiwkuf as Goggasap (which
translates, roughly, as “Beetlejuice”; the meaning is
mysterious). But the truly amazing thing is that this
axis sweeps constantly through an arc relative to he
centre of our galaxy and rotates through exactly 360
degrees in precisely one year, the exact same number
of degrees as there are around the equator of the earth.
How could the ancients have understood the structure
of the Milky Way and what gave them such fantastically
precise control over navigation and astronomical time?
3. I shall now have to become somewhat technical and
I apologize for this but it is unforgoable. A Great Circle
projected from the structure at Guacamole passes right
through the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Earlier
measurements suggested that it missed the left hand
corner by the value of pi expressed in cubits but this
was the result of a deliberate error built into GPS
systems by the CIA in a bungled attempt to hide the
truth from the public. Now for the clincher: if one rotates
this circle according to a locus that fixes the position of
the magnetic North pole in the location in which it was
at the time the pyramid was completed and one then
considers the circle to be the perimeter of a geometrical
figure in he plane, then the circle passes through the
apex of he pyramid and both the North and South poles
and the plane divides the earth exactly in half? Thus we
see that the Tiwkuf understood the mathematical
concept of Polar Coordinates when Europeans were still
baking mammoths in mud huts.
4. The fact-and it is indisputable; I have checked it that
really shook me personally, as a geologist, is this one:
the pyramid is exactly above he centre of the earth. What’s
more, a line joining the centre of the pyramid to the
centre of the earth passes right through the Mohorovicic
discontinuity, which is scores of kilometres inside the
earth and was not discovered by western science until
the twentieth century! How does one explain this?
Apply Occam’s razor. The answer is obvious. (In order
to avoid sensational allegations of partiality he word
“Aliens” will not be used anywhere in this article).
5. The Tiwkuf were consummate mathematicians. The
product of the volume of the pyramid, the area of the
apex of the structure, the area of the base and the length
of the hypotenuse constructed by halving the base
through any two opposing corners is exactly zero. And
it does not matter whether he hypotenuse is considered
to be Euclidean or spherical. This operation provides a
function of awesome numerological power. (The
Tiwkuf, like the ancient Egyptians, Pythagorus and
Newton, were clever enough to be scared fartless by
the power of numbers). If differentiated, he function
generates a truly frightening equation, which the Tiwkuf
would never dare to mention by its true name. They
referred to it, if at all and in error, as “Arfur”, which is
difficult to translate but comes out, approximately, as
“Eric”. I have, with trepidation, played around a bit
with Eric. When I discovered that this function, if
applied to the logarithm of the telephone number of
Barry Williams, in accordance with the Trapezoid Rule,
also generates the determinant zero. I gave up in fear
of my sanity. There are about three billion telephone
numbers in he world. The chances of Barry’s number
coming up in this equation are far less than the odds in
Tattsotto. There is also the spooky question of he prime
numbers. Any mathematician will tell you that he prime
numbers are a small subset of all the natural positive
integers. Yet he following aspects of he pyramid (inter
alia ) are all defined by primes -he number of angles
adjacent to the above-mentioned hypotenuse; he number
of edges that each inclined face shares with contiguous
faces and the number of planes defining the geometric
shape of the building. There is no doubt that a study of
he writings on the walls inside the pyramid will in due
course reveal other amazing mathematical truths. I was
particularly fascinated by the sacred script on the
countermure above the girandole. The first few words
have been translated but he rest is as yet indecipherable:
“An old Tiwkuf shaman named Zall, has a dodcedhedral
left...”
6. The Pyramid is a marble of engineering, being built
out of metamorphosed limestone, which we cannot
manufacture even today. Notwithstanding its mass of
417 billion tonnes it is completely stable; this despite
having not one skerrick of prestressed concrete in it. It

continued p 61...
Festival of the wallet

Trevor Case

If you think that belief in the paranormal, pseudoscience etc is not widespread, suspend your judgement until you attend a Mind, Body, and Spirit Festival. On May 2 three members of the NSW committee (Richard Lead, Alynda Brown, and I) went to one such Festival at Darling Harbour. Our conclusion: belief in the paranormal, pseudoscience, and the supernatural is alive and kicking.

Despite the miserable weather, the punters turned out in droves to attend this Mecca of promised enlightenment. How much did it cost to enter the world of the enlightened and mingle with self-styled gurus? A token $12. Well, that got you through the door anyway. To buy merchandise or attend courses the cost was considerable greater.

Once inside, the aroma of burning incense and sounds of synthesised dolphin squeals set the stage. Check your critical faculties at the door. There’s no place for the limited world of rationality at this exhibition. Open your mind, open your heart, and most of all open your wallet. There were over 200 exhibits in all, so ambitiously we decided to divide and conquer.

Now, we have all seen “Magic Happens” bumper stickers and $20 Tarot readings at the local shopping centre, but in this time of unparalleled scientific and technological advances, are people willing to swallow any ridiculous claim? Moreover, is there really any money to be made in peddling poppycock? From our observations at the MBS festival the answers to these questions is an unqualified “yes.”

Most of the exhibits were inundated with people who were ready and willing to part with cash for merchandise. In fact, the exhibition centre was so crowded at one point that it became impossible to move in any direction. Throughout the day people were queueing up to pay $30 for a half hour reading from any one of approximately 40 psychics.

There were iridology treatments, aura readings, reiki and so forth. However, the main exhibition was “therapeutic crystals, kirlian photography, ‘wholistic’ dental treatment, and angels, to list but a few.

We managed to speak with some of the exhibitors about the products and services they were offering. At one exhibit on wholistic [sic] dental treatment it was claimed that teeth are related to different body parts via acupuncture meridians. I indicated my surprise and asked if there was any scientific evidence to support this claim. I was told of a study appeared in a (nonrefereed) journal in which a tooth was removed from a human patient who suffered from cardiac disease and implanted in a rabbit. Apparently the rabbit consequently developed cardiac disease. I wonder where they implanted the tooth! The exhibitor volunteered to send me a copy of the paper.

At another exhibit people were buying small purple plates for $35 each. The exhibitor claimed these plates were made of aluminium and that the atoms of the aluminium had been altered so that the device is in tune or in harmony with the energy of the Universe. The order form for this “Positive Energy Plate” promises that the energy can be felt “by many sensitive people”. A similar product is claimed to increase the fuel efficiency of your car, and ranges in price from $75 to $200, depending on the size of your car. Is there anything these magic plates cannot do?

We also engaged the people at the Neuro-Linguistic Programming exhibit in an argument about the lack of empirical basis for their claims. In response I was told to imagine my favourite colour -I still cannot determine how this exercise had a bearing on the argument. Perhaps I would need to pay the $2140 NLP Practitioner training fee to find out.

The highlight of our journey into fast buck, supermarket-style, enlightenment was our visit to the Infinity Empowered Water exhibit. In the words of our subtle and quietly spoken treasurer, Richard Lead “Wait ‘til they feel 125kg of Lead come down on them”.

Richard approached the Infinity exhibit declaring “This has been debunked on national television. So what are you doing here?” The staff may have been confused at first, because Richard was cleverly disguised. Unlike his recent appearance on Ch 7’s Today Tonight program (see “Around the traps”, this issue), which exposed the Infinity empowered water scam, this time Richard was fully clothed.

However it was not long before a young girl working at the exhibit saw through Richard’s clever stratagem -perhaps she undressed him with her eyes. “He’s one of those Skeptics!” she cried. Richard’s cover had been blown. Another Infinity associate confidently asserted “We know all about the Skeptics.” The crowd that had gathered in all the excitement began to disperse. After all, he was just one of those noisy, cynical Skeptics trying to ruin everyone’s fun.

It was all over. As usual, the charlatans and hucksters preyed on wishful thinking and poor judgment and came out Victors. After a long day of persistent scepticism in the face of truck loads of piffle we decided to repair to the comforts provided by nearby pub to trade stories of our experiences over a few cleansing ales (non-wholistic).

We record, with regret, the death, in the USA on April 27, of David Fasold, from a brain tumour.

David Fasold was Ian Plimer’s co-applicant in the Noah’s Ark trial in 1997, and was awarded $2500 in damages against Allen Roberts for plagiarism of his book.

David was a nice bloke and we have asked Ian to write an appreciation of his friend for the next issue.

Vol 18, No 2 THE SKEPTIC
You will be like a god....’
Alex Ritchie

In 1986, when I was the Scientific Officer on an Australian Museum project team planning a major new human evolution gallery, “Tracks Through Time...”, to mark Australia’s Bicentenary, I had a problem. Desperate to find suitable items to illustrate our displays, and with limited funds to buy anything, I remembered a little bronze statue I had seen and admired in the entry hall of the Zoology Department in Edinburgh University when I was a student.

The statue depicted a chimpanzee sitting on a pile of books, one of which bore the name ‘Darwin’. The chimp was holding, and gazing at, a grinning human skull. Its left foot clutched a pair of measuring callipers. It seemed to sum up everything I wanted to say in our introductory evolutionary section.

I asked around, trying to find where we could buy a copy of the statue but without success. Then, a casual remark in conversation revealed that a member of the Museum’s Education Department owned an original copy of the cast;his family had been involved in antiques and had held onto one when it came into their hands.

Our immediate problem was solved. Jim Hood, one of the Museum’s most skilled preparators was given the job of moulding and casting the statue to produce a copy for our display. Cast in resin, with a bronze patina to match the original, it provided a marvellous introductory statement, under a picture of Darwin, next to a copy of *The Origin of Species*, under the heading “Evolution is a Fact”. Needless to say this single display provokes some animated responses from aggrieved creationist visitors in the Museum’s comments book.

I decided to research the history of the statue, who sculpted it and when, with some success. It appears that there are several versions in existence and I suspect it has been copied and recast more than once. My information suggests that the original sculptor was one Hermann Obrist (1863-1931), I believe he was Austrian, and the sculpture was titled, appropriately, ‘Evolution’.

One of the books on which the chimp is sitting is open. On the top of the right hand page is the Latin inscription ‘eritis sicut deus’ meaning ‘you will be like a god’, which seems a bit enigmatic. The bottom of the page is blank, but with a break in level suggesting something may have been removed.

I have been informed that another version of the statue exists, but have not seen a copy. In this version the inscription continues onto the bottom half of the page and reads ‘*scientiae bonum et malum*’, meaning ‘knowing the difference between good and evil’, which makes much more sense!

After our ‘Tracks Through Time...’ gallery opened in late 1988, I was contacted by several people in NSW who either owned, or knew of the existence of, other original bronze copies. Sir Edward Hallstrom, former Director of Taronga Zoo, owned one. Another copy belonged to a former Editor in chief of *Smith’s Weekly*, a popular publication in the 1930s, and is still treasured by his family.

Another caller informed me that a copy of Hermann Obrist’s statue was one of Lenin’s favourite possessions, and it can still be seen to this day on Lenin’s desk in the Kremlin. I later learned the fascinating story of how Lenin acquired it. Apparently the American millionaire businessman, Armand Hammer, who maintained a lifelong business relationship with the Russians, even through the Second World War and the Cold War, passed through London on his way to Moscow in the early 1920s and was looking for something to take as a present to Lenin. A friend suggested the chimp statue, Hammer bought it, presented it to Lenin and that was the beginning of a long, productive and profitable relationship with the Soviets.

That is basically all I know, but some questions remain unanswered. I would be grateful if any readers of *the Skeptic* know of any other original bronze copies and can provide any more information on either the sculptor or the statue.
Great Australian Science Show. Adam Santilli organised a stand for us at the GASS and it really was a gas. After not having one last year the organisers did a magnificent job. The space was actually very well controlled but it felt like an open sort of labyrinth marvellous for wandering.

There were research institutes, universities, specialist industries, Madame Tussaud’s Einstein, the solar car, the dolphin research group, amazing book vendors (don’t you hate it when you see all those good books and you blow your weekend allowance?). JJJ broadcast live (hello Paul Willis) and you may have seen the discussion on cloning on the ABC recorded at the show one evening.

And then there was the Skeptics stand. We had all our brochures freshly reprinted and a few books but the bed of nails and the astrology corner were almost constantly busy.

The bed of nails is just brilliant -so much easier than fire walks. Do you know you can bounce balloons off it? We put a balloon on it and weighted it down with several kilos of books and couldn’t get it to burst. Anyway we had big bulky blokes with mums and their children standing on top of them, and people were just amazed.

The astrology corner had a list of the real star dates for 2000AD and a computer with SkyGlobe running. This is a superb Astronomy shareware with star data from 30,000BC to 30,000AD. You can get the software free from the web and I’ve written course notes for year 7-10 classes if anybody wants them (due to be presented at the next STA V conference). You just dial up the birth date of somebody and show them where the sun really was when they were born (most Geminis are Tauruses etc) and people are just amazed. I’ve found this to be the biggest challenge to people’s acceptance of astrology. And I don’t know how many times I recited the “Astrology is the remnants of an agricultural calendar from Sumeria” rave. I had a great time except for an almighty blue with a homeopathist.

The things I didn’t see in the stars
Despite constantly consulting the best psychics in the country (seers without peers) I wasn’t ready for this interesting surprise. I’ve been bought by the Yanks. (Well, the company I work for has been bought.) Two interesting consequences of his are that I have to move to New Jersey in January and I have to get married. Apparently I can get a ‘Principal Alien’ visa sponsored by my new employers but my partner can only get a ‘Trailing Spouse’ visa and the US immigration do not recognise de facto relationships for that purpose. What a backward country. Anyway, it really gripes me that I have to drop out of Aus Skeps just when I was getting used to it. Perhaps I can send Letters from America.

Radio
Prodos Marinakis (3WRB 97. 4fm) is back on the radio after a spell and you can hear the Skeptics on Wednesday afternoons

TV We’re working on a weekly TV show for Channel 31. It’s quite a strain getting enough people in the same spot at the same time to do something productive but we’re still perservering. Once again, if you would like to help, give us a call. We need pretty well everything -camera talent, scripting talent, acting talent, directing talent, six months spare time

The Challenge
The $100, 000 Challenge and $20, 000 Spotters Fee brochures have been printed and sent to Challenge Officers nation wide and with the help of SA and NSW you should be hearing and seeing it in the media real soon. Bob Nixon is our Officer and he’s doing a champion job.

... pyramid from p 58

is held in place purely by an incredibly exact counterbalance between the local gravitational field and forces of electromagnetic repulsion emanating from tetrahedral arrangements of atoms within the structures of crystals of nesosilicates, orthosilicates and other unique materials that the ancients knew how to find and transport to the site to use as a foundation. How did they manage this without gravitometers and bulldozers?

7. The Tiwkuf were master planners and organizers, with an ability to meet deadlines that has never again been reproduced in any Public Service anywhere in the world. The building of the pyramid involved moving 900 million ashlars and over 5 trillion lamingtons. (They slid the blocks on the lamingtons; a good measure of the pitiful extent to which uncritical thinking has run riot through modern society is the vast number of deluded people who now imagine that these objects were meant to be eaten). Nevertheless the Tiwkuf had the pyramid ready for the opening ceremony on Christmas day, 2000 BC.

8. One last little gem: all of the Egyptian pyramids are infested by the Abyssinian epauletted bat, which is detested because it lives on anchovies and green mangoes, with disastrous consequences for the efforts of the interior decorators of long ago. These bats are absent from the pyramid at Guacamole. What power unknown to science keeps them away?

So there you have it, fellow Skeptics. You all feared in your heart of hearts that this day would dawn, didn’t you? Finally left you speechless, hasn’t it? I knew it would. But take courage; there is practical good in all of this. If you are being troubled by a dull blade, you can always stick him under a 1:1000 scale model of the Great Pyramid of Tiwkuf and your difficulty will be terminated, just like magic.
Your correspondent has finally been to Yankalilla to see the apparition of the BVM on an Anglican Church wall. My visit, together with fellow SA Skeptics Laurie Eddie and James Lakes, was made so that a film crew could get some footage of Skeptics and the image for a future TV documentary.

As I was the only one not to have seen the image previously, here was the danger that the TV camera could have taught me being wonder struck at first sight. Especially as they started filming as we entered the church - a situation I wasn’t aware of until after I had been talking for a couple of minutes. However, I found it less impressive in reality than it is in print (or even artfully enhanced photographs.) Actually I couldn’t really see any definite image there at all, which left me making comments about hypothetical images.

After the filming, we also had a look at the dowser-discovered “healing spring”, which supplies the miraculous water (one cure already claimed). If anything, I found it less impressive than the image inside. It consists of a pipe coming out of the ground, with a tap at the top to deliver the water. Where the other end of the pipe goes, remains a mystery.

But Yankalilla, and its rector, Father Andrew Nutter, are still making news. On Sunday May 3, he used the pulpit to tell the congregation to “back me or sack me”. He later told the Advertiser that “the overwhelming majority of the parishioners support me 100% with what I’m doing in the parish and in the shrine”, and that only a small minority was opposed to the dramatic change. This statement may have been a bit hasty, as the Sunday Mail of May 10 carried a full-page feature, highlighting Fr Nutter’s statement that he had failed as a parish priest, and critical comments from members of the congregation.

From phone calls received the SA Skeptics were aware that opposition within his congregation was more extensive that Fr Nutter had previously implied, although, there wasn’t much we could really do about it.

The Skeptics’ brief is fairly wide, and some of us do stretch the boundaries as to what we get involved in (I more than most). But I am pretty sure that we aren’t meant to get involved in internal parish affairs. However, when several members of a congregation feel the need to complain about the pastoral position of their priest to a group called the Skeptics, it doesn’t indicate a particularly harmonious situation.

The following argument was put to Michael: The Sun and Moon affect us. The Sun and Moon are heavenly bodies. The stars are heavenly bodies. (The conclusion is left as an exercise for the reader.) Perhaps, because the astrologer did formulate the argument in the logical fashion above, she considered it a reasonable argument.

**Oncoming Events:**

By the time you read this we will have engaged in the following highly newsworthy events.

**Mind Body and Psychic Festival, May 30.**

We are currently anticipating hawking our wares at the festival at the Morphettville racecourse function centre on May 30. This might be considered slightly difficult, as our wares primarily consist of such intangibles as logic, reason, and encouraging people to think for themselves. However much of what is sold at these events is even less substantial than what we are offering, so we should do a roaring trade.

**June 3 Skeptics Dinner**

Chris Kenny speaks about the Hindmarsh Island Secret Women’s Business.

**August 3 Dinner and Discussion**

Our 7:30pm Dinner and Discussion evening at the Rob Roy Hotel, 106 Halifax Street Adelaide, will feature well known South Australian author, Peter Goldsworthy, speaking on “The X-files Phenomenon”.

If you wish to attend, please ring me on 08 8277 6427 to confirm your booking.
There have been Skeptics groups, formal and informal, over the years in Queensland, but last year Bob Bruce revitalised the Brisbane-based Skeptics and incorporated the Association.

At our first meeting on June 30, 1997 we discussed our aims and ideas. As a start, it was agreed to have a regular meeting on the last Monday of each month, at 7pm in the Dutton Park State School, Annerley Road, Dutton Park. Bob Bruce was voted in as president. At later meetings, Hamish Fraser was appointed secretary and Charles Coin, treasurer.

A small payment of $5 is required to join the Queensland Skeptics as a voting member. This goes towards sending out notices, copying, etc. We received ASSEF funding to purchase a computer, printer, email address, etc. Bob is planning to purchase other equipment and materials so that we can more readily spread a Skeptical message.

Attendance at meetings is open to all Skeptic subscribers. Besides the invited speaker’s topic, we usually discuss other topics as well. Our members come from diverse backgrounds and bring a variety of skills and experiences to thinking skeptically. A stimulating evening is always assured.

* * *

We have had a range of interesting speakers for our monthly meetings. In July, Marianne Mitchell spoke about sociolinguistics and alerted us to how language can subtly influence our opinions.

Andrew Vincent of the Chiropractors Association of Australia spoke at our August meeting. I don’t know if anyone was convinced about chiropractic, but it was appropriate to hear another viewpoint, and we agreed with Andrew when he spoke against the wilder reaches of un regulated natural healing.

In September, prominent Victorian Skeptic Steve Roberts presented his talk, UFOs as Religion, from the August National Convention. Among other things, I liked Steve’s comparison of the phases of aliens and UFOs reported since WWII and their representations in movies. The comparison strengthened his proposition that many “sightings” are just individuals’ projections of popular culture.

For October, John Gearing, a pharmacist and herbalist spoke. His approach to alternative medicines is more accepting than that of some other pharmacists, and his comments generated lively discussion. The audience included Geraldine Moses, a pharmacist who is heard regularly on local ABC radio. Geraldine brought a lot of mainstream knowledge to the discussion.

Our end-of-year function was held in November with Bob Montgomery as guest speaker. Bob, who has a regular fortnightly segment on ABC Radio’s Life Matters, is the professor of psychology at Bond University. He reminded us about making judgements about other people and pointed out some flaws in inductive reasoning.

Tony Thulborn, of the Zoology Department, University of Queensland, discussed evolution at the January meeting. For a simple idea, evolution has a lot of depth and breadth to it and Tony covered some of these aspects.

For March, Bob brought along the latest Nexus, a Queensland-based “new times magazine”, which promised on its front cover: conspiracies, the hidden history of Jesus, healing with resonance, covert experiments on the public, Brazil’s miracle healer, UFOs, and the like. I was intrigued by the mathematical thinking exhibited in an ad for the Bio Electric Field Enhancer which said, “Take one bath with the Field Enhancer every other day for a period of around a month (28 baths in all).”

Our guest for April was Dr Stuart Reece. Stuart is a GP in an inner suburb of Brisbane. He is an enthusiastic speaker concerned about trends in gambling, drinking, disease and social problems. His talk covered the relationships between many disparate statistics and a skeptical eye is needed to tease out the nature of these relationships.

Horse sense?
While discussing the Brazilian miracle curer at our March meeting, a member who is a retired vet told us how horse chiropractors, mostly with no veterinary qualifications, claim to “cure” horses by manipulating the spine, usually with something like a couple of rubber balls. How a human can have the power to alter the spinal column of a 600kg horse was beyond him, but he reckons that the clients swear by these chiropractors. He added, though, that if you pay for something it is human nature to believe it works!

The vet is also very concerned about qualified veterinarians who have embraced homeopathy, naturopathy and so on. These practices have gained de facto respectability due to the apathy which has allowed special interest groups for such approaches to form under the umbrella of the professional associations, such as the Australian Veterinary Association.

I was surprised at some of these revelations until I caught some of Animal Hospital on TV on 9 April. A chiropractor was brought in to a WA aquarium to treat the back problems of 2m shark!

* * *

Contact details for the Queensland Skeptics are on the editorial page.

Moving?
Don’t forget to let us know.
Tasmanian trivia

Fred Thornett

Since our incorporation in 1997 we are continuing to grow, but slowly so. On a per head of population basis we probably have more members than most other states, but that is only to be expected in the intellectual ferment that is Tasmanian society.

* * *

Our second function for 1998 was an illustrated lecture by Dr Lindsay McLeod entitled “Natural Remedies - Real and Imagined”. Dr McLeod is man who knows his drugs! One of the more interesting things he highlighted was that a very large number of modern drugs ranging from the tricyclic anti-depressants to pethidine have been derived from research programs seeking to improve natural drugs derived from only a few plants. These included belladonna, opium and curare.

Dr McLeod also told us of a most interesting pseudo-pharmacological scam comprising both book and potion. The book, The Oxygen Connection - Major Disease Breakthrough (New Appendix on AIDS), is published by Veritas Publishing Co of Cranbrook, WA. The book is supported by a bottle of “OxyZone” described as “Stabilised Electrolyte of Oxygen Drops.” This interesting nostrum’s bottle claims that it contains sodium chloride 4.4% w/v, sodium chloride 0.7% w/v and purified water 94%. To kill anaerobic bacteria, five drops are diluted in 250ml of water. Pretty strong stuff? There must be at least four or five free oxygen molecules per litre of solution.

It is endlessly astonishing how often “amazing discoveries” such as these are made by men like the author who in his preface tells us that, “. . . I am no scientist, doctor or PhD” Read the book. All of you who have spent your productive years studying at universities to learn about science and such hard stuff will now realize you have wasted your lives.

* * *

Fred Thornett has now repeated his ten lecture course, “Skepticism - Opening your mind without letting your brains fall out” at the University of the Third Age in Hobart. Once again the class was full. Next term he will be leading a series of mediated discussion groups canvassing topics of interest to those of a skeptical bent.

Adult Education in Hobart has now agreed to offer a modified version of the course on Skepticism in its program for the next term. It will be interesting to see if it attracts anything like the interest that is shown in Adult Education courses about new age topics: naturopathy, crystal healing, astrology, aura therapy and such like. As we do not live in a scientific age, it probably should be heartening if it attracts any interest at all.

Still we can but try to bring the light of rationality to our fellows. If we do not then we leave the field open to the purveyors of pseudo-science who will, as Roland Siedel so aptly said, “Go harvesting the gullible.”

* * *

Finally, why waste money on a shonky non-qualification from a US Bible College? Keep your money in Oz. Buy one of ours. See the website for details or contact Tas Skeptics.

Surfin’ Skeptics

John Winckle

To celebrate the hugely auspicious date of April 1 the Gold Coast Skeptics had a talk from fellow Skeptic and medical specialist, Julien de Jaeger. Julien has made something of a hobby of collecting data on medical nonsense. He is after all a rheumatologist and there are probably more non-cures for rheumatism than any other condition. His collection runs to hundreds of cures, and all of them have helped at least one person. Topic of the talk was “Medical Fraud in the Nineties”. Not much different from medical fraud in most other times, as it happens, just surprising that here is so much of it still around.

One important point that was made, is that alternate medicine is ruled out of court by the medical profession, not because of its unconventionality, or some conspiracy by the doctors. It is out because it does not work. If dried tigers penis had any therapeutic value, it would be used. We could synthesize the active ingredients or farm tigers. The reason we don’t do this and discredit tiger medicine is, it does not work. This is quite apart from the obvious damage to tigers.

Another issue of interest and concern is when doctors depart from the accepted medical practices. One doctor backing alternate medical practices can provide great propaganda value for groups like the anti vaccination network. This has happened on the Gold Coast.

Our next meeting is on June 3 and Prof R. Montgomery will talk on “Human Thinking and Beliefs”.

Members are asked to bring a friend. This has the good effects of introducing more people to the delights of Skepticism, and increasing the number of informed Skeptics in the community, who can do their bit for rationality in a gullible world. We plan to form special interest groups to work on areas of greatest concern.

We are also trying to get publicity for Skepticism in the media. John Stear writes tirelessly to the papers and I gave an interview about the $100,000 challenge. The photographer faked up a wonderful photo of me apparently levitating a lady journalist, David Copperfield style. The journalist however wasn’t so friendly, and after expressing the view that vaccination is a conspiracy between the drug companies and doctors for profit, wrote a dismissive piece about the soulless life of the Skeptic not believing in anything that can’t be proved and so forth. Ah well, nobody said life was easy.
Sex in Science

Kathy Butler
Is science different for boys and girls?
Four scientists will tell you their experience at the Australian Skeptics Science Symposium.

The Australian Skeptics’ Science Symposium is approaching, and this is your last opportunity to fill in the form in this magazine for tickets, and mail or fax it to the Vic branch! (You can even apply via our web site!) It’s on August 11 at 5.30pm at Scienceworks, Booker St, Spottswood, Vic. The evening includes four great speakers, coffee and cake for early arrivers, a great supper and freebies from Vic Skeptics and New Scientist. For only $25 that’s a real bargain. Please help our ticket secretary by getting your order in early. I know that August seems a long time away but it will be here in a flash.

Dr Andi Horvath
Museum of Victoria
What do girls like about science?

Who are the most important science educators in a child’s life? Dr Andi Horvath of the Museum of Victoria (and probably best known as the Kitchen Professor of 3RRR’s Einstein-go-go) says it is most assuredly their earliest teachers. “I can’t stress enough how important preschool and primary teachers are to forming a child’s attitude to science”, she says. “They are an extremely powerful influence.” The unfortunate catch to this is that women who take up early childhood studies tend to be less interested in science, and men are actively dissuaded from these studies. “This is a flipside that also has to be addressed,” says Andi, “men who study early childhood education have their motives and masculinity under suspicion. This is so unfortunate and unfair. It is so important to give young children an unbiased view of the world from an early age.”

She says that we also unconsciously bias our children’s ideas of technology from preschool age. She set her fourth-year students at Melbourne University the task of examining how we introduce very young children to technology (the calculator, remote control, electric can opener, etc) The results showed clear gender lines as to what children were introduced. Andi has done a little investigation of children’s interest in Tamogotchis (those little Japanese computer games that need “feeding” and tending to). Her first findings are that both boys and girls are equally attracted to playing the game, but apparently for different reasons. Her earliest observations tend to suggest that girls play the game for its relationship and nurturing qualities whereas boys play it for the power and control they have over it.

The way children approach science is an important concept for teaching science. Where girls in a technology class tend to sit and plan, a group of boys will rush to begin a practical project first. Lessons should be planned with this sort of difference in mind, she says. Andi will be presenting local research into gender differences in science learning at the Australian Skeptics Science Symposium this year. (If you can get her away from the podium, ask her how to make a tea-bag rocket: it is my favourite Kitchen Professor party trick!)

When was the last time you read your horoscope in Playboy? (let me tell you—there isn’t one.) Why do boys like physics and girls like biology (or do they?) It is about power—who has it and who has to make their own. So says Dr Claire Colebrook from Monash University Dept of Philosophy. “Although there are more women and girls entering science education and work, society in general and the women’s movement in particular are becoming more opposed to modern science. Science is seen by feminist groups as a man’s creation: a power held by men, and women entering it are ‘selling out’, becoming pseudo-men. Women who feel alienated from real power are attracted to the various pseudosciences. This is reinforced by the growing new-age element in society, appealing to ‘feminine’ ways of thinking.” Since women have these pressures to contend with should science be taught differently to girls from boys? “Not at all. That would only reinforce the idea. Science certainly suffers from being taught in a dogmatic fashion, and this should be changed, but the idea that science is different for boys and girls is an idea that should be exploded, not reinforced.”
**Professor Priscilla Kincaid-Smith**  
Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Melbourne  
*Changing times in science*

Professor Priscilla Kincaid-Smith concedes that when she started medical study in the 1940’s it was rather unusual for a woman to do so, but it was not until she left South Africa to work in Australia that she encountered any prejudice. Although trained in medicine, cardiology and pathology, she was denied a position in medicine because she was a married woman. Dismayed at the situation confronting them in Australia, her husband suggested that they should look abroad for work, and they were both accepted to a position in New Guinea. As Dr Kincaid-Smith used her maiden name professionally, it wasn’t realised that she was married. “Once they knew”, she says “they said that I could have the job until a man came along. Not a more qualified man, mind you, any man.”

Fortunately for us, the couple decided to stay in Australia for the next eight years. It was during this time that Dr Kincaid-Smith came across a uniquely Australian puzzle. She noted, while taking patient histories for her husband, that a large number of patients with high blood pressure also had kidney disease, and she recognised that the common factor was the huge number of painkillers that they were taking. Around the same time she attended a post-mortem of a patient who had died from kidney failure. Although it was fairly common in Australia, Dr Kincaid-Smith had never seen a case before. She is credited with tracking down the killer: a combination of aspirin, paracetamol and caffeine, all due to our once common habit of taking daily doses of painkillers. “It was an incredible habit”, she says “people would load up their supermarket trollies with huge boxes of painkillers.” After a long battle, she finally had legislation approved to prohibit the production of painkillers using those particular ingredients together. The kidney disorder has virtually vanished from this country.

During her career she can also boast of being the first female president of the Royal Australian College of Physicians and the first female president of the World Medical Association, among many other achievements. At the symposium, she will reflect on how the opportunities in medicine have changed for both sexes.

**Professor Adrienne Clarke**  
Lieutenant Governor of Victoria, Past Chair CSIRO  
*Science and the future*

When Professor Adrienne Clarke first took on the job as our Lieutenant Governor, a journalist asked her if she thought it was a step forward for women. She replied, bemused, that she hadn’t thought about it like that: she thought of herself as a scientist. This probably says a lot about the evolution of science and society. As a new Melbourne Uni student in 1957, she and her fellow female college residents entered university one week early. They had to pass a housekeeping exam before being allowed to begin formal study. Chemistry was her first discipline: she took biology much later in her studies. She advises any young biology student that they can’t go wrong with a strong background in hard-core subjects such as maths and chemistry. She says that society would be more science-literate if more students combined science with their degree, such as science-law or commerce. “They switch on the computer without thinking of the intellectual drive that went into making it. They reach for the yoghurt without thinking about microbiology or food safety. Science and technology, whether we like it or not, is defining our future.” Professor Adrienne Clarke is a past Chairman of CSIRO. She is currently director of the plant cell biology research centre and professor of the school of Botany at Melbourne University. Among her numerous achievements, she is an officer of the Order of Australia and Victoria’s Lieutenant Governor. She will be speaking about the future of science at the Symposium.
Australian Skeptics Annual Convention
Canberra

31 October - 1 November 1998
National Science & Technology Centre
King Edward Tce, Parkes ACT 2600

Skeptics are invited to attend the 1998 Australian Skeptics Annual Convention. Following is the draft of the proposed programme, and such details as are available at this stage. The final programme will be in the next issue of the Skeptic.

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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
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<tr>
<td>Saturday, 31 October</td>
<td>9.30 - 12.30</td>
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<td>Saturday, 31 October</td>
<td>2.00 - 5.00</td>
<td>Creationism</td>
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<td>Sunday, 1 November</td>
<td>10.00 - 12.30</td>
<td>Pseudo-healing</td>
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<td>Sunday, 1 November</td>
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Convention fees: Four sessions $75.00 Concession $55.00
Single session $20.00 Concession $15.00

Australian Skeptics Annual Dinner
Saturday, 31 October
7.00pm - 11.00pm
Kings Hall
Old Parliament House

Cost $55.00 per person - no concessions available

Skeptics interested in presenting a paper on any of the broad topics are requested to contact:

Julie McCarron-Benson
Ph: 02 6239 6212
Fx: 02 6239 6320
email: mcchat@interact.net.au

or

Canberra Skeptics
PO Box 555
Civic Square ACT 2608
Letters

Letters are welcomed from anyone wishing to air their views or vent their spleen, about items that have appeared in the magazine, or anything else that takes their Skeptical fancy. We reserve the right to butcher your contributions unmercifully for reasons of space or clarity.

Awareness?

Roland Seidel (18/1 p19), I find very convincing, and am sorry to have missed his first article referenced as 17/3. Convincing, that is, until he states “awareness” is “what makes everything about humans difficult”. And that should’s are agonised over only by us superior bipeds.

Human awareness, if defined as sense perception, is extremely deficient compared with most wild animals. If Roland means “consciousness” or self awareness, his statement might have passed muster not very long ago, but as someone who listens to the ABC Science Show programs (usually an excellent substitute for holy writ), and also as one who prefers a pet pet to a pet human, the idea that some or most animals have consciousness similar to ours is very appealing. Whether animals “agonise” over decisions may be as doubtful as whether all humans do so, but they experience crisis situations that would seem to create stressful emotions akin to those of our ignoble species.

I will leave it to more macho males to explain to your learned contributor that the male biomass will be seen not to have been a complete waste, as soon as cloning techniques and artificial wombs arrive to give the ladies something to agonise about!

Arthur de Munitiz
Paddington NSW

Awareness?(self)

Thanks, Arthur, I did mean self-awareness. There is good evidence that this is only present in a few of the higher apes, principally chimpanzees and ourselves. After a short while, chimps recognise a mirror reflection, and use it to inspect parts of their bodies they can’t normally see; all other animals persist in seeing the mirror image as a rival or just another animal. When you say “the idea that some or most animals have consciousness similar to ours is very appealing” you are toying with what you would prefer to be true, and you are honest enough to recognise that this perception derives from your preference for pet pets. The scientific evidence suggests that, no matter how appealing, no matter how it seems, it is not the case.

It depends, of course, on how you define self awareness, consciousness and identity. People in research and philosophy are doing that now, and to show how devastatingly important the definitions are, consider this problem for the anti-abortion groups.

From the work of Francis Crick, Daniel Dennett, Susan Blackmore, Noam Chomsky, and others, emerges the view that identity takes some time to form in the brain. The newborn brain has been working for a few months in utero and now has to make sense of a wider experience. It eventually forms mental models of everything around and at some point forms a mental model of the body it which it survives. This is the self. Prior to that there was no self, no identity, no consciousness, no person. This happens at eighteen months of age.

It is a staggeringly non-intuitive proposition that persons don’t exist until their bodies are eighteen months out of the womb, and has very significant legal and moral consequences. Anti-abortionists argue that persons come into existence much earlier, some argue at the time of conception. But again, it is very difficult not to confuse what is, from what we feel ought to be. (BTW, the ancient Greeks had a variation of this. The first time you did something of significance -sacking Troy perhaps - you were deemed to be forty years old, your date of birth was set at forty years ago.)

The bit about male biomass was all provocation and no science. It’s my contribution to knocking some of the hubris out of males to give females a fairer go. It does, however, have philosophical significance. If we were designed by intelligence, the waste of biomass questions the quality of that intelligence.

Roland Seidel
Selby VIC

Economics

I write in response to letters by Bob Entwistle and J. T. Wearne in the autumn 1998 edition of the Skeptic. Their letters attempt to criticise the discipline of economics, as originally discussed by PP McGuinness.

The issue of entropy is hardly relevant; the earth is not a closed system and receives energy from the sun each day. Thus the tendency for entropy to increase in a closed system is not important for the issues that economics considers.

Economics is essentially the science of scarcity, that is, how limited resources are best allocated to maximise welfare. If there were unlimited resources (able to satiate all desires) there would be no need for economics.

As it is, there are limited resources and unlimited wants. How best to allocate these scarce resources has been an issue confronting human society since its beginning.

Society has, in general, been fairly successful in improving living standards. Each generation is better off than the previous generation and there always has been, and always will be, economic growth. In first-world countries, those classified as being below the poverty line have far better diets and life expectancies than royalty did two centuries ago. A key driver of this is technology: the ability to do more with less.

Now Bob might think that we will have to face a situation of zero growth, but I don’t think the poor in many developing countries would agree. Perhaps in a thousand years that type of consideration might be important, but then again, perhaps not. In any case, can we really take decisions for circumstances so far in the future? What type of decisions would have been taken by William the Conqueror in 1066 for the twenty-first century? Sustainable economic growth implies greater poverty.

The market economy has been remarkably successful in allocating resources efficiently. With few exceptions, a market economy can allocate scarce resources to their most efficient use far better than central planners can. And this is the basic choice: should individuals trade amongst themselves with few restrictions, or should the Government step in and make those
Dolphins

I would like to provide Skeptics with a recent example of how a simple observation turns into an apparently believable "fact", without the slightest amount of supporting evidence.

The story concerns the factual observations that:
(a) A number of deceased dolphins turned up on the beaches of southern France over some weeks proceeding the 22nd of March 1998.
(b) Each of the dolphins is also known to have featured a circular wound below their eyes or next to their upper jaw.

A copy of the story was posted to Usenet and may be viewed at http://search.dejanews.com/getdoc.xp?AN=336516944
The story was also printed in Melbourne’s Sunday Herald-Sun of 22nd March.

From these two undisputed facts, it was deduced, or at least strongly suggested, by the story’s author, that the US Navy was responsible. Other observers had no qualms about directly implicating the US Navy, for example a Mr Leo Sheridan, from Ariege in France. The “logic” used to draw this conclusion is that:
(c) The US Navy is known to use or experiment with dolphins for use in underwater operations such as torpedo recovery, patrolling naval installations and attaching limpet mines to enemy ships (fact).
(d) Some of the dolphins went AWOL (speculation).
(e) Rather than the US Navy allowing some of these escaped creatures to get into unfriendly hands, they must have remotely detonated explosives contained within collars attached to the dolphins in order to kill them (speculation).

A skeptical reporter may have done a bit more research before coming to the above conclusions. Some inquiry may have been made as to where the dolphins came from.

The US Navy has only one dolphin facility, in San Diego, and this has been subject to large budget cuts. Most of the animals found were of the "striped dolphin" (Stenella coeruleoalba) species. These are highly susceptible to stress and cannot be easily trained or kept in captivity, and this was noted by scientists interviewed for the article. The wounds were quite clean and well defined, not the type of damage expected for an explosive device, or any other type of “self destruct" apparatus. Also, surely if it was so important for the US Navy to destroy these animals, they would have tried to recover the bodies once they started washing up on shore?

More rational explanations have been made for the wounds. One suggestion is that the sea lamprey (Petromyzon marinus) is responsible. Some animals have two wounds, one larger than the other, suggesting that a male and female pair may have been responsible. The wounds themselves may not have been fatal but they allowed cleft mutilations. Other suggestions are that some other type of marine organism caused an initial wound and it was enlarged post mortally by sea birds.

There is a scientific investigation under way in France at the University of Montpellier II concerning these fatalities and the information is being posted at http://www.obsbanyuls.fr/web/departs/monica/gecem.htm along with pictures of the wounds. This page will be updated on a regular basis and more information will hopefully be available by the time this magazine goes to press.

Note that in this case the US Navy has been blamed for the mutilations and deaths, not aliens, as has been suggested in the similar cases of alleged cattle mutilations. No one is suggesting the US Navy exploits New Age-like emphasis given in the article on the dolphins as "friendly and intelligent animals" and "kind and gentle creatures". The inference being that, in contrast, the US Navy exploits these innocent creatures for its own "evil" ends. This is a typical good/evil scenario common in general folklore and of interest to those skeptical of conspiracy theories and alien invasions/abductions. Incidentally, dolphin brains are structurally quite primitive and there is no reason to believe they have a "consciousness" like humans, hat New Agers seem to believe.

An interesting point to note is the New Age-like emphasis given in the article on the dolphins as “friendly and intelligent animals” and “kind and gentle creatures”. The inference being that, in contrast, the US Navy exploits these innocent creatures for its own “evil” ends. This is a typical good/evil scenario common in general folklore and of interest to those skeptical of conspiracy theories and alien invasions/abductions. Incidentally, dolphin brains are structurally quite primitive and there is no reason to believe they have a “consciousness” like humans, hat New Agers seem to believe.

In addition to the more outrageous types of claims that Skeptics are used to dealing with, they should also be wary of these more subtle types of erroneous claims, which don’t directly involve the paranormal or aliens, but nevertheless involve the same types of logical flaws.

David Maddison
Toorak VIC
Scientism

I fear I must accuse your resident capital-H Humanist, James Gerrand, of falling into the grievous sin of Scientism. By “scientism” I mean the false doctrine that experimental tests are the only source of reliable knowledge or truth.

Reviewing the philosopher Jean Curthoys’ recent book Feminist Amnesia (18/1), Mr Gerrand wonders: “Why try to resolve, in the mind, the difference between mind/matter, God/reality, male/female, when the scientific method determines, much more understandingly and positively, any differences?”

Well, precisely because it is not easy to see what sort of experimental test could apply. For example, how would we test experimentally whether it is God, or some lesser genie, or collisions among sub-atomic particles, that accounts for nuclear explosions? (Anyone who thinks that there is such a test would be well advised immediately to dash off an application for the Chair of Philosophy at Harvard.)

“One is foolish”, adds Mr Gerrand, as if determined to compound his sin, “to reject science when its use over four centuries has proven to be the most powerful tool for making wise decisions.”

I don’t know. Consider President Harry Truman’s decision to drop the Bomb on Japan in 1945: I select Harry because of his high reputation, then and now, as a practitioner of the arcane, perhaps mystical, but certainly non-scientific art of purely practical politics. A wise decision it was, in my submission, to drop The Big One; but others will disagree and sincerely. The point is that no imaginable laboratory test could have helped Truman to choose. Nor could science have helped anyone placed in Harry’s position. And, no disrespect to any scientist, but wouldn’t you be happier having a trained barber and small-town politician - for such Harry was - taking that awful decision? I like scientists, we all do, but if I wanted a wise decision, well, I’d go to the barber.

Michael O’Rourke
Griffith ACT

Not scientism

Michael O’Rourke relies on a simplistic view of science “experimental tests are the only source of reliable knowledge or truth” - in his criticism of my review of Jean Curthoys’ Feminist Amnesia (18/1). Certainly you get the most reliable knowledge when you can test knowledge by experiment. Physics is the prime example. Working in the engineering discipline that relies principally on physical laws for its technology I know of no laws of physics that have been found false over the past four centuries - some have needed extension or variation when at the extreme levels such as in quantum mechanics.

However scientific theories can prove reliable even when testing is not possible. The outstanding example here is the theory of evolution based on a wealth of observational evidence, together with other scientific correlation such as that all living material has a common factor in DNA.

Then there are the less reliable disciplines, such as economics, where it usually not possible to carry out experiments due to the changing nature of its factors. But even here the best approach is by the scientific method, which is to observe the workings of an economy and endeavour to note results that seem to be connected with economic transactions. Keynes studied and observed economics with such success that it not only made him a millionaire but “manifested in the principles of economic science” (Everyman’s Encyclopaedia) as particularly expressed in his “General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money” (1936) which was employed to great effect by the USA, the UK, Australia and other countries.

When suggesting something better than philosophy or feminist post-modernism for resolving the distinctions between mind/matter, God/reality, male/female, I did not necessarily imply confirmation by experimentation. However scientific investigation and experimentation has shown, particularly recently in the field of neuroscience, that mind is very much a matter of matter, that our mind is purely the workings of the neurons in our brain.

Similarly science has found many clear distinctions between male and female, not only the visual differences but also in the brain development (see Brainsex by Moir and Jessel). There is no scientific evidence for a God of a personal kind and this why belief in a personal God has largely disappeared in the population who seek reality, a belief based on evidence.

As regards President Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, I feel sure he would have sought advice on possible consequences of his action, and his decision would have been best if he had obtained the best advice based on what scientific evidence was available. No doubt he followed the advice from some of his advisers, probably from the military, that his was the only way to end the war with Japan quickly, and so save many American lives, even if it cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. Perhaps the same early end of the war could have been equally achieved and more humanely by dropping one bomb on a large military base.

As regards the abilities of American presidents to further human progress, writer Gore Vidal has concluded that President Roosevelt was the last good US President. President Truman who took over when Roosevelt died, has been criticised not only for the atomic bomb dropping, but also for inaugurating the Cold War which, whilst it resulted in the supremacy of the USA at the expense of the USSR, did cause hideous expenditures on armaments by the Cold War adversaries.

I have no need of a barber (my wife cuts my hair) but my choice for a politician is a wise, scientifically literate humanitarian.

James Gerrand
Kew VIC

Show biz beliefs

When I first started working in the theatre I was only about 21. I suppose that I had stars in my eyes and maybe I’d taken a few drugs. It was consequently forgivable if I had a few strange ideas, and thought occasionally in clichés. In my imagination the people I would encounter would be thoughtful, intelligent and sensitive. Well it was not quite like that. But you, Scott Campbell, in “A little out where?” (18/1 p9), have no such excuse. You have enough years and education on your side not to be making vague and ill thought-out assumptions.

What’s all this palaver about “show
Show biz beliefs II

Terry’s Byrne’s letter brought back memories of school days, being lectured to by pompous headmasters, who would tell me “A student of your age and intelligence ought to know better than to be so foolish and disrespectful”. It’s heart-warming to know that bombast is still being cultivated as an art form.

I would agree that on the whole show folk are probably more intelligent than the average person. But general intelligence is not closely related to believing in things like the paranormal and alternative medicine.

And in my opinion, here are more believers in show biz than most other professions, or at least - as I stated clearly in my article they just like talking about it more.

Terry accuses me of presumption, and of talking without basing what I say on a scientific study. This is astonishing. It was made perfectly clear that his was a personal opinion. If anything, I laboured the point by adding that perhaps a survey should be done some day to find out if what I think is true. I suggest that Terry sticks to what’s on the page rather than making his own “silly leaps of logic”.

(Terry, on the other hand, shows us what real presumption is, when he informs us that a survey would probably support his claims. And where is your scientific evidence, Terry?)

Note that my claim that show folk “rarely have any idea of what they are talking about” was intended only to refer to the topic at issue, the paranormal. The fault here may have been mine, in not making myself clearer.

Terry accuses me of using a ‘parachute’ word in my claim that I ‘suspect’ that TV actresses are more likely than most to procrastinate. Let me explain some basic rules of reasoning. My argument was not based upon this suspicion. I was based upon the claim that “we can all take too long to make decisions” (which I certainly stand by). This was not qualified by any ‘parachute’ word. This claim supported my argument by itself, even if my additional suspicions about TV actresses were wrong. So contrary to what Terry claims, the word ‘suspect’ does not provide me with a convenient ‘out’ here.

Terry then finishes by virtually refuting himself. First he says that actors may not care about what we the public think. But then he says that the show-biz industry is a well-oiled machine, and “one of its main aims is to make its industry brethren feel important”. Why do you think the industry does that, Terry? Do doctors, electricians, street sweepers, journalists and cooks have to have their egos wrapped in cotton wool like actors do? Is it just a coincidence that actors are in a profession where you can get constant applause and admiration from the public?

My mistake

In my letter “Nuclear answers” (Letters, 17/4) I goofed. The third paragraph should have read “This corresponds to an equivalent annual dose of one twentieth of a sievert, which is the occupational dose limit.” Not half a sievert.

Mea culpa. I thank a friend for drawing my attention to the error.

The graph to which I was referring is perfectly correct. It shows that the radon radiation dose to the occupants of a poorly ventilated house may be startlingly high. It shows that the dose level in an average home is, for example, more than a hundred times greater than the whiffs of radiation nearby residents might receive from the Lucas Heights HIFAR reactor when it is producing medical radioisotopes.

Hypnosis

I wish to comment on the article by Amanda Barnier on “Hypnosis and posthypnotic suggestion” (17/4) in which she claims that her research has, in some sense, ‘exploded’ myths about hypnosis and posthypnotic suggestion. Her research failed to find any difference between hypnotised and nonhypnotised people in this respect. Amanda’s research seems to tally with the views expressed by Nicholas Spanos, the recently deceased Director for Experimental...
Feedback

Following Hans Weiler’s letter (18/1) suggesting that people write to say which articles they fancied, here are my comments on the last issue (18/1).

I enjoyed Scott Campbell’s article “A little out where?” (p9) in which he analysed how clairvoyants operate. He put into words many of the thoughts I had had about clairvoyants, but which I had not taken far enough to show the inconsistencies of their statements. Scott’s statement “It is never made clear just what he clairvoyant is doing” was a useful starting point. I examine whether clairvoyants are really predicting the future or reading your mind or whatever.

“The Australian UFO mania of 1909” by Robert Bartholomew (p28) illustrated how “sightings” can be influenced by current media issues, cultural values and so on. Useful examples from another age. Allan Lang’s “Fair(l)y true” (p33) made me think how many authors and directors change the facts to present a good story. How many people will be able to distinguish the fact and the fiction? Does it matter? Perhaps not in this case, but I wonder about other cases.

“Conning the con-men (pt II)” by Harry Edwards (p39) was another interesting article about suckers. However, nowhere was it stated who or what is the 419 Coalition. Without this information, I’m hesitant to believe all their claims. (The racy writing style of the 419 Coalition adds to my feelings of hesitancy.)

I was intrigued to see in Bob Nixon’s “Testing a strange claim” (p41) that the tested subject had to match 14 out of 20 images to be considered successful. Yet, Bob claims chance predicted one correct match and the subject achieved this result. There’s a big difference between one and 14. Has the bar been set too high? (Probably not, since the subject thought he’d achieved 16 matches.) Would Bob care to explain how 14 was chosen? I’d also be interested to see a list of the probabilities for achieving 0, 1, 2, . . . , 20 matches. It’s a while since I’ve done probability and I don’t think I can calculate them myself.

I note also that MC Escher’s magnificent graphical work was reversed for the front cover.

Michael Vnuk
Annerley QLD

In a letter (Letters 18/1 p69) I suggested that readers should comment on articles they read in the Skeptic. Following my own advice, I herewith present my views on some articles in 18/1, which may motivate some readers to have another look.

In “The evolving challenge” (p7), Roland Seidel discusses the idea of a “spotter’s fee” for spotting genuine clairvoyants [and others] who are unaware of the Skeptics prize of $100,000, or who are too shy to come forward to be tested. The successful clairvoyant would receive $80,000, and the spotter the remaining $20,000. This brilliant idea is further pursued by John Stair (“Challenging times” p8). Both articles are short and to the point, well worth reading.

Scott Campbell, in “A little out where?” (p9), reports on a TV programme on psychic matters. Such sessions must be reported and analysed, but the article is 81/2 pages long, and we have heard it many times before. How many readers will be patient enough to read it all? [We think Scott’s article was important because of the clinical way in which he analysed every word spoken by the “clairvoyant”. We tend to mention this sort of thing in passing, but it is very valuable to have such an in-depth analysis, to back-up our claims that “psychics” usually do nothing more than confirm the prejudices of their clients. Ed] Sydney Bockner (“The rise and demise of psychoanalysis” p17) was interesting and brief. Worthwhile reading.

Scott Campbell, Harry Edwards and Trevor Case (“Synchronicity, telepathy, coincidence” p21) investigate a strange coincidence where two people each wrote a book, independently of each other, and, when they later met, found amazing similarities in their stories. Our investigators each show that the events only appear to be unlikely, needing no explanation by thought transference. See also the Skeptic (16/4 p41) where I discuss when a rare coincidence that has actually occurred should be accepted without explanation, even when it is a genuinely unlikely event.

Bob Nixon’s “Testing a strange claim” (p41) reports on the rare occasion where a person claiming to have psychic powers actually offers himself to be tested by Australian Skeptics, in order to win the $100,000

Hypnosis at the Carleton University, in his last book Multiple Identities and False Memories. The extensive research done by Spanos and his colleagues has failed to show any objective difference in the abilities of people under hypnosis and those not hypnotised.

The conclusion that stares one in the face, therefore, is that hypnosis is merely a fake, in which the patients merely perform a role which they believe is expected of them. Most importantly, from the point of view of scientific principle, is raised the question: How is it possible to investigate a claimed state, such as hypnosis, if there is no objective way of distinguishing those in the state from those who are not? I rest my case. I believe that The Skeptics have lacked in scepticism in its support for Amanda.

Allen J Christophers
Brighton VIC

Legs

In his article on psycho-analysis (18/1) Sydney Bockner makes the oft repeated claim “In Victorian England even piano legs were covered”. Are there any contemporary references to his practice, or is it just a comforting belief that allows us to feel superior?

Gavan O’Connor
Wembley WA

Information sought

Would anyone who has received or knows of anyone who has received a letter or fax from Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, asking for money to pay for a bone marrow transplant please forward a copy to Harry Edwards PO Box 331
Newport Beach, NSW 2106. It may be a scam and the information is needed to check it out.
The interest in this report lies in the test itself, carefully designed to cover all possible loopholes. Congratulations to all the testing team.

Harry Edwards presents yet another case of phony predictions ("Travels of a Skeptic" p44). We are used to entertaining articles from Harry, and this one is no exception. I have, however, some reservations about his item on the Wizard of Wanaka, as essential; information is missing about where the promissory note is likely to be located. [Harry assures us he mentioned this item for general interest only, not as a puzzle for readers. Ed]

Richard Lead's Forum item "An oasis of privilege", (17/4) gets deserved attention in this issue (p54), which is wound up by Bill Saxby's humorous item "A peripheral idea" (p57).

Advice to writers.

Since people have different spheres of interest, it will depend on the subject matter who reads your article, but it will also depend on your style. If your paper is too long, or too hard to understand, some readers will stop reading. If it contains too many colloquialisms, you will lose Skeptics of interest, it will depend on the subject matter who reads your article, but it will also depend on your style. If your paper is too long, or too hard to understand, some readers will stop reading. If it contains too many colloquialisms, you will lose Skeptics whose mother tongue is not English. I suggest keeping your articles short and simple, but long enough to bring out what you have to say. Don’t expect your style to be praised, for it will also depend on your style.

I suggest keeping your articles short and simple, but long enough to bring out what you have to say. Don’t expect your style to be praised, for it will also depend on your style.

**Note:**

**Write support** — A giant 76-page issue this time! Talk about getting your money’s worth.

You can help us to keep it up, by writing contributions, and by getting them in early and in legible form. Next deadline is August 1, followed by November 1.

You can also help by recruiting new subscribers. We have included a subscription form on the next page to make it easier for you.

Enjoy the winter solstice.

**Dear Reader**

**The Editors.**

**About our authors**

**Martin Bridgstock** is a philosopher of science at Qld Uni and is a Life Member of Australian Skeptics.

**Glenn Cardwell** is a nutritionist, dietician and frequent commentator on these topics in the Perth media. He claims to be diet advisor to the West Coast Eagles (whatever that might be) and rides a unicycle.

**Trevor Case**, psychologist and Eureka laureate, is a member of the NSW committee, where he has his work cut out keeping his eye on their idiosyncrasies.

**Michael Creech**, geologist and Hunter Skeptics correspondent, is feeling a trifle jaded, and who can blame him.

**Shaun Cronin**, computer buff, spends his spare time chasing weirdos around the 'net. Some people have too much time on their hands.

**Harry Edwards**, an ageing playboy, is Chief Investigator and General Curmudgeon of the Skeptics. He is at present visiting his overseas domains.

**John Foley** (a pox upon him) is coordinator of Qakatak, an informal group within the Skeptics that is dedicated to rooting out pseudomedicine from the health system.

James Gerrand, an original Skeptic, is an engineer and fearless promoter of scientific education.

**Richard Gordon** is a medical practitioner and president of Australian Skeptics Inc. As such, he is the editor’s boss, and will not have any snide remarks aimed at him in this column.

**Colin Keay** is *el supremo* of the Hunter Skeptics and a rock star (if that’s what it takes to have an asteroid named after you).

**Allan Lang**, inventor of Stanism, edits the Southern Skeptic.

**Richard Lead**, renowned nude TV artiste and tax expert, is in line to inherit the title of Curmudgeon-in-chief, when Harry E lays down the mantle.

**James Marchant**, despite the many who imitate his art, has no peer, and he remains, indisputably, Australia's greatest living plagiarist. For some reason he is on the Tasmanian committee, where he brawls with the Scrivener in Chief.

**Simon Potter** is an artist and a member of the Darwin Skeptics committee. He is afraid of no ghost nor phantasm, but is an expert in fan dynamics.

**Alex Ritchie**, palaeontologist, is famous wherever Scotch is drunk and Scottish spoken, the noo.

**Steve Roberts**, a man of many parts (some of them connected) is the Skeptics’ UFO expert and a cryptographer (we don’t know - we think it means he haunts graveyards).

**Roland Seidel**, VicSkep *grande fromage*, is a mathematician on his way up (or down, depending on which way you look at the map) to the USA, where he will no doubt become a Septic Skeptic.

**Karen Stollznow** is a journalism student and member of the NSW committee. She is in fine shape, considering her ailments.

**Barry Williams** slaves over a hot keyboard to edit this thing, and look at all the thanks he gets.

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**Hans Weiler**

Croydon NSW

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