

# the skeptic

VOLUME 18, NO. 3

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A journal of fact and opinion

Creationist deception exposed!-P7

Fundamentalism & fanaticism!-P11

BEWARE  
THE LIGHT AT THE  
END OF THE TUNNEL!

Alternative therapies? - P13



# the Skeptic

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## Announcement

# 2000 World Skeptics Convention for Sydney

In 1996, the First World Skeptics Congress was held in Buffalo, NY, the home of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) the world's first organised Skeptical organisation. This event drew visitors from all parts of the globe and presented a chance for the international Skeptical community to get together and exchange ideas and to hear presentations from leading Skeptics.

The Second World Congress was held in Heidelberg, Germany in late July, 1998, and was hosted by EuroSkeptics, an informal grouping of all the European Skeptics organisations. A report on the Heidelberg Congress will be published in the next issue.

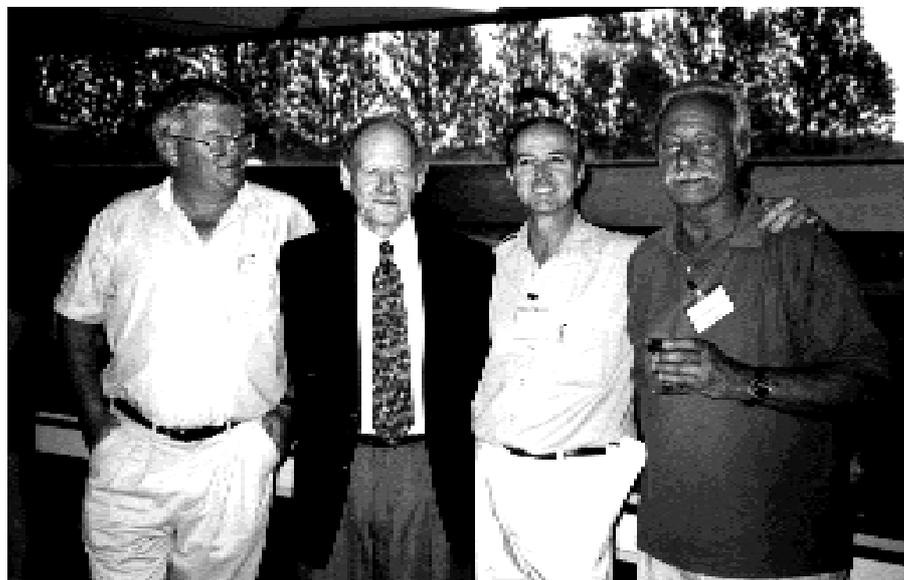
At this Congress, discussions were held between representatives of Australian Skeptics, CSICOP and the EuroSkeptics to decide the venue for the Third World Congress, in 2000.

We are now delighted to advise all our readers that it was agreed that Sydney should be the host city for this important event in the worldwide Skeptical calendar.

This represents a chance and a challenge for all Skeptics and branches throughout Australia to work together and contribute their ideas and assistance to ensure that World Congress 2000 does not suffer by comparison with the previous two events. We have no doubt we can make Skeptics 2000 an event to remember.

At this early stage of planning, a date and venue has not yet been fixed, however, we will ensure that it does not conflict with a certain sporting event in September 2000.

A proposal will be put to the joint branches meeting at this year's annual convention and more details will be published in the next, and subsequent, issues.



Richard Lead (AS), Paul Kurtz (CSICOP), Richard Gordon (AS) and Harry Edwards (AS) at the Second World Skeptics Congress, Heidelberg.

## Credit cards

Australian Skeptics Inc now has credit card facilities available for subscribers wishing to renew subscriptions, purchase merchandise, or attend functions. BC, MC and Visa are acceptable. Contact us at the address shown at the head of the previous column. Australian Skeptics (Vic) Inc also accepts the same cards for purchases from that body.

# Around the traps

## Bunyip

Greg Keogh, our web guru, tells us that the most popular page on our site is the brief mention we make about the death of the late Princess of Wales. And most of the posters want to regale us with their favourite conspiracy theories, some of which are extraordinarily strange indeed.

It seems that this is now the most popular topic for conspiracy theories in the world, with hundreds, if not thousands, of sites being dedicated to the topic. We also hear that a recent survey of Britons shows that 41% of them believe that the crash was no accident.

We find this just a trifle weird. It's not as though deaths in car crashes are rare phenomena. Meanwhile, we'll stick to the only one that seems to make sense - that the accident was organised by the flower selling industry, who must have made huge profits from the unhappy event.

\* \* \*

Early in July we received a phone call from a man in WA, seeking to register for our Challenge, and telling us that a "tidal wave" was going to cause devastation to a coastal area "before the end of July". This happened before the tragedy caused by the tsunami on the Papua New Guinea north coast, and it may suggest to some that this call was evidence of a precognitive ability about which we have long been Skeptical.

However, our caller was much more explicit than that. He said that the wave would hit the Gold Coast and that it would undermine all the tall buildings near the beach, and cause them to topple into the ocean (we warned the GC Skeptics, but none of them moved). He was very clear about those details. He also said that another such wave would hit the coast of WA at Bunbury in October, and that the water would surge 50km inland, and made several other predictions, including "skiing in the streets of Fremantle in July" (why didn't we hear anything about that in the East) and assorted mentions of the "NFL Table", whatever that is, but none of them were very specific.

We haven't heard from him since the PNG tsunami.

While on the subject of "tidal waves", there are all sorts of predictions floating around about a tidal wave due to devastate parts of Australia's east coast in the week commencing August 23. If you are reading this, it probably didn't happen. *The Skeptic's* editorial office is sufficiently adjacent to the east coast to be adversely affected by any such oceanic upheaval, which some seers claim will be up to 350 metres high.

On such seer is "Terrence, Messenger of God", who lives in the fair city of Launceston and who has been plugging this disaster on his web site for some time.

This prompted our indefatigable colleague, Tasmanian Skeptics secretary Fred Thornett, to correspond with Terrence and make him an offer of \$1,000 for his residence in Launceston, possession to take effect in the week commencing August 30.

Remarkably, Terrence failed to take advantage of this generous offer, which would have given him cash-in-hand to assist in moving himself and friends to high ground, and would have left Fred, had he survived, with title to a patch of salt-laden mud.

Seems that many of these prophets do not have the courage of their delusions.

\* \* \*

Continuing the theme of matters hydraulic, it occurred to us that any homoeopathic preparations manufactured in Sydney during the recent (and ongoing) "water crisis" may well have been polluted with the highly concentrated "memories" of *cryptosporidium* and *giardia* parasites. We wonder if it has also occurred to the manufacturers of these potions, and if they have issued recall notices? If not, why not?

\* \* \*

While on that topic, we ran a sweep in *the Skeptic* editorial office on which would be the first media outlet to describe the problems of Sydney Water as "Watergate".

We are not claiming prescience, merely reflecting that the tribe of sub-editors, having once got their hands on a good running joke, never let it

die until they have bludgeoned it beyond recognition.

Since the original Watergate (was that really more than a quarter of a century ago?), every governmental scandal, anywhere on Earth, has been labelled by the media with the suffix "gate".

The first reference we can find to the new "Watergate" was in the *SMH* of Saturday, August 1, but as that was three days after the full extent of the problem became known, we would be very disappointed if that was actually the first. Readers are invited to advise us of any earlier sightings.

Suppose it would be too much to hope that, having come full circle, this example of subeditorial whimsy will now lapse into desuetude.

\* \* \*

Sticking with Sydney's water for a moment, one thing that puzzles us is the suggestion, by certain entrepreneurial members of the legal fraternity, that those affected by the water problems might like to join in a class action against the water authority. Now that sounds like a good idea, but is it?

In effect, it seems to be that the taxpayers of NSW living in the Sydney Water region (and that's by far the largest proportion of them), are being invited to sue the owners of Sydney Water (the taxpayers of NSW).

If it came to court, it would be in a court owned by the taxpayers of NSW, in front of a judge paid by the taxpayers of NSW, and with the lawyers for the respondent, and all the other costs associated with running a court system also being paid for by the taxpayers of NSW.

Now we don't run to any highly skilled legal counsel on the staff at the *Skeptic* office, so would one of our legal readers mind giving us some advice (*pro bono*, of course) on how the taxpayers of NSW could win out of all this?

\* \* \*

An interesting item in the *Melba* column of the *Weekend Australian* (Aug 1-2) referred to a German member of a sect, Worshippers of the Pharaohs, jumping to his death from the 187m Cairo Tower in order to

prove to sceptics that the "Pharaoh's Curse" was true. It wasn't so much interesting in showing to what lengths True Believers will go to prove a point, but in the explanation of the "Curse" that Melba appended to the end of the story.

...the curse emerged in 1923 after the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. Several people connected with the discovery subsequently died.

We are not at all surprised, it was 75 years ago, after all. We think it would be safe to say that most of the people who attended the declaration of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 subsequently died. Could this be the Curse of Australia?

\* \* \*

Apropos the "Pharaoh's Curse", a media-invented myth that resurfaces from time to time, James Randi, in his excellent work *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1995) lists all those Europeans who were present at the opening of the tomb, and the dates, where known, when they died. Based on actuarial tables, he calculates that, on average, they lived a year longer than people of their age and social class should have expected to. Of the people who actually opened the tomb, and removed and handled the remains (and thus those most exposed to the Curse, if it was real), Randi lists the following:

Howard Carter who headed the operation and was the most intimately involved in all aspects of the find, died in 1939, 17 years after the event, aged 66;

Dr Douglas Derry, the anatomist who dissected the mummy, also died in 1939 at 80+;

Alfred Lucas, the chemist who analysed mummy tissue, dust etc, died in 1950 at 79;

Most impressive was Sgt Richard Adamson, the guard who remained in the tomb and close to the remains, for seven years, and was still alive in 1980, 57 years after the opening. He must have been well over 80, though Randi could find neither birth nor death dates for him.

Lord Carnarvon, the patron of the expedition, died four months after the tomb was opened, reportedly from blood poisoning caused by an infected mosquito bite. He had been in poor health for some time before the

expedition. Only two other people present at the tomb's opening died within five years of the event, and one of those had been seriously ill before he went to Egypt.

Most of the supposed "victims" of the curse had very tenuous links with the enterprise, of the "man I met in a pub's second cousin's brother-in-law's gardener's wife" variety.

\* \* \*

And, in a late breaking story on the above, a scientist in France is reported to have claimed that the "Pharaoh's Curse" could have been the result of fungal spores in the tomb becoming extremely virulent in the 3000 years since its closure and attacking those opening the tomb.

A nice theory, but as Lord Carnarvon was the only one to whom the "Curse" could have applied, and as death from 'blood poisoning' was not uncommon in the years before penicillin and sulpha drugs were invented, it may well prove to be a solution for which there is no mystery.

\* \* \*

Readers may recall news reports from last year about the former Orange County (California) Treasurer, the appropriately named Robert Citron, who had been dismissed from his post and gaoled when it was revealed he had been consulting astrology charts prior to investing the county's funds. Recent court action in the US helps put his case into perspective.

It seems he consulted a \$4.50 chart prepared by an astrologer as a guide to his strategy for the county's \$20 billion investment portfolio. As a result of a wrong-way punt on the direction of interest rates, the county lost \$1.6 billion (that's not a misprint) and led to the US's largest ever municipal bankruptcy.

A number of those US astrologers who have been boasting about how they predict financial matters have run for cover, saying that their predictions are "for entertainment only".

\* \* \*

We were rather taken with this novel twist on a popular chain letter we found on the 'net:

Scientists this week decoded the first confirmed alien transmission from outer space. Here is the text of the message that they decoded: This really works!

Just send  $5 \times 10^{50}$  atoms of hydrogen to each of the five star systems listed below. Then, add your own system to the top of the list, delete the system at the bottom, and send out copies of this mes-

sage to 100 other solar systems. If you follow these instructions, within 0.25% of a galactic rotation you are guaranteed to receive enough hydrogen in return to power your civilization until entropy reaches its maximum!

\* \* \*

Some very positive publicity we have received in the media recently about our investigations into the diagnostic abilities of "alternative" practitioners, has resulted in a substantial number of new enquiries and subscriptions from medical practitioners.

We are very pleased to see that, but it did help to confirm our old prejudice about doctors and handwriting. Fortunately, our phriendly phamily pharmacist was up to the translation task.

\* \* \*

While on the subject of subscriptions, we were a little nonplussed to receive one of our reminder notices back from a former subscriber who chose the "Please remove my name from your mailing list, or I'll have the law onto you" option. It wasn't so much a feeling of rejection that assailed us, but total bafflement. Nowhere on the form, nor the envelope, had the subscriber included his/her name or address. We're not psychic here at Skeptic HQ, you know.

\* \* \*

Just a thought for any patriotic old rockers out there. How come Elvis is always being sighted in suburban shopping centres and laundromats, and Johnny O'Keefe never is? Isn't it about time we did something about this?

\* \* \*

George Richards, esteemed editor of *Column 8* in the *SMH*, has advised of some good that can come from the notorious Nigerian Letters Scam. Seems the stamps used on the letters are as false as the offers contained within, and that some stamp collectors are paying up to \$20 for them. Now if only we'd kept all the ones on our letters ...

\* \* \*

An amusing find by our Qld correspondent, Michael Vnuk:

Here's a quote I found in *The State of the Language*, edited by C Ricks and L Michaels (1990). It comes from an Arkansas town school superintendent when refusing a request that foreign languages be taught in high school:

If English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for you. ☹

# Creationist deception exposed

Barry Williams

A small apprehension often lurks in the back of the mind of any Skeptic who has ever given an interview for later publication or broadcast; "What if the interviewer wants to show me, or the Skeptics, in a bad light?" With the technology now available to the media it would not be at all difficult to rearrange the words one has used to change one's meaning completely.

Perhaps we should mention here a little about the technicalities of the TV interview. In any news or current affairs type interviews, pre-recorded outside a studio, a small technical deception is not uncommon. Normally only one video camera is used, and that camera is usually focused on the interviewee, but if the interview is played like that, with disembodied questions coming from 'off camera', it tends to make the subjects look like they are talking to a wall. So, at the end of the interview, the camera changes places to focus on the interviewer, who then asks some of the questions again, or gives their reactions to something the interviewee has said. These are known as "reaction shots" (or "nod-dies" in the vernacular) and are designed to include the interviewer in the final product. This is technically a deception, but it is a harmless one used to make the segment more viewable. In documentaries, however, this quite often does not apply, and it is usual for the people speaking to be seen expounding their views without the intervention of interviewers.

Of course, in all such cases there must be an element of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. It would be quite simple, technically, for the interviewer or the tape editor, to record a totally different set of questions and splice them together with the interviewee's answers, thus making the interviewee look like a complete idiot. However, to do so would be a gross breach of a journalist's professional ethics, and it doesn't happen often. Personally speaking, I have usually found that those ethical rules are scrupulously observed. I don't believe I have ever been misquoted, nor taken out of context, in the many interviews I have given, although I might sometimes feel that my main point has not received the prominence it deserves. That is only personal opinion, however, and usually good editing has often made my answers sound more coherent and less prolix than I am sure they deserved, and they have always retained the sense of what I said.

Some exception to the rule may be made in the case of comedy programmes, where some prominent identity is seen as giving answers to some question the host

throws up, for example, his genuine answer to a complex economic question might be seen as a response to a query about his sex life. (Clive James uses this to good effect in his late night talk show.) This is all good clean fun and is hardly likely to cause the respondent any serious heartburn, because it can clearly be seen to be a deliberate manipulation of data for comic effect. That this is not always the case is exemplified by a recent experience of Richard Dawkins.

Richard Dawkins is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. He is one of the world's leading evolutionary biologists, the author of several highly regarded books on evolution through natural selection, including *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker* (to my mind, the very best explanation of evolution for the lay person), *The Extended Phenotype*, *River out of Eden* and *Climbing Mount Improbable*, and is constantly in demand as a public speaker, and by the media as an advocate for good science.



Professor Richard Dawkins

Given his position and his professional expertise, it is hardly surprising, then, that he is also a cogent and trenchant critic of the anti-scientific dogma that masquerades under the title "creation science".

## The background

In June this year, Professor Dawkins contacted *the Skeptic* office, seeking assistance in locating an Australian TV production company. His story will demonstrate the depths to which the creationist movement will stoop in order to try to discredit its critics.

Recently Professor Dawkins had been made aware of a video

tape being circulated in creationist circles, in which he appears, and on the cover of which is his photograph. Titled *From a Frog to a Prince*, it is distributed in the Australia by Answers in Genesis, of Acacia Ridge, Queensland and in the USA by American Portrait Films, Cleveland, Ohio. Copyright is held by "A.I.G. - I.C.R. - Keziah" and it was produced by "Keziah".

AIG, as regular readers will recognise, refers to Answers in Genesis, the new trading name of the Queensland based Creation Science Foundation; ICR is the Institute of Creation Research, a prominent US creationist outfit, and the source for much of what passes for information in such circles; Keziah was then unfamiliar to us.

Prof Dawkins was puzzled, and not a little perplexed, to be informed by a Christian contact in the

USA that his appearance on the tape included a question being posed to him, whereupon he pauses for 11 seconds, and then answers an entirely different question. His contact, having viewed the tape, and having noticed the long pause and seeming evasion of what was a pretty simple question about evolution, was convinced that it had been a set-up.

As he hadn't then seen the tape, it was difficult for Richard to comprehend the full details, but he was suspicious of the circumstances, and sought our assistance in tracking down Keziah, which he thought was an Australian company. We had no information about Keziah, though we did recall a request from a woman purporting to represent American Portrait Films, for an interview with Richard while he was in Australia as our special guest at the 1996 Australian Skeptics annual convention in Melbourne. Subsequently, we managed to track down Keziah Productions to Peregian in Queensland.

### The set-up

Prof Dawkins then acquired a copy of the tape and became even more incensed as the details of what had been done to him became clearer. In correspondence to me (published here with his permission) he recounts what had happened:

As a preamble, I should explain that, following the advice of my colleague Stephen Jay Gould, I have a policy of not granting interviews to creationists or flat earthers. This is not because I cannot answer their arguments, but because I have better things to do with my time and I do not want to give them the oxygen of publicity.

On September 16, 1997, Keziah Video Productions, in the persons of Gillian Brown and Geoffrey Smith, came to my house in Oxford to film an interview with me. I had agreed to see them, on the misapprehension (as it later turned out) that they were from a respectable Australian broadcasting company. I had no idea they were a creationist front and I would not have granted them an interview had I known this, because of my policy as mentioned above.

The interview began. I have considerable experience of television work, and I was initially surprised at the amateurishness of their filming technique, but I carried on without voicing my surprise. As the interview proceeded, I became increasingly puzzled at the tone of the questions. Puzzlement gave way to suspicion that Keziah was, in fact, a creationist front which had gained admittance to my house under false pretences.

The suspicion increased sharply when I was challenged to produce an example of an evolutionary process which increases the information content of the genome. It is a question that nobody except a creationist would ask. A real biologist finds it an easy question to answer (the answer is that natural selection increases the information content of the genome *all the time* - that is precisely what natural selection *means*), but, from an evolutionary point of view, it is not an interesting way to put it. It would only be phrased that way by somebody who doubts that evolution happened.

Now I was faced with a dilemma. I was almost certain that these people had gained admittance to my house under false pretences - in other words, I had been set up. On the other hand, I am a naturally courteous person, especially in my own house, and these were

guests from overseas. What should I do? I paused for a long time, trying to decide whether to throw them out, and, I have to admit, struggling not to lose my temper. Finally, I decided that I would ask them to leave, but I would do it in a polite way, explaining to them why. I then asked them to stop the tape, which they did.

The tape having stopped, I explained to them my suspicions, and asked them to leave my house. Gillian Brown pleaded with me, saying that she had flown all the way from Australia especially to interview me. She begged me not to send her home empty handed, after they had travelled such a long way. She assured me that they were not creationists, but were taking a balanced view of all sides in the debate. Like a fool, I took pity on her, and agreed to continue. I remember that, having had quite an acrimonious argument with her, when I finally agreed to resume the interview I made a conscious effort to be extra polite and friendly.

Now perhaps it could be argued that Prof Dawkins' memories of the events might have deteriorated with the passage of time since the interview, so let us consider the general plausibility of what the tape purported to show. A question was asked relating to "evolutionary process which increases the information content of

the genome". This question was not asked of just anyone, but of a biologist whose speciality is precisely in that field, who has been teaching biology at Oxford University for 27 years, and who is very experienced in answering the far more complex questions of some of the best students in the world. It beggars belief that someone of Richard Dawkins' stature in the field would have been stumped by such a simple question or would have evaded it.

Anyone who has ever been interviewed will recognise that 11 seconds of silence is an inordinately long hiatus in any interview. Even if one is not an expert in the field, or is unfamiliar with the question being asked, the normal human reaction is to say, "Well, I don't know much about that ..." or "That's an interesting question ..." or to generally waffle on a bit, while arranging one's thoughts. What one does *not*

do is just sit there saying nothing. Even in the case of a total media neophyte, stricken by "mike fright", they *might* react that way, briefly, but it is highly unlikely that anyone would remain mute for such a length of time. However, Richard Dawkins is far from being a media neophyte, having been the subject of hundreds of media interviews, and he was not asked a question he couldn't answer, merely a question he regarded as being put in an ill-informed way.

Richard puts it into better context in his letter:

As it happens, my forthcoming book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, has an entire chapter ('The Genetic Book of the Dead') devoted to a much more interesting version of the idea that natural selection gathers up information from the environment, and builds it into the genome. At the time of the interview, the book was almost finished (it is to be published in November, 1998). That chapter would have been in the forefront of my mind, and it is therefore especially ludicrous to suggest that I would have evaded the question by talking about fish and amphibians.

### What the tape shows

Cut from previous interview with an Israeli biophysicist to interviewer in an obviously different room from the one in which RD has previously been shown.

Interviewer: "Professor Dawkins, can you give an example of a genetic mutation, or an evolutionary process, which can be seen to increase the information in the genome?"

Cut to RD, who looks around the room, [shot holds for 11 seconds]

Cut back to interviewer, while RD begins speaking off camera

RD: "There's a popular misunderstanding of evolution [cut back to RD] that says that fish turned into reptiles and reptiles turned into mammals and that somehow we ought to be able to look around the world today and look at our ancestors and see the intermediate species... [RD goes on to explain]"

If I'd wanted to turn the question into more congenial channels, all I had to do was talk about 'The Genetic Book of the Dead'. It is a chapter I am particularly pleased with. I'd have welcomed the opportunity to expound it. Why on earth, when faced with such an opportunity, would I have kept totally silent? Unless, once again, I was actually thinking about something quite different while struggling to keep my temper?

If it had been left at that, it might merely have been evidence of professional incompetence on the part of the producer and editor of the tape. Further evidence of incompetence includes the tape showing the male "interviewer" in a completely different room from the Dawkins' drawing room where the interview took place, and with entirely different lighting. Moreover, the person who interviewed Prof Dawkins was named as Geoffrey Smith, while the "interviewer" shown in this clip is identified as Chris Nicholls, the narrator of the entire tape. However this, of itself, is not evidence of malice. While it is doubtful if any professional video producer would inadvertently leave a silence of that length in a tape, the fact that the long silence ends with an answer to an entirely different question, one about fishes, amphibians, and common ancestry, speaks strongly of malicious intent.

This becomes even more apparent when one views the tape, particularly if one has had the pleasure of spending any time in the company of Richard Dawkins, as I did as his Sydney host during his Australia in 1996.

Throughout this tape, Richard Dawkins speaks about his field of expertise in his usual polite and informative way. Then, suddenly, we see the interpolation of an "interviewer", quite obviously inserted at some later stage of production, posing a question directly to Richard [see box on previous page]. The tape then cuts directly to Richard and holds on him for 11 seconds, while he is shown looking uncomfortable, then cuts back to the "interviewer" briefly, while Richard begins to (seemingly) answer an entirely different question, during which the tape cuts back to him.

There are several clues pointing to deceptive intent here. Nowhere else in the tape is an interviewer shown directly asking a question of any of the other four people who speak, nor is an interviewer seen posing any questions to Richard in his previous pieces. Richard does not react as one would expect him to, had he merely been asked a difficult question; his reaction is much more believably one of someone who has just realised he has been conned into giving an interview he would not normally have given, ie he doesn't look nonplussed, he looks angry. To compound this, there is another brief insert of the "interviewer" with Richard's voice coming from off camera, before returning to Richard, looking as urbane and polite as ever. Such is the dramatic change in Richard's demeanour between the two segments, that it is utterly inconceivable that the second piece of tape followed immediately after the first.

Quite clearly, this tape has been manipulated, and rather ineptly done at that. But by now it is asking too much to blame it all on simple incompetence; it begins to reek of deceitful intent.

Stronger evidence of this has subsequently come to light. In an advertisement in *Creation* magazine, the official mouthpiece of Answers in Genesis, the tape *From a Frog to a Prince*, is touted as a "brilliant new documentary" and contains the following excerpt:

... Then the documentary shows a question put to the highly fluent evolutionist Dawkins, which is really the crucial question: can he point to any example today in which a mutation has actually added information? (If there is such an example, surely an Oxford zoology professor, promoting neoDarwinism around the world, would know of it!) This is actually the dramatic high point of the whole presentation.

We think that the Dawkins response on screen (we won't spoil it for potential viewers) makes a more powerful point against evolution than volumes written by Creationists! Even a ten year old watching it in our Brisbane office, got the point.

And we also get the point. Because their volumes of unscientific dogma are having no effect in the scientific debate, they resort to trickery in order to denigrate their critics, and to mislead unsophisticated minds.

### The nature of the plot

It was mentioned earlier that some comedy programmes use the interposed question for comic effect, but the Keziah tape is not being sold as a comedy tape; it purports to be a serious discussion of a scientific issue; it purports to show that there is no biological evidence for evolution. By selectively editing this tape, the producer clearly seeks to show:

- a) that Richard Dawkins, an eminent biologist, was unable to answer a question he was asked about biology; and
- b) that he then evaded the question by answering a completely different one.

This tape seeks to denigrate Professor Dawkins' professional reputation, and it is difficult to believe that it was not deliberately done.

It begins to look, then, that this is a piece of crude propaganda\*, deliberately manipulated to give the false impression that the fact of evolution is seriously under scientific question, and that the fanciful notions of creation 'scientists' are contributing to that debate.

There is further evidence that this is the line being pursued in creationist circles. In recent times, both the Australian Skeptics web site and at *the Skeptic* office, we have fielded questions from a number of individuals who have posed questions couched in the terms, "Can you give one example of new information being added to the genome by mutation today?" We have no way of telling whether the callers are asking this question because they have seen (and been misled by) this deceitful video tape, or because creationists have been otherwise spreading the word that it is "a question evolutionists cannot answer". It does, however, seem too much of a coincidence that it should all be happening in such a short space of time.

From our experience of answering such questions, it becomes clear that they have little knowledge of biology, and when asked to clarify what it is they are asking, they invariably flounder around the point. Clearly this has not been a question that just popped into a selection of enquiring minds all at once; it seems obvious it is something they have been told will "baffle the evolutionists".

### Historical precedents

Certainly this is by no means the first occasion on which the creation 'science' movement has sought to misrepresent the words of eminent scientists to bolster their own inept grasp of scientific matters, and to mislead their own unfortunate followers.

In the early 1980s, the Creation Science Foundation published and sold a pamphlet entitled *The Quote Book*. This publication contained some 120 quotations from prominent scientists (among others) whose words were considered (by the CSF) to call evolution into question. When one academic, Dr Ken Smith a mathematician at the University of Queensland, and a member in good standing of the Baptist Church, took the trouble to track down the sources the quotations used (he could find only 80 of the 120, such was the poor level of scholarship used in the compilation of the magazine) he found that *only one* of the 80 could be considered to be a completely accurate reflection of the original statements. Much of this book consisted of quotations taken out of context, or so badly mangled as to entirely misrepresent the positions of those quoted.

In that case, adverse publicity forced the CSF to withdraw the item from sale, and to produce a substantially revised version; one that paid somewhat more attention to truth, and which thereby lost much of its propaganda value. Even there the organisation was less than honest, in that copies of the discredited book were still being sold at a discount, with no warning that it was inaccurate, some time after it had supposedly been withdrawn.

Professor Dawkins has taken steps to reduce the harm done by the Keziah tape, both to his reputation and to the public understanding of science. On July 2, he wrote to the Institute for Creation Research in California, pointing out in detail how the tape had dishonestly misrepresented his position, and requesting that the Institute investigate his complaint and immediately withdraw the tape from circulation. At the date of publication, he has not even received an acknowledgement from the ICR. Nor can we be entirely surprised by this. As the titles roll at the end of the tape, we see that Dr John Morris and Dr Carl Wieland, chief executives respectively of the Institute for Creation Research and Answers in Genesis, are shown as "consultants".

So much for the supposed impartiality of Gillian Brown, the producer of the tape, or for her protestations of "balanced view", of which she assured Professor Dawkins when seeking to continue taping in his home.

### What does it mean?

So what is one to infer from this exercise? This tape, *From a Frog to a Prince*, purports to be a serious discussion of a scientific issue, but how is a scientific issue addressed by what clearly appears to be a deliberate misrepresentation of the position of one of the protagonists? That is not the way science works, and anyone who makes any pretence of being engaged in scientific discourse should be well aware of that. But then, science has very little to do with what creation 'scientists' are about.

This is, sadly, typical of the less-than-honest political propagandist approach creationists use in their "mission". Unlike genuine scientists they conduct little, if any, scientific research in support of their contention that the natural processes of the world are as a direct result of a supernatural creation event within the past 6-10,000 years, and of a global flood some 3,000 years ago. What they *do* seek to do is to attack the credibility of evolutionary (and other) theories that show up their claims for the poorly thought-out and simple-minded religious dogma they really are. Because they are not engaged in scientific research, and thus cannot

hope to succeed on the scientific level, they resort to *ad hominem* attacks on the genuine scientists who have exposed their myths.

### What are the effects?

What effects will the dissemination of this particularly egregious example of that tactic have in the real world? What effect would it have, for example, on Richard Dawkins' professional reputation among his scientific peers? We would suspect practically none, because no professional biologist, nor any other competent scientist, would be hoodwinked for a moment into thinking that Prof Dawkins had been baffled by such a crudely easy question.

But that misses the point of the tape. This propaganda is not aimed at professional scientists who would not be fooled by the implied message. Richard Dawkins' academic chair deals with the "Public Understanding of Science" and, as such, he is among those academics who are sometimes referred to as "public intellectuals", those scientists, and others, who make their expertise and knowledge available and comprehensible to the public.

So what of his public reputation? Less scientifically literate members of the public, who have the misfortune to be subjected to this propaganda, may be led to believe that he had been stumped by a simple question and, as a consequence, they might be misled into believing that creationists are actually engaged in scientific debate. Nothing could be further from the truth - their purpose, pure and simple, is political.

There is yet another consequence - in some ways more serious. There are many people whose strongly held religious beliefs make them prime targets for creationist propaganda. Should these people see this video tape, and, by it be encouraged to believe that creation 'science' has found a fatal flaw in the theory of evolution, then they have been cruelly deceived by people they have been led to believe they can trust.

Most scientifically literate people, and even many of those whose understanding of it is slight, have long recognised creation 'science' for the infantile religious dogma that it is, so this crude propaganda is unlikely to have a great deal of lasting effect on them. But those who have little understanding of science, and particularly those who have trusted the creationists' claim that they are engaged in science, have had their trust betrayed. The nature of the calls we have received from people who have seemingly swallowed this line leave us in no doubt that that is precisely what has happened.

This is not the way of science - it is the way of political propaganda - yet another blatant example of "telling lies for God".

### Note

\* The etymology of the word "propaganda" is interesting. Now generally used to mean "the organised dissemination of information, allegations, etc to assist or damage the cause of a government, movement, etc" (*Collins English Dictionary*), the word derives from the 18th Century Italian use of the Latin title *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, (Congregation for Propagating the Faith), a 17th Century congress of cardinals set up by the Roman Catholic Church to propagate their faith overseas through missionary activity. That this word evolved from a purely religious beginning into its present wide use in a political context seems to make it particularly apposite in this case. 🔄

# Fundamentalism and fanaticism

Lindsay Moore

## The questions

How does one identify fundamentalism? Where do you look for its telltale characteristics? Is fundamentalism a matter of attitude? Is there a typical fundamentalist personality?

## The problems

Fundamentalism is on the increase. In the USA, fundamentalist Christian churches are growing rapidly, whereas the main-line churches are languishing.

In Latin America, Pentecostal churches have experienced four and five fold growth in the last thirty years.

Jewish fundamentalism is in the ascendancy in Israel.

The Ayatollah Khomeini injected a particularly virulent strain of Islamic fundamentalism into Iran.

In India Sikh and Hindu fundamentalists engage themselves in armed aggression and terrorise their kinsmen.

There is a revival of papal fundamentalism within the Roman Catholic Church and many observers consider that Pope John Paul II himself is its leading exponent

## How is fundamentalism identified?

Fundamentalism is essentially a mind-set. It reflects a sense of alienation with the present. It occurs where there is a fear of losing touch with one's historical roots. It issues a clarion call for the return to a lost tradition and the restoration of the ancient landmarks. It fantasises for the reclamation of the pristine values of an idealised past, which never existed.

Simply looking to a system of "right" doctrine or belief does not identify fundamentalism. It is identifiable by the existence of a particular attitude towards such a system of doctrine or belief. You do not look primarily for what is believed but for the way in which it is believed.

## Is it positive?

No. It is a strategy of resistance, which pants for the certainty of eternal truths and eternal values. It looks for a literal plain sense of things and searches for a stable world picture and a consistent cosmology.

A German researcher into the psychopathology of religion, from whom this paper draws heavily, Gunter Hole, maintains that fundamentalism demonstrates three particularly striking criteria, namely consistency, simplicity and clarity.

These are positive values and they are enormously effective in presenting fundamentalism as a stimulus for social, political and religious life in an otherwise changing, complex and intimidating world.

Today, we use the label "fundamentalist" mostly as a term of abuse. Usually it evokes pejorative judgment and brings to mind attitudes, which may be described

as ignorant, hard-lined, reactionary, right winged and obscurant.

Those epithets also characterise dogmatism and fanaticism. Nobody likes to be called dogmatic and fanatical. Therefore nobody likes to be called a fundamentalist, unless, of course, you are an alumnus of the Bob Jones University in the USA, or a freshly ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, where the label is worn like a medal of valour.

## Religious fundamentalism

Religious fundamentalism is pledged to basic values and basic ideas. These must be protected at all times and at all costs. Its values and doctrines were "once delivered to the saints" by supernatural means. Its claim to be revealed truth is therefore accompanied by a chronic anxiety about compromise and novelty. It opposes pluralism and relativism. It rejects all thought of any process, development or evolution.

Fundamentalism erects a rigorous system of doctrine to safeguard its values and attitudes. Just as walls and ditches protect a medieval castle, so does this system of doctrine provide a sanctuary for shelter and protection. It defines the precise boundaries of fundamentalist thought and secures its behavioural patterns. The inmates of this fundamentalist castle lack any capacity for self-criticism and self-analysis.

This proclivity for building walls and digging ditches gives fundamentalism its most public and enduring characteristics... fanaticism and dogmatism.

## Fanaticism and dogmatism

The characteristic most widely manifested by the fundamentalist mind-set is that of being possessed with a single idea or attitude which allows no other possibility. Its most distressing feature is that those who exhibit it can rarely be shaken from it. This most likely derives from a personality defect that manifests itself when the distinction between belief and delusion becomes blurred.

Particularly in religion, extremism and rigorism are often regarded as being signs of special perfection or deeper commitment to the cause. In all likelihood, however, these attributes are often manifestations of a deeply rooted defect of character or a fanatical type of personality.

Fanatics may be active and belligerent. They may be passive and silent. The latter are the less obvious followers of the former. They seldom make a great stir. Yet they still cherish, with equal tenacity and stubbornness, the convictions of their more boisterous leaders.

The more active fanatics exhibit an aggressive personality. A strong drive and a deeply felt need for status and success motivate them. This drive may override any overt manifestations of personal emotions or humanitarian commitment. Hence often, but not necessarily, they manifest a lack of love and pastoral con-

cern. Social values and personal relationships do not rank highly in importance. In the long run it is the system of doctrine that matters.

They are on a divine mission. Compelled to be consistent personalities, their real values are determined by what they regard as being necessary for the task and conducive to the success of their divine mission. They are indeed God's special agents. Reminiscent of Maxwell Smart, they dig up chaos even if it only exists in their own fevered imaginations. They berate and bewilder those under their control. They are fixated by crass labels and rigid formulae.

Fundamentalism is therefore most dangerous when it is linked with other personality characteristics of a typically neurotic nature. This is manifested by a fertile imagination that applies heroic words and deeds of other people to themselves. They see themselves as martyrs. They become excessively mistrustful, and, as a result, they project their own fears and apprehensions on to their environment and associates. It is paranoia.

Resistance to their views cannot be tolerated. This is the enemy within the citadel. The enemy has to be detected and cast out. When fundamentalists are threatened they project the idea that the whole citadel is at risk. Their crises become your crises.

A common feature is an abnormal capacity to persist in a conviction, even in the face of overwhelming evidence and argument to the contrary. Their field of vision is so narrow that they are able to block out of view what they do not want to see. It is cognitive dissonance. They can close their eyes with blind passion and pursue their convictions with a total inability to compromise. They will listen to the views of others only so long as those views confirm their own.

They have inflated views of their own capacities, and their interests are so constricted and limited that they very quickly become familiar in them. There is therefore nothing that they need to know other than what is already known to them. Their learning and scholarship must fit rigidly into their system of right doctrine. Their knowledge is selective and they are totally unable to engage in self-analysis, open discussion and debate.

Fundamentalists stick to the letter of the law; their law. In the Christian religion they adhere to a rigid view of the Bible. Often they harbour an unbending attitude towards the historic creeds, confessions and the ancient formulae. In their hands these documents are used to exclude people, rather than enlighten them.

Their aggression can therefore be cruel and unforgiving. Anathema and heresy trials are the ultimate weapons of warfare. When they gain control, the appetite for criticism becomes a craving for persecution. They are the voice of God and public disapprobation has no effect upon them.

This "schizothymic triad" of idealism, fanaticism and despotism is as much perceived in the Apostle Paul, John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola as it is in Robespierre, Hitler and Stalin.

In some cases these defects of personality derive from an intellectual schizophrenia. These are the cases where there is deeply seated and genuine doubt, which is stifled and bottled up, in the individual psyche. However, personal doubt is not allowed to emerge into the open, even though the normal psychology of religion teaches that doubt goes hand in hand with faith

and that where there is no room for doubt there can be no room for faith.

C G Jung once remarked that "fanaticism is the brother of doubt". Someone who harbours secret doubt often compensates by embracing the idea more zealously. This condition may be manifested by an intense zeal for evangelisation, in the hope that by convincing others they might yet convince themselves.

Doubt undermines the personal security system of the zealot. Therefore doubt must be subjugated and repudiated. But this is easier said than done and may lead to further private anxiety and stress. Release is sought in bludgeoning and hectoring other people into submission. It becomes addictive. When an individual harbours cruel misgivings about the validity of his most fundamental beliefs he tends to react with public aggression.

At this point the individual looks for strength in numbers. He aligns himself with the aggressors in his group and its members turn inwards upon themselves. Being now under internal, as well as external, threat they move to identifying themselves more precisely and they do so in a negative way. They identify themselves, not by what they positively believe, but by what they oppose. They mobilise to select and delineate a common enemy.

According to Professor Martin Marty "The basic feature of modern fundamentalism is oppositionalism". The agenda for fundamentalism is always set by what is opposed. Fundamentalists invariably polarise a community by engaging in the emotively charged process of demonising the enemy. By doing this their battles assume cosmic dimensions. The warfare is holy warfare. God is on their side. They are fighting not against "flesh and blood", but against "principalities and powers". The devil is a real person and demonic forces have been set loose in the universe.

There must therefore always be an enemy. In fact, without an enemy fundamentalism cannot really identify itself. The most harrowing problem for a fundamentalist is to eliminate the enemy. Now you can't have your enemy if you eliminate him and if you eliminate the enemy against whom you have identified yourself, then you have eliminated your own identity.

This exquisite dilemma is only answered by finding another enemy. Hence Professor Marty's "oppositionalism". Yesterday, the enemy was one thing. Today, it is another. Tomorrow, well who knows? Fundamentalists are never so happy as when they can find an enemy and engage him in mortal combat. This profound rivalry is part of the dynamics of the fundamentalist's struggle for power and control.

Unfortunately, all of us have within ourselves tendencies towards fundamentalist attitudes, perhaps even of a fanatical type. A great deal of introspection is required on our part, especially if we are fascinated with ideal values, ultimate concerns and fundamental imperatives of our particular philosophical commitment. These things are valid notions. They are within the province of legitimate thought and practice for all of us.

We should endeavour to promote loyalty, honesty, especially intellectual honesty, trust and love in regard to our neighbours, and practise truth and courage in regard to ourselves. Then it may be possible for us to heal the hurts of fundamentalism and drive it out of the garden.



# Sense and nonsense in manual therapy

Philip Latey

**Manual therapy is permeated throughout with myths, fads, frauds and self deceptions on a grand scale. The author, himself an osteopath and vigorous sceptic, presents here some personal opinions of some of the obvious nonsense that he has encountered.**

It is wrong to think that any non-orthodox health worker must agree with any of the others. Nor is there necessarily any consistency of agreement within each denomination. Internal disagreements may be at least as wide and intense as their disagreement with orthodoxy. The author thinks it is far more important to show questioning, debate and academic ferment leading to testing of hypotheses, than it is to pretend that there is any real cohesion within each form of therapy. Collusion with ideas that are unsound, naive and generally insupportable is almost universal throughout health care.

In the hands of a good manual therapist you should experience a careful and perceptive analysis of the structural tensions and torsional patterns of the body that are giving you trouble. Where appropriate this exploration leads to the use of slow and relatively pain-free unknotting and unwinding, aiming to re-establish smoother and more integrated function.

All of this must be preceded by a full and broad-ranging case history taken by the manual therapist (not just a checklist to fill in). When any medical complication is suspected, referral is mandatory.

There must also be full discussion of the diagnostic pattern, with some sensible exploration of the reasons for the problems. Prognosis, treatment plan, management and prevention of recurrence also need thorough discussion before treatment can start.

Where the problems are long-standing, quite severe and complex, the initial exploratory stage may be quite long, before some agreement about treatment and management is arrived at.

## Snares And pitfalls.

- You must have a strong personal recommendation. Picking from an advertisement, list, register, yellow pages, shop front or brass plate is asking for trouble. High odds!
- If you don't know who to see, perhaps ask the local ballet school or dance company. If their person can fine-tune bodies with very exacting and precise needs, their manual skills are at least likely to be better than basic.
- If you are female and at all uneasy about seeing a male therapist, ask if a companion can come and sit quietly during your session. Good ethical therapists welcome this with apprehensive patients.
- Always ask how long they spend with you, and whether all of the treatment is done by them - with their undivided attention. Anything much less than half an hour is pretty useless. They haven't much to offer. If they are using "assistants" or associates to do part of the treatment, they are working *pro bono walleto et ego* rather than doing their personal best for your

problem. Here the clinical relationship / rapport never reaches a full focus where they can really help you to resolve things properly.

- Addiction. A nice massage, a rub and a crack, and some special stretches can be highly addictive. The repeated popping of spinal joints is "not helpful toward sturdy stable structure; they only wear a rut from the 'in' position to the subluxated position, making it easier and easier for the malposition to reassert itself". (Myers, 1998)

This is the McDonald's of manipulative therapy. Is your treatment really resolving problems so that you don't have to keep going back? Or is it just a nice (or nasty) temporary relief of tensions that becomes less effective over time? Regular supportive treatment may be unavoidable for some, but it means that your body is not doing it's own work.

- Remember that doctors and therapists may seem very nice and kind; even charmingly winsome. But most are also very tough bullies, either direct or indirect/subtly; and you don't want to have more to do with them than is absolutely necessary. Many are also extremely arrogant, thoughtless, greedy and lazy - and some are entirely unscrupulous, with an almost sociopathic lack of real ethics.

- If there is the slightest whiff of a publicity machine, an overblown or "public" reputation, "charisma" and followers, run fast. Sceptics know that any requirement to believe is always a lie: others don't. They delude themselves and others they come into contact with.

- Latest and greatest, then, is usually not the best; just the most puffed up.

## The symmetry myth

Apart from where New Zealanders bury their dead, symmetry does not exist in most organic life forms. All of us are "handed", with dominant arm, eye and leg preferences. Virtually all of our activities, work, sport and preferred positions of rest are asymmetrical. "Which side do you dress sir?"

Bone growth itself is asymmetrical: one is foot larger than the other; legs, knees and pelvis, generally round 2% to 5% differences in length, breadth, size and shape. A 10% difference in one shoe size, is not unusual. So the spinal and general posture is never perfectly straight - nor should it be. The body functions in complex oppositional spirals and doesn't need bilateral symmetry at all. Within (perhaps) up to 30 degrees of displacement, we can all do well.

So:

- You don't need X-rays to show that your spine wanders sideways from the vertical; we all do. Unless, of course, there is some major anomaly, structural damage or medical bone/joint problem to be eliminated.
- You don't need someone to tell you one leg is longer than the other, or one hip or shoulder higher; they all are. Naturally, if we strain a joint in our neck or back we will temporarily lean to one side (like limping); but it resolves itself. This certainly doesn't need a bully to

“thrust it straight”, especially when a disc is injured or bulging. Very dangerous.

### Spinal joint magic

The myth that minor disturbances of spinal joints of themselves cause illnesses elsewhere in the body is total nonsense. The mixed stiffness, laxity, crookedness, even over-straightness that we all have, do not link to any particular general pathologies at all.

### The magic pop

Many people “crack” their knuckles by pulling the fingers. This doesn’t seem to do much good; nor does it seem to do much harm.

The little joints at the back of the vertebrae are much the same size as finger joints; and the same therapeutic irrelevance applies to popping them, with some modifications and caveats.

Of course it is impressive when someone pops the spinal joints for you, especially if they don’t frighten or hurt. Sometimes there is an immediate release of tensions and extra freedom of movement. But, on its own, this will not resolve any difficult chronic problem; and can often be dangerous. It’s never good for it to be repeated too often, as it may wear a *groove of recurrence* (Myers, above). Some pain relief from forceful manipulations may be due to shock and impact to the tissues triggering an endorphin release - which might last anything from five minutes to five days.

### Specific diagnoses

Any diagnosis must make good sense in line with our ordinary knowledge of anatomy, physiology and conventional pathology. Anything else is likely to be rubbish, however plausible.

Osteopathic spinal lesions and chiropractic “subluxations” do not exist as discrete significant entities nor as stopping points in diagnosis. If a joint seems restricted there may be hundreds of different pathologies and patterns of somatic dysfunction that would make it so. And why is this happening?

In the spine, for example, we must consider:

- Schuermann’s disease (osteochondrosis: very common).
- Vertebral architecture collapsing from osteoporosis.
- or
- Secondary carcinoma (from, say, breast or prostate).
- Disc damage or degeneration.
- Foraminal nerve-root compression and neurology.
- Degenerative joint disease.
- Seizure of a hypermobile joint.
- Ankylosing spondylitis; rheumatoid, Pagets, and other less common medical problems.

In all of these examples the “thrust and pop” approach could be disastrous. There is no excuse for ignorance of basic orthopaedics, rheumatology and neurology in manual therapy.

### Healing energy

Good manual treatment is surrounded by a morass of esoteric flim-flam about “healing energies”. You will run into all sorts of chakras, chi, auras, meridians, acupuncture points and fanciful pseudoscientific research tosh. These are grandiose explanations for effects that themselves have been very poorly studied. Apart from heat transfer and physical contact/movement it’s a safe bet that there is nothing more happening than the effects of human intersubjective

realities. These are complex, but the feelings of comfort, contact, containment and care; the handing over of control of movement with reassurance and release of specific tensions/torsional patterns account for most of these quite easily.

Claims for the effective use of very subtle body movement patterns clearly do have some basis in the complexity of this intersubjectivity. But they are not realistically described by their proponents. It is only when we realise that these “enhanced placebo” effects don’t work with most chronic long-term problems that life starts to get interesting.

### Vague conditions

Many diagnostic labels are dumping grounds for patients and stubborn symptom clusters that don’t really belong together.

Chronic fatigue syndrome, post-myalgic encephalitis, post-viral fatigue syndrome, reflex sympathetic dystrophy, post-traumatic shock syndrome, repetitive strain injury, and fibromyalgia are some of these grab-bag diagnoses.

While there is usually no doubt that the patient was in a ghastly state at some time, and still may be well below par, they’ve usually become stuck in patterns of illness behaviour. Like the unemployed in a poverty trap, this can be nearly impossible to get out of. Among the characteristics of this are “multiple faddism”, hypochondriacal self-preoccupation and simultaneous engagement with several therapeutic resources.

Many seem trapped between “won’t” and “can’t” get on with building a life. And, unless we are able to help them face up to what they might really be furious and resentful about, and perhaps such difficult things as laziness, cowardice, self-indulgence, failure and embarrassment, manual therapy has nothing to offer beyond temporary or illusory relief.

Therapists claiming to offer remedies for these “conditions” are fibbing. The honest opinion must be that “a few will do well - but it’s a long hard struggle”.

### Spurious links

Links between specific muscle-group function and particular food sensitivities/allergies and so forth are claimed by many. Don’t believe it. It is no more likely than that your bowels are traced out on the sole of your foot (ugh: squishy), your liver palpable in the pulse at your wrist, or your premolars precipitating pancreatitis. Pure nonsense: but easy to fake phony testing procedures.

### In conclusion

Good manual therapy feels right to the patient and makes sense to them. It can be helpful for a surprisingly large range of human ills, but is often very time consuming, hard work and tiring both to the therapist and to the patient.

The common-sense warnings and dismissals outlined here should help you to avoid the 98% of peripheral and mainstream manual therapists who, in the author’s opinion, can’t really help resolve difficult problems.

### Ref

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# Is natural best?

J T Wearne

More and more one sees and hears claims that herbal remedies are better than conventional medicines because they are "natural". Emotionally this hints at the nice contrast between the pleasant plants of kindly Nature, often with poetic names, and those *Drugs* stemming from ugly factories with smoking chimneys and foul effluent drains. Of course there are useful natural products, some famously so. The oils in culinary herbs appeal to our senses; the sap of the poppy dulls pain; willow bark eases rheumatic pain; foxglove stimulates the heart.

Some arrogantly believe that the medicaments have been included in plants for our benefit by God, or the Spirits, or the Life Force, or whatever. It is said that a certain doctor reasoned that, as 'rheumatism' is notoriously worse in damp, dank conditions, then in such an environment God would have placed a balm for the condition, and he found it in the willow. [There are two defects in the story: firstly, the remedy was used by the Romans; secondly that school of theology which holds God to be an English gentleman, knows that the willow was created for cricket bats. The willow contains salicylate, but He put a nicer form of it into the little herb wintergreen, for rubbing on bowlers' strained shoulders.]

If these factors in herbs are not primarily for our benefit, can they be of some use to the plant? The answer is obvious, since nearly all, even the oils of culinary herbs, are poisons to deter predators, who learn that their taste is associated with unfortunate effects. We may find that, in small quantities, they can correct some error in our metabolism. Opium mimics the action of pain-suppressants in our brain. Only now, after being perhaps the most commonly used drug for a century, is the painkilling action of salicylate becoming partially understood, as is also its usefulness, observed only comparatively recently, for reducing blood clotting and hence some heart attacks.

Is natural willow-bark or its extract preferable to the synthetic imitations produced by the ton from petroleum? The former is so damaging to the stomach that few could tolerate it for long. When the German, Bayer, prepared the derivative, aspirin, the natural product was rapidly abandoned. [In WWI we cancelled German patents and the small local firm of Nicholas began preparing aspirin, giving it the catchy title "Aspro" which, like journo, muso etc, seems to appeal to the Australian ear.] Looking at our huge consumption of it, one might assume that it is quite harmless, but in fact it is not good for the stomach, and prodigious efforts by the pharmaceutical industry have not fully overcome this, nor found a completely satisfactory substitute. This damage is a "side effect", as listed in the product literature of every pharmaceutical, and to which natural-therapy enthusiasts point with glee.

Are natural products free of these unpleasantnesses? Why should they be? They contain chemicals and if

these are potent enough to have any appreciable effect, is it likely to be so perfectly tuned as to correct just our complaint, while doing nothing else? The drug companies have to document clinical trials of any new product, proving its efficacy and listing any observed side effects. The procedures and their supervision may not be perfect, but only recently have the 'alternative' producers begun to be nearly as thorough.

This adjective 'alternative' is discussed interestingly by John Foley. A system of medicine which continued for thousands of years can be described as "mainstream". Only near the end of the 19th century did scientific medicine appear, and it is still far short of full development. As the 21st century dawns, a number of people are returning to the old mainstream and calling it 'alternative'! Admittedly, it's not quite the old system, having borrowed indiscriminately from Oriental 'mainstream' medicine, acquired a bit of gadgetry and much smooth marketing, largely from California, today's cradle of credulity.

To return to our preference for the natural: though the exact chemistry is known of all herbal components with proven usefulness, eg those of the foxglove, the poppy, the coca tree and others, they cannot be synthesised economically. But they are carefully purified and standardised so that dosage can be matched accurately to need. Is similar care taken with the host of nicely packaged, expensive drugs available in the health shops?

There is the possibility that some herbs may be effective from having a mixture of components working together. Some of these may be unknown, or ignored as unimportant by analysts, though this grows less likely daily, as chemists, armed with ever more sensitive apparatus investigate any material with a possible value. They have even analysed the oh-so-many items of the Chinese pharmacopoeia, which are supposed to increase 'vigour' ie sexual prowess in men.

There is material, especially the penis from 'sexy' animals; - dogs, bears, deer, tigers etc. There's the famous rhinoceros horn, which consists of fused hair, and is quite indigestible by man - but looks very phallic. It must be effective because its so expensive - and illegal. The ginseng root, also agreeably costly, has no discernible pharmaceutical property, but looks to a fevered imagination like the lower half of a woman, and so must have an effect. [Europeans ascribed magical powers to the mandrake, which looks like ginseng, but is quite different and too poisonous to be much used.]

Some will say that magical features are the very essence of 'natural healing'. I'm aware that faith in a therapy is part of its success, as the placebo effect demonstrates in clinical trials. Magic, by definition, can not be approached rationally, but can we see an overall effect, even if it can't be measured? Do we see that the Chinese, the greatest users of herbal and faunal medicines, are noticeably healthier than the rest of us, even

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# Alternative health insurance

Richard Cadena

My attention drifted from the television during a commercial break. However, the sight of a man clapping two fish together over a woman lying on a table quickly caught my eye. The ad was for HBA's new 'alternate' therapies cover. It wryly mentioned that 'most' therapies were covered, insinuating that this wacky fish therapy wasn't. My immediate thought was, "Where is the line drawn between the fish therapy and other 'alternate' therapies"? I've always believed that the alternative therapies should have to prove their effectiveness just as rigorously as modern medicine.

I called HBA for a list of the therapies covered. It took two attempts to get a brochure mailed out. The cover being advertised is titled "Alternate Therapies" and is under the "Your Choice Extras" category. These are broken into:

Natural Therapies - Naturopathy, Homoeopathy, Western Herbalism and Dietary

Traditional Chinese Medicine - Acupuncture, Chinese Herbalism

Massage - Kinesiology, Bowen Technique, Remedial Massage, Therapeutic Massage, Shiatsu, Reflexology etc (sic)

That "etc", seemed a bit open-ended to me. I also noticed that all of the six Extras (except for Basic) provided coverage for Chiropractors and Naturopathy, listed separately from the Alternate Therapies. Four of the six also provided for Acupuncture, again listed separately. There is, on average, a \$400 annual maximum benefit. I was interested to note that the Loyalty Maximum program, a frequent member program, which can increase coverage to \$800 after seven years, does not apply to the Alternate Therapies cover.

I decided to make some phone calls. First, I called the Health Industry Commission where I was told that it wasn't really their domain and I should contact the Federal Health Minister and HBA. After speaking with Dr Woolridge's staff in Melbourne, I was put onto his advisers in Canberra. A conversation with an adviser named Rachel revealed that the Government Incentive for private health insurance wasn't sufficient to warrant interference with private companies over this matter. Although supportive of the idea that therapies that are not scientifically based shouldn't be considered alternatives, there was no real way to alter the commercial decision of the private health insurance companies.

I moved onto HBA. I asked to speak to the manager of the Alternate Therapies section and was told Angus Norris was the contact. I spoke with his colleague, Mirella Moppi, and explained my concern over unproven therapies being accepted by HBA. She assured me that this wasn't a step HBA took lightly. HBA had consulted with many different organisations, government agencies and the medical profession. I asked if they consulted with the Australian Medical Association. She said she believed they did. I asked for the

name of that person. Ms Moppi informed me that Mr Norris had that information. I left a message for Mr Norris.

Weeks of unanswered messages went by, and when I had almost given up, I finally got through on Mr Norris's mobile phone number. I asked Mr Norris about the Alternate Therapies section. He was very reluctant to give me any information until he had a category to place me in. Was I a therapist, doctor, insurer or journalist? Each response I gave him that I was merely a private concerned citizen did nothing to placate him. When I mentioned that I hoped to write an article about the topic, he seemed greatly relieved to have a box in which to place me.

I mentioned my concerns about the unproven nature of these 'alternate' therapies and he responded with "It is not our job to decide what is good or bad medicine, our customers decide what is good medicine. We give our customers what they want."

I asked why Reflexology was covered but not iridology. He stated that they were covering treatment modalities not diagnostic techniques. He appeared unconcerned at what diagnostic tools someone would use. He said the practitioner was covered for giving treatments, any diagnostic tool used was their choice.

I questioned how the modalities covered were chosen and he explained that HBA had spoken with the organisation representing each modality. Representatives had met with HBA and explained how the therapy worked. I suggested that if you only asked the people in each modality, of course, they would assert the effectiveness of their treatments. Mr Norris disagreed; saying that the length of time the modality has been around was important as well as its standing in the general community. The 'general' community seemed to me to be the community of 'alternate' therapists. The length of time spent studying is also a consideration. A certain amount of study is required but I was not informed of the specific criteria. "We check education standards at each organisation." Mr Norris was very proud of the fact that, "HBA have set the best benchmark in the business by requiring education, examination by the modality boards and general acceptance in the community."

When I offered that there was no scientific proof of these various treatments, Mr Norris said that they had looked at the scientific evidence and wouldn't have selected treatments that didn't have scientific evidence. I asked what scientific evidence that was. Mr Norris said that there is evidence and it is a debate going on at the moment. He finds the pro and con of the scientific evidence "tedious". He said that 10-15 years ago a similar debate over chiropractors took place and now chiropractors are accepted.

When I asked about the AMA, Mr Norris said that they had not spoken with the AMA. He didn't see a reason to speak with them but had spoken with vari-

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# Qakatak - making a difference

John Foley

Qakatak is beginning to work, but it needs a lot more supporters. Following are some of our successes.

*The Vinegar Book* was featured in *the Skeptic*, 16/1, p 32, and partly due to that exposure, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission ran it out of town in July, 1997. In March this year, South Australia's motoring organisation, the RAA, published an ad for a bandage called "Knee Relief" in its magazine. The addresses for both the *Vinegar Book* and for the Knee Relief were in Avalon Parade, Avalon Beach (though at different numbers) and the advertisements were remarkably similar.

A phone call to the editor of *SA Motor* alerted him to the possibility of another long running scam, so he agreed not to run the advertisement any more. Sadly, the May-June issue ran the ad again so I wrote a letter to the editor of the magazine. He sent a memo out to his staff that they were not to accept ads from that address. In the July-August edition, Qakatak had the desired effect and the ad was not published.

A phone call informed us that Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* had run two advertisements for "natural" treatments, with large advertorials on the top. By phone and letter, I found out that advertisements for "complementary" medicine are supposed to be checked by Ad Clear in Sydney, and carry an NFAA five digit clearance number and the date. In reply the advertising manager of the *Sunday Mail* confirmed that he had instructed his staff that under *no* circumstances were they to accept material without the appropriate clearance numbers. The ads in question have ceased, but unfortunately others are still getting through. Letters are currently being written to combat them.

I read a letter to the editor in *The Australian* claiming validity for chiropractors because they are trained at Macquarie University and RMIT. After some tenacious phone calls and investigation, I wrote to the editor of *The Australian* pointing out the way that these two courses got accreditation. I haven't heard that my letter was published, but the matter is being pursued with the two universities.

Some valiant supporters have joined the team, who I will identify here only by their given names.

Ruth wrote to the SA Minister of Education and asked about quack courses being accredited by the SA government. He explained that all was well and that Carol, one of his public servants, could answer any further questions. Ruth immediately replied that Carol had already confirmed to Qakatak that her branch of the Education Department had no interest in efficacy, and didn't consider it when giving accreditation. A second letter from the Minister's office told Ruth that the matter was being investigated.

Bill wrote to the TGA and asked them what its definition of a "health professional" is. They replied that it meant anyone who called themselves a health professional, and health professionals don't have to follow

the law. Bill will reply to their letters until they have no alternative but to give up, or admit they are supporting a scam.

Peter wrote to the Pharmacy Guild of Australia and asked for their policy in selling goods that have not had their efficacy reliably demonstrated. The official response was that they did not have a policy, but "broadly that therapeutic claims should only be made in respect of substances known to be certified as efficacious by the Therapeutic Drugs Administration", as well as snide references to non-professional bureaucrats and pains in the neck.

It is alarming that the Executive Director of any organisation does not know the name of the government body regulating his industry, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, and that he doesn't know that "Listed" goods have not had their efficacy tested. Peter made a phone call to ask if his follow-up letter had arrived at the Guild.

The response was a very rude letter objecting to our name, Qakatak, and suggesting that we change it to "Defence of the Medical Model in Health". Sounds like a good name to me. The trouble is, on their current performance, we wouldn't accept the Pharmacy Guild of Australia as a member. Pharmacies are supported in selling quack remedies by their guild so my answer is, "If the cap fits, wear it".

Other letter writers are working quietly and are having an effect. If you would like to make a difference, be a soldier in the Qakatak army and write for Qakatak. One hour, 50 words, once a month, and you *will* make a difference. Contact:

**John Foley,**  
**PO Box 551, Glenelg, SA. 5045,**  
**or e-mail [qakatak@senet.com.au](mailto:qakatak@senet.com.au)**



## ... Insurance from p 16

ous government departments. He could see no reason to give me a list of who was involved. He emphasised that this was alternate cover so "if you don't want it you don't have to pay for it".

Our conversation ended with Mr Norris still convinced of the scientific validity of the 'alternate' therapies and the good of HBA leading the push to give their customers what they want. I have no doubt of the validity of the commercial decision. More people will purchase the extra coverage than would leave HBA in alarm at their premiums being wasted. Also, there will be more repeat business if the therapy is inefficient. I am not a big fan of the 'slippery slope' style of argument but I certainly noticed the number of times Mr Norris used chiropractors as an example of this issue being looked at and resolved in favour of the 'alternate' therapy. The premise of Mr Norris seems to be, since chiropractors are accepted, in the future these 'alternate' therapies will be too. I'm concerned he may be correct.



# Investigating alternative therapists

Bob Nixon

Following on from a mottled John Foley's experiences with natural therapists, I set out with a crew from *A Current Affair* to test the skills of three naturopaths on my medically diagnosed diabetes. *A Current Affair* paid all the fees listed below. The three therapists were chosen from the *Yellow Pages* by the segment's Sydney producer, John McAvoy, entirely at random. I was accompanied on this tour by Carol Hall, from the ACA Melbourne office. She carried a video camera concealed in a handbag.

Prior to starting, we discussed the line I should take with each therapist. I would present symptoms experienced by diabetics, lethargy, thirst (sometimes severe) and a need to urinate frequently. I added a symptom of my own, a real one that I had experienced but one that is not among the 'classics'. This was the infrequent but maddening appearance of itchy red blotches on my skin, including my hands. These symptoms, along with my age (38) and the fact that I carry more weight than absolutely necessary, should have been sufficient to cause suspicion that late-onset diabetes was the culprit. In his office, a GP would be expected to jab a finger to extract a drop of blood and, using a simple test unit, measure the glucose in my blood.

## Ron Jean, Naturopath

John and Carol had stressed that I must not lie if asked a direct question about diabetes. This backfired first time out when we visited Ron Jean, at the Bentleigh Naturopathic Centre. Among his very early questions was "Are you taking any medication?" to which, according to the rules we'd set, I gave an honest answer. I named the drug I was taking, and he immediately turned to one of his books. Having admitted to taking a drug which is used only to treat Type 2 diabetes, I had to umm and ahh a good bit and admit to being too stupid to ask my doctor any questions about what was wrong with me. I thought I'd blown it early, but not so. Mr Jean was perfectly happy to accept that I had not concerned myself enough to ask the appropriate questions of my doctor, and just as happy to think that my doctor had not made my condition clear.

He then moved me to the iridology apparatus and looked into my eyes, comparing the iris of each eye in turn with his chart. He pointed out a weakness in the segment of my right eye relating to my pancreas, before moving on to what was a clear failure in my nervous system. My left eye just as clearly revealed a failure in my lymphatic system. This seemed to be my most serious complaint.

The list of questions continued, and a preprinted form was gradually filled out. Sexual inadequacies were inquired about, potential mental difficulties suggested, along with a weakness in my collar bone. Ultimately I was advised to visit my doctor to get a clearer picture of why I had been placed on the drug, a drug which

Mr Jean said may, in fact, have been responsible for the symptoms I was experiencing. If diabetes was indicated, Mr Jean could treat me with homeopathic medicines. He added that he would not suggest that I discontinue my existing medication, since he saw his role as complementing the medical treatment I was already receiving. I was advised to reduce the amount of acid in my diet, because my system was out of balance. Mr Jean gave me a basic diet to follow, a printed sheet which listed healthy foods and those to avoid. There was no customisation for my particular complaint, just the standard diet. Mr. Jean's fee was \$40, and the consultation took about an hour.

Following this first visit, Carol contacted John by phone and discussed the difficulty of admitting to the medication. In fact by presenting these symptoms as real we were already lying to the therapists, since I do not in fact suffer from them at present, thanks to my medication. This point eased the decision to change the story. I was now to be undiagnosed and untreated for the remainder of the exercise.

## Kirren Metz, Naturopath

Number 2 was Kirren Metz, a registered nurse who works in a cardiac care unit when she's not running her shop. She advised Carol and me that she had worked a night shift in a hospital, but was feeling fine. Unfortunately the other girl who works at her store was unavailable, so she would have to mind the shop during our consultation. I was surprised to see the exact same pre-printed form appear, and the same basic questions were asked, although she avoided the more personal areas. I presented the same symptoms and was quickly asked if I had ever been tested for diabetes, I replied that I had not. Ms Metz then said that her husband suffered from that complaint. A registered nurse, with personal experience of the symptoms I was describing should have seen the clues immediately, and so she did.

Then she happily let the subject of diabetes drop. She took my blood pressure, announcing that 140/90 was "on the high side". Again my eyes were examined in turn, although this time minus the expensive and impressive camera and lights arrangement of Mr Jean. Instead she simply held an eyelid open and peered at my iris. Again the lymphatic system was mentioned, although Ms Metz pronounced my nervous system to be solid and my constitution strong. No mention of pancreas, but liver, kidneys and lungs featured. As one of the few (living) smoking Skeptics, my lungs were easily explained. Ms Metz was honest enough to admit confusion over my condition. Carol brought the subject back to diabetes, and again it was briefly discussed, before the therapist went off on a tangent once again.

This time the subject was cholesterol. I was handed a few Heart Foundation pamphlets on healthier living, a diet was discussed - more fruit and vegetables. I

needed, apparently, to flush the toxins from my body. More exercise and a healthier diet. At the end of the consultation she suggested that I visit my doctor and request a blood test, but to check my cholesterol, not my blood glucose level. There was no suggestion that my doctor should consider diabetes.

My hour with Kirren Metz cost \$50, and I agreed to return in the next few days to collect a photocopy of my diet plan (her fax/copier was not working), and a herbal tea that would assist in the flushing of my system. Our consultation had been interrupted twice by customers.

### Saad Merhi

Therapist number 3 was the most professional of the trio. Saad Merhi is a member of a practice which includes a GP and a "Natural Therapist". He is an acupuncturist and Doctor of Naturopathy, which he took pains to tell us early in the consultation, listing his qualifications for us.

Mr Merhi is a confident man, and exudes this confidence in every way. Again the same pre-printed form was produced and the symptoms described for his consideration. "Have you been tested for diabetes?" was the first question asked after hearing the facts, when I replied that I had not, he suggested that it was time I was. Once again the naturopath had quickly and clearly identified a possible cause of the complaint, and once again he moved quickly away from that to other areas.

I was invited to sit on the examination table and he prodded me a few times, felt my hands for signs of cold and then came the bright light and magnifying glass for the long stare into my eyes. Again there was the weakness in the lymphatic system, yet again the suggestion of hidden emotions and anxiety. He asked a great many questions, but unlike Ms Metz, stayed largely to the point. He did get into some very personal areas, including a couple of questions to my "wife". One question I found rather odd concerned my sleeping garb, and he expressed displeasure when I told him I wear nothing. Mr Merhi stated that he could fix my problem, and do so very quickly, so long as I was prepared to put in the work.

My system needed a severe flushing out of toxins. The itchy red marks, which he classified as a "rash" would go away if I took regular exercise, not merely walking the dogs, but really pushing myself every day for a week. This would enable my system to force toxins from my body in the form of sweat. To assist me he would prescribe vitamin C in modified form, at \$15 for a package of 60 tablets. I was to take six of these tablets each day, "a pretty high dose" according to Mr Merhi.

I would also have to return in two weeks, he said, after I had been to see my doctor and asked for a general check-up, including tests for cholesterol, lipids and diabetes. Mr Merhi's services cost \$30 for approximately forty minutes of his time. The medication brought the final bill to \$45. Later I read the label on the pill bottle to learn that the recommended dose is *one* tablet daily.

### Conclusion

All three naturapaths visited, including Mr Jean, who was given the answer, arrived at the correct conclusion. All mentioned diabetes as a possible cause of the symptoms that I had presented, and all did so very quickly during the consultation. This is to their credit;

clearly these three had some knowledge of medicine and wide experience in dealing with patients.

Less to their credit, all three, including Mr Jean who had his suspicion confirmed, ignored this obvious answer and proceeded with a lengthy consultation, and all eventually reached incorrect conclusions. Mr Jean voiced a concern that the medication I take was the agent responsible for the symptoms, rather than the illness it was prescribed to counter. All three suggested a healthy diet and exercise; all three used iridology at their primary diagnostic tool, backed up by a long string of questions.

And all three found problems with my lymphatic system. There are three possible causes for this. I may actually have such a problem, in which case iridology works as a diagnostic tool; I may have a feature in my eye which shows on their identical charts as erroneously indicating this problem, in which case iridology does not work; the three therapists, having undergone similar training, have all incorrectly diagnosed this problem, in which case their entire approach is suspect.

The lymphatic system transports digested fats from the intestine to the bloodstream, removes toxins from the bloodstream and assists the body to resist disease. Lymph nodes, or glands, become enlarged during the course of an infection, those in the neck and armpits can be felt relatively easily at this time.

Of the three therapist only Ms Metz actually felt my neck during our consultation, and she found no swelling. This did not seem to alter her opinion. For all three therapists the only evidence that my lymphatic system was not working properly was the iridological examination. A breakdown in the lymphatic system can lead to a lack of immune response, which, as far as our trio were concerned, was what I had. So far as I know, I have no medical problems other than the one described in this article, I certainly experience no symptoms other than those described, and these disappeared soon after I began a course of medication.

Diabetes is a serious illness, undiagnosed and untreated it can lead to severe and even life threatening complications, including loss of eyesight, restricted blood circulation and impotence. My condition is under control thanks to a simple white pill containing a drug called gliclazide. It has to be said that my condition may well improve in response to more exercise and a better diet - the aim being to lose weight. This is true of many medical complaints, and I dare say we could all look after ourselves a little better than we do.

Better diet and more exercise is not the answer to everything, however, sometimes the body needs assistance. A little white pill, clinically tested and proven to be both safe and effective, allows me to enjoy the occasional jelly bean or glass of red wine, a regular check with a GP keeps me on the straight and narrow. All three of the therapists visited offered sound advice and a caring shoulder, but all three also brushed over the obvious signs of a serious illness, serious enough to need quick and effective control. Ms Metz chose to ignore it completely, despite medical training, while the other two advised they could treat diabetes (following diagnosis by a doctor) with homeopathic remedies. It was clear from the three visits that naturopaths offer only a limited range of services, and rely heavily on medical doctors for diagnosis, before they can treat the condition behind the symptoms.



# Investigating alternative therapists II

Karen Stollznaw

When consciousness tore me away from a peaceful slumber one morning, I discovered a message on my answering machine from one of the producers of Channel Nine's *A Current Affair*. On my returning his phone-call, John McAvoy revealed his skeptical tendencies, while requesting my participation in a follow-up to our investigation into the practices of alternative therapists (see *the Skeptic* 18/2).

The plan proposed that I visit three practitioners, accompanied by a hastily adopted 'brother' who, unbeknown to the therapist, would record the consultations on a video camera concealed within his bag. Further to this, I would be interviewed regarding the outcome of these consultations, and the results of the previous investigation conducted by the Skeptics. Dr Richard Gordon would also be interviewed and, for the sake of fairness, balance (or comic relief) several prominent alternative therapists would be invited to comment after viewing the resulting material.

Taping commenced that very night, as Dr Gordon was due to leave for the Skeptics World Convention in Europe the following day. For the benefit of television, my medical examination and subsequent consultation were re-enacted. My eyes, or rather the infamous spots in my eyes received the limelight, as this investigation was to focus, primarily, on the practice of iridology. After assessing that all was well, the final consultation was reconstructed. Dr Gordon discussed my pathology results that belied the diagnoses of the practitioners I had previously attended, and would call into question the guesswork of the therapists I would subsequently visit. Ironically, several hours later I would succumb to one of the most debilitating doses of the 'flu that I have ever experienced.

Yet again the trusty *Yellow Pages* were consulted and three naturopaths plucked from its listings. Now, it would be virtually unheard of, for example, for a cardiologist to also specialise in gynaecology and/or dermatology, or for a corporate lawyer to also specialise in family and/or criminal law. However, it is possible to encounter an alternative therapist who dabbles in a range of claimed practices. This was the case with the three selected therapists who, among them, were versed in the arts of naturopathy, homoeopathy, iridology, Chinese herbal remedies, magneto therapy, pranic yoga therapy and a host of other unidentifiable quirks of technique.

My story was to remain the same. Travelling later this year to Europe via Asia (when will I ever leave for this damn holiday?), I now sought a clean bill of health to assist in my complete enjoyment of the journey. I vouchsafed the therapists no clues as to any ailments I may or may not suffer from, and professed excellent health, despite a raging and blatantly obvious case of the flu, which I admitted to, along with, stupidly, the fact that I am a connoisseur of the occasional cigarette or two. Despite the lack of complaints from myself, each

therapist was, yet again, determined to find fault with my constitution.

## Naturopath

I firstly visited Mr Doug Home, naturopath, erstwhile hippie and subsequent graduate to the status of Sensitive New Age Guy. Mr Home chose to repeatedly inform my 'brother' and me, in a self-deprecating manner, of the fact that he was not a doctor. This insinuated a profound lack of confidence which could only be reflected onto his patients. However, he was later to opine that medical practitioners only serve as repairmen undertaking patchwork upon the ill, whereas naturopaths work towards the prevention of disease, thus nullifying the need for doctors.

I completed a form and indicated my details, leaving blank the section querying my state of health. Mr Home expressed his surprise at my complete lack of even the most trivial health problems. I responded that I have suffered from the odd headache or bout of tiredness although I could always attribute the cause and was not plagued by trifling complaints. Deprived of health issues that he could focus upon, Mr Home resorted to an examination. He took two readings of my blood pressure, whilst I was seated and standing and omitted to comment upon the result, which I interpreted as indicating a normal rate.

Mr Home then extracted a drop of blood from my left middle finger, which I assumed was for a blood sugar level test. Incorrect in my surmise, I was astonished when the droplet was placed under a microscope and viewed. Mr Home switched on a small screen that enlarged the image of the blood sample, and which made it possible for him to conduct a running commentary about my blood cells. It would appear that I was suffering from severe anaemia, however, to determine the severity, I would require a pathology test. Could I be referred to a pathologist by Mr Home? No, but I was advised to visit a medical centre late at night and say (falsely) that my menstruation cycle was irregular and often heavy, and to request the appropriate blood tests. I should then deliver the results to Mr Home for decipherment and treatment.

Upon examining my hands, and applying pressure to certain points, Mr Home concluded that my nails displayed a zinc deficiency. The colour of the lines on my palms indicated poor circulation and the tenderness of the areas to which he applied pressure exhibited my body's inability to properly cope with and utilise calcium.

Now Mr Home put his iridology skills to use and stared intently into each of my eyes with a small torch, meanwhile stating that there is contention within the medical industry as to the benefits of iridology, or lack thereof, and admitting that he harbours only a wavering faith in its accuracy and credibility. Nevertheless, he claimed, the tiny green striations in my left eye are

indicative of a stressful episode in my past and the spots, previously noted, were not attributed to liver problems, scoliosis, lymph gland congestion or a psychological resentment as diagnosed by iridologist Ted Hall (see story in *the Skeptic*, 18/2) but are indicative of lung and chest problems.

Mr Hall had previously informed me that the spots in my eyes would remain, despite any success I may have in rectifying my supposed ailments, so now I posed this question to the naturopath. Astonishingly, Mr Home declared that the spots would disappear upon the rectification of my condition. Now Mr Home startled me with the sudden statement that my brown coloured eyes are actually blue and that if I were to carefully modify my diet and alter my lifestyle they would return to their natural blue hue. Mr Home also made an admission that past illicit drug taking had caused his eyes to develop into a bright copper orange colour. However, by ridding his system of the substances and nursing his body to a healthy state his eyes recovered their original blue colouring.

Finally, I was asked to lie upon my stomach on a surgical bed whilst Mr Home manipulated my back and applied pressure to certain points. A particularly violent jab to the kidney region caused me to emit a shriek of protest that elicited another diagnosis from Mr Home. My kidneys were in dire need of attention and this ought to be a matter of great concern for myself (not having them pummelled would be a good start, I thought). A diagnosis of liver problems was also plucked from the air. In concluding the consultation, Mr Home recommended I increase my vitamin C intake to 4000mg per day, increase my intake of water, reduce smoking and commence a course of multivitamins, despite his complementing my general health and diet. The duration of the consultation was approximately one hour and cost \$70.00.

### **Naturopath/Iridologist**

Dr Nishant Mohan, a naturopath/iridologist/etc, was next graced with the presence of myself and my dear 'brother', whom incidentally, bore no familial resemblance to me whatsoever. Ushered into an austere surgery boasting overseas qualifications on its walls, Dr Mohan briefly questioned me as to my state of health. He then checked my pulse and glands and flatly announced that my constitution was in receipt of an over-active thyroid, inflamed kidneys and a questionable gall bladder. I then requested an iridology check-up as we then had entered an uncomfortable silent pause. Unfortunately, Dr Mohan's diagnostic equipment was currently away for repairs and he did not venture a visual eye examination, so I was spared the detection of further ailments.

Dr Mohan now developed a witty alliterative phrase and bade me to remember the two words that, if heeded, would reinstate good health "water/walk". I was to increase my intake of water and commence a regime of regular exercise in the form of walking, despite the fact that I had already informed him that I drink sufficient water and consistently walk for thirty minutes daily. A bottle of antioxidant tablets and a bottle of colloidal silver (carrying the fearful warning: "not to be stored near magnetic fields") were thrust upon me as though my ailments had been preordained by Dr Mohan prior to my consultation.

Leaving, I paid the \$140.00 consultation fee, prescribed treatments inclusive. The appointment had lasted a mere fifteen minutes. I was presented with what can only be described as an A4 sized business card, replete with the Doctor's capabilities and enlightened quotes. "All ailments are a mere manifestation of the disequilibrium in one's trinity factor. In other words, diseased condition of the body is a result of disharmony between the Body, Mind and Spirit". In a nod to accuracy Dr Mohan had the words "Not a Medical Practitioner" written in small print below his title and qualifications.

The second appointment had left the crew pondering whether they should hail an ambulance for me. However, we decided against this, instead opting for an interval in the day's proceedings. In an amusing twist of cliché, it was a case of the victim returning to the scene of the crime as we revisited some of the clinics I had previously visited for the original investigation. I was filmed entering and exiting the entrance stairs to Ted Hall's practice (only to encounter the man himself and have him gallantly hold open the door for me, obviously without recognising me!).

### **Naturopathic clinic**

My final consultation was with a Mr George Repeti of the GSR Naturopathic Clinic. Resplendent in a white lab coat Mr Repeti conducted the entire examination as I lay on a surgical bed.

My wrist pulse was checked and then my blood pressure was read. Unlike Doug Home's non-response to the two readings he had taken, Mr Repeti dramatically declared that my blood pressure was excessively high and this situation would have to be immediately rectified. Again my wrist pulse was checked and a bout of questioning followed. On learning that I am a smoker, Mr Repeti announced forthwith that my lungs were in a state of degeneration and he promptly re-checked my wrist pulse. Leaving my wrist, he began checking my pulse in other areas, all in the name of variety and, obviously satisfied that, yes, I did possess a pulse, he asked me to turn over and lie on my stomach.

Mr Repeti then told me that he was going to take a sample of blood. He inserted a needle below the back of my knee, pricking a vein, then paused to await the blood flow, before alternately palpating and wiping the area with a damp cloth. My concerned 'brother' then inquired as to why the blood sample was extracted from my leg rather than the traditional hand or arm. By now I knew better than to expect an orthodox blood test. However, I certainly did not expect to be the recipient of an archaic form of treatment either, for Mr Repeti stated with a casual authority that he was engaging in the act of blood letting. According to his beliefs, all toxins accumulate in the lower half of the body so this was the obvious area from which to obtain blood. He had deduced that the initial slow, then irregular flow indicated that I was suffering from poisoned blood and that he was relieving me of some of it. I guess he then checked my pulse but I was in a state of shock from my disbelief of his methods and cannot confirm this.

I now expected Mr Repeti would suggest leeches and an elixir of youth, or would enter into a discourse upon the virtues of the study of physiognomy. Sadly, this didn't happen, nor was my condition attributed to possession by the devil, however, I was in for another

## Challenging alternatives

Barry Williams

surprise. My spine was manipulated with a disregard for comfort, causing me to tense my back. As his hands gained momentum and the stinging sensation rose to pain, I demanded that he desist from slapping me. He defended himself by primly declaring that he was attempting to clear my lungs and stimulate my poorly functioning nervous system.

Mr Repeti cleverly chose this opportunity to wind down the consultation. He commented that I was very unfit, and, considering the sedentary lifestyle that I must lead as a student, I should commence exercising daily. I should also decrease my water intake as I drank superfluous amounts of water given my activity levels. Apparently, the water I drank would not be properly utilised by my body.

After reiterating the list of my supposed ailments, Mr Repeti concluded by quipping "aside from all that, you're very healthy". Very unfit and very healthy. Quite a feat. The duration of this consultation was thirty minutes and thirty minutes too long at that. The fee charged was \$47.00.

I can only conclude that since the first investigation my thymus has now fully developed and that I have fortunately recovered from my scoliosis and lymph gland congestion. I have clearly been negligent in rectifying my anaemia, zinc deficiency, calcium intolerance and overload, liver and gall bladder conditions. Furthermore, I have since had the misfortune to contract kidney problems, stress, a faulty nervous system, poisoned blood, lung and chest problems and to have developed an over-active thyroid.

However, do not despair dear readers, there is a positive side to this tale. If all goes well and I successfully rectify the disequilibrium in my trinity factor before my holiday, I should be able to view the splendid sights of Asia and Europe through a pair of beautiful blue eyes.



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### .... Natural from p 15

after excluding those damaged by poverty and overwork? I would guess that Chinese and Indian mainstream medicine, all the 'native' and cult systems which attract some people, all the 'alternatives' are as successful as once was ours, with its leeches and clysters and piurges and ...

None of this criticism need suggest that all is well with evidence-based medicine, nor with the pharmaceutical industry, but they have been among the important factors in improving our longevity, and our wellbeing at every age level. There will be more successes, if only because the defects of the system are so well publicised and huge efforts are made to overcome them. It's worth remembering that no 'healer', of any persuasion has ever cured anyone of anything. When out of order, our body has to heal itself, and will usually do so given time, but a helping hand may be desirable. We're slowly getting clearer ideas of when the interference is really useful. Being selective, it is less unnatural than the mish-mash of offerings from the 'natural healers'.



Since we began concentrating our attention on the topic of "alternative" healthcare we have received a number of letters and calls from people wanting to know why we don't give equal attention to the failings of orthodox medicine. In particular, some correspondents have referred to specific cases where they have been badly served by individual medical practitioners. Other received complaints refer to failures of various remedies used in orthodox medicine and question what we are doing about it.

This misses the point of what we are seeking to achieve. As John Foley says of Qakatak, its purpose is not to act as a consumer's watchdog investigating the failures of medical practitioners, nor of medicine in general. The practice of medicine is regulated (some medical practitioners would say over-regulated) both professionally and legally and any failures of individual practitioners should be pursued through the systems that are established for that purpose.

Neither the Skeptics generally, nor Qakatak in particular, has the expertise, nor the authority, to carry out that role. Our challenge to claims made by new agers about "subtle energies", does not mandate that we should therefore investigate every incompetent electrician.

Mainstream medicine is based on scientific principles, and, in an ideal world, there would be cures for every disease, and all medical practitioners would be infallible. But this is the real world, and science does not have the answer to everything, it is merely a tool (albeit a powerful one) we use to find the answers. Not every scientific experiment is guaranteed of success. Moreover, doctors are human beings, prone to the same failings affecting every other member of the species, and they do not have the gift of infallibility.

It is quite understandable that issues such as these should evoke emotional, rather than rational, responses. Our health is a very personal thing, and we would all like to think that we should be immune to the ills that flesh is heir to, but that is not reality.

Our purpose in challenging "alternative" practices is simply to demand that they be subjected to at least the same level of scientific, legal and professional scrutiny and regulation, as does orthodox medicine. We ask that its claims of efficacy be substantiated; that the powerful tools of science be applied to such claims, not merely the power of public relations and uncritical belief.

If, for example, iridology can diagnose all ailments, and if homoeopathic preparations can cure them, then it is incumbent on their proponents (and no one else) to do the trials and provide the evidence. That is the test that orthodox medicine has to meet, and surely we have the right to expect no less of any other practice that claims to provide the same outcome.



# UFOs - the first 50 years

Steve Roberts

Spread the fingers of one hand; let each finger point at a different person; count all the fingers of those people. Since the first UFO story was told, our planet has orbited its star that many times, and still we have only stories. Those who tell the stories have failed to produce supporting evidence of adequate quality for general belief.

However, not only do the stories definitely exist - they have been independently recorded for us, by the movie industry. Movies, after all, reflect rather than determine popular culture - the purpose of nearly all movies is to sell tickets rather than get some important message across. Many movies have stemmed from the UFO subculture itself; in particular, both cultures follow that of the United States of America - where 80% of reported abductions occur.

Even before movies were invented, we made up stories that reflected our belief systems. Many will have played that party game where someone leaves the room while a story is told. The absent person returns and tries to establish the story by asking questions to be answered with "yes" or "no". But there never was a story, and the yes/no replies are accurately determined by some arbitrary rule. Unaware, the questioner constructs a story anyway, and then passionately believes in it, revealing various hidden psychological obsessions to the amusement of everyone else.

Movie films are a ready indicator of Earthling culture, and can be recalled unchanged and reviewed objectively many years later. The rewriting of history by the UFO subculture is interesting in itself. For example the Roswell incidents of 1947-48 were rapidly dismissed at the time, resurrected as an obscure story in about 1980 and did not feature prominently until the 1990s. Now the exploiters are making a living out of them.

The half-century since Kenneth Arnold's seminal sighting of 24 June 1947 can be readily divided up into six points of time a decade apart. Now, after half a century of this tiresome phenomenon, let us view the evolution of UFOs, aliens and their messages at each decade of the late 20th century, first through the movie culture then through the UFO reports that have wasted so much popular time and attention.

In 1947 movie science fiction was in its infancy. Typical movies of the pre-UFO culture that bear on the subject included Flash Gordon and the cartoon Marvin the Martian, with its aliens like ourselves (saving on spe-

cial effects) with small but bizarre differences - the aerial on top of the head. Of course the aliens came from planets with breathable atmospheres, naturally spoke English, wore shirts and trousers and were chauvinistic towards females. They were so like us.

Those very few UFOs seen before 1947 - and only considered to be spacecraft since 1947 - tended to be made of everyday materials such as wood and cloth. Ezekiel (600 BC) saw men, wheels and fire. The American sighting of 1897 was described (and drawn) as an airship, no other flying objects having been invented at the time. Not only were the materials of these primordial UFOs limited to what was well known - so was the technology, with little interest being shown by humanity in how the darn things might be able to fly. People were more concerned that the UFOs should have opening windows so that the aliens could look out, and maybe get some fresh air.

Unlike the craft, sightings of pre-1947 aliens stretch back into prehistory - we can include gods, devils, succubi, and ghosts. However none of these generally had attitudes towards humanity or messages for us.

After the 1947 and 1948 UFO flaps, things changed rapidly and before the first movies on this theme came out in about 1952, the UFO phenomenon had blossomed, died down and become a laughing stock all round. We had become UFO-aware, and already skeptical. By 1957 a whole swag of flying-saucer films had been made, some very poor of course but a few

such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* have become icons of popular culture. Even now who cannot repeat with joy "Gorth, Kla'atu barada nikto?" Well, perhaps some benighted people can't ... anyway the shiny flying saucer and mighty alien robot have featured on LP covers, the posters of the film now sell at high prices, and the film is still watched with respect.

The UFOs reported in the 1950s tended to be of riveted, unpainted sheet metal - contemporary

with our own aircraft at the time. Their technology was more accessible to our understanding - almost knowable, but just out of reach. It was the sort of thing that we would be developing twenty years later - when, indeed, electrical engineering student colleagues of mine made a look-alike flying saucer for a project. (It even hovered and moved along, above a steel plate, using heavy induction coils and incurring a vast electricity bill).



The aliens reported (and often photographed) in the 1950s wore, like us, the neat shirts and baggy trousers and short-back-and-sides greasy hairstyles of contemporary human fashion. They also wore the same chauvinism, females being generally dismissed as insignificant by aliens and humans alike. Contemporary earthling culture included a post-war acknowledgment of military rank and power; therefore the aliens commanded us, and we listened with fear and respect. They had dictatorial messages for humanity, such as "stop fighting wars". In the movies, when this attitude got too exasperating, or on suspicion that the aliens might be Communists, the earthlings would start to shoot at the aliens with pistols; sometimes the aliens retaliated, with a ray gun, and shot more accurately.

By 1967 our political and social climate had changed considerably, and our UFOs reflected this new happiness. Our society was fertile for the hippie revolution; a military-versus-civilian schism had opened, with people asking why we had so many atom bombs when we weren't fighting any wars. A significant movie of this era was *Dr Strangelove: or how I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb*, which showed a new-found contempt for authority and the underlying instability of its military power, even though the audience had to draw its conclusions for themselves since no characters in the film stated them.

The 1960's UFOs also showed marked improvements and now were typically of moulded plastic construction, with smooth curved surfaces. Human imagination had widened so much that the UFO propulsion technology had leapt ahead and now belonged about fifty years ahead of its time - slightly ahead of what we could have now. The typical pre-hippy aliens were beautiful humanoid characters having long, blond hair and a serene expression. They wore one-piece jump suits made of some incomprehensible high-tech silvery material.

The aliens' attitude was no longer commanding but more like advising; we ourselves had evolved politically and were no longer ready to obey every command. They spoke in soft, reasonable voices. Messages to humanity were still patronising, but not in an aggressive manner; "stop testing atom bombs" reflected a contemporary obsession of our politicians and military. Sometimes the aliens offered to give their advanced technology to us, if we could exhibit a bit more maturity. We were as inquisitive children playing with fireworks, handling power beyond our intellect and consequently in some great but unknown danger.

Then our society moved along to 1977 and the aliens changed with us. The big movie of 1977 was actually about aliens and was called *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; it gave rise to its own UFO flap. Comparing this cinematic confection with its precursors of twenty years before, it reflected a far kindlier attitude by humans to ET's, and vice versa. Everybody empathised and became touchy-feely; nobody got shot at. It was also far better made than previous efforts, and the box-office returns of this investment showed that there was now big money in UFOs.

The alien craft of the 1970s had evolved from mysterious shapes of plastic to realistic shapes resembling our own aircraft; we were getting fussier about our science (except that film-makers and UFO devotees alike often forgot that aerodynamic styling is not necessary

in outer space). UFO propulsion technology was understood to be far in advance of our own; based on atomic fusion, for example - the sort of thing that humanity might achieve in 2100 with considerable effort. Generally the aliens were willing to transfer their advanced technology to us, and now without preconditions; in human culture barmy theories of physics were appearing in quantity.

By the 1970s aliens had undergone a transition from the beautiful, brainy beings towards a more grotesque form seen in the films *Star Wars* and *ET*. It is indicative of Spielberg's genius that he depicted aliens more in the style of the later 1980s - or that his films drove this to happen. The aliens also began to warn us instead of instructing us - "stop polluting the planet" again reflecting the contemporary concern of humanity.

A period of confusion followed and by 1987 we did not really know where we were going. Culture, development, fashion, pop music and even the UFO phenomenon all fell into a sort of suspended animation as humanity pursued a relentless greed. Spacey movies also went through a lean time, but the NZ film *The Quiet Earth* was among the better ones. This does not exhibit aliens but rather deals with an unknown interference with nature; the central character wakes up to find all other humans have vanished without trace. Jokers said that it was made in Auckland on a Sunday.

The very few aliens that were reported in the 1980s - we were too interested in ourselves - tended to be small, grotesque, naked beings evoking sympathy rather than fear. They had human-type weaknesses, which even allowed us to have condescending attitudes towards them; recall that *ET's* spacecraft took off without him. The aliens' attitude was more sympathetic than superior towards us, as shown by their messages typically addressing us at the individual level instead of as part of humanity. One of many bleeding-obvious messages to us from the denizens of Thiaououba (1987) was "don't trust politicians". This appeal to individuals became more detailed in later years, so that the aliens' message of the Cahill sighting of 1993 had degenerated to "Look under the car" - a touching concern over loose mufflers.

Alien spacecraft were also rarely seen in the 1980s. With far better earthling technology - everybody now had a camera - and even less physical evidence for UFOs than usual, abductions began to catch on (stories that avoid the need for evidence) and conspiracies began to be detected (stories that are actually generated and supported by the lack of evidence). The Roswell story reappeared, in obscure form, as a conspiracy. Apologists were driven into saying that UFOs were a psychic phenomenon, not a physical one.

And so to 1997 and what have we as the 20th century draws to a close? Contemporary movies include *Men In Black* and *Roswell* - the former being an excellent example of the art of special effects that should be seen by anyone who thinks that the 1995 alien autopsy film might have been hard to make. The central tenet of both films is that the public are being wilfully deceived by the authorities; anyone in uniform is now a bad guy instead of a commanding authority, and is still to be feared, but in a different way.

Very few alien craft are now seen; human technology and awareness is now so pervading and accurate

continued p 25...

# Alien encounters - a neurological explanation

Sydney Bockner

Imagine awakening in the dead of night to hear padding footsteps in your bedroom. You have a sense of a malevolent presence in the room, and you may hear breathing. Even more frightening, you find yourself paralysed, unable to move a muscle. The footsteps seem to approach you, then you feel someone or something touching your body. Light fingertip pressure moves over your chest, abdomen, genitals. You are still motionless, except for your breathing. Try as you might you cannot open your eyes or move your limbs. You may experience a strange sensation of levitation. Then all goes blank. You awaken a little later, able to move normally. The room is silent and dark.

This strange phenomenon is due to a neurological condition called sleep paralysis. Russell Brain (1947) describes it as the outcome of a failure of the uniform spread of sleep over the nervous system. Levels concerned with consciousness remain awake when the motor and postural levels have fallen asleep, or conversely are awakening before them. In an article on sleep Russell Brain (1939) describes the condition as a splitting of function of the sleep centre in the brain, with the body asleep and the mind awake. This unequal distribution of sleep was described recently on ABC Radio by physicist Paul Davies as "Lucid dreaming". The condition is not usually due to organic disease of the brain, although it may occur in lesions of the posterior part of the hypothalamus (Mayer-Gross, Slater & Roth, (1955). The neurosurgeon Cairns (1942) includes the condition in the disturbances of consciousness with lesions of the brain stem and diencephalon.

Hallucinations (false sensations without an external stimulus) occur in this condition, and they are often elaborate and terrifying. The night terrors of childhood appear to be of a similar nature. The sensation of one's body being palpated and examined, and the sounds of footsteps and breathing are hallucinations. This hallucinatory state is the result of a dissociation of consciousness, akin to dreaming when the subject is partially awake, known as hypnagogic hallucinations. It may be noted that the condition is the converse of somnambulism (sleep walking). In this latter condition the conscious mind is asleep, while motor control in the brain is awake.

In sleep paralysis the subject is awake but there is some clouding of consciousness. This may result in irrational thinking. In the light of day the majority of subjects will dismiss these ideas. But a few more imaginative persons may elaborate and rationalise their night experience. Thus the concept of alien encounters arises, particularly in view of the media hype on this subject. The terrifying paralysis may be rationalised as the alien's ability to immobilise the human subject to allow him to be examined. In the dream-like state the subject may include alien abduction, particularly in

view of the sensation of levitation. Some subjects report that aliens create a mental block causing amnesia. According to SA UFO enthusiast Colin Norris "Aliens can cloud the minds of humans". In this clouded or amnesic state some subjects may believe that they were abducted, examined and experimented upon. Aliens, it seems have a penchant for experimentation on humans, especially in the sexual sphere (pun intended).

Thus disorders of the mechanism of sleep may account for some of the myths of alien adventures.

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## ... UFOs from p 24

that we will no longer accept false stories so readily. A convincing advertisement for a mobile telephone shows us how frustrating it would be to observe a UFO and not have this particular product readily to hand. Nevertheless, skilful UFO apologists have learned to exploit us - Stanton Friedman and many others making a living by charging \$20 a seat for lectures of the same tired old material; skilful handling of the media makes every hall fill up. There is a 1-900 number where you can report UFO sightings or listen to them, but you pay heavily for the call.

Alien technology is now taken to be far, far ahead of anything we could comprehend; but the aliens themselves have become just ordinary folk, from a society remote but like our own. They reflect humanity's passions and fears; but now these have become unpleasant. The aliens have lost interest in helping us, advising us or in sharing their advanced technology with us. They prefer instead to abduct us and investigate the naughty parts of our bodies. Despite all their wondrous technology, they still mirror our own repressed obsessions.

After half a century it has come to this. How we ignored the sage wisdom of those early aliens! They commanded us, they tried to advise us, they warned us, then they sympathised with us and now they are abusing us. The age of innocence is over; now the aliens are exploiting us sexually while the UFO apologists exploit us commercially. I wish those 1950s humanoid aliens would come back, they and we would speak the same language, wear the same clothes, argue on equal terms, maybe fire a few bullets and generally miss.



## A postcard from Berkeley

Amanda J. Barnier

Late last year I received the Australian Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking (1997), and I thought it was time to let you, the members of the Australian Skeptics who generously supported this award, know what I have been doing and how I have used the Eureka Prize money. I am writing this only a month or so after returning to Sydney from Berkeley, California (USA). I decided to use the money to help fund a five month period (January-June) as a visiting postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley.

Berkeley itself is a very interesting, albeit somewhat unusual, place. With a reputation for counter-culture movements and with traces of the anti-government feelings that sparked riots in the 1960s, it was not uncommon to see student politicians, religious fanatics, and protesters of various stripes as I walked around the streets of Berkeley and the university campus. On any particular day I might be asked to sign a petition supporting farmers against the Federal government, to help save the "wild brumbies", or to protest the removal of anti-discrimination legislation by joining a "sit-in" along the main street. Yet at the same time I often saw student singing groups, a host of sporting teams (note, you can take tennis for course credit here!), and marching bands, which hinted at a different side of life. Similarly, there was a stark contrast between the lifestyle of the many homeless people in Berkeley and the young men and women living (and partying) in the Greek fraternity and sorority houses scattered around the campus.

Nestled amongst all of this, the University of California, Berkeley remains one of the largest and most prestigious universities in the United States. With over 30,000 undergraduate and graduate students, it boasts something like 15 Nobel Laureates amongst its faculty. Moreover, the Department of Psychology (in which I was a visitor) is ranked as one of the top three Psychology faculties in the country; it is home to many well-known researchers, including Professor John Kihlstrom (who hosted my visit), a leading expert in the areas of memory, amnesia, and hypnosis. Thus, Berkeley as a university and as a place in which to live offered me a unique insight into American culture, politics and education.

I had a number of goals for my visit: I hoped to extend my knowledge by attending some graduate courses, departmental seminars and conferences; I aimed to establish the methodology for a research project on posthypnotic amnesia and autobiographical memory (funded by the Australian Research Council), which I am continuing now that I have returned; and finally, I hoped to establish personal and professional relationships and collaborations with researchers in my field that I could draw upon in future work. Looking back over my time in Berkeley, I am pleased to think that I achieved these goals to a large degree.

Also, I was able to meet some world-class researchers, as well as scholars from many different disciplines, from all around the world.

During my stay, I attended courses on autobiographical memory and narrative, attention, and scientific approaches to consciousness. These last two were particularly relevant to me given my background in hypnosis and posthypnotic suggestion. In a previous article, I told you about the research I had conducted on posthypnotic suggestion and the theoretical model I had developed. Well, one issue that remains unresolved is the degree to which the processes that subjects engage in when responding to a posthypnotic suggestion (preparing to respond, recognising the response cue and initiating a response) are conscious or unconscious. The courses on attention and consciousness made me think about this problem in some new ways.

It is generally accepted that the environment offers to us an almost unlimited array of stimuli, but since we have only limited cognitive or mental resources, we must allocate these resources to particular stimuli in the most efficient way. One method of allocation is via the process of attention, or more specifically, "selective attention". This concept refers to the set of processes that determines which of the many competing stimuli we choose to focus on, and which subsequently get through to consciousness and further processing. Typically, you might expect that a person can report (in other words, they are consciously aware of) what they are attending to. But think about hypnosis - during hypnosis, individuals are presented with stimuli that they appear to be attending to and which influence their responses, yet the individual seems, or at least reports, not to be aware of them. Posthypnotic suggestion is a good example of the processing of stimuli in the environment (in this case, the posthypnotic cue to respond) without conscious awareness.

Traditional attention research includes concepts such as "attentional set", which simply means that people who have advance information about a stimulus can perceive that stimulus more effectively. In other words, they may be able to "set" their perceptual system to process certain stimuli or to carry out certain discriminations more effectively than would otherwise be possible. So, for example, an observer might be able to recognise a scene of complex objects such as beds and wardrobes more quickly if they know in advance that it will be a bedroom rather than a street scene. Research on attentional set also suggests that the benefits of developing such a set will increase depending on the match between the cue that is expected (target) and the cue that is given, as well as depending on the presence of confusing, irrelevant (nontarget) cues. To make a long story short, perhaps the success of a posthypnotic suggestion depends upon how good the match is between the cue that subjects expect to receive in order to initiate their response, and the various pieces of in-

formation that come their way following the suggestion. If the match is very good, the processing of the information may be very fast, very efficient, and seemingly automatic. To answer this question, hypnosis researchers may need to borrow some research paradigms from areas outside the domain of hypnosis, including attention and automaticity.

During my visit, I also learnt a great deal about an issue in psychology that is becoming quite controversial. As I have mentioned, some psychologists argue that we have only limited cognitive or mental resources at our disposal and that we must allocate these resources as efficiently as possible. As a general rule, if a particular task is undemanding (in the sense that it requires little or none of these resources), then several such tasks can be carried out in parallel; if, however, the tasks are demanding, then cognitive resources must be focused on one task at a time. From about the 1970's there was increasing interest in the concept of "automatic" (as opposed to "strategic" or "controlled") processes; in other words, some processes or tasks require little or no cognitive resources either because they are innately automatic or because they have become automatic through extensive practise. A good example of this second type of process is learning to read or driving a car. Although we must pay a great deal of attention to all the component skills that enable us to drive successfully when we are first learning, with enough practice, we can drive a car while holding a conversation and eating a hamburger!

By the mid 1980s, this general notion of automaticity had gained widespread acceptance, based on the belief that there are cognitive processes that make no demands on cognitive capacity, that do not interfere with other ongoing activities, and that are not subject to voluntary control by the individual. More recently, however, many cognitive psychologists are backing away from this notion of automaticity and suggesting that such processes lie along a continuum of control and cognitive resource demands. At the same time, and in direct contrast to their colleagues, some social psychologists have begun to argue that most, if not all, of our everyday behaviours are an automatic response to external stimuli in the environment, rather than a strategic response by us based on our decisions or motives.

Such a view of human cognition and behaviour has some rather broad implications. For instance, a number of researchers suggest that we hold attitudes and stereotypes that operate outside of awareness. Tony Greenwald, a Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington, Seattle, argues that racial prejudice, for instance, may operate equally among those who consciously avow or disavow it, because of the implicit operation of attitudes. In one study, Greenwald and his colleagues examined evidence for prejudice based on religious affiliation (Jewishness vs non-Jewishness) among a group of scientists who had published research on prejudice. To do this, they examined the names of authors who were cited in the articles published by these scientists. In over 17,000 citations, Greenwald found that if the scientist was Jewish, for instance, there was a 78% increase in the likelihood of him or her citing another Jewish author. If the scientist was non-Jewish, there was a similar increase in the likelihood of him or her citing a non-Jewish author. Presumably, such discrimination in the citation behaviour of these scien-

tists is not consciously mediated. Rather, Greenwald argues that this behaviour is driven by processes that operate outside of consciousness. What is more, such implicit activation of a stereotype or prejudice leaves the individual unaware of having expressed a stereotypic or prejudicial behaviour. An obvious question must be: if the individual is unaware of the operation of such processes, are they nevertheless responsible for the behaviours that result? I should note that not everyone is equally convinced that people have so little control over or insight into their behaviour, but such findings place the issue of consciousness and its role in psychology back into the hot seat.

During my visit, I also spent a great deal of time developing the methodology for a research project on posthypnotic amnesia and autobiographical memory. It is my goal to develop a laboratory-based model of disorders of autobiographical memory, such as psychogenic amnesia and dissociative identity disorder. One of the major characteristics of such disorders is an inability to access certain autobiographical memories. Posthypnotic amnesia has also been shown to temporarily limit an individual's access to memories for experiences and information learned during hypnosis. In a series of studies, we have recently demonstrated that posthypnotic amnesia can influence information learned before, as well as during, hypnosis. Work currently under way is extending the paradigm to memories for autobiographical events. We expect that once the model is established we can investigate not only the development of such memory deficits, but also the maintenance and reversal of their effects. I hope that in the near future, such work will contribute to the understanding of difficult clinical and professional issues, such as the controversy surrounding repressed and recovered memories.

Finally, I should say that one of the major benefits of my time in Berkeley was the opportunity to exchange ideas with scholars from a range of disciplines and countries. During my stay I lived at the International House, which houses about 600 US and international students and scholars each year. The accommodation was pretty spartan and the food had its moments, but I was able to learn, for instance, about science, technology, and chaos theory in Bulgaria from a Fulbright scholar named Dr Dimitar Valtchev (I also learned how to say "epiphany" in Bulgarian!), and about architectural and cultural space expressed in literature from a Japanese Professor of Architecture (Professor Shigeru Wakayama). And I can't even begin to tell you about the arguments around the dinner table each evening (all meals were served in a huge, common dining room!) - politics, movies, religion, sport, architecture, science, and history.

It was a unique experience from beginning to end and I'm grateful to the Australian Skeptics for giving me the opportunity to have it. 

*Help us to make the Skeptic more reader friendly with pictures. Photographs, cartoons, illustrations of Skeptical subjects needed.*

# Make believe III

Roland Seidel

*A Lawyer Presents the Case for the Afterlife - Irrefutable objective evidence, Victor Zammit (lawyer, author, empirical psychic researcher), Self Published.*

This book arrived, accompanied by a pamphlet announcing two challenges:

Victor offers Christian fundamentalists the sum of \$100,000 if they can prove what the *Bible* is saying can be objectively proved.

Victor offers the sum of \$100,000 to any skeptic or atheist who can prove that the afterlife does not exist.

I enthusiastically set about reviewing the book - Victor sounded pretty confident, the reviews were glowing and I thought this might be that batch of evidence we have been waiting for. I have to say I was disappointed. I found the evidence neither irrefutable nor objective. I don't think Victor is serious in his challenges and, by way of reviewing the book, I will use it as another example of how to apply the ideas in "How can you tell from make believe?" (*the Skeptic*, 17/4)

## How can you tell it from make believe?

This simple question refutes pretty well all of Victor's evidence, because he has made no real attempt to address it.

In the first article I recommended this question be asked of everything; not just new age stuff but also the claims of everything from economics, religion, science, medicine and advertising, the people you pay to provide a service, your colleagues, friends and relatives and especially your own brain. I am persuaded of this broad scope by the astounding pronouncements of the last decade or so of brain research that constantly and unswervingly reiterate that we are simply mugs and fools for believing what our brains tell us. Fifty percent of what you perceive is invented for you by your brain. Memories are always distorted and constantly changing. Your brain swindles you all the time.

I closed that article by noting that we do need a way of determining the truth or falseness of a proposition, and observed that the only reliable system so far found is the scientific method. I further stressed that peer review, the most recent addition to that tool that we have enjoyed for only 150 years, is the defining element of the method, peculiar to science, and the only device among the "ways of knowing" that makes any attempt at dealing with the fact that humans suffer delusion.

People don't draw the wrong conclusion because they are bad or stupid, only because their brains have swindled them into it. Richard Epstein said it as well as any in *The Theory of Gambling and Statistical Logic* (Academic Press NY)

Without impugning an experimenter's integrity, we would be well advised to recall Dicey's dictum that men's interests give a bias to their judgements far oftener than they corrupt their hearts. This bias, which can descend to the level of blatant axe grinding, is often accompanied by incredible naivete concerning the safeguards necessary to ensure controlled experiment.

## Evidence and truth

Victor makes a stab at defining scientific evidence, mentioning repeatability but fails to mention the cornerstone of modern science: peer review. Evidence is not scientific until it has been published and survived the gauntlet of peer review, where your experimental protocols, interpretation of data and conclusions are scrutinised for bias, omission and delusion.

He also fails to acknowledge that legal truth is not the same as scientific truth. In our adversarial system of law, truth is assigned to the most persuasive argument. You only present the evidence that supports your case - it is your adversary's job to present contrary evidence. In science you are expected to present all the evidence. This probably explains the omission of the work of people like Susan Blackmore, Francis Crick and Daniel Dennett (to name a few) whose work has already refuted most of the evidence presented here.

## I hear voices - the Cloud Effect

The first evidence offered is Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP). You put your tape recorder into record for a few minutes, then rewind it and let it play.

I noticed the peculiar rhythm mentioned by Raudive and his colleagues ... I heard a voice ... I believe this to have been the voice of my mother who died three years earlier. Bander, Peter (1973) *Voices from the Tapes* Drake, NY. Reference to Raudive (1971) *Breakthrough* Colin Smythe, London.

Apparently the Vatican is keen on it, there are pioneers in the field and associations around the world. There are addresses from which you can buy tapes, books and periodicals. I tried it myself and also found one web site with examples. Then there is Instrumental Transcommunication (ITC).

Since about 1980 psychic researchers have claimed that amazing contact with people who have died has also been made via radio, over telephones, on television, on answering and fax machines and on television"

Among other accounts, experimenters around the world have been receiving paranormal telephone calls from Raudive, who died in 1976. Full details of the research can be purchased from Continuing Life Research in Colorado. Some special equipment is briefly described. There is a discussion of the role of ectoplasm in EVP and ITC that explains the varying success of different researchers. It is recommended that better results can be obtained by having a few transformers running close together as "They produce a very quiet hum which provides a weak gentle field of electro magnetic energy which can be combined with the ectoplasm." - or with the other background noise to enhance the Cloud Effect perhaps?

Victor even quotes from Hines (1987 *Pseudoscience and the Paranormal - a Critical Examination of the Evidence*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York) who puts it rather well:

If one expects to hear voices, constructive perception will produce voices ... the Indians used to believe that the dead spoke as the wind swirled through the trees. The tape recorder has simply brought this illusion into a technological age.

And then fails to address the obvious plausible alternative to the "voices of the dead" hypothesis. It is entirely possible that the voices heard are constructed by the brain of the listener to entertain or (especially in the case of recently deceased loved ones) to console.

How can you tell this from make believe? How about testing whether all people hear the same voice at the same place on the tape. For instance, would anybody other than Mr Bander hear the voice of his dead mother on that tape? Try the test using digital recording equipment rather than analogue tape. The background noise on tape is almost unbearable to anyone who has become accustomed to the pristine clarity of digital, and offers the brain ample room for invention.

There are a few other killer questions that are appropriate here that Victor has also not addressed:

How can you tell when it's not working?

How can you tell a real voice from an imagined one?

Would the world look any different if it weren't true?

(- would people still hear voices if there were no after-life?)

### Technobabble

This chapter really put the lid on it for me. Victor is explaining materialisation:

Einstein's formula  $E=mc^2$  - energy equals matter to the speed of light, shows that matter  $m$  is equivalent to energy  $E$ . This explains how materialisation and dematerialisation operate by matter being transformed into energy. When people try to argue that this equation is all theory but cannot be demonstrated they should be reminded that less than one ounce of matter was transformed in to energy to destroy Hiroshima.

(So, how much energy would be released when a seventy kilogram human is transformed?)

The mispronunciation of the formula (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared), and the subsequent discussion using terms like vortex, swirling at the speed of light, superenergy, the earth plane, new dimension, intelligence, oscillation and the old classic, vibration, do not inspire one with confidence that Victor knows what he is talking about. Where these words are used in science they do not mean what Victor suggests they mean.

For instance, if you are talking about vibrations you have to be able to say what physical thing is vibrating, at what frequency and what instrument you use to measure it. The old hippie term "vibration" means "impression" and describes a human experience rather than something in the natural world. Its meaning has lately expanded to include communication, message, plane of existence, intention, consciousness or any feature or quality of any thing.

The adage "whereof you do not know, thereof you should not speak" is not entirely fair - you have to be able to play with ideas outside your field of expertise to come to grips with them - but in a document with the ambition of this one it is disappointing in the extreme to find such a shallow understanding. At the very least it should have been proofread by someone who knows what the words mean.

### Sophistry

Victor spends a chapter defining a closed minded skeptic as anyone who doesn't agree with him. This is the sophistic device "Redefinition of Terms".

The modern usage of the term 'closed minded skeptic' is someone who does not and will not accept the after-life or the existence of psychic phenomena even if scientific proof is shown.

He also uses a strange new definition of "thoroughly" with which I am unfamiliar, given the absence of Blackmore, Crick, Dennett, *et al* from his reading list.

To a certain extent I still consider myself an open minded skeptic - but not in the specific and the particular issue of the afterlife because I thoroughly investigated it.

He cites many cases of scientists rubbishing ideas that turned out to be right (like the Wright Brother's claim that machines could fly) and again this is a sophistic device, "Argument by Analogy". The fact that the afterlife hypothesis is rejected then becomes evidence for its veracity because that's what happened to the claim "machines can fly".

Reference is made to the abundance of anecdotal evidence. This is a "Wig-Wam" argument. No single piece of anecdotal evidence can stand on its own but when you stack enough of them together, like the sticks of a wig-wam, you claim that you have a free standing robust case.

He "Appeals to a Higher Authority" by noting the many respected scientists who dabbled in the paranormal. Respected scientists are human and this is a subject of endless fascination to humans - we have weird experiences and we want an explanation. But this observation fails as a case for the afterlife because very little of this work has been subjected to peer review and none of it has passed - in my view, because none of it can be distinguished from make believe.

There is a fair bit of *ad hominem*:

...this Assistant Professor has fraudulently made something up, deliberately indulged in wilful lies to try to fool the reader by deceitfully concocting false information to make it compatible with his own skeptical non-scientific partiality.

### Anger indicates brain swindle

You can see that Victor gets pretty hot under the collar about closed minded skeptics.

Those who for material motivation have become the dupes of their materialist masters and are repeating Walter Mann's deliberate falsification against Sir William, will one day retract their scurrilous, gutter level smear campaign.

This is hardly the language of scientific evidence. Compared with the generosity he affords mediums - Whilst there are undoubtedly some who call themselves "mediums" who have no talent and some who cheat and lie for commercial purposes, there are also genuine mediums whose results have shocked the world with astonishingly accurate information about the afterlife

- one is left in no doubt that Victor's brain has decided who the good guys and bad guys are, what is true and false, and that any challenge to that will be met with the standard fear response. His language is frequently forceful, passionate and exaggerated; the language you would expect to be derived from a strong conviction, but not the language of irrefutable evidence.

### Medium rare

It is extremely rare to come across a very highly gifted psychic medium.

One can't help but agree. Victor devotes many chapters to some of these rare individuals, to the scientists who have been persuaded of their veracity and the skeptics who have been bamboozled and persuaded. He even slams Houdini and refers to Jerome Ellison's *The Life Beyond Death* (1974) in which is the claim that Beatrice Houdini did receive the secret message that she and Harry had planned to attempt after death. Hmm, I wonder how easy it will be to trace that? (It has been well established to be a myth, much like Charles Darwin's deathbed conversion. Ed)

The problem with mediums is still the same one. How can you tell when they're pretending and when they're real? When Skeptics plant a medium that convinces all and sundry and then announces, "sorry, I was making it up", the brain of the believer is unwilling to conclude that they could all be making it up, knowingly or not, and smother the thought with an angry outburst of indignation at being made to look a fool.

It is entirely plausible that mediumship is just another branch of show business. It is entertaining and engaging the way a movie is. You identify with the heroes and villains, project your own experiences on the tale, delight and despair at the turn of events, reflect on what the story says about human nature, introspect on what it means to you - there's just a difference in the price.

### NDEs /OBEs (Near Death/Out of Body Experiences)

We agree on most of this, it's just in the conclusions where we differ.

We agree that historical accounts of these weird experiences can be found as far back as you like. We agree that they are real characterisable experiences that are consistent: everybody's particular experience contains some but not all of the elements from a well defined palette including the tunnel, the light, bliss, saturated reality, at one with the universe, the decision to come back, life review, seeing family or divinities. We agree it can be a profound life changing experience, generally for the good and that people are absolutely convinced that they've seen God or heaven.

But is it evidence for the afterlife?

No. Not until you can eliminate the possibility that it is ordinary brain response. It is entirely plausible that this is what the brain does in coping with these extraordinary circumstances. The Dying Brain Hypothesis, most digestibly articulated by Blackmore in *Dying to Live*, not only accounts for all these elements but explains even the detail (why does it look like a tunnel? - failing visual sense, random noise concentrates at the centre where receptors are most dense; why is the tunnel round? - that's the shape of the back of our eyes; why is the light gold? - because we have a surfeit of yellow cones). Every element of the experience can be reproduced in non-death circumstances and even provoked on call by direct brain stimulation.

We don't have any evidence, all we have are amazing stories, and we all like a good story. Typically, when you chase these stories they cease to be amazing and it becomes clear that the account is at least tenth hand and has changed somewhat in the telling. Take for example the "Maria's Shoe" story that is frequently recommended as the best case by supporters of mystical theories about NDEs. A heart attack victim, Maria, recalls lots of things in her NDE but particularly a tennis shoe on a window

ledge. Hayden Ebborn, Sean Mulligan and Barry Beyerstein chased this up and their account in *Skeptical Inquirer* Vol 20 No 4 (July/Aug 1996) differs considerably from Victor's .

Victor cites "Professor Kimberley Clark of the University of Washington"; *SI* refers to "Kimberley Clark, a social worker". Victor has Maria astrally travelling to a storeroom where she finds the shoe on top of lockers; Clark's own account has it on a third floor window ledge. Much is made of the difficulty of seeing the shoe any way except by flying but Ebborn *et al* found it remarkably easy to see, in detail, from plenty of ordinary vantage points. Clark was not a trained investigator, did not publicly report the details until seven years after it happened, has not produced notes or recordings so we have no way of knowing what leading questions may have contributed to Maria's recollection. "On delving into this incident, we were first disappointed, then amused, that such a weak case should have achieved the importance it has been accorded."

For Victor to claim he has thoroughly researched the field, his bibliography should have included that account and at least: Blackmore, Susan. 1993. *Dying To Live*. Grafton. London. - 1982. *Beyond the Body*. Academy. Chicago. Bailey, Lee Worth & Yates, Jenny. 1996. *The Near Death Experience: a reader*. Routledge. NY.

The last has to be the best compendium of all views on the matter including Moody, Jung, Rinpoche, Ring, Blackmore and many others.

### Other bits

Victor called in lots of other irrefutable evidence for the afterlife: Apparitions, Deathbed Visions, The Ouija Board, Xenoglossy, Poltergeists, Reincarnation and even has a ten page transcription of his own conversation with an intelligence from the afterlife wherein we learn that heaven is a sphere of higher vibration and that unconditional love is the highest form. Hmm. I think these intelligences all go to the same bookshop.

Is it evidence of the afterlife? No it's not. How can you tell it from make believe?

### Those challenges

Victor offers Christian fundamentalists the sum of \$100,000 if they can prove what the Bible is saying can be objectively proved.

I was surprised a lawyer would frame something like this. He isn't asking for proof of what's in the Bible, merely that what it is saying can, in principle, be objectively proved. I should have thought that if a giant ghostly figure with a white beard appeared in every capital simultaneously and roared "I wrote this, it's true" while it performed some miracle like making all dogs float ten feet in the air, that might constitute proof.

Victor offers the sum of \$100,000 to any skeptic or atheist who can prove that the afterlife does not exist.

This is fatuous and also is surprising from someone whose business involves logic. You can't prove a negative proposition. Randi's classic example is "Prove that reindeer can't fly." You could throw reindeer off the roof all day and all you had proved is that those reindeer, on that occasion, for some obdurate reindeer reason, had chosen not to fly.

The onus is not on a sceptic to provide disproof, it's on the claimant to provide proof. In refutation of Victor's evidence I simply ask, "How can you tell it from make believe?"



# Darwinian debates

John O'Neill

*Reinventing Darwin: The Great Evolutionary Debate*, Niles Eldridge. Phoenix, London, 1995. 244 pp. \$19.95 (pb).

Okay, I admit that I had this book sitting on my bookshelf for a year before getting around to reading it, and then took five months to actually finish it, but a couple of years down the track (the paperback edition was first released in 1996) the general gist of the story told by Niles Eldridge is as relevant as ever.

Eldridge's name possibly means little to most readers. Many of those that do recall the name would remember him best as the co-proposer of "punctuated equilibria" along with Stephen Jay Gould in 1972. Indeed the connections between Eldridge and Gould go back further than that, having studied together as graduate students under Norman D. Newell at Columbia University. Since 1969 Eldridge has been on staff at the American Museum of Natural History, as well as maintaining affiliations with Columbia University and the City University of New York, and is a fairly high profile palaeontologist. He is also the author of several other books, none of which have achieved particularly wide acclaim in general circles, but such is the nature of the subject.

First and foremost I will put one thing perfectly straight. The 'great evolutionary debate' of the title is not the creationist versus science debate that may first spring to mind. As Eldridge lucidly puts it, creationism is "outside the confines of biology". Rather *Reinventing Darwin* focuses mainly on the serious scientific debates currently being undertaken by genuine scientists struggling with the complexities of evolutionary biology.

In reality evolutionary theory has always been hotly debated. Darwin's proposed mechanism of Natural Selection was not greatly appreciated, even when evolution was first accepted as a real process. The grip of Darwinian evolution was progressively weakened, and was virtually abandoned in the early 1900s with the re-discovery of Mendelian genetics, and the birth of this new field of study. It was not until the 1930s that the likes of Fisher, Haldane, and Wright were able to reconcile natural selection with what was then known about hereditary, and neo-Darwinism was born. Since then few serious scientists have questioned the core Darwinian principles, but the finer details are under constant review.

Eldridge addresses the current situation throughout the book using the metaphor of a "High Table" (stemming from 'a welcome back to the high table' for palaeontologists by John Maynard Smith in a 1984 edition of *Nature*), around which the main proponents of the different viewpoints sit in discussion. To simplify the situation he divides the participants into two basic groups, with 'ultra-Darwinians' on one side and 'naturalists' on the other, although he still recognises differences of opinions held by individuals within these groups.

The ultra-Darwinians are generally very genetically minded, typified by the likes of John Maynard Smith and Richard Dawkins. Their view of evolution tends to

be reductionist in nature, so much so that Eldridge suggests at one stage that they "are guilty of a form of physics envy". This reductionism is taken to its logical conclusion in the form of Dawkins' 'selfish gene' view of evolution. As Eldridge says, Dawkins is the "ultimate ultra-Darwinian". Until very recently High Table participants were almost exclusively ultra-Darwinians, and many ultra-Darwinians would like it to have been left that way.

The naturalists, on the other hand, tend to be a far more eclectic grouping, but with many of the most vocal proponents being palaeontologists. These include Gould, Steven Stanley, and Eldridge himself. Eldridge certainly makes no bones of the fact that the book is written from the biased viewpoint of an individual with his feet firmly placed in the naturalist camp. The naturalists offer a more wide reaching view of evolution, recognising many contributing elements and levels, and in general a more complex system. Eldridge suggests that this is a "less assumption driven, theory laden" view that is "perhaps not as neat... [but is] ...a more accurate description of actual biological systems".

It is interesting to ponder for a moment the reasons for this split in opinion largely down lines of discipline. Whilst Eldridge acknowledges that there are no hard and fast rules for which side of the debate a particular type of scientist will be on (not all geneticists are ultra-Darwinians and not all palaeontologists are naturalists) it is nonetheless a recurring theme, and both sides of the debate rightly trace their patrimony back to the great man himself, Charles Robert Darwin. It is hard to decide whether the differences in opinion come down mainly to the different training received by these scientists early in their careers or whether there are deeper underlying personal causes. Is there any coincidence in the fact that Eldridge and Gould were both trained by Newell, thereby later giving them a particular outlook on nature, or did their underlying preferences draw them to a like minded mentor? These issues are interesting asides but perhaps unresolvable (and only briefly mentioned in this book). And who said science was unaffected by the surrounding culture?

Undoubtedly many readers of *the Skeptic* would be at best only vaguely aware of the internal wranglings amongst the evolutionary experts, and some may actually find this a bit disconcerting. This is in fact the typical way in which science is conducted and slowly pieces together a more accurate view of reality.

Lest you think that this is a particular problem with evolution, Eldridge himself describes an incident from his more naive days in which he was explaining this schism to a gathering of physicists, chemists, and mathematicians. He suggested to them that they must find this type of persistent argument with no real prospect of agreement quite strange, being used to their precise sciences with problems quickly elucidated through elegant experiments. He was, he says, "nearly laughed out of the house", but was gladly able to drop the thought that there was somehow some problem with "the messy field of evolutionary biology".

## Lost Feynman found

Andrew Stewart

*The Meaning of it All*, Richard P. Feynman; Allan Lane, London 1998 133 pp., A\$19.95 ISBN 0-713-99251-4

The other problem that Eldridge briefly mentions is the fact that this internal arguing provides grist for the creationist mill. Indeed as far back as 1981 Gould stated that he was discerning a trend to mute this "healthy debate" to attempt to defuse the then rising spectre of creationism (in *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*, 1983). Fourteen years down the track, Eldridge states that the fact that evolutionists have united to fight the common enemy of creationism has allowed the "cannier creationists... [to accuse] ...evolutionary biologists of hiding our very real disagreements under a cloak of unanimity". Well beyond fringe creationist groups, Eldridge claims that he has it on good authority that he and Gould were the scientists that Ronald Reagan was referring to in his famous 'evolution is only a theory that has been challenged in the world of science' statement. He spends no time in refuting creationism - that was never the aim of this book - but does comment that:

In a way, creationism was good for evolutionary biology. It made us articulate our basic precepts more clearly. And it reminded us that we have, after all is said and done, more in common as evolutionists than we have issues that drive us apart.

*Reinventing Darwin* is a well written book shedding light on both sides of the evolutionary debate. Whilst explicitly written from the viewpoint of a chief proponent of one of the debaters, Eldridge manages to give clear and fair descriptions of both ultra-Darwinian and naturalist arguments, even if it is to then (justifiably) argue his own case. What is unique with this book is the candour with which Eldridge describes the nature of the debates and relates the fact that he is strongly biased towards one side, and thus opens the reader to a fair evaluation of what he is saying. Few other writers in any field openly state their own biases in this way.

Be warned however that *Reinventing Darwin* is not light bedtime reading (unless you happen to be an expert in the field). Eldridge does not shy away from technical terms and references to admittedly comparatively well known evolutionary biologists, and once explained he tends to assume that you have learnt the terminology and remember the contributions and arguments of the individuals. For this reason I would recommend that you read this book fairly quickly, rather than stretching it over an absurdly long timespan as I did.

This is certainly no introductory primer on evolutionary theory, but is not inaccessible to people with at least a basic understanding of evolution. It is unlikely to help you in arguing against your local creationist (at least on my experience of their level of knowledge and understanding of evolution) but will greatly further most readers' personal knowledge of the current thoughts and arguments amongst the professionals. The only real anti-creationist use would tend to be to help you to counter arguments about 'evolutionists being unable to agree on a theory so evolution must be wrong', as mentioned above.

The type of arguments and bickering detailed in *Reinventing Darwin* are necessary components of any functioning science. The very fact that these disagreements are taking place is evidence of a healthy non-dogmatic field. To finish in the words of Stephen Jay Gould from *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*:

...if we ever begin to suppress our search to understand nature, to quench our own intellectual excitement in a misguided effort to present a united front where it does not and should not exist, then we are truly lost.

Here is a long hidden treasure. In 1963 Richard Feynman, then at the height of his powers, delivered three lectures at the University of Washington on the topic "A Scientist looks at Society". The transcripts of these lectures got lost among Feynman's papers, were rescued by his children and have now been published in full for the first time, although James Gleick, in his biography of Feynman *Genius*, has discussed parts of them.

The lectures are "The Uncertainty of Science", "The Uncertainty of Values" and "This Unscientific Age". In them Feynman, with his ruthless clarity, ranged as widely as he ever did over the relation of science to society, to religion, to ethics, to political philosophy and even as far as belief in UFOs. His theme, as often expressed by him, is the irreducible nature of doubt and uncertainty in all of human endeavours, not least in science.

Scientists are used to dealing with these characteristics in the course of their work; the "uncertainty principle" lies at the heart of physics. Feynman thought that uncertainty in fields such as religion, philosophy and politics should be recognised and embraced because the dissatisfaction that it engendered led to the search for new ways of doing things. Only by taking nothing for granted, continually trying to do things in a new way and adopting those ways that worked better could progress be achieved. He pointed to the damage done to the development of civilisation by those people whose ideas are fixed and unchangeable.

In the realm of politics, Feynman concluded that while the government of the United States was not very good it was "with the possible exception of the government of England" (was Feynman a monarchist?) "the greatest government on earth". But then he says in his next lecture, in the spirit of that other great doubter Descartes, that even this should be doubted. This was a not uncharacteristic public attitude for a resident of Southern California to take in the early 1960s when ultraconservative groups like the John Birch Society were still a force to be reckoned with in those parts and had knocked off not a few outspoken academics. Perhaps Feynman was too eminent to be touched. Perhaps it explains why the lectures were not published at the time, they were too radical for true believers of any political flavour.

This book should, as all Feynman's general writings, be read by every thinking person. It is a shame that this contribution to the discourse on the relation between science and society has been hidden for over thirty years, but now at last we have it.

A shorter version of this review first appeared in the *Australian Physicist* earlier this year.

# Many-bang evolutionary cosmology

Colin Keay

*The Life of the Cosmos*, Lee Smolin. Phoenix 1997. 440pp. Pbk \$17.95

From time to time a science popularisation appears which throws an almost blinding light on topics of deep mystery. Lee Smolin's challenging paperback is one of them. It excited me because it strongly argues for a revitalised insight on cosmology and points a way toward resolving many of the nagging questions which orthodox cosmology fails to answer, such as the astonishing fine-tuning of the constants of physics and the fundamental structure of time and space.

It is a marked contrast to Stephen Hawking's best-seller, *A Brief History of Time*, which, for me at least, introduced only one new idea, the concept of imaginary time, then failed to explain what is meant by it! Lee Smolin, on the other hand, sows the seeds of a bumper crop of new ideas and explains them in lay terms as far as he possibly can within the constraints of current scientific knowledge and its historical roots. In doing so he draws attention to the shackles of theology which must be broken if we are to understand the workings of the cosmos.

In a nutshell, as they say, the key concept of *The Life of the Cosmos* is that the development of universes within the cosmos obeys the principles of evolution, with survival of the fittest beautifully accounting for the fine-tuning of the physical constants which make things the way they are, including us. Just as Darwinian evolution in biology overthrew the primitive concept of the Maker in *Genesis*, the new evolutionary cosmology removes the throne of God altogether. The notion of an evolutionary cosmology goes back to the last century, no doubt inspired by Darwin. But at last a talented physicist has developed the concept and given it form and substance.

To establish his thesis, Lee Smolin contrasts the philosophies of Newton and Leibniz. The former framed his famous laws of motion in terms of absolute time and space which, because of his deep theological views, allowed for a supreme being to reign outside of his laws. Leibniz dissented from Newtonian absolutist physics, holding that only relations between objects governed their properties. He was vindicated by Einstein's relativity theories, Mach's ideas, and the success of quantum mechanics and gauge principles in particle theories in which there is no place for God.

Like many other theorists, Lee Smolin considers that a successful quantum theory of gravity will be essential to a full understanding of cosmology, with strings and knots in a quantised substratum of space explaining many features of our physical world. However he allies himself with a small minority who argue that a quantum universe must feature self-organisation, maintaining a necessary balance between order and chaos. This leaves open the enticing prospect that universes may evolve to optimise themselves for survival of the fittest. Only unfit universes suffer heat death.

As in the case of living organisms, the fittest universes are ones which procreate most successfully. The key to reproduction, Smolin argues, lies in black holes which give birth to new universes with slightly mutated parameters. Those whose physical parameters favour the formation of galaxies containing stars of which a proportion - not too many - end as black holes keep the process going. In so doing they nurture other stars which create the conditions necessary for living beings to exist and evolve.

Absolutely vital, for both stellar and biological evolution, is the nature of the carbon atom. As recognised by Sir Fred Hoyle many decades ago, carbon's nuclear properties enable stars to synthesise heavier nuclei and of course all life is based on its chemical features.

Lee Smolin's canvas is so seminal and so broad that a short review cannot do it justice. He does not pretend that his vast concept is the last word - it cannot be until a rigorous theory of quantum gravity is developed. But the sweep of his ideas is so seductive that one is left with feelings that perhaps the mists of the future may have thinned just a little to reveal glimmers of hope for our own evolution in the cosmos.

For me at least, *The Life of the Cosmos* is the most mind-blowing essay on cosmology that I have read in decades. Here indeed is high-calorie brain-food. Skeptics, buy it!



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Friday, Nov 6  
6.00pm - 9.00 pm

Guest speakers:  
Robyn Williams  
Anne Moyal  
Stephen Martin

Admission \$35

Full details contained in an insert in this magazine  
(NSW and ACT subscribers only).

## Testable predictions - at last

John O'Neill

A recent radio broadcast on the Austereo network, transmitted on FOX-FM in Melbourne (first heard by this correspondent on 11/4/98) has at last offered some definite testable predictions by a radio psychic.

Many of the predictions given included a date (well at least a time frame) and are specific predictions, rather than the generalised tripe usually presented in such situations. Unfortunately however, most of the predictions are for fairly distant events, possibly in the hope that believers will have forgotten the predictions by the time they fail to come true.

Lady Sancia, billed as The Accurate One (where have we heard that before), is proclaimed to be superior to all the other famous psychics doing their thing in the mass media. In the pop style of the station she is introduced with the hyperbolic claim "...move over Athena Starwoman, pack your bags Karen Moregold, and get out of town before you cop a psychic arse-kicking Mystic Meg. It's time for another forecast from the accurate one, as once again, Lady Sancia predicts."

The predictions given by Lady Sancia on the above date are recorded verbatim below, and it will be interesting to look back upon them in the future to check on their accuracy. The predictions made were as follows:

I predict that in the future computers will not only be able to read your moods and facial expressions, they'll be able to tell if you're faking it during cybersex.

I predict that fifty years from now Black and White magazine will be offering celebrities big bucks to be photographed with their clothes on.

I predict that before the segment is over this music [referring to the mystical new age background music] will be really starting to shit you.

I predict that in 25 years, having sold everything not nailed down, the Australian Government will privatise itself, and the entire country will thereafter be run by a Perth contractor from his one bedroom flat, with no phone and a busted fax.

I predict that within five years capsicum spray will be deemed too dangerous, and police will instead be armed with wet rolled up beach towels.

I predict that in the year 2150 Daryl will announce "This is the final year for *Hey, Hey*".

I predict that in the year 2151 hell will freeze over, and moments later Gracey [the show's producer, Peter Grace] will finally get laid.

I predict that aliens will one day visit us, but we'll have nothing in common with them; conversations will be awkward and full of uncomfortable pauses, and after a couple of weeks they'll sneak back home and no one will ever mention them again.

I predict that within a year Stephen Hawking will quit his job and announce his engagement to Anna Nicole Smith, and start openly referring to his chair as The Shaggin' Wagon.

I predict that in the future media barons will be so powerful, for their own protection, they'll be forced to get around in huge Transformer style suits of armour.

I predict that in the future the President of the United States will have two sets of genitals; one for home, and one for around the office.

Clear, definite and precise predictions that are readily put to the test and verified or disproved. Just the type of thing we want to see as sceptics, and just the

type of thing that it would be nice if more foretellers of the future would or could provide us with. Furthermore, should these predictions turn out to be correct I believe that Lady Sancia may be eligible for the \$100 000 Skeptics Challenge payout, less of course my \$20 000 spotter's fee.

However we all know the unlikeliness of these empty claims coming true. I await with anticipation the chance to disprove you Lady Sancia, you evil servant of the Dark Lord. 

## Spilled secrets shock!

Sir Jim R Wallaby

**Warning: Do not read the following item unless you have a High Security Clearance.**

In August Australia was honoured to receive a visit from Stanton Friedman Nuclear Physicist (who once had a High Security Clearance) during which he revealed the Startling Truth about the Roswell UFO Crash, the Recovered Alien Bodies, and the Dreadful US Government Conspiracy to Cover Them All Up. Come to think of it, we seem to recall that Stanton Friedman Nuclear Physicist was here last year, revealing the same things. Surprisingly, given the Explosive Nature of the Secrets SFNP had to impart, his media appearances seemed to be confined to entertainment, rather than news programmes.

Australian Skeptics thought of attending one or other of the performances by Stanton Friedman Nuclear Physicist, however, after a Highly Secure Telephone Conference between Steve Roberts Nuclear Physicist (no relation) and Barry Williams Magazine Editor, it was decided that they would wash their hair instead.

No doubt their absence was the cause of no great concern, as there were sure to be plenty of other people willing to spend good money to listen to SFNP's often reiterated tales of official state chicanery in covering up the secrets of Roswell.

One question however; if any of this poppycock bears any relationship at all to the facts of the case, and if the US Government is prepared to go to any lengths to keep secret the "fact" that they have had access to interstellar scientific and engineering information, and alien bodies, for half a century, how come Stanton Friedman Nuclear Physicist (along with a plethora of other, competing, spinners of conspiratorial myths) has been allowed to go free for the past 15-20 years to spread his message? During that time, quite a number of Americans have been incarcerated for passing far less sensitive information to foreign governments. It couldn't be that these conspiracies exist only in the minds of SFNP and others of like kidney, could it?

Or, as Roland Seidel Mathematical Whiz would put it, "How can you tell it from make believe?" 

## Notice

# The Challenge process

Bob Nixon

Readers might have noticed mention of the Australian Skeptics Challenge in the media of late. This is the result of a determined push by the Skeptics to get the message out to the public that \$100,000 awaits anyone who can demonstrate a paranormal ability under controlled conditions. Thanks to the publicity, those readers who wear their skeptic's badge with open pride might find themselves the target of questions relating to the challenge. This article will briefly describe the process that follows an approach by a challenger.

Initial contact can come from the challenger personally, or from a third party who wishes to nominate someone for the challenge, and so make themselves eligible for 20 percent of the prize money. The contact details are passed to the challenge coordinator in the challenger's state. He (all the challenge coordinators are currently of the male persuasion) then contacts the challenger and the nominator to obtain details of the actual claim being made.

If the challenger is self nominating, he or she must supply a written reference from a person who has seen the claimed ability at work, and is unable to explain it in mundane terms. This condition is applied in order to eliminate delusional challengers and the process remains on hold until the reference is supplied.

When this arrives and has been verified the coordinator will work with the challenger to make a first pass at an appropriate test protocol, the aim being to find a test that is achievable by the challenger, and includes the necessary controls. The coordinator then takes these first thoughts to the support team, which includes the challenge coordinators in the other states, a stage magician, a mathematician, a psychiatrist and, for challengers who claims healing powers, a medical doctor. This team then throws ideas around, the mathematician calculates the odds against chance, and a more refined test protocol is the result. The challenger is advised of the specifics and this cycle continues until a final test protocol emerges.

The challenger must be happy that he or she can complete the test successfully, and we must be satisfied that the necessary controls are in place, that an unambiguous answer will be the result, and that the odds against a chance success are one million to one.

The challenger will often balk at these odds, so it is often necessary to stress that it is merely the odds against success through chance alone. If the power being tested is real, chance is not a factor.

When a final test protocol is agreed upon, approval is sought from the Executive Officer of the Australian Skeptics. Only he has the authority to approve, on behalf of the underwriters, that a test may go ahead.

If approval is given, preparation for the actual commences. Equipment is constructed if necessary, details are released to the press, documents are prepared for signature. Date, time and place of the test are decided.

On the day of the actual test the challenger signs two documents; the first details the test protocol, the second that he or she is able to complete the test on this day under the existing conditions. The test proceeds only when these documents have been signed.

The challenger must be accompanied by a friend who will witness those aspects of the test protocol which are not visible to the challenger personally. The test is open to the public and the media, although the challenger is not required to co-operate with the media unless he or she wishes to do so.

When the test is complete, the challenger and his or her friend are both present when, for the first time, the results are tallied. If the challenger has been successful the money is paid immediately, if not there is no penalty incurred.

It is possible, however, that a challenger will face some costs relating to the test, and this fact is made clear to the challenger early in the design process. In order to eliminate challenges which are taken up solely to spend money, (an obvious example would be a diviner who's accuracy can be ascertained only by drilling a number of test wells) all costs associated with the test must be borne by the challenger. This having been said, every effort is taken to keep the test protocol both simple and inexpensive. Our January test of Jason Worthing, for example, cost the challenger absolutely nothing.

For further information, or to obtain copies of the challenge brochure, contact the challenge coordinator in your state at the address shown inside the front cover of this magazine.



## The Australian Skeptics \$100,000 Challenge

to anyone who can demonstrate a paranormal ability under controlled test conditions.

# The Lead balloon

Richard Lead

## ASC on the Attack

We Australians enjoy criticising our governments and government departments. Such criticisms are not always unwarranted.

The Australian Securities Commission recently engaged in a pro-active campaign to educate the public about get-rich-quick schemes, and as part of this campaign it published a series of bogus advertisements in daily newspapers. The products promoted in these advertisements were so ludicrous nobody could possibly fall for them. What do you think of investing in Geep breeding? (A Geep is the result of mother goat and father sheep loving each other very much). How about a nice bluebottle farm? My favourite - invest in land & airspace packages near an airport (every Boeing flying over your land must pay you a fly-over fee). All products promised extraordinary returns and the lure of tax minimisation.

Nobody could possibly fall for such twaddle - but 700 members of the species *Homo sapiens stupidicus* did. A spokesman for the ASC advised *the Skeptic* some of the potential victims who responded expressed anger at the ASC that the products do *not* in fact exist.

The Australian Skeptics congratulates our corporate regulator on its education campaign and on the wry humour of its advertisements.

If only our state consumer protection authorities would follow the ASC's example and target some of the more obvious scams marketed under their very noses. The flood of \$4.99 per minute telephone psychics regularly plying their trade in the Murdoch press and on midnight television is an obvious target. Rather than waiting for a disgruntled consumer to complain, perhaps they could have a staff member apply for a job as a telephone psychic and see for themselves how this \$300 per hour scam works.

## Behind the Festival

At the 1996 Eureka Prize awards Barry Williams gained an appreciative response from the audience by continually



referring to a coming event as the Mind Body and Wallet Festival. Having now attended one such festival (see Trevor Case's report in *the Skeptic*, 18/2) I believe Barry should have christened it Mind Your Wallet - the atmosphere was pure money.

Exhibitors ranged from the benign (solar panels, water-efficient shower heads, clothing, vegetarian food) to the vapid (magnets to remove negative energy from water, and much more along the same line). By a strange twist of karma one of my former clients was an exhibitor. For ethical reasons her identity cannot be disclosed to *the Skeptic* but I do not breach client confidentiality in reporting her annual profit is around \$2 million. We are all in the wrong game.

The promoter of the Festival is a company named New Life Promotions Australia Pty Limited. This company has enjoyed a short but colourful history. It was incorporated in February 1993 with a Graham Wilson and an Antony Drew as directors. In February 1996 a John Rhodes replaced Graham Wilson. Two weeks later John Rhodes resigned and was replaced by a Mrs Rosamund Burton. In May 1997 she resigned leaving Antony Drew the sole director.

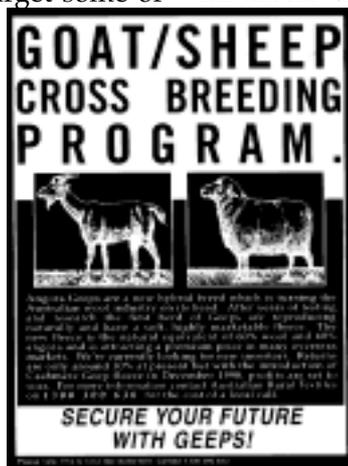
The company's ownership structure follows a well trodden path - all shares are held by a company named Orminay Holding Corpora-



tion of the British Virgin Islands, the world's most popular tax haven. The impenetrable secrecy provisions of this jurisdiction protect the identity of the beneficial owner(s) of New Life Promotions from the scrutiny of both *the Skeptic* and the world's taxation authorities.

New Life Promotions has claimed that in 1994 and 1995 the Sydney festival "was the highest attended event for its kind in the world." It seems plausible the costs of establishing a holding company in a tax haven were justified.

New Life Promotions did not have a happy 1997 and racked up trading losses of \$170,000. This did not inhibit the lifestyle of Antony Drew, who charged monthly "consultancy fees" of \$6,667 via his company Alternative Options Pty



Limited. Graham Wilson's lifestyle was similarly unaffected by these trading losses and his nominee company received \$52,000 "consultancy fees" in 1997. How was this cash drain financed? By charging Festival stallholders in advance (anything up to 12 months) and simply spending this cash. From what I can determine the cost of a stall at the May 1998 festival averaged around \$4,500 for the three days, so there is clearly money to be made in selling aura photographs of the credulous to the credulous at \$25 a snap.



The company was placed under Administration in December 1997 with an estimated deficiency of some \$500,000. Under corporate laws the director was obliged to provide the Administrator with reasons for the company's failure. One reason offered was bushfire alerts which resulted in poor attendance at the December 1997 Festival. We can only speculate why not one of the clairvoyants or psychics or numerologists *et al* who had previously paid New Life Promotions for a stall discerned the bad omens about the ill-fated date.

There seems to have been a power struggle within New Life Promotions with Graham Wilson and Antony Drew submitting separate proposals to the Administrator to take over that company's business. The creditors accepted the proposal tendered by Graham Wilson. Under his proposal, creditors will not be paid out until November 1999.

If the crush of humanity at the May 1998 Festival is an indication of profitability it would seem New Life Promotions has indeed received a new life.

**The Pastor's Package**  
On June 1 this year the captioned advertisement was published in the Positions Vacant columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

As the attached calculations show, whatever sacrifices a person makes when he/she takes up the Protestant cloth it is hard to discern any financial sacrifice. The values of the fringe ben-

efits have been estimated but the numbers used are typical of calculations I have performed many hundreds of times. When we add the value of the free housing and car to the pastor's stipend his income almost doubles from \$33,000 to some \$65,000 per year. And this quite rightly is absolutely none of our business. What a church chooses to pay its staff is its business alone. But it is the next step in costing the pastor's package which makes it very much the business of every taxpayer. As you will see from the right-hand column of the costing, a secular worker on the same stipend and benefits is on a total package in excess of \$91,000. The cause of this is immediately obvious when we calculate total taxes paid on the two packages - the secular employee and his employer together pay almost five times the taxes paid by their religious equivalents. Even more galling is the unfettered legal ability of the pastor to reduce his stipend to the tax-free threshold and take the difference in tax-exempt fringe benefits, thereby increasing his take home pay by a further \$7,700 per year. (See "An oasis of privilege, 17/4). Few things in this life disturb my serenity but I do not find serendipity in these numbers or in our taxation laws which sanction this situation. Our parliament has enacted a discriminatory taxation system whereby secular workers are discriminated against. I submit these taxation laws breach UN Resolution 36/55 *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief* (25 November 1981). Rather than helplessly bleating about it to anyone prepared to listen I have recently lodged (on my own behalf, not on behalf of the Australian Skeptics) a formal complaint with our Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

<b>The Pastor's Package</b>		
<b>Assumptions</b>		
Rental value of Sydney manse per week		\$385
Cost price of vehicle		\$30,000
Annual vehicle operating and financing costs		\$10,000
Kilometres travelled per year		14,000
Stamp duty on vehicle purchase (NSW)		3%
Superannuation percent of salary		7%
Payroll tax rate (NSW)		6.85%
<b>Costing the Package</b>		
	<b>Pastor</b>	<b>Secular</b>
Taxable salary	33,000	33,000
Rent free housing	20,020	20,020
FBT on housing	exempt	18,854
Motor vehicle	10,000	10,000
FBT on motor vehicle	exempt	7,345
Travelling allowance	not stated	not stated
Compulsory superannuation	2,310	2,310
<b>Package Total Value</b>	<b>65,330</b>	<b>91,529</b>
<b>Taxes Paid</b>		
Income tax (incl medicare)	7,737	7,737
Superannuation contrib tax	347	347
FBT on housing	exempt	18,854
FBT on motor vehicle	exempt	7,345
Payroll tax	exempt	4,324
Stamp duty on motor vehicle (year 1 only)	exempt	900
<b>Total taxes</b>	<b>8,084</b>	<b>39,507</b>

Watch this space.  
Accountancy is not boring.



## Death of an eccentric

Brynn Hibbert

It is always sad when a valiant opponent is no more. Yull Brown epitomised a breed of inventors who were destined for riches despite any failings of their invention, and who leave a number of people passionately believing that if only Science (ie folk like me) had recognised the genius of Yull Brown then the World would be a better place.

I first met Yull Brown about a year after I had arrived in Australia as a young and quite unworldly Professor of Analytical Chemistry. I had been contacted by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and invited to inspect "Professor Brown's gas generator". I am an electrochemist, and had worked on electrolysis in England, so thought I knew most of what there was to know about the phenomenon of putting electrical energy into water and producing hydrogen and oxygen gas.

Yull Brown was a small, round, affable man who was more than happy to give a demonstration of a 'Brown's gas' generator in his garage in a western suburb of Sydney. I duly explained that all that I saw could be explained in terms of basic electrochemistry, and he, equally pleasantly, explained how Brown's gas was much more than a simple mixture of hydrogen and oxygen. I was slightly peeved at being apparently caught out on some chemical facts - "Well Professor Hibbert how many isotopes of oxygen are there?" - "Three, oxygen 16, 17 and 18" - "Ah! I think you will find there are eight". It turns out that apart from the three that make up all the oxygen you or I will ever breathe, there are five more short-lived isotopes that are only found in esoteric nuclear reactions. It did not seem to be my job to bag a little back yard inventor so I contented myself with wishing him well and telling him to be careful with the hydrogen.

The next morning I entered the office to find a queue of messages to ring radio stations, to appear on TV and to give newspaper interviews. The cause of this was to be found on the front page of the *SMH*. Under a rather arty picture of Yull Brown with his face lit by a welding torch was an article whose headline was "Water into fire: inventor's triumph", which started "A cramped workshop at the back of a suburban house in Sydney's west seems an unlikely place to trigger a global energy revolution."

Indeed! Well down the article; after explaining that cars would be run from the garden hose (a certain Queensland ex-premier eat your heart out), the fact that Professor Brynn Hibbert had been consulted was mentioned. I was quoted as saying that I would be a "bit twitchy" about using mixtures of hydrogen and oxygen and that I did not have a "ready explanation why the gas performed in all the ways it had been demonstrated". My eyes were opened somewhat when the TV program *Business Today* asked me to appear in their second exposé of Mr Brown's business methods. It was alleged on the program that Yull Brown had obtained \$2,000,000 from an assortment of small and large investors to finance his project, with nothing to show in

return. His Professorship, they said, was the sort that can be bought from a Californian college having few academic pretensions.

My contribution to the program was to observe that although I would love to have a gas named after me, I was firmly of the opinion that Mr Brown had done no more than electrolyse water. A solicitor's letter from Mr Brown duly followed, after which I thank my University for standing by me and seeing off the threatened legal action.

Over the next few years I had a number of enquires from would be investors in Brown's gas. These ranged from representatives of Japanese engineering firms, through academics, to ordinary folk looking for good investments. My standard reply was that the University lawyer had advised me to make no further statements about Mr Brown or his inventions, but if they would care for a report about electrolysis this could be provided at great cost. I am still in correspondence with a Vet from South Australia, who owns a Brown's Gas generator and is convinced that he can do experiments to show the unique nature of the stuff.

My dealings with Yull Brown came to a head when I was asked to give expert opinion in court in a case that Brown had brought against a foreign company attempting to import hydrogen-oxygen welding machines. In a very long report I repeated my assertion that Alessandro Volta discovered electrolysis of water in 1800, and nothing had changed much since then. The workings of the court seemed entirely concerned with points of law, not science, to the point where the judge persuaded both sides to accept my report as written without cross examination. No Plimer-style days in the witness stand.

The Hibbert report caused not a ripple in the "Brown's gas" pond. Those who believe, however, still think that igniting Brown's gas causes a 'near-perfect vacuum' happily ignoring water vapour pressure. They still think that tungsten may be vaporised by the flame (tungsten boils at 5660 °C), despite my suggestion that what is actually happening is the sublimation of tungsten oxide at 800 °C. They still think that a Brown's gas generator is the neatest thing since sliced bread and could be the answer to the World's woes.

Was Yull Brown merely misguided? Reading his web page <http://www.alpha.net.au/~onevoice/BG/>, it is hard to see what the fuss is about.

Professor Yull Brown discovered that hydrogen and oxygen gas can be safely mixed (plus or minus 5 percent) if that ratio is strictly maintained. The result is Brown's Gas, a hydrogen and oxygen mixture that can be economically generated, compressed, and used safely. In Professor Brown's process, the hydrogen and oxygen gases are immediately and intimately mixed at exactly the right ratio (the scientific term is "stoichiometric mix"). Brown's Gas is produced within an electrolysis cell, without membranes and with safety, invented by Professor Brown.

continued p 39...

## Ericka Cheetham 1939-1998

Allan Lang

Ericka Cheetham, the writer largely responsible for the present wave of interest in Nostradamus, died on May 3, at the age of 58.

While it is certain that there would have been a Nostradamus revival at the end of the 20th century anyway, and Cheetham is not as bad as subsequent "interpreters" (Cannon, Hewitt, Hogue), it is arguable that Cheetham's contribution was detrimental, despite being based on an authentic early edition of the *Propheties*.

For many years the only "complete" English translation was that of Henry Roberts; a work of poor scholarship based on a 1649 edition of dubious authenticity.

Edgar Leoni's massive, and thus far definitive, work was largely based on the edition probably published at Troyes by Pierre Duruau in 1605 (all details are inferred), and on 19th century reprints of two earlier editions. Despite this it remains, in James Randi's words, "indispensable as an information source on the subject". (I could not have written this article without it.)

However, there was no English translation directly based on original copies of the 1568 (and earlier) Lyon editions, or the 1589 Paris editions of *Les Propheties de M. Michel Nostradamus*.

In 1969 the omens seemed auspicious for Ericka Cheetham. She, on her own statements, had done her university studies in Ancient French and Ancient Provençal and was completely at home in the archives. She also possessed a copy of the 1568 Lyons edition, and had access to the British Museum which holds copies of other significant early editions. And, most importantly, she had a commission from an American publisher which meant that her book would actually be printed.

With all these advantages, the work she produced, *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* (1971), was a poor one of minimal scholarship. Her reluctance to acknowledge her considerable debt to Leoni's 1961 book meant that her book was not be the useful examination of the early editions it could so easily have been.

More than this, the subsequent success of her book, which is now published by so many publishing houses that I have given up counting them, has permanently poisoned the water hole. It (and reprints of the 1947 Roberts version) so dominate the market that it is unlikely that any decent study of the early editions of Nostradamus will ever be published.

She subsequently published two other works: *The Further Prophecies of Nostradamus* (1985), which has negligible merit, and the *Final Prophecies of Nostradamus* (1990), which is largely a revised version of her 1971 work.

The 1990 book has a better French text without Cheetham's earlier modernisations, but its chief interest lies in the section on "The Life and Times of Nostradamus". This section contains little (actually nothing) that is new, but reveals with stark clarity just how extensively Cheetham plagiarized Leoni's 1961 *Nostradamus: Life and Literature*.

The pedant in me must point out that newspaper obituaries declaring that Nostradamus's quatrains were a "hybrid of archaic Provençal, with Latin, Greek, Italian and English phrases" were less than accurate.

Nostradamus was a reasonably astute businessman, with an eye to the market for prophetic works. Then, as today, this was those in the leisured classes who had been (in the words of Peter Medawar) "educated far beyond their capacity for rational thought".

If, as Eugene Parker has suggested, Nostradamus "apparently aimed at the mediocre in intelligence and position", he would have realized that while obscurity in his writing was desirable, it still needed to be readable by his audience.

The quatrains are actually largely written in French, with a small amount of Latin and Old French, and less than a hundred words from all other languages combined. But absolutely no English, apart from words originally derived from French but no longer used in Modern French.

Also, none of the obituaries managed to get the title *Les Propheties de M. Michel Nostradamus* correct 

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### ...Eccentric from p 38

I might take exception about whether Yull Brown ever did any novel work on the explosion limits of hydrogen and oxygen, but there is not too much to carp about here. What I cannot seem to get through to Brownies is that the energy required to break up water is precisely what may be obtained when the mixture of hydrogen and oxygen is burned. (In fact you need more and get back less because of inevitable inefficiencies). There is also the lingering rumour that Brown's gas can remove nuclear waste.

For collectors of coincidence, I hear that Stanley Meyer, another American electrolysis merchant has also recently died. I warned the TV show *Beyond 2000* off him when they wanted to do a piece on his invention. For a program about real science, I was surprised that they had not smelled a rat when he claimed that God had spoken to him in the 1970s and asked if he could solve the world's energy problem. After debunking his theory of 'resonance' (see my article in *the Skeptic* - "A Chemical Free Lunch", 14 /1 pp 36-37 (1994) and at <http://www.chem.unsw.edu.au/staff/Hibbert/perpetual/>) the producer lost interest and would not even do a story along the lines "Australian exposes American perpetual motion scam". Coincidence, or conspiracy? I understand Stanley Meyers claimed he had had death threats purportedly coming from oil companies. Perhaps the oil companies decided to do away with a two at one go (the Assassin's Guild were having a two for one special). I am sure that where Yull Brown left off others will follow, providing endless amusement for this Professor of Chemistry and articles for *the Skeptic*. 

# Stolen children

Mark Lawson

When I was a reporter in a small Victorian town in the early 1980s, and while in the process of doing a straightforward news story on the local aboriginal community, I asked the editor how many aborigines there were in the district. His reply: "Too bloody many".

That was all I ever found out about the size of the local aboriginal community. Indifference? Bitter prejudice? Wary co-existence? As I never had much contact with the aborigines in the district - and here I should start using the more general term indigenous people - I cannot say. I also never gave indigenous people much thought, one way or another, until another newsroom conversation prompted me to take a sceptical look at the Royal Commission report entitled *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*, better known as the stolen generation report.

As almost all of Australia should know, this report received saturation publicity when it was released around August 1997, complete with graphic detail about the removal and subsequent mistreatment of many thousands of indigenous children over the better part of a century by, it would seem, callous European authorities. The furore over the report is still continuing with the recent national "Sorry Day" - a national apology by the European community to the Aboriginal community over the incident.

## History

The history the commission investigated is, briefly, that up until the 1940s, European authorities would take 'mixed descent' (usually those with indigenous mothers and absent European fathers) children from their communities on little or no pretext and have them raised as Europeans, partly in institutions and partly by adoption to European families. Behind this brutal policy was apparently the hope that by winnowing away the mixed descent children, the 'full descent' indigenous people would eventually die out or be absorbed into the European population.<sup>1</sup>

Around the late 1940s the emphasis of the removals changed to that of child welfare. Authorities removed children, largely irrespective of their descent, on welfare grounds - that is, on the grounds that the children were in some form of danger. The policy switch was also accompanied by talk of assimilation. One major category of children removed were those taken at birth from single indigenous mothers, where the mothers were also often well under age.

These various removal practices continued in one form or another up until around the mid-1970s with the end brought about, in part, by indigenous people forming their own organisations and getting funding from the Whitlam Government, to pay for legal help to challenge the removal orders (report: p 35 - also see footnote 2). There may have been other reasons, which shall be addressed in a moment.

The children removed by one means or another over that lengthy period were either fostered or adopted out, mainly to European families, or placed in institutions where the quality of care varied. Some of the institutions were decently run (the report singles out Colebrook Home in South Australia and Bomaderry Children's Home at Nowra for praise), at least for a period and given the times and state of funding. Others were possibly run by people who should not have been put in charge of children. The fostering process also had mixed results - as is evident from the bits of testimony of fostered children quoted in the report - with some children being labelled 'uncontrollable' and handed back to the system, while other children adapted. In both the institutions and in the adoption programs there were instances of abuse of children, both physical and sexual.

## Commission report

So much for history. This is obviously an historical episode in which European Australia can take no pride, and it is one that should be fully investigated by competent historians, but the 689 page commission report cannot be described as the result of a proper investigation, nor is it really an historical document. In fact, it is difficult to say exactly what the Royal Commission's report is supposed to be.

The commission's terms of reference say that it is to "trace the past laws, practices and policies" concerning the separations, and their effects, as well as examine current laws and practices and (all important) look at the question of compensation. For that vast task, the commission had a budget of \$2.6 million<sup>3</sup> - a very small sum for a Royal Commission and one that would have to be carefully managed to get the job done. Unfortunately, the commission's approach to its job was peculiar to say the least. For the commission seemed to regard a major part of its task as the collection of as many statements as possible from indigenous children separated from their families for whatever reason, and long grown into adulthood. The witnesses were mostly those who came forward when the inquiry hearings were publicised (report p 18). They were treated carefully, being given personal and psychological support from specially hired indigenous social workers (report p 19). Extracts from the statements of these witnesses are also reprinted throughout the report.

Such care and attention to witnesses is commendable, but Royal Commissions are also meant to ask hard questions and the care taken with the witnesses appears to have also extended to taking all statements made at face value. Admittedly not much can be done with statements made by people remembering events from, say, the 1960s and even as far back as the 1940s - often things that happened to them when they were very young children. But even where it would have been possible

to do some basic checking, the commission, at least to judge from the report, largely failed to do so.

Another, far more serious omission, is the commission's apparent failure to take evidence from those directly responsible for the removals and later custody of the children. With a little exertion the commission could have found, say, welfare officers that had dealt with indigenous people of the 1960s or staff members from homes caring for indigenous children before the mid-1970s, but if the commission did make any attempt to find such witnesses, it is certainly not evident from the report. Present day representatives of some of the organisations involved in the removals gave evidence and, perhaps, one or two of the foster mothers (although this is by no means clear from the report) but otherwise, nothing is said about evidence being taken from police or welfare workers or custodians of the time.

One example of this unquestioning, one-sided approach to investigation is shown by the statement of "Evie" (p 147) who lived at Garden Point in the Northern Territory, run by a religious order (unnamed in the report), until 1964. She says that the Priests were assaulting both boys and girls at Garden Point, and the nuns were assaulting boys. She also says that one of the Priests was always coming into the girls dormitory late at night to take one of the girls back to his place.

He use to come and get her out of the dormitory every night. He used to sneak in about half past twelve, one o'clock in the morning and take her. We'd get up in the morning and she'd be just coming in the door.

Evie says that the girl later became pregnant by the priest and was taken off the island, and that the priest concerned is also the only one of the staff members still living.

An active place it would seem, but readers will note that Evie does not say anything happened to her at Garden Point, apart from a suggestion that she was a recipient of harsh discipline. Instead, she says things happened to other people. Her statement does not even say she spoke to this other girl about the nocturnal visits by the Priest. The commission, at least to judge from the report, also does not appear to have bothered to ask the Priest for a statement or to have checked Garden Point's records to find out what happened to the girl. The evidence was given in confidence, but the subsequent checking could also have been in confidence.

In fact, the commission has so little interest in the other side of the removals and custody of the children that it is not even immediately clear from the report who actually did the removals. Various references indicate that the removals were mostly handled by state welfare officers, although occasionally the police are mentioned. Nothing whatever is said about how the welfare officers were selected or organised or, apart from references in the various statements presented in the report - how they decided on the welfare removals. There is also no overall list of the institutions that cared for the children after removal, or what organisations ran them. Some were run by religious orders others by the state

Despite the major shortcomings of the report including the lack of any evidence from those who handled the removals and institutionalisation, the commission's habit of liberally quoting from the statements taken from removed persons does shed the occasional gleam of light on the events it is trying to investigate. I shall quote a part of one statement given in the report, of a

NSW women removed in the 1960s (report: p 48). In its way, I found this statement to be the saddest of them all.

The biggest hurt, I think, was having my mum chase the welfare car - I'll always remember it - we were looking out of the window and mum was running behind us and singing out for us. They locked us in the police cell up here and mum was walking up and down outside the police station and crying and screaming out for us. There were 10 of us.

Ten of them with a single mother (see later in the report), at a time when single mother families were very far from the socially-approved fact of life they are now, and probably (I am assuming here) living in appalling conditions. Readers are invited to place themselves in the shoes of the police and welfare workers of the time and ask what they would have done - especially given the considerably more primitive social services and housing conditions of the 1960s, including the fact that there was no single mother's pension. I also sincerely doubt, although there is no way to tell from the report, that welfare officers working with remote indigenous communities were as heartless or as ignorant of indigenous society as the report often implies.

Could not the government have done more? Certainly it could have done more for indigenous people and the whole community, but it did not. Those were different times with entirely different attitudes<sup>4</sup>.

### Three types of removals

As the reader might also gather from this discussion the commission was largely considering two types of removals - the earlier mixed race removals and later welfare removals. In fact, various references in the report indicate that there was a third type of removal - children removed at birth from single, indigenous mothers, who were often seriously underaged.

Having three different types of removals over several decades considerably complicates the picture of a supposedly ruthless European community snatching indigenous children from their mothers. Mixed race removals cannot now be defended, and no-one would try. However, in at least some of the welfare removals, as is evident from the report, the welfare/police officials had no choice but to act (see James Family, p 229). Those case studies are quoted as an example of how earlier interventions by European authorities had caused later problems, but in any case the welfare officers, or whoever, on the spot had to do something about the children at risk.

So how many removals were justified in full or in part and how many the result of some sort of oppression or lack of understanding? As the commission completely failed to collect evidence from the other side of the removals, that basic question must go unanswered, but there are two potential indications of the fairness or otherwise of the removals. One of these is a set of figures collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics showing that grown-up removed children are more likely to be arrested than adults in the general aboriginal community (report, p 14). That statistic is of only limited use, however, as it is quite easy to argue that removed children had more problems to begin with than the general community.

The second piece of evidence is the apparent general decline in removal rates when removal orders began to be challenged from the mid-1970s. That point

should have been further investigated by the commission, as potentially its strongest piece of evidence on whether the welfare removals were necessary in any way, but there is a major complication in those figures. Removal rates also declined about the same time as the Whitlam government introduced the single mother's pension and when there was a major change in community attitudes to single mothers. The commission did nothing whatever to untangle those complications, or untangle the total confusion concerning the third set of removals, children taken at birth.

### Adoptions

As noted earlier, babies were taken from single indigenous mothers at birth, but in complaining about that unjust practice the commission is complaining about an unjust practice that was, in fact, normal for the whole community. Up to the mid-1970s, when the Whitlam government brought in the single mother's pension, single mothers, irrespective of race, routinely gave up their children for adoption. They were often also unfairly pressured by hospitals, social workers and even their own families, to give by the child and, up to perhaps the 1960s, had to contend with strong community prejudices against single mothers<sup>5</sup>. Community attitudes and social practices have now changed completely, with one major result being a sharp drop in the number of adoptions in Australia. In 1971-72, there were 9,798 adoptions in Australia. In 1995-96 there were just 668<sup>6</sup>, and a portion of those were babies adopted in from other countries.

Another point that can be made is that close on 10,000 adoptions a year of children in the general community is, in retrospect, a staggering figure. Collectively the number of adoptees, the European stolen children, may well overshadow the number of indigenous children of any age that were taken. But in making that comparison we encounter the most ridiculous of all the omissions of the commission. It makes only the feeblest of attempts to estimate the numbers of children removed and does not arrive at a conclusion.

One historian, at the request of the commission, counted the number of removals in NSW between 1883 and 1969 to arrive at a figure of 5,625 (report, p 36). As the records are incomplete and only count official removals, the total state figure will be an underestimate, but rounding up, and assuming the same numbers in each state for the purposes of argument, a ball-park total for that time period is around 40,000 plus (my estimate). Another possible guide for the total number of stolen children is an ABS survey conducted in 1994 (report, p 37), which estimated that 10 per cent of indigenous people older than 25 were removed. The report does not do the basic arithmetic, but from other ABS figures<sup>7</sup> a best guess is about 11,000 stolen children are still living. The first figure is unlikely to include children taken at birth - this point is unclear - but the second may include most (see below) of the children taken at birth. Anyone wanting better estimates will have to wait for competent academics to do the numbers. The report adds to the above total confusion by quoting other research indicating a higher proportion of stolen children among the current population.

How many of the stolen children were taken at birth? There is yet more confusion. As noted, figures are not the commission's strong suit but it says that about 22.4% of inquiry witnesses were removed at an age of less than

one year (report, p 182). For another 11.6% of the commission's witnesses, the age at removal is not recorded. However, as the witnesses came forward, apparently of their own accord - they were not randomly selected - there is no way of relating those figures to the general population of removed children. It is also worth noting, by the by, that in the same CAB article quoted previously<sup>3</sup> Commissioner Chris Sidoti says that the vast majority of removals were from single mothers.

Now we come to the issue of the treatment of indigenous children in custody. There is a great deal that could be said about the various statements selected for presentation, but I have already commented on the commission's apparent lack of interest in checking details and its apparent trust in statements given by people of events that occurred often more than 30 years ago, when they were children. The commission also made a point of not specifically asking witnesses whether they suffered any physical abuse (report, p 194), and does not give any definition of what it considers to be abuse. Also, as noted, there is no statistical way of linking the experience of witnesses with that of the general population of removed children.

For what its worth, 28% of commission witnesses voluntarily reported serious physical abuse, while 17.5% reported sexual abuse (p 194).

Having read through the, often sad, statement excerpts, and ignoring the commission's attempts to investigate the issues, the worst area for abuses of all kinds would seem to be in the long-gone practice of sending indigenous youths out to work in farms and homes and the like. One clear-cut piece of evidence on this point, mentioned almost as an after thought by the commission, is a comment by an Archbishop visiting a Queensland institution in 1915, that more than 90 per cent of the indigenous girls sent out as domestic servants came back pregnant to white men (p 75). All of the girls would have been under age and, incidentally, all the children born to them would most likely have been removed.

Evidence on mistreatment in various institutions, at least from the statement excerpts presented in the report, I found to be less convincing, but I have no doubt that there were such incidents. Such things are now known to have occurred in institutions much better funded and run than those housing indigenous children<sup>7</sup>. The commission, however, could have done something towards clarifying the degree and incidence of mistreatment of indigenous children - was the mistreatment confined to certain institutions? Were many staff members involved? Which institutions were mentioned most frequently and at what periods? One way to say something more specific about these instances of abuse, as well as cross-check on the evidence given in statements, would have been to spend a little time on one institution during one period for which there are records and witnesses from both sides. As the commission did not bother with such an exercise, or with anything that could be described as an investigation, or any sort of analysis of the statements it did collect, all anyone can really say is that there were incidents.

The statement excerpts from indigenous people also often say that various state welfare departments prevented relatives from visiting them while they were in governmental care, and did not even pass on letters. This can be confirmed as, at least in a number of cases, the witnesses had access to their own welfare files

which included the unsent letters. Were these isolated incidents or widespread abuses? Again it is impossible to say, as the commission did not investigate the issue in any meaningful way.

Discussion of statements given to the commission should close with a brief mention of the case of Judy Darcy, now Judy Stubbs. Mrs Stubbs gave evidence anonymously to the commission but the basic facts of her evidence are now public knowledge. A recent report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*<sup>9</sup> says that Mrs Stubbs has applied for compensation from the NSW Victims Compensation Tribunal, alleging bizarre sexual abuses by a female staff member of the Cootamundra Girls Home, where she lived until 1959. Mrs Stubbs is quoted in a newspaper report as saying she did not recover the memory of these abuses until after a 1994 reunion of women who had been at the home - 35 years or so after the events in question. Mrs Stubbs also insists, in the newspaper article, that she recovered these memories spontaneously, without the help of therapy or hypnosis.

Mrs Stubbs case is worth mentioning as one of the first compensation cases brought by the so called stolen children to go to public hearing - albeit before a state victims compensation tribunal, which have been known to award minor sums even to 'victims' who were part of the crime. As is widely known, the existence of recovered memory, in any form, is controversial.

As can be seen indigenous people have been subject to certain practices, such as sending girls out to work and mixed-race removals, that cannot now be defended and had consequences that ranged from poor to disastrous. There were incidents in other aspects of the treatment of indigenous people, but as the commission really did not investigate those problems they do not, yet, weigh heavily in the long catalogue of European crimes against indigenous people. Further investigation is necessary.

Additional investigation is also required on the basic issue of what would have happened, particularly for the later welfare removals, if the removed children had been left with their mothers. I know this to be a question often asked by those confronted with publicity on the stolen children's report and, given the state of the welfare system at the time, it remains a fair question. A common response to that question is to say that the welfare system should have been better. Perhaps. A lot of things should have been better.

A few friends to whom I mentioned the basic thrust of this analysis worked hard at defending the report, with one argument being along the lines of "What does it matter if there are a few problems, the report brought these issues to the attention of a wider audience." I am not sure it is a valid argument to say that a Royal Commission report can be of a lesser standard that would otherwise be expected, simply because it deals with a particular issue.

A great deal more could be said about the rest of the commission's report. Much of it is on other issues such as compensation and current removal practices, although the bulk of the commission's time appears to have been spent on listening to removed children recount their tales. However, there is space only for a few points on the furore the report has caused.

#### Apologies:

I can see no harm in the now fashionable practice of individuals and groups apologising to indigenous

people generally. At the same time I can see the point of the Prime Minister, Mr Howard, in offering sincere personal regrets instead of an apology for the policies of governments of 30 years ago, at a time when community values and practices were entirely different. Neither an apology or the offering of sincere regrets will, of course, alter the material circumstance of the indigenous community one iota.

#### Compensation:

a major problem with this issue is that the queue for compensation for poor government policy of previous decades is a very long one. Even if compensation is confined just to stolen children, as noted, adoptees of any race also count as stolen and so deserving of a pay out, if anything is paid at all.

The stolen children's report is also such a poor example of the craft of investigation that paying out anything at all on the strength of its recommendations might well count as an additional injustice, in a long string of injustices committed since European settlement.

#### Note:

Consultant and anthropologist Ron Brunton, has written an analysis of the Stolen Children report, published in the magazine *Quadrant*. I understand, from media reports, that Mr Brunton and I have travelled along similar roads to reach similar conclusions, albeit with his analysis being considerably more detailed and considering issues I have omitted. However, I have not read Mr Brunton's analysis.

#### Notes

1. This brief history can be gleaned, among other sources, from the commission report itself (see the national overview) and from an article in the 1994 *Commonwealth Year Book* entitled *Aboriginals and the Government*.
2. By "report" I mean the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*.
3. An edited address by Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti, reprinted in the *Current Affairs Bulletin* of December/January 1998. Sidoti comments that half the budget came from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which is still in debt as a result.
4. A few examples of the general sea change in community attitudes that seemed to start in the 1960s and ran through the 1970s are evident from this article. Another example is that up until 1960 *The Bulletin* magazine ran the slogan "Australia for the White Man" on its masthead. Those were different times.
5. On this point I regret I can only cite anecdotal evidence. In my, not very extensive, review of this issue I could not find any references to past adoption practices. I would welcome hearing from those better versed in this area, if there is any evidence to offer. Email: mlawson@s054.aone.net.au.
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's annual report. *Australian Welfare* 1997. pp 210-213.
7. 1991 census figures quoted in *ABS 3231.0: Experimental projections of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Population*.
8. There are endless media reports to cite on this point, including former students suing for their former schools over sexual molestation and police laying charges. One recent case is that of Christian Brother Michael Evans, principal of the Catholic Boys School Edmund Rice College, who committed suicide in 1994 as the police were about the lay charges. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, March 3, 1998).
9. *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 28, 1998, p 9



# I'm a postmodernist and I vote

Linden Salter-Duke

I'm also a skeptic, and I believe that it's a pity that many writers in *the Skeptic* magazine have taken against postmodernism. Perhaps it is difficult to understand - but so is theoretical chemistry, and Skeptics don't take issue with that.

This is not a definitive statement of postmodernism - there's no such thing. Almost every statement in this article will have at least one other postmodernist disagreeing with it. After all, one of the main features of postmodernism is a wholesale distrust of definitive statements about anything, which ought to fit well with skepticism.

However, let me have a go at explaining and defending what this particular postmodernist believes. Equipped with a skeptical attitude and an imaginary machete to hack through the postmodernist verbiage, let's go on an intellectual journey through the jungles of one of the most important ways of thinking in the past few decades.

We'll start with modernism. That began around the eighteenth century (the Enlightenment and all that), when people found that they could use what was then a new way of thinking - the scientific method - to solve some very old problems.

And they did solve problems: how to stop smallpox, what the sun was made of, how to feed, educate and house millions of people. They wiped out slavery and got to the moon. They wrote some damn good novels. They gave us clean water, electricity, and antibiotics. They created the computer on which I write this article.

Unfortunately, they also gave us concentration camps and the hole in the ozone layer. Let's celebrate the modernist heroes: Darwin and Dickens, Lincoln and Edison. But let's not forget modernist villains like Hitler and Stalin.

Another point: both heroes and villains were almost exclusively WEAMs-White European or American Males. A very tiny number weren't: Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie, Booker T. Washington, a handful of writers. (Go on, name any more. Betcha can't.)

I'm happy to recognise the achievements of WEAMs. Some of my best friends are WEAMs. But I can't help feeling that an outlook based only on their view of the world is a teensy bit narrow. What makes it worse is that modernism doesn't recognise that it's narrow. Modernists use words like progress, reality and objectivity to beat anyone else over the head.

There have always been a lone few voices against modernism, mostly from writers. James Joyce's *Ulysses* showed that realism wasn't as straightforward as it seemed, while Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* warned of the dangers of irresponsible technology.

But in the past few decades, the reaction against modernism has got going in earnest. Here are a few reasons:

\* Auschwitz, the atom bomb, and other less welcome products of modernism showed that maybe Mary Shelley had a point.

\* At the same time, we have come to take for granted the undoubted successes of modernism: for example, we expect that all our children will outlive us, and we have forgotten that this would have been manic optimism before modern public health services (indeed, it still is in too many parts of the world).

\* Globalisation and movements in society and technology have brought about change so rapid that the only thing one can be certain of is that the future will not be like the present.

\* Attempts in the "soft" research areas like sociology, psychology and aesthetics to use the methods of the "hard" sciences were proving futile (they were pulling habits out of rats to explain Hamlet and the Mona Lisa.).

\* The hardest of hard sciences, physics, went distinctly soft at the core when relativity, quantum mechanics, and more recently chaos theory showed that uncertainty was fundamental.

\* French and other European philosophers, always a little out of mainstream modernism which is mostly conducted in the English language, started to put forward alternatives.

\* Linguistics showed that there was at least one social study which could do good things without trying to imitate physics. Central to linguistics is the belief that meaning is made by people, and there's no such thing as The Meaning apart from the way that people use language.

\* But mostly it was because there was an increasing number of educated people who were not White, or not European or American, or not Men. Modernism gave everyone a stark choice: if you want to join the party, act like a WEAM.

I could go into detail about a language that referred to all humans as "him", about medical trialling on men which then applied the results to women and children, about reference books that gave as much space to Indiana as they did to India, and about social studies that were divided into sociology (about Us) and anthropology (about Them). But just take a look at any encyclopedia from the seventies or earlier and see for yourself.

I'm not an extreme postmodernist, so I'll grant that the scientific method is a very good way of finding out about the world. Buy me a drink and I may even agree that it's the best way people have found so far.

But it's not the only way.

There are important areas of human experience which cannot be explained by the scientific method. Ask scientists about marriage or music and they won't give you a better answer than anyone else. If you want to find a way of looking after land in Australia, CSIRO may give you a good answer. So may the Aboriginal people who did perfectly well here for more than fifty thousand years.

I'll present a picture that should help Australian Skeptics to see what I'm on about.

There is nothing wrong with this map of Australia. There is no reason in astronomy or geography why we shouldn't have South at the top. The reason we don't is because maps are nearly all made by people in the northern hemisphere, from their point of view. We in Australia are so used to this point of view that we refer to ourselves as Down Under, and we think that this map is upside-down.

Postmodernism says that there's no such thing as The Answer. All answers are at best tentative, or conditional upon the question and the questioner.

This is nothing new in philosophy: the quest for certainty goes back a long way, and nobody has found it yet. Mathematicians and logicians have known for centuries that, no matter how well constructed the arguments, their foundations are more or less arbitrary. Scientists will agree that the closest they can hope to get to truth is knowing that something is falsifiable but not yet falsified.

Scientists will also agree (if you buy them a drink) that even the best scientific theories are created by fallible human beings who share the beliefs of the societies in which they live. The circulation of the blood, for example, could not have been discovered before pumps came into wide use and could be used as a metaphor for the action of the heart. Again, it's difficult to see anyone coming up with natural selection before the days of rip-roaring capitalism in the nineteenth century.

Am I doubting the circulation of the blood, or natural selection? No, of course not. But some of the best scientific theories, like Newton's theory of gravity, have been proved wrong.

This is where the argument starts to get heated, as postmodernists are accused of saying that any dingbat's idea of evolution is as good as Darwin's. We don't say that - or at least, I don't. What my sort of postmodernist says is this:

Look at Darwin's theory, and the way it fitted so perfectly into rampant capitalism. Look at what was done with his theory to justify racism and colonialism. Look at the way the language of Darwinism is used today to justify ruthless exploitation: "survival of the fittest" is used by any shonky business to justify sacking its workers and polluting the water. Then try to defend the view that Darwinism is neutral about values. Look at how modern science spends its time and energy: we have Viagra to give men more erections, but we don't stop millions of African babies dying each year of malaria.



Postmodernists are attacked on the artistic front as well as the scientific. We're accused of saying that a bus ticket is as good as Shakespeare. This is not the case: if I was asked to choose one item of reading matter for a long stay on a desert island, of course I'd take Shakespeare. But maybe the bus ticket is better at showing Year 9 on a Friday afternoon how language works today. There's no such thing as Better (full stop). There's only better at something. Shakespeare is better at a lot more things than the bus ticket - but not at getting you on the

bus.

*The X Files* has the slogan "The truth is out there." In my view, this is as much codswallop as the rest of the show. The Truth is not out there. Nor are The Meaning, The Answer, Reality, or The Definitive List of Good Literature and Great Art. They are all inside us. We human beings make meaning, and truth, and answers. We can also change them. This is why postmodernism ought to be liberating. It ought to provide ordinary people with an intellectual toolkit for challenging those in authority.

Why doesn't it? Why is it notoriously difficult for ordinary people to understand? I think there are two main reasons.

The first is that it actually is difficult - it involves a radical change in the way people think, as the comforting belief that there is a truth Out There has to be abandoned.

The second reason is that far too many postmodernists have all the writing ability of a constipated rottweiler.

If I were a conspiracy theorist, I'd say it's because most of them are WEAMs and they want to keep this liberating idea away from ordinary people. But I'm not a conspiracy theorist, and so I'll accuse them of nothing worse than incompetence.

I shan't recommend any books: even the best introductions tell you to go off and read some heavy French philosophers, and I don't think that's necessary. Much better, if you want to find out more, is to grab hold of your friendly neighbourhood postmodernist and a tinny or two. Talk about what you believe, what she or he believes, where you differ, and where you agree.

But don't expect to find The Answer. 

**Thinking of shooting  
through like a Bondi tram?  
Don't forget to send us your  
forwarding address.**

# The lure of the knee-jerk

Bob Nixon

A problem needs an answer, and the simpler the answer the better. We possess within us the ability to question and to seek the evidence, but we also possess a willingness to accept the answer that best fits our view of the world. If our search is for evidence of life after death, reports of ghosts, near-death experiences and mediums contacting the spirit world will be quickly stuffed into our backpacks as we make our way through the world. A quest for the origins of life, the universe and everything can be satisfied by the simplicity of Genesis and its six days of creation. With a simple answer having been found to satisfy the basic question, the need for deeper investigation can be safely eliminated.

Skeptics are guilty of just such a search for simplicity. We call it Occam's Razor, and claim scientific veracity for the view that the simplest answer that meets all the available facts is to be favoured over more complex possibilities. Few could argue, to take one example, that Genesis is more complex than a 4.5 billion year time frame, geological processes, a mysterious arising of life in the oceans and the evolution to higher forms. The flaw in that argument, of course, is that a simple answer only suits a simple question. "How was the Earth created?" is a surprisingly simple question, one that is formed in young minds. More complex questions come later; How is a star formed? What is the effect of gravity on planetary motion? How are mountains formed? Specific questions probe more deeply into the mysteries of the origin of the universe, and only by understanding the more complex answers can we arrive at the more complex truth. It is not in the best interest of simplicity to pose the questions at all, let alone seek their answers. Simplicity might be more satisfying, but the need for it leads us down a very short road to a dead end.

Problems also have a cause. Little problems can have a simple answer; my car won't start because the battery is flat. How did my battery go flat? My wife didn't close the passenger side door properly. I can now safely refrain from speaking to my wife for a good ninety minutes or so because my car won't start and I can't get to the video library to borrow a movie so I won't have to talk to my wife for ninety minutes or so.

We like to have someone to blame when it all goes wrong, whatever the size of the problem. The difficulty arises when we try to apply simple answers to complex questions. The state of the economy in 1930s Germany was blamed on the greed of Jewish bankers, the perceived loss of status of the United States in the 1950s was blamed on the infiltration of communists into the power base of the nation. These are simple answers to complex questions, and they are invalid because of their simplistic view. Paradoxically it is their very simplicity that made them attractive. A working man who sees his family going hungry needs someone to blame, Jews will do until something better comes along. By 1945

the state Germany found herself in could reliably be blamed on the Nazis, again a simple answer, but an attractive one because it exonerated the very people who assisted the Nazis to power. McCarthyism in the United States died a less violent death than Nazism, but blame for the aberration was levelled at a few politicians, without considering the wider questions of where their support stemmed from. It's not my fault the battery went flat. Populist knee-jerk answers to life's complex questions have always been part of the political scene. One Nation's success in the Queensland poll has left us all with a new set of questions for which to find answers, and groups to blame.

Simple question: Racism is still an unfortunate aspect of the Australian mindset.

Simple answer: Aborigines get benefits not available to the rest of us, so we resent them.

Simple blame: Aborigines because they exploit the system.

Simple question: Farmers are struggling.

Simple answer: We're financially supporting South Korea, Indonesia and other Asian economies, so we don't have the money to support our farmers.

Simple blame: South Koreans because they're taking money that we need.

There is no search necessary for a deeper answer to a more complex question in these propositions. Each is fully formed and will function if allowed to stand unchallenged. What, for example, would be the effect on Australian farmers if the economy of South Korea - a major purchaser of Australian primary produce - was allowed to stagnate? How can we ensure that Aborigines receive the same access to services that the rest of us take for granted? Such questions would be unwelcome by the lovers of the knee-jerk.

It works the other way too. One Nation has been successfully labelled as racist because we like simple labels as much as we like simple answers. Not all One Nation policies can be so labelled. Some are identical to those of more established political parties. Established parties, with established policies are boring and have got us to where we are now. The naivete of One Nation statements might even be a boost to popularity; a call to print more money in order to pay bills is clearly the utterance of an economic novice, but we all know that he wouldn't be allowed to do that, don't we?

When we allow simple answers for difficult and complicated issues we permit the erosion of critical thought. Whatever the issue, whatever the forum, there is often more to a question than the basics voiced by a politician, or aromatherapist, or Christian pastor. When such a person offers a simplified view of life, the universe or anything, it should be a signal to those of us who consider ourselves equipped with a bullshit detector superior to earlier models.

# The “three doors paradox”

Roland Seidel

Game show players, you have three doors to choose from, one hides the prize. You choose a door. The host says, “just before we open that door I will show you one of the others”, (opens a door showing no prize), “do you want to change your choice?” Is there any advantage in changing?

Thanks to all those people who wrote in demanding an answer to this puzzle I mentioned in the last issue. I always felt I had good intuition about probability but this puzzle took me quite by surprise and I was just as annoyed as everyone else.

The key to it is that probability describes the behaviour of random entities. When an outcome is too far removed from what probability suggests, we suspect some form of collusion or prescient behaviour. In this case the puzzle, as described, seems to fit perfectly well among all those other permutation and combination sums from school, but there is a confidence trick. A piece of intellectual sleight of hand has introduced an agent that does not meet the expectations of probability. The host is *not* a random entity.

The best non-mathematical explanation I have come up with is this: Consider another variation where after you pick your door the host says, “OK, you can have that door or you can have both of the others.” Would you change? Of course you would. That is clearly two chances against one. You just have to convince yourself that that is precisely what is being offered. After you pick one door you know that at least one of the other two doors is a dud. When the host opens a dud he is not telling you anything you don’t already know, he is just saving you the labour of opening it yourself after you elect to take up his offer of having both the other doors.

For those of you who like real maths the neatest explanation is: Given that the host will always show an empty door, the other two are the one I begin with and the one I change to. I either start with the prize and change to empty or start empty and change to the prize. When I change, my original chance of winning becomes my chance of losing and vice versa. Since I clearly have a 2/3 chance of losing if I don’t change, I clearly have a 2/3 chance of winning if I do change.

For those unconvinced by anything but a bunch of numbers: Firstly, what are all the possible events if the

host were to behave randomly? The prize could be behind any door (3), I could choose any door (3) and the host could show me any of the other doors (2) so there are  $3 \times 3 \times 2 = 18$  possibilities, easily representable as a decision tree that you should refer to to check assumptions. Now, no real mathematician would bother drawing the entire tree when symmetry can reduce the problem to a much simpler one. I will describe the analysis for “I pick door one” knowing that it describes all other cases because they simply represent a renumbering of the doors.

There are three equally likely possibilities:

a: the prize is behind door one, the host shows me either of the other two, if I change I lose.

b: the prize is behind door two, the host shows me door three, if I change I win.

c: the prize is behind door three, the host shows me door two, if I change I win.

Clearly, changing gives a win in two cases and not changing in only one. Note how the host’s behaviour is dependent on my first choice confirming that he is not a random agent. If you are still unconvinced, draw out the full decision tree and you’ll find some branches that have to be cut off because they represent things that can’t happen like the host opening the door with the prize.

I used to tell my students that you only need two qualities to be a good mathematician: a good eye for pattern and strategy, and inherent laziness. The laziness means that, rather than do it the hard way, you’ll sit and think “there must be an easier way”. The eye for pattern and strategy means you have a good chance of finding the easier way.

In one year I had two bright students who exemplified the difference between what you might call an engineering approach and a mathematical approach. For the final paper, Greg did everything by the book, produced fifteen pages of neatly written text book solutions - 92%.

Jo spent much of the time chewing her pen and looking out the window, produced four pages of somewhat scrappy work that included some quite clever applications of symmetry and other short cuts - 93%.

PS What if there were four doors?



## NSW Branch Cocktail Party

### *Skepticism and Wine Myths*

Stamford Hotel  
Herring and Epping Rds  
North Ryde

October 14, 7.30 pm  
(See insert for full details)

## Skeptical of Humanism

The last issue contained three letters defending Humanism, that is Secular Humanism, against my apparently eccentric suggestion that Secular Humanism is not perfect. There were some misunderstandings. Perhaps I could have been clearer.

Nigel Sinnott misunderstood my reference to universal patriarchy. I was referring to universal patriarchy in the human species and in particular I had in mind Steven Goldberg's book *Why Men Rule*. Forget the lady elephants, Nigel, and look at the human evidence under your nose. Goldberg's theory has been around for twenty years and has steadily grown with supporting evidence from diverse fields. It *cannot* be ignored. The point I was trying to make was that although Secular Humanists take creationists to task, quite rightly, for beliefs which irrationally try to override the available scientific evidence, they are silent about the current left-wing orthodoxy that wilfully ignores the scientific evidence for a biologically driven universal patriarchy in our species. Scientific theories should not be rejected on feminist, ideological grounds, any more than they should be rejected on religious grounds. Goldberg has suffered abuse for his pioneering research. That the Secular Humanist and Skeptics movements, supposed champions of scientific inquiry, have not stood up for him is a disgrace. The reason for their failure is perhaps an underlying left-wing orthodoxy that tends to ignore any scientific research not congenial to their social world view. Similarly, research on race and intelligence frightens off the darlings of free inquiry and open-mindedness. It is easier to chase spoon benders and confused folk who believe the Earth is not much older than grandma's isinglassed eggs, than to deal with unpopular scientific ideas that challenge current political wisdom.

The authors' shadow-boxing claim that I must be religious because I can defend Christians is prejudice caught in the making. Mr Sinnott's reference to my "harsh brand of religion" is fantasy. And why does an attribution of religiosity come as an accusation? Any more of this nonsense and suggestible readers will be hesitating to shake hands with Baptist grannies.

A phone call to me would have saved Mr Sinnott the embarrassment of building a straw man argument out of his anti-religious feelings. I declared myself an atheist and materialist at the age of fifteen. My philosophical beliefs have changed but I am still a non-believer. The ease with which three Humanists lapse into careless inferences about a critic in order to defend their cherished beliefs is revealing. They can't handle it. I have seen it all before. Several years ago one Humanist elder even warned me not to publicly criticise the opinions of a Humanist leader because the poor old chook would not like it.

Mr Sinnott correctly observes that some depressives are high achievers and he gives examples. Some were Christian, some were non-believers. For the amusement of true skeptics might I suggest an hypothesis for test-

ing? Those Christian achievers who are depressives overcome their handicap because of their religion, whereas the Humanist achievers overcome the same handicap *despite* their Humanism. Sinnott's examples draw attention because they were outstanding people. There is a salience-availability bias operating here. Generalisations about the class "depressives" should pivot on the average, not on a few salient cases. So what does your average depressed Humanist, as a Humanist, achieve? Strictly speaking, neither Mr Sinnott nor I have decisive evidence for our claims on this issue. That is why I used the word "clue", whereas he overconfidently jumped straight in. Mr Sinnott could benefit from reading the literature on the psychology of positive illusion. As a student of belief maintenance and folk logic, I have particularly paid attention to the Humanist belief in the worth of their own rationality. I have a poignant memory of one Humanist, intellectually inept, proclaiming that she and other Humanists should be proud of their rationality. The idea is dubious, but if it helps depressives get through the day, who am I to complain? Belief in reason is commendable, but Humanists maintain their core belief by endlessly reciting to each other the irrationalities of their religious enemies whose image is a gross stereotype consisting of bigots, wowsers, Inquisitors, etc. A more rational approach for Humanists would be to conduct classes in informal logic to teach themselves humility. Significantly, Humanists have an underlying tabu system that hobbles the honest deployment of objective intellectual doubt. The irrationalities of gays, for example, are a tabu topic in public Humanist discourse, although a private letter from a Humanist leader suggests to me that this is at least whispered about in private. There are honest Humanists afraid to speak out.

Rather than compare the Inquisition to the Holocaust, it would have been more relevant for Mr Stear to compare it to the atrocities committed by secular-atheistic communist regimes. Why? Because during the cold war the left-wing Humanist movement, unlike the Church, did not collectively oppose the communist bloc. When I joined the movement in the seventies, it was riddled with Marxist fellow travellers and potential quislings. Anti-Marxist Humanists like Antony Flew and Sidney Hook were notably rare exceptions. We can remember left-wing protesters outside American installations and embassies, but can anyone remember freedom loving Humanist groups protesting outside communist legations? Mr Stear should also consider the possibility that some Inquisitors were closet atheists. We can hardly prove it now, but there are examples of closet belief and identity in this century that make the speculation interesting. Here are some examples. The collapse of monolithic but nominal communism in the former Soviet Union brought all sorts of beliefs out of the woodwork that were perhaps previously latent. We hear Humanists complain that some religious folk do not inwardly believe what they pub-

licly confess. Christians themselves complain about Christians who are not truly Christian, and in the Middle East we can find Jews thinking like Nazis. The sociologist Andrew Greeley (*Religion As Poetry*) reports that independent surveys of non-believers in the USA and Britain show that a significant minority actually pray. In the world of belief, you cannot judge by appearances alone. There are enough cynics amongst the Skeptics to figure out why an insincere employee of the Inquisition might outperform the regulars in the performance of his duties.

Mr Bernardi has misunderstood my letter. My point was that if we can scientifically investigate religion and mental health then in fairness we should investigate atheism and mental health. Judging by the over-sensitive letters from the Humanist Thinkery, the suggestion is a fox amongst the hens. Bernardi defensively claimed that he supports World Vision and then threatened to withdraw his support if I do not apologise for unsettling the Humanist funny farm. His proposition is logically consistent with the generalisation "hardly any Humanists are compassionate". If he thinks Humanists are compassionate then he has to demonstrate a trend in their behaviours that shows this. So far I have not seen the soup kitchens of these overachieving Humanist Societies competing with the Salvation Army for hobo clients. His complaint that I am mudslinging is ironic. If there is any dirt on the Humanist movement, then it is ingrained. Consider the following. The British Humanist leader and ethicist, Francis Bennion, has claimed, presumably after much research, that incest can be "morally neutral", which is double talk for the conditional approval which his text implies (*The Sex Code: Morals for Moderns*). His view outraged Britons, but the Humanist movement, critical thinking to the core, has failed to sharply question Bennion on the matter. It has failed, for example, to note a complete absence of personal testimonials as to the value of incest. Has anyone questioned Bennion's family for their views? The better informed Humanists could have reminded him of the research of the American anthropologist Robin Fox who claims that there is evidence that the widespread ban on incest in human cultures is biologically driven. Bennion, like the American Humanist leader Vern Bullough, has liberal views on paedophilia and has painted an approving picture wherein a friendly paedophile might induct a boy into the higher knowledge of adult sexuality, albeit a most unrepresentative variety practised by gays. He even suggests paedophiles, as such, could function as sexual "social workers" (page 189) with parental consent. Considering his views on incest, one wonders what form this parental consent would take.

Maybe we cannot judge the whole movement by its ratbags, but we can know the tree by its fruit: the Humanist movement has chosen not to take Bennion and his kind to task. Is this collusive silence motivated by assent or lack of moral spine? The silence is second only to the much noted silence of Jehovah. Shouldn't we ask what people are drawn to the Humanist ranks by dubious publicity that decent religious folk would quickly disown? Bullough, as a matter of interest, has written an approving foreword for the book *Loving Boys* by the Dutch paedophile activist Edward Brongersma.

All of the above is hard to reconcile with the popular Humanist pastime of denouncing paedophile priests. The facts cry "double standards". Another idi-

ocy was the recent announcement by the Humanist leadership, that they had discovered a right unsuspected by moral philosophers, namely the right for men to marry each other. The "discovery" was not researched, current scientific knowledge was ignored, and the proposal was not openly debated amongst the rank and file, which suggests that they count for little and are told what to believe. But what can you expect from a movement that for years uncritically took advice from the work of Kinsey, a corrupt and incompetent scientist? The more I look, the more I see that Humanism has a problem with its trousers. That it has attempted to infiltrate moral education in schools should worry parents. Considering the dubious advocacies that Humanists tolerate within their ranks, I recommend comparative scientific studies of the sexual problems of Humanists and religious people on the grounds that ideas have consequences. In which group is social science more likely to find the walking wounded of the sexual revolution?

Mr Bernardi can find the evidence on burned churches in a recent issue of the journal *Heterodoxy* which obtained its data from a national organisation representing the US insurance industry. We should not assume that all Humanists would condemn arson of churches. A Humanist leader in Brisbane has publicly defended, and declined to condemn, a left-wing activist who used criminal vandalism as a protest weapon against the US government. Other Humanists did not publicly dissent. If it is moral to righteously vandalise army property then why not Salvation Army property?

Mr Sinnott asks how representative my data is. He says that he has known many Humanists. But if he easily mistakes a freethinker like me for a bible thumper then how objective is he? The Humanist movement is typically small in most countries. Indeed, in Australia Humanist numbers are so tiny that you could count more people joining a tribe of frog worshippers. It is not difficult to generalise across small groups, especially when they tend to copy-cat each other's orthodoxies. I have been a member of three groups and have heavily subscribed to Secular Humanist journals. The stagnation, cliquishness and small size of Humanist groups make them prime candidates for group-think. They get away with double standards, prejudice peddling and dubious morals, just like some Christians. What we need are a few latter-day Strepsiades to torch the idiocies of the Humanist phrontisterion. "What in the nephelai is that?", worries Mr Stear, who was upset by my use of the word "dhimmitude". I have no room to expound on the subject of dhimmitude, but Mr Stear can consult an Oxford reference at the Queensland State Library. Rather than complain about men with words bigger than his, he should be grateful for being inducted into higher knowledge. Anti-religious prejudice is the last respectable bigotry amongst secular intellectuals.

**John Snowden  
Tarragindi QLD**

**Convention '98**

**Canberra.**

*Be there or be square.*



## Oasis of privilege

The Oasis of Privilege debate was started by Richard Lead (7/4; pp50-53), and has seemingly generated more obfuscation than edification, largely because the participants are coming from emotional perspectives, including Lead. Going back to the claims in the original article:

1. Organised religion (OR) has a privileged income tax position compared to other community organisations. OR avoid a wide range of taxes, eg council rates, that do not apply to other bodies - **Fact**.
2. OR includes organisations that are in some cases regarded as a danger to society, or a scam. Certainly there is no requirement that they do good works to receive the privilege - **Fact**.
3. There are other organisations that receive some of the tax exemptions, eg trade unions - **Fact**.
4. The opportunities for income tax/FBT minimisation (and manipulation of the Social Security system) available to OR insiders are enormous. - **Fact**.
5. OR is a minority practice - **Fact** and **Irrelevant**.
6. ORs are wealthy - **Not Fact** as generalisation, and **Irrelevant**.

Unfortunately the article is anti-religious in tone, which was bound to muddy the waters. More importantly the article does not come to grips with the real issues (from my perspective), which are:

1. The transparency of transfers (OR and others) from the public purse.
2. The criteria for such transfers.

Unfortunately the anti-religious comments give Lead's critics the lead (pun intended) to attack him without challenging any of the claims (1 - 4) above, or the real issues. The debate does not progress, there are two main protagonists Matthew Wills vs Richard Lead. Lindsay Brash basically agreed with Lead, but with quite a bit of waffle that Lead pounced on.

Matthew Wills attacks Lead's anti-religious polemic, with considerable invective, and answers none of the relevant questions above (in either of his two letters). He goes down the justification by good works route (where is Calvin?). Wills claims that *the Skeptic* should not cover OR critically. This is somewhat tendentious; assuming that OR does not make spurious claims. Unfortunately Wills then makes one himself. He lists the good works "provided" by the churches, and then says "... and therefore this entitles them to some tax breaks". Obviously Wills has not studied effect:cause:effect logic. By the way the good works listed "schools, hospitals, nursing homes, counselling services, ..." are all subject to substantial direct government funding, and whilst perhaps "provided" by OR, are not significantly funded by it.

Richard Lead replies, taking Wills and Brash to task:

He hones in on the "good works" defence, and easily demolishes the OR tax privilege, it really is indefensible (this does not mean that transparent transfers from the public purse are indefensible, the Sallies are a case in point). From what I have seen the Scouting movement does more, without government funding, direct or indirect, and no OR tax breaks. Richard, I would not

push the tax-free altar wine point, have you tasted it? It is a pity Lead attacks OR again, this simply enables his critics to avoid answering the key points. Interestingly he misses probably the main point - governments have traditionally funded OR to use it as a means of social control, eg "stolen generation".

Breathlessly we await Vol 18/2. And the thunder rumbles again. Matthew Wills reveals he is on the privilege gravy train! He focuses on the popularity statistics, but they are irrelevant to the main issues, otherwise Soccer would be the World Religion (as well as the World Game, the devotees at games show more enthusiasm than the faithful at a Billy Graham rally, showing my age). The popularity of OR is no argument for or against tax privilege.

We get a repeat by Wills of the good works argument, with all the inconvenient bits left out. Here I must indicate a position, my children were educated at private church schools, ie, in receipt of the very privilege we are talking about. Wills lists the good works: education, provided by the Uniting church to the wealthy with substantial direct government funding; health, funded largely by the government, welfare agencies, which Wills later in the paragraph admits are virtually government agencies, are largely not funded by the church faithful. His statement "Thereby the cost to the taxpayer is actually reduced because of religious communities" is not substantiated, if only because the present subsidies are nowhere fully (?at all) calculated.

I think the issue of OR wealth is irrelevant to the issues, however Wills, statements on accountability are nonsense. Wills must know the FBT and other minimisation opportunities open to ministers, but forgets to mention them. Incidentally most priests do *not* take a vow of poverty, only those in religious orders. Actually it is often a pretty tough life, and "I do not begrudge them a decent salary, if only they would not whinge so much" (words of the lay head of a church agency). By the way, it is hard to see JC massaging his remuneration package to minimise tax. Actually for someone who teaches at Knox, a bastion of wealth and privilege, to decry OR wealth totally is a bit rich. No doubt he feels that the legal battles between the Presbyterian and Uniting Churches were over doctrine and not property - we wish. Wills says "Essentially Christianity is not about wealth accumulation but about wealth distribution (not just about financial wealth either)". The bracketed comments enable Wills to avoid suggesting Knox turn its substantial wealth into a housing estate for the poor, rather they will get their wealth in the life to come. Again Wills does not discuss the real issues, relies on invective.

Richard Lead replies again, do tax accountants ever give up? His numbered points:

1. **Are religionists the majority?** Goes on about statistics on church membership, a big topic for both Lead and Wills, but really who cares?
2. **Tax and good Works**, hammers the points of earlier letters, and adds the economic distortions that can be

generated. Critics have not addressed these questions.

3. **Church Accountability**, makes the point that the Churches (mainstream or otherwise) will never accept providing full public accounting, including the tax benefits they receive.

4. **Double taxation chestnut**, here Lead misses a point - donations to church charities are tax deductible to parishioners. Contributions to the normal running of the church are not, nor are contributions to the golf club, now there you see real religious fervour. My payments to the Scouts are not tax deductible.

5. **Church employees and taxation** - Wills has studiously avoided the main point, I would expect more intellectual honesty from the "Head of Religious Education". We do not reliability know to what extent the tax minimisation opportunities are exploited. I do know of two mainstream organisations that do exploit FBT in a comprehensive fashion. The legal, but perhaps immoral, methods are wider than even those listed by Lead. Responsible OR should be pressuring the government to close the loopholes that must be being exploited by "commercial" religion. Lead's and Brash's point about revealing the full extent of the privilege is where we should be heading. But don't hold your breath waiting for the churches to do this.

John Stear is off-topic, but fun. Bill Saxby is on the ball; turning Skeptics Inc into the Church of Universal Science, with Newton *et al* as saints. Great idea, I knew I should have studied science instead of law, then I could have joined the (presumably non-celibate) priesthood. In good Jesuitical fashion Saxby restricts the priesthood to those with science degrees. I am religious about my sailing, and participate in my aquatic parish weekly, if not more often, with too regular baptisms. I regularly read the words of wisdom of the yachting prophets. Could I perhaps convince the sailing club to become an OR? Our bible is the ISAF Rules. And if we could turn the water in Majors Bay into wine I reckon membership would increase exponentially.

The next steps required are:

1. Publish all subsidies, not just those received by OR.
2. Openly discuss which are in the community inter-

est.

Will OR support this? Is it time for OR to provide evidence to support claims of public cost:benefit? If they did this it might revitalise OR. The OR drop out rate of young people moving through the Catholic system is over 90%!

**Peter Evans,  
Epping NSW**

## Richard Lead replies

I thank Peter for his contribution and agree with much of it. But firstly, how can it be irrelevant that the religionists are a minority? If we were all equally churchd there could be no subsidies from the unchurched. And secondly, the wealth of the religious institutions can only be irrelevant if they abandon the "good works" argument in defence of their privileges. Both issues are strongly relevant.

I have tasted altar wine, Peter. It goes well with transubstantiated human flesh. It may seem petty to harp on this subsidy, but a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation shows the dollars involved are not insubstantial. Every one of us can instantly propose a better social use for those dollars than subsidising a religious ritual.

As stated in my original paper, its purpose was to alert readers to the magnitude of the taxation privileges enjoyed by organisations which call themselves religious. Many readers have since contacted me and agreed they had not known of many of these concessions, particularly those granted to ministers of religion. The Australian voters are free to agree or disagree with my submission that these privileges should be removed. I predict that when the churches are forced to open their books and the public can see, boggle-eyed, the extent of their wealth and their lack of charitable expenditure from their own funds, the call to close the oasis of privilege will be overwhelming.



# Your new fitness programme

## How to lose weight at work without doing much...

A guide to calorie-burning activities and the number of calories per hour they consume. We found it on the net and bring it to you as a public service. We make no claims as to efficacy, but have no doubt it is at least as good as any diet you are likely to read in any weekly magazine.

Beating around the bush	75
Jumping to conclusions	100
Climbing the walls	150
Swallowing your pride	50
Passing the buck	25
Dragging your heels	100
Pushing your luck	250
Making mountains out of molehills	500
Hitting the nail on the head	50
Bending over backwards	75
Jumping on the bandwagon	200
Balancing the books	25
Running around in circles	350
Eating humble pie	225
Blowing your own trumpet	25

Climbing the ladder of success	750
Pulling out all stops	75
Adding fuel to the fire	160
Opening a can of worms	50
Putting your foot in your mouth	300
Starting the ball rolling	90
Going over the top	25
Picking up the pieces	350
Counting eggs before they hatch	6
Calling it quits	2
Leaving no stone unturned	500
Putting your best foot forward	150
Touching base	50
Running this past you	125
Dropping the ball	20
Kicking out of bounds on the full	40
Taking the long handle	75
Giving it a good tweak	50
Catching you out	60
Getting offside with	75
Making the hard yards	750

## Notice

# The definitive Skeptics library

Allan Lang

### Last call for nominations

The total number of nominations now totals 450, however I consider that for consideration for inclusion in the final list a book should be recommended by two people. Now one of these people can be me or Barry Williams. Barry was kind enough to give me a start by providing a list of some 180 books that he knew of. About half of these have been also recommended by other people and are under consideration. But this also means nearly 100 books on his list still need an additional nomination for consideration. Similarly there are many books I personally know of that I will not include until they get a second nomination.

Limiting the final selections to those with two or more nominations reduced the list from 450 to a more manageable number, each of which I have tried to at least glance at (if only to confirm its existence and/or its availability).

Actually there are only 15 titles under consideration that I haven't seen, and I expect to track down most of them in the next two months.

One book that I recently located had been on this "to review" list, and its title indicated just the possibility of inclusion if nothing else on its subject was nominated. When I located it, I realized that I was wrong. It is actually of interest to all skeptics, and must be included. There may be other books like this.

So while I am preparing a provisional listing which is being reviewed by a number of skeptics, the list is a protean one. Final nominations can still be made until I prepare the list for publication in the Summer Skeptic.

A single nomination can still determine whether a book is considered, included, or indeed gets the additional commendation as one of the 13 top skeptical books.

So keep those faxes, letters and 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 enough information for an adequately described entry.

Title, Author, publication details, what it's about, and a word or three why you think it should be on the list. The last isn't essential but makes it less likely I will overlook an essential book.

Could you send your listings to me

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



## Tribute

# The Don at 90

Barry Williams

I never saw him play, though the 50 miles that separates my boyhood home from the 'Gabba doesn't seem like any distance these days. Then it was different; a war had just ended, and everything was much farther away.

He played there only twice during my youth; 187 against England in 1946, and 185 against India in 1947 (that was the year we named our kelpie pup Amarnath, after the Indian captain), but it was too far to travel, and I never saw him play.

His name was always there in the back of my mind, along with such lesser mortals as Curtin and Menzies, Churchill and Roosevelt, Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini.

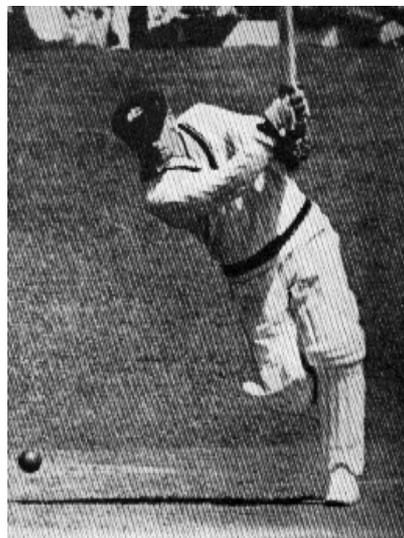
And then I was ten and he was off to England to play his last tests, and ten is when you start worshipping your heroes, and I listened to our radio, with its A and B batteries, sitting in the corner, the short wave reception full of whistles and crackles like a constantly clearing throat.

And then he came back he wasn't going to play any more, and I had missed my chance, and I was never going to see him play.

But you grow older, though in some deep-down part you never grow up, you are always ten and it is always your Golden Age, (and my golden age was the Age of the Invincibles) and you read the books and you watch the old newsreels and you marvel at the records, and always, somewhere there in the back of your mind he is, "the Don".

And now the Don is 90, and I'm not getting any younger myself, but the ten year old deep inside takes comfort from the fact that he reached 90 twenty nine times in tests, and never failed to reach the century.

Happy Birthday Sir Donald, and thank you - long may your innings last. Your batting was the closest thing to the paranormal this Skeptic ever expects to experience.



## Dental amalgam - a reply

The article by Dr Don Wilson, immediate past president of the Australian Dental Association in South Australia ("The rise and fall of dental mercury: hazard or scam", *the Skeptic*, 18/1) was an interesting exercise with many of the characteristics which he ascribes to myself, ASOMAT and anyone else concerned about the actual and possible effects of mercury vapour which is released from dental amalgam fillings. This article restricts itself to the more blatant errors which Dr Wilson has made. A response to each and every point is not feasible due to space considerations but I will be happy to respond to any issue raised subsequently.

Let's begin with the first misleading comment. Dr Wilson writes "...the mercury used in dental amalgam is implicated through a simple piece of faulty logic. Mercury is a harmful poison. Dental amalgam fillings contain mercury. Dental fillings are a harmful poison." There is certainly faulty thinking here but it is Dr Wilson's. He avoids acknowledging that research has unequivocally shown that mercury is released from dental amalgams, (even all the dental associations accepts this as scientific fact), and that this mercury spreads throughout the body. This mercury is chemically identical to the mercury used in manufacturing applications (in fact it has to be certified to almost 100% purity to be used in amalgam fillings) and is the same mercury shown in thousands of articles in the research literature to be related to a variety of effects on health, biochemical and biological reactions. The WHO commissioned an expert review of the literature to look at the sources of mercury in the Environment. The Committee's report (*WHO Criteria* 118, 1991) reported that the main source of mercury exposure in humans was from 1.6 to 7 times greater from dental amalgam than from the next nearest source, seafood. This report is never mentioned by the Australian Dental Association, with the result that most dentists don't know this information. It's accuracy has never been credibly disputed and has, in fact, been accepted by Health Canada as a credible and valid assessment of mercury exposure in humans. So, a more appropriate statement would be: "Mercury is a harmful poison. Dental amalgam fillings contain mercury. Mercury is released from amalgams and accumulates in the body. It's toxic properties are unchanged when it is released from amalgams, and it remains a harmful poison, no different from any mercury from any other source". This obviously would not be nearly as convenient for Dr Wilson's purposes but it is certainly more accurate and much less misleading.

On the topic of Hal Huggins, it should be noted that Hal Huggins appealed the verdict of the court case which he initially lost, and every single point he appealed was ruled in his favour. He was also awarded costs against his opponent, an uncommon ruling in the US legal system. It would have been nice if Dr Wilson had included that information in his article but then, the impression created would have been different, would it not?

Dr Wilson undermines his own case when he reports the reaction of Health Canada to the Richardson report. It is worth restating Health Canada's most significant recommendations; essentially, don't use it in children, don't use it in pregnant women, don't use it in people with kidney diseases, and don't flush it down the sewers. These echo the concerns of the German and Norwe-

gian Health Departments which advised that amalgams not be placed in the mouths of young children or pregnant women, or in people with kidney problems. The Canadian Dental Association further advised their members not to place amalgams in people with neurological problems. It should also be noted that in May this year the British Health Department sent out letters to all doctors and dentists in the UK advising them not to place or remove amalgam fillings from the mouths of pregnant women. We should further note that one of NHMRC guidelines states "salvage all amalgam scrap and store in a tightly closed container. Storage under water offers no protection". Further, the American Dental Association (*JADA* 105: pp930 1982) recommended that amalgam scraps be stored under photographic fixer solution in a tightly closed container. Pretty strong advice for a totally safe material.

The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare review mentioned by Dr Wilson, was, like its 1992 counterpart, a very politicised affair. Both have been severely criticised for bias and inaccuracies. I quote the well read anti-amalgam Norwegian activist, Dagfinn Reiersol, (<http://home.sol.no/~reiersol/amalgam.htm>) from a recent comment.

Yes. I've read the report. It's in Swedish, so I'm one of the 'lucky' ones who can do that, unlike most of those who believe in its conclusions. Norwegian MD, Harald Hamre, one of the most scrupulously objective people I know, found that about 20 per cent of the references in this report were cited in an incorrect or biased manner. The summary adds further bias and is not an accurate reflection of the contents of the report. (We will see this occur again very shortly) Other studies mentioned in this Swedish report were deemed by the 1993 USPHS report to be too small or too flawed.

Further critiques of these reviews, by the Swedish chapter of IAOMT (the International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology) and Dr Murray Vimy (a leading and published researcher in this area), are available on the ASOMAT home page. ([www.asomat.com](http://www.asomat.com))

The 1993 USPHS report is an interesting one and the way it is used. Dr Wilson cites it approvingly, quoting, "The US Public Health Service concluded that ... there is scant evidence that the health of the vast majority of people with amalgam is compromised or that removal of fillings has a beneficial effect..." This is actually taken from a section titled "highlights of the report". However, and this is a very big however, when you actually read the full document and the reports from the various subcommittees you find the following statements.

Nonetheless, the possibility that this material (referring to amalgam), as well as currently available alternatives, could pose health risks cannot be totally ruled out because of the paucity of definitive human studies. In the absence of adequate human studies, the subcommittee on risk assessment could not conclude with certainty whether or not the mercury in amalgam might pose a public health risk. (p 3, "Amalgam Risks")

When you go to the Conclusions of the Subcommittee on Risk Assessment (p 2830, Appendix III), you find the following comments ...

...subtle signs and symptoms of chronic mercury intoxication may not be found through routine physical examinations.

Available data are not sufficient to indicate that health hazards can be identified in non-occupationally exposed persons. Health hazards, however, cannot be dismissed. Because there are no scientifically acceptable studies with sensitive standardised measurements for physiological and behavioural changes in non-occupationally exposed populations, we cannot, at present, determine whether such changes observed in persons with low-level occupational exposure to mercury also occur as a result of exposure to mercury from dental amalgams. The margin of safety may, however, be lower because body burdens of mercury are already high as a result of exposure to other sources; some persons may perhaps respond adversely to the incremental exposure to mercury derived from dental amalgams.

At the mercury doses produced by amalgam fillings the evidence is not persuasive that the wide variety of non-specific symptoms attributed to fillings and "improvement" after their removal are attributable to mercury derived from the fillings. Conversely, the evidence is not persuasive that the potential for toxicity at the levels attributable to dental amalgams should be totally disregarded.

The potential for effects at levels of exposure produced by dental amalgam restorations has not been adequately studied.

Some more statements appear in the conclusions of the *Research Work Group (RWG) Report*, (p 8, App IV)

..definitive answers will require research efforts over a period of many years. The available research evidence is not specific enough or strong enough to make sound pronouncements about human health risks from dental amalgam.

Given the potential that end effects from low level mercury exposure may well be subtle and non-specific and that the relative importance of various forms and sources of mercury are not clearly established, much work remains.

Finally, even the covering letter dated January 15 1993, at the front of the report, from the then Assistant Secretary for Health and head of the Public Health Service, Dr James O. Mason, stated:

Because the possibility of adverse health effects resulting from the use of dental amalgam cannot be fully discounted based on available scientific evidence, I am requesting the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Food and Drug Administration to undertake an expanded and targeted program of research, professional and consumer education and product regulation.

After reading this 1993 report in its entirety, even though it is five years old, the following can be stated with certainty...

- Humans with amalgam dental fillings are chronically exposed to mercury from the fillings.
- There was insufficient documented human evidence to clearly determine whether or not this chronic exposure to mercury causes specific adverse health effects.
- The potential for adverse health effects to mercury exposure from amalgam dental fillings was a definite possibility, as well as a cause for concern requiring definitive research.
- Public announcements that the CCEHRP Committee concluded that mercury exposure from amalgam dental fillings has no adverse health effect in humans or that mercury/silver amalgam dental fillings are "safe" or "harmless" are clearly contradicted by the Committee findings, and blatantly misrepresent the facts.

I assume that Dr Wilson does not have a copy of this report and therefore has not read it, because if he had, then it is difficult to characterise his use of it, in the way he has, as other than a most obnoxious misrepresentation, deserving of our strongest condemnation.

This example encapsulates very neatly the entire reason for the existence of ASOMAT. That reason being the blatant misrepresentation, misinformation and filtering of information disseminated by the dental associations, and their spokespersons. Basically you have to confirm and double check every single thing you are told. I will give an example of another blatant lie, this time by the American Dental Association, further on.

Dr Wilson mentions Eley's study. How fortunate that I have some information on this as well. The paper Dr Wilson refers to is a seven part article reviewing the amalgam issue. The most significant part of the series is contained in parts 4 and 5 which comment on and criticise the Mark Richardson's risk assessment study for Health Canada. It needs to be pointed out that Dr Eley is a dentist from the Periodontal (gum diseases) Department of the King's College School of Medicine and Dentistry in London. He has, to the best of my knowledge, no formal background in toxicology or risk assessment. Dr Richardson, on the other hand, is a specialist in this area who used standard accepted techniques and whose paper, the conclusions of which, incidentally, were validated by other researchers, was peer reviewed by 16 other people before being submitted to Health Canada. A further three anonymous peer reviewers reviewed it before publication, making a total of 19 experts who found his approach and methodology to be appropriate. Clearly this is not impressive enough for Dr Wilson. Unfortunately for Don and the ADA, Eley's criticism of Dr Richardson is fatally flawed. Let me quote just one instance from Dr Richardson's response (full response detailing ALL the mistakes is published on the ASOMAT web site) to Eley's criticism:

Of greatest note, he claims my study results to be invalid and then in Table IX of part 4 he presents what he purports to be the more accurate estimates of exposure. Note that Table IX does not contain data from Mackert, as the Table legend suggests, but rather presents the results of my own exposure calculations from my report for Health Canada. The data that he presents in Table VIII, which he attributes to me, is fictitious.

I have no idea where the data in Table VIII comes from but it most certainly is not from my published study. Dr Eley obviously believes that the data in Table IX are correct. Therefore, he supports the results of my study. What more needs to be said.

What more indeed. (The table of Richardson's calculations mis-identified by Eley, is table 5.12 on p57 of Richardson's report to the Medical Devices Bureau, dated August 18, 1995 - Dr Wilson is sure to have a copy) Here we have a study which supposedly, in Dr Wilson's words, reaffirms the lack of evidence for the alleged health effects of dental amalgam. However on closer examination, it is replete with errors of fact as well as evidence of a lack of understanding of the subject. How can this be so? Isn't research supposed to be reviewed and checked? Yes it is but this one was NOT published in a peer reviewed journal appropriate for the subject, but in the journal of the British Dental Association. Just as one would not expect an article on the mechanical performance of dental fillings in a risk assessment journal, one would not, by the same token, expect any article detailing criticism of a major risk assessment study to be in a dental journal. It should have been submitted to a relevant journal, where knowledgeable and experienced reviewers could assess the merits of the criticism, not to one whose reviewers had no understanding of the subject. This is how bad science gets published and

these are the types of articles which get quoted asserting the safety of amalgams. What say you, Dr Wilson?

Another example of misleading information is Dr Wilson's listing of the symptoms of mercury exposure. He presents them as being reported by Dr Sukel and others, and says that he can't help being sceptical and observes that the vested interest is blatant. What is blatant is Dr Wilson's apparent ignorance on this issue. He does not tell you that the list is a compilation of symptoms reported in the medical literature, and he seems oblivious to the fact that the Australian Dental Association itself, in a memorandum dated December 1986 and sent to all dentists, discussed mercury and the effects and symptoms of exposure. That memorandum stated, and I quote.... "Chronic toxic exposure to mercury is manifested as neurological effects. Early non-specific signs include weakness, fatigue, anorexia, weight loss and gastro-intestinal continues ... "Signs of advanced toxicity include tremor and may advance to behavioural changes including excitability and memory loss. There may also be ataxia and speech disorders. The triad of symptoms - increased excitability, tremors, and gingivitis have been recognised as major manifestations of mercury toxicity from inhaled mercury vapour." Should Dr Wilson, as immediate past president of the Association in South Australia, have been aware of this and if he was, why did he present these symptoms in the way he did, rather than repeating the advice the ADA gave to every member at that time? Did he, while he was President, make sure that every South Australian member was aware of this information. If not, why not? Should he even be writing about this subject?

I promised an example of another lie. The American Dental Association has a page ([www.ada.org/prac/position/canada.html](http://www.ada.org/prac/position/canada.html)) on the mercury issue, a page to which Dr Wilson has provided a link from his own amalgam page (<http://dove.mtx.net.au/~wilsondc/dental.htm>) Go to the AmDA site direct or click onto it from Dr Wilson's page, and you see the page stating that Health Canada rejected the Richardson Report, even giving three reasons why the report was rejected. Where is the lie? The lie is that Health Canada has *never* rejected the Richardson report. In fact, on February 27 1996, Health Canada wrote to Dr Richardson and stated among other things:

The fact that the committee considered the report to have been done in a careful and conscientious manner with methods generally appropriate for this type of risk assessment indicates that the report was scientific. Furthermore, the Medical Devices Bureau considers it to have scientific merit; otherwise, the Bureau would not have released it.

The letter ends with

I hope this letter will serve to clarify that the Medical Devices Bureau has not rejected your report and values the research you have done on the Bureau's study of amalgam safety.

Signed: Richard Tobin PhD Director

Over two and a half years later, that lie is *still* on the AmDA home page and Dr Wilson's home page still links to it. Can we expect a correction Dr Wilson?

Dr Wilson accuses ASOMAT of being a society set up to "institutionalise the weak theory based on mistaken notions". This is a desperate strategy foundering on the fact that since ASOMAT was set up in January 1993, it has presented three two day scientific conference, with fourth one to be held on September 5th and 6th this year. Our speakers have included internationally known and published researchers in this and associated fields. Two of our main speakers this year are Dr Mark Richardson,

the risk assessment specialist whose report led to changes in Health Canada's position and Prof Boyd Haley, Chair at the University of Kentucky, whose labs are doing cutting edge research on mercury and Alzheimer's disease. Rather than denigrating ASOMAT, Dr Wilson would do better to attend one of our conferences and get some facts. Clearly, as I hope I have shown to date, he could use some. Every offer by me, personally, at the debate in November last year, to Dr Wilson, and publicly to the ADA through letters to the editor and in correspondence to the ADA Executive, to present our evidence and have it assessed and debated by the profession have been ignored and rejected. This correspondence can also be viewed on the ASOMAT home page.

Dr Wilson mentions the NHMRC and states that the withdrawal of the pamphlet does not imply a change of policy and castigates lazy news editors and the media. Briefly, I wrote to the head of the NHMRC, Prof Leeder and asked specifically whether the withdrawal of the brochure meant that the policy supporting the safety of dental amalgams was withdrawn. He answered unequivocally and I quote his exact words. "Yes, it is correct to say that as the booklet has been withdrawn there is no NHMRC policy statement on this topic." This is what ASOMAT reported. The full transcripts of all correspondence about this are on the ASOMAT home page. Readers can decide for themselves whether they prefer ASOMAT's view of this or Dr Wilson's. They should also note that no official statement has been made withdrawing that original advice.

I have to chuckle when Dr Wilson mentions the defensiveness on some of the anti-amalgam bulletin boards. I particularly liked his comment.. "the first thing that they lose is their capacity for impartial analysis of their work.." Here is just one sample of a post from the Internet discussion group for Australian dentists, Ozdent. I quote (spelling errors and all) the comments posted by one dentist when the amalgam issue was first raised in May this year:

>>>You can apply any words you like to the following acronym: FO (BTW first word rhymes with duck).

another from the same post..

>>>A cheap and tawdry response regarding the use of references from someone the like of you.

And my personal favourite..

>>>Lastly, no apologies for the tone and style of language used in responding to what I consider to be unmitigated self-serving crap.

This response came from a dentist who is a Staff Specialist & Head of an Oral Medicine Unit and a Clinical Lecturer, at one of our Universities. I may have missed it but I did not see any rebuke from Dr Wilson at that time. If I were unkind I could assume that his silence was tacit approval of the sentiments.

Space prevents the many more examples of evidence on this issue I would have liked to give, but I am happy to respond to specific questions on matters I have not canvassed. This issue is complex and much more needs to be learned. All I ask is that you read this article in conjunction with my previous one (p50 Vol 18 no1), keep an open mind, perhaps visit the ASOMAT web site ([www.asomat.com](http://www.asomat.com)), and heed the advice of the koala on the Skeptics very own home page, who says.. "Seek The Evidence"

**Roman Lohyn**  
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## Economics - a response

Padraic Pearse McGuinness [and let me say PPM here on in] argues persistently [17/3 & /4] that we need “rational” economics. In doing so he makes many interesting points and observations and one or two questionable assertions. I think he makes a very reasonable case for trying to *be* rational about economic matters which he shows to be a difficult but very necessary art. I, however, was not reassured by his failure to assert, unequivocally, that economics is not a science [and I am disappointed that only two other skeptics thought PPM’s very substantial article needed qualification]. Below are some of my, basically rational, objections to his article.

### Science

PPM asserts that “science is quantification” but surely that is only half the story, the other half is rigorous testing of hypotheses through controlled experiments in which conditions are replicated. It has been the combination of careful measurements *plus* controlled testing which has allowed the scientific method to evolve the accurate descriptions of phenomena which have empowered human beings to transform their world so much during the last 400 years or so, in comparison to that achieved over previous millennia.

Without rigorous, repeatable testing of hypotheses it is easy for us humans to create a mental model of something and project that model onto the world even though the model may not represent the most salient facts about the matter or might even be hopelessly wrong. This is because we humans habitually see what we believe [rather than the reverse “seeing is believing”] and most of what we believe has come from those around us. Being social, very much group-support-dependent, animals we all find it very hard not to be strung along with the beliefs of our peers. This is a fundamental trap for all forms of belief including scientific reduction, not just economic reductionism. The saving grace for scientific endeavour is that things such as atoms and molecules appear to have no memory and no individuality worth talking about so they cannot learn from experience. As such it does not matter which particular ones get chosen to be measured - air is air and water is water - and experiments really *can* be repeated, so beliefs which withstand repeated testing can be justly acclaimed as knowledge. It is not the same for people and their societies. People are historical, they learn from their experiences [even if they are mistaken in what they learn] and thus are not the same from one day to the next. This prevents replication of circumstances, so social and economic “experiments” can never be repeated in the controlled way needed for scientific method. So what economists can give us is “rules of thumb” which may be very useful, as long as we accept that they are culture bound, but they cannot give us laws. Furthermore, failure to acknowledge the cultural [value] components leaves economists open to being viewed as uncritical apologists for the status quo.

Another way to look at this is to remember the painting [by Rene Magritte?] titled “This is not a fish”. It

sure as hell looks like a fish but of course the point is that it is a *representation* of a fish. Just so, the terms used in economic formulae are representations - mathematical objects in this case - which purport to stand for people, the things they do and the things they [or at least some] own. PPM is probably never guilty, but I have more than a sneaking suspicion that some economists fall so much in love with their mathematical models that they mistake the models for reality itself. This could be problematic enough but there is much more to consider.

I doubt that PPM’s distinction between analysis of what is, versus analysis of what ought to be, is necessarily as clear as he would have us believe. I mean the very assertion that “xyz” is what is, involves choosing “xyz” out from amongst other processes or entities capable of being modelled, and telling the world that “xyz” is what needs looking at, measuring, debating in public forums, board rooms, lecture theatres, academic texts, etc, all or which take time and effort, costs money and may be subsidised by taxpayers. In our culture we are for ever being told either explicitly by economists, politicians and business leaders or implicitly through advertising and many kinds of journalism that our happiness and security will be assured through the production, acquisition, consumption or possession of material things, things which can be bought and sold. This is the uncritical materialism - possessionism would be a better word maybe - of consumer capitalism. It is purported to be self-evident that this is “what is” in the human world. We hear politicians and others say things like: “..if we can just get the economic fundamentals right, everything else will fall into place.” Yet this kind of thing is an assertion of faith not knowledge. There is no scientific basis for accepting it. We are also receiving other more subtle messages concerning “what is” [important in being human] encoded in media images and reporting of people and events and I submit that there is enormous cultural, class and gender bias in most of it. It comes down very much to who is doing the creation and dissemination of the models and who is paying him/her. The decisions about what is and is not modelled contain inescapable ethical and political dimensions. I hope you can see I am not saying we should be irrational, quite the opposite, just that it is *not* self-evident “what is”.

PPM seems to denigrate environmentalists for “repeating empty mantras” then tells us “it is a pretty safe bet” that if we, the current generations, use up all the coal - and oil too presumably - this won’t matter because science will provide alternative cheap energy sources. That is surely an appeal to the Fairy Godmother! Nobody knows the future and he could be totally wrong in his belief in the ultimate viability of fusion power. Let us all hope like crazy that it does work out. If not, fission power will have to do but for that to succeed I think it will require complete separation from the military and complete honesty on the part of *all* parties involved. Watch that space but don’t hold your breath!

Meanwhile the practice of calling coal, oil and natural gas "fossil fuels" just might turn out to be the single biggest mistake we humans are making right now. What is potentially a source of complex carbon-chain molecules suitable for making recyclable polymers for thousands of years to come is just being burned for relatively trivial purposes. It is quite possible that future generations will call us "The Stupids" or "The Age of Stupidity" because we have the means available to conserve precious and irreplaceable resources but refuse to do so, preferring instead to use them up a million times faster than they were created while polluting ourselves and everybody else in the process because we are afraid to try something else.

PPM may say the market is working just fine because, for example, so many people want to buy cars and so many producers want to make and sell them but this argument is flawed. The producers of cars are not doing it for altruistic reasons but in order to make profits for a select minority who are the shareholders. [Grudgingly, workers also must be paid but that is not the reason for making the cars.] Acknowledgement of the fact that there are significant hidden costs in the production and consumption of motor cars eg pollution and driver/passenger safety is always resisted by those who profit the most. Another such cost is the destruction of communities: the streets have been stolen and made incredibly dangerous by cars which has caused radical changes in our society. [How many of your neighbours do you know?] The fact that bicycles, the most efficient form of human transport ever discovered, could provide very cheap, safe, clean, healthy transport for most journeys of most people on Earth for hundreds of thousands of years to come, is either ignored or disparaged.

### Sex

PPM is wrong to assert that the difficulties found in establishing an agreeable value for the performance of sexual acts by women [or housebound husbands for that matter] with their partners undermines the whole project of estimating the value of women's unpaid work. Firstly, sexual acts in marriage do not take up a great percentage of time [if only they did!] in comparison with food preparation, shopping, cleaning, laundry, dish-washing, caring for children, instructing them, transporting them around, etc. So if we assumed that sexual "work" should be ascribed a money value there would be no great distortion to the figures if it was left out of the account. But it *should not* be in such an account because sex within a marriage acts as a glue for, and as a means of deepening, that particular relationship. As such it is qualitatively different from the services provided in exchange for cash by sex industry workers who, as I understand it, normally seek expressly to avoid such personal relationships with their clients. Surely it would be a fairly rare couple where the wife suggested they "Dial a..." prostitute delivery or they just pop down to a local brothel because she "felt like a change tonight"!

### Domestic and other unpaid work in general

When economists insist that only paid work, or goods and services traded for cash or credit, are important enough in the scheme of things to warrant inclusion in national accounts they are asserting particular judgements about the world. They are "assuming"

many things about the nature of persons, culture, and society and about value in particular. Why should we not have a national system of labour input valuation based on, for example, skilled labour time equivalence? That is: ascribing skilled labour time units to different classes of unpaid work based on the amount of training required and performance levels achieved by experts in the field?

Certainly the importance of ascribing real value to unpaid domestic and other voluntary work cannot be overestimated. Failure to do so involves neglect and contributes to the destruction of what is in fact indispensable social infrastructure or "social capital". Our society is composed of a vast web of people and their relationships and our culture is all the concepts and skills created and stored in the heads of Australian people. "Economic" activity ie selling of labour and trading of goods for cash, etc, is just a part of this - indispensable of course - which cannot occur without all the rest particularly the concepts and skills involved in basic communication, basic awareness of right and wrong, and indeed all the other basic life skills. All this "rest" however is possible only because of the domestic labour of mothers [in particular] and it is quite rational to consider that the unpaid labour of such mothers is intrinsically more important in the ultimate scheme of things than most of what is called "economic" activity. Put it another way: the value "added" by mothers [and many fathers, where present] is critical to the well being of children and their ability to function later in society as adults. Or again - nitty gritty materialism this - the human brain is a massively parallel, self-programming, computational system. The infant brain requires that it be "locked onto" significant others in order to develop its personality and life skills. This requires commitment and real hard work by the significant others or the self-programming goes awry in the infant brain with significant long term, economically countable, costs to the community [jails, graffiti, accidents and inefficiency at work, etc]. How can we rationally ignore this critical human labour? Does it really make sense to say its not accountable just because no money is changing hands?

Mark Peaty  
Bayswater WA

## Eureka Prize Nominations

Nominations for the 1999 Australian Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking will close on November 30.

Readers are invited to submit nominations using the forms obtainable from the address below.

Will the Psychology Dept at UNSW achieve the trifecta, or will another discipline and another institution break the spell?

Further information on the Eureka Prizes, and nomination/entry forms, is available at:

[www.austmus.gov.au/eureka](http://www.austmus.gov.au/eureka)

or from

Roger Muller

Australian Museum

tel: 02-9320 6230

email: [rogerm@amsg.austmus.gov.au](mailto:rogerm@amsg.austmus.gov.au)



## Southerly aspect

Allan Lang

Do you know what was the bad experience you had as a child that turned you into a Skeptic? Me neither. But that was the question that was put to us a number of times at the Mind Body and Psychic Festival on 30-31 May.

We were told that if we hadn't had such an experience we would not have been skeptical and more ready to believe others. We insisted that such experience was not necessary to be a Skeptic, but I don't think we were believed. The disciples of the New Age also had difficulty in comprehending that we had a stall there and were not expecting to make any money.

So, why were we there?

It was the arrival in South Australia of the brochures on the \$100000 Skeptics Challenge which started us on this quest. We discussed how we could best bring this to the notice of the varied local psychics, and, more importantly the media and the general public.

There was some idea of us pamphletting at the entrance of the Mind, Body, and Psychic festival at the Morphettville racecourse function centre on May. Eventually we decided to do it right and operate a stall there over the two days.

With the challenge brochures and assorted other brochures on the Skeptical view of NewAge ideas, two or three Skeptics were present over the period of the festival to explain our views - or occasionally have them explained to us.

How did it go? In my humble opinion, very well.

In my occasional perambulations around the festival, I took note of how the NewAge groups similar to us

were doing. By similar I only mean those offering a complete mind-set rather than retail psychic services or artifacts. From observation of the Mahikari, Paranormal Research Foundation, Rosicrucian, and Stargate stalls, I noted that they rarely had more than one earnest enquirer (usually none), while we were usually dealing with two or three at a time.

Incidental observation: The feng shui (the people who arrange living and office spaces harmoniously) managed to get the worst location in the festival, with a pillar right through the middle of it.

There ain't no justice department: A prize of a free stall at the next festival was given to the "best healing stall", declared to be Silica Sounds: Crystal Music Therapy. I had mentally already given this my nomination as the least desirable stall. Standing at 5 metres distance, the effect of the sound and vibration generated by the "therapy" were akin to having your teeth drilled. How the occupants of nearby stalls felt can only be imagined.

\* \* \*

We sent media releases out to the media highlighting the \$100000 psychics challenge and possible \$20000 spotters fee.

Eventually four paranormalists agreed to be on the TV segment which went to air on the *A Current Affair* program a few weeks later. This seems to have been successful in that the Skeptics(SA) are still getting enquiries from all over Australia from people keen to take up the challenge.

\* \* \*

At our June 3 Skeptics Dinner, Chris Kenny, Adelaide journalist and author of the book *Women's Business*, spoke about the Hindmarsh Island Secret Women's Business. Chris is a journalist who has examined all ramifications of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair and provided an excellent exposition of how the affair gradually developed and how its presentation by the media was handled.

A number of the so-called "dissident" Ngarrindjeri women were also able to attend. After meeting them I appreciate how they were able to maintain that the truth should be told, in spite of the various groups opposing and misrepresenting their position.

It shouldn't have to be said, but neither these women nor Chris Kenny will gain any financial advantage from any development work on Hindmarsh Island.

And for the benefit of the anonymous caller who rang the Skeptics to vehemently register a protest about us holding this meeting at all; You probably won't see this, but I assure you that your protests and insinuations have been given the attention I think they deserve.

\* \* \*

And on Wednesday 7 October our 7:30 PM Dinner and Discussion evening at the Rob Roy Hotel, 106 Halifax Street Adelaide will feature local radio broadcaster Derryn Hinch giving his recollections of the early activities of the Australian Skeptics in Melbourne.

If you wish to attend, it is necessary that you ring me on 08 8277 6427 to confirm your booking.

## National Convention 1999

(hosted by Skeptics SA)

## November 1999

## Adelaide



## Victorian attitudes

Roland Seidel

Our new format newsletter is getting better and better, hats off to Steve Roberts. No. 25 spent a fair bit of space on the Symposium but there were also bits on reverse speech, cold reading, thaioouba, the bent spoon nomination for Franca Arena, the national convention, the continuing saga of the strange man at the Haunted Bookshop, lots of funny bits and the odd poem. Victorians who haven't yet committed to the local rag can do so by sending \$5 to PO Box 5166AA Melb 3000.

Also reported was some impressive news about our linguists. Jane Curtain and Mark Newbrook attended the annual conference of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia and the Australian Linguistic Society, presented a couple of well received papers and successfully encouraged interest in the skeptical enterprise. Mark has also joined the International Society of Cryptozoology, whose members include Dr Colin Groves and other Skeptics.

\* \* \*

We had our second Science Symposium at ScienceWorks on Tuesday 11 August. Sex in Science - what the hell are women doing in science? Prof Adrienne Clarke, Lieutenant Governor of Victoria and chair of all sorts of science stuff, suggested that the coming Age of Biology and Information Technology, being more driven by team effort than the lone genius, will engage more women and accelerate the redressing of the gender balance.

Prof Priscilla Kincaid-Smith recounted in a most engaging manner her adventures from South Africa in the 40s, where women were well represented in Universities, to Australia in the 50s where married women were simply expected to forget about work altogether. That changed in 1967 but it was staggering to hear how she still runs into surprising bigotry even now.

Dave Davies brought out the ever popular Bed O' Nails in the break. It's just amazing how fascinating that thing is.

Dr Claire Colebrook stunned us a bit by observing that Science and Feminism began as handmaidens in

the eighteenth century when Reason became redefined from "God Given to the select few" to "available to anyone through rational thought". It promised the liberation of women but after a century or so when Science has risen and women are still struggling, Second Wave Feminism has taken the view that Science is no longer an ally. Because Science seems to have left women behind and appears complicit in their disenfranchisement, they are more likely to embrace pseudoscience.

Dr Andi Horvath was as entertaining as ever with accounts of her study of the semiotics of dunny doors and observations about schooling and science and sex. Educators have vacillated over the cause and remedy of the problem and it seems like its getting better. Kathy Butler organised it, ran it, set it up, closed it down and generally did a brilliant job. A few of us helped.

\* \* \*

If you're in Melbourne on the third Monday of the month, drop in to Pugg Mahones pub in Hardware St in the city for a casual chat with a bunch of skepos, 7pm onwards. This was Steve Colebrook's brilliant idea and it's really taking off now - damn well done.

\* \* \*

Keep an eye out for the Skeptics stand at the STAVCON conference coming up in late November. We'll probably be presenting a couple of things like Adam Santilli's great piece on Science Teachers and Skeptics and a demonstration of some superb astronomy software (free giveaway with class notes) and how you can use it to dispatch astrology.

\* \* \*

For those of you interested in the Days of our Skeptical Lives, you may recall that I announced in the last issue my impending departure to America on being bought by the Yanks. Well, the drongoes have changed their minds and now I can stay. I must say, I am really really enjoying totally reorganising my life every few months. It's a funny old world isn't it?

## Tasmanian trivia

Fred Thornett

The winter has been quiet in Hobart. Fred Thornett has now completed the first ten hour lecture course, *Skepticism: Opening your mind without letting your brains fall out* for Adult Education in Hobart. Alas the class, which could have taken 24 members, commenced with only eight people. We do not live in a scientific age. Alternatively the citizens of Hobart are so astute and worldly wise that they need no advice about scepticism. (This is a distinct possibility given the nature of the Tasmanian government and the quality of most of our state and federal members of parliament.) Despite the small numbers, the course was successful. Great discussions were held. Copies of Harry Edwards' magnificent tome, *A Skeptics Guide to The New Age* were sold and promises were made to subscribe to *the Skeptic*.

\* \* \*

The demand for dodgy doctorates from the *Collegium Scepticorum Tasmaniensibus* has been flagging a little of late. Why waste your money on a shonky certificate from an Arkansas Bible College. Keep your money in Oz! Buy one of ours and help solve the balance of payments problem. Contact the Secretary of the Tassie Skeptics for details.

\* \* \*

We have recently asked skeptics in the Northern half of Australia's South Island if they would like to hold a few functions separately from the scintillating programme offered by the Hobart mob. Nothing firm has come out of this yet. I will let you know how it all goes in the next *Skeptic*.

\* \* \*

The Tassie Skeptics will be having a gala party on October 10, 1998 at the waterfront palazzo of our President for Life, Warren Boyles. Please contact the Secretary for details.

# Banana bendings

## Michael Vnuk

The May meeting of the Queensland Skeptics, heard Ian Davies, a reiki master, talk about reiki. Reiki (pronounced "ray-kee") was developed in Japan in the 19th century, based on Tibetan practices. Its use has grown rapidly in the West in the last few decades. According to a sheet provided, reiki, meaning "universal life energy", is the nurturing energy that holds the fabric of living matter together. When a person is treated with reiki, the energy is automatically drawn through the treater to the treated, to the area that most needs balancing or where there is a problem. Once a particular area has taken in the energy it requires, the flow stops. Treatment is non-invasive and patients stay fully clothed.

Ian's partner Judy, also a reiki master, demonstrated on a few Skeptics. Reiki treatments usually last an hour, but Judy gave some shorter treatments by placing her hands on various parts of the participants' bodies - neck, chest, shoulders - and holding them there for a few minutes.

Our guinea pigs did not notice any energy flow, except perhaps the warmth of Judy's hands. It was, as Ian promised, relaxing, but as the participants pointed out, such relaxation could come naturally from sitting still in the presence of a calm person, such as Judy, anyway.

Members did not seem to be convinced of anything about reiki. Some of its benefits can be explained by standard things like sitting calmly. However, at least with reiki, there doesn't seem to be much danger in the actual procedure, compared to, say, consuming a herb of unknown origin,

composition and strength. Of course, reiki could be dangerous if used in place of proper medical attention.

Ian spoke much about energy. Far be it for any of us to say we completely "understand" electrical or gravitational energy, but, as a member pointed out, we can measure such energies or their effects, and we can make predictions based on equations. We can do nothing of the sort for reiki.

\* \* \*

The June meeting was the AGM. Bob Bruce was re-elected unopposed as President. Hamish Fraser remains as Secretary, Richard Buchhorn is the new Treasurer, Charles Coin is Minutes Secretary, and I'll continue as Branch Correspondent. Following a few more administrative details, we got on to a wide-ranging discussion in which we were pleased to hear the ideas of some of the new people attending their first meeting.

\* \* \*

The July speaker was a natural therapist. (No, this is not a conspiracy; Bob has promised speakers from "our" side. Scheduling has just resulted in several alternative therapists close together.) Brendan Confaloniere, head of the Omni Clinic, spoke about the alternative treatments he provides, and others. He was dismissive of some: iridology is promoted by vitamin companies; aromatherapy oils are worthless, consisting only of fragrances.

Brendan appears to spend time with his clients discussing their habits, traditions and learned responses which lead to health problems. He

considers such self awareness to be important. Such a view - analysing one's behaviours for merit, rather than just accepting them blindly - sounds appropriately skeptical. He stressed the need for a proper diet and other health advice consistent with general orthodoxy. Brendan said that he does not diagnose, and would still go to a doctor for an antibiotic.

Due to the enthusiastic nature of the speaker and the many questions from the audience, we didn't get to hear of all the clinic's therapies, though I was intrigued by the use of "detox wrap" as part of detoxification, in which a client is coated in oils and covered with a heat-sealing wrap.

\* \* \*

Bob Bruce has been supplying the local newsagent with copies of *the Skeptic* and they sell out. Perhaps this could be extended to more newsagents. Bob also reports that a few people have rung about the \$100,000 Challenge, but none has taken it further.

\* \* \*

Queensland Skeptics meets on the last Monday of the month, at 7pm in the Dutton Park State School, Annerley Rd, Dutton Park. The entrance to the school is a poorly lit driveway on the city side of the nearby Dutton Park Police Station. Go up the driveway a hundred metres to a small parking area adjacent to the school buildings. Walk between the buildings to your left into an area almost surrounded by buildings. We meet in a building to your right, ie furthest from Annerley Rd.

To be a member of the Queensland Skeptics, an annual payment of \$5 is required. This entitles you to voting rights and you will be sent notices of meetings. Membership of Queensland Skeptics is separate from your subscription to *the Skeptic*.

To join the Queensland Skeptics for 1998-99 (or to renew your membership if you joined last year), fill out the

form below and please send it with a \$5 cheque made out to the Queensland Skeptics Association Incorporated. Contact details for the Queensland Skeptics are on the editorial page. If you do not wish to cut up your treasured *Skeptic*, photocopy the form, or copy the details by hand. To reduce costs, no receipts will be issued. (Your details will be used for no other purpose)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Interests \_\_\_\_\_ Comments \_\_\_\_\_

Please tick if you permit your details to be circulated within the Queensland membership

## RIP Darwin ghost

Simon Potter

After the media furore began to die down, public interest waned and monies had been paid, The Horror of Humpty Doo was finally laid to rest - or put back in the drawer - depending on your chakras.

Although The Darwin Skeptics are always on the job there was still one stone unturned. We had not had a look at the place.

Finally I managed to contact Con and Angela Boubaris, the owners of the house. In my initial phone calls it was obvious the actions of the tenants had caused considerable anxiety and financial stress on them. During the course of the calls I convinced Angela of our sincerity, support, and understanding of the ordeal they had obviously suffered. After (what I consider) brilliant PR, Angela granted us access.

Unfortunately for us she had already begun to clean the house the day before we were due to arrive. I was aware of this, so I asked her to pay particular attention to ceiling fans and to please report any thing that seemed unusual.

On our arrival on Saturday morning we were met by the owners. Con was particularly garrulous, strongly voicing his disapproval of the transactions in his absence. He stated that not one other interested person or party had even asked his opinion, nor had even acknowledged his vested interest in the occurrences.

I was particularly enthralled with Con's recounting of his side of the story. Many of the points I raised in my earlier article were clarified and blanks filled in.

Without giving a blow by blow account of our visit and conversations, I'll give a synopsis of points raised, which can be read in conjunction with the article in *the Skeptic* (18/2).

- Angela confirmed our interest in ceiling fans. Stating the fans overall were filthy *except for some cleaned areas on top*.

- The haunting was claimed to have been going on for 6 weeks. The Boubaris family went on 6 weeks holiday starting at the approximate time the haunting allegedly began.

- Only one of those living at the house was known to the landlord.

- No media report mentioned that the owners actually lived only 30 metres away in another house on the same block.

- Con said nothing untoward had happened when he lived in the house prior to the tenants moving in.

- While on holiday the Boubaris's were contacted about the haunting by a police friend in Melbourne. He had recognized one of the tenants names from an earlier similar incident occurring locally.

- It cost the Boubaris's \$4000 for one lawyer to evict the tenants. Con said he came home one day to find the tenants drinking with two legal representatives. Con said these people were known to him and positively identified.

- In court the tenants obtained an extension prior to eviction to seek legal advice. During this time a maintenance man was engaged to fix any damage the "ghost" had caused. The grounds sought for eviction were rent arrears and destruction of property.

- Channel 7 was still contracted to the tenants during the stay of eviction, handyman repairs and the infamous "bottle cap scene". Were "reimbursements for inconveniences caused by Channel 7's stay" met to the end?

During the course of our conversations over a period of two hours,

Derek Hogben, Stefan Dippel, Ron Gray and I all spoke independently to the owners. These interesting points were gleaned from our collective involvement. As you may imagine a great deal of information was actually exchanged very nearly completing the jigsaw. Sadly, much of it was hearsay, so legally we'd better leave it out. We concede from a media point of view, this type of story holds all the trump cards in the ratings game.

We have:

1. Human Interest - people thrust together in a close environment. The story of ordeal against forces beyond their control.

2. The Supernatural- a malevolent presence bent on the disruption of innocent lives.

3. Violence - steak knives and various other projectiles thrown with sufficient force to injure in the presence of potential human targets.

4. Tragedy - a connection to an horrific auto accident- referenced by words written with various objects in various places

- 5 Comedy - any rational observer following the saga was bound to get a chuckle out of it.

As a final coincidence (and perhaps the best one) Channel 7 had just opened a local station some weeks prior to the "haunting" coming to light, and they hadn't shown the *Witness* program before at all. When 7 began showing it, its introductory story was? You guessed it, "The Humpty Doo Horror". A perfect story for their first local ratings eh?



### *the Skeptic* will soon be changing its e-mail address.

We'd love to be able to tell you what the new one will be, but dealing with these things seems to take longer than evolution took to convert a single celled organism into a magazine editor. If you have anything to e-mail us, and it doesn't get through, try calling 02 9417 2071 or faxing 02 9417 7930. If we can sort it out, the new address should be in the next issue (or when the Sun turns into a red giant, whichever comes sooner).

Meanwhile, we have now acquired a plain paper fax machine, which means you can fax us items that we can scan into the computer, which will be a big help.



## Predictions

Your recent edition (18/1), and in particular the article *A little out where?* by Scott Campbell, has reminded me of a personal experience that may be of interest to other readers of your esteemed publication.

My family is rather firmly divided between the credulous and the incredulous. My brother and myself are staunch sceptics, whilst my sisters and mother tend to be fairly gullible on matters psychic, astrological, etc (same upbringing, initial education and so on - does this say something about females' greater propensity to believe in the paranormal, or is it merely a coincidence?). Although believing that there is some validity to the claims being made, happily at least they do not tend to be customers of these charlatans.

Anyway, enough about my family problems, back to the story. My mother was recounting to one of my sisters a few months back how one of her sisters (my aunty) had visited a psychic, fortune-teller, clairvoyant or something similar. This was either just before or just after the marriage of my aunt, and the psychic, among other typically general statements and noncommittal predictions, made the (perhaps now discouraged) prediction that the marriage would end badly, possibly in a divorce. Nonetheless, to the psychic's credit, a specific and rather brave prediction to make some fifty years ago to a young Catholic female client, although with no time frame provided.

My aunt died some ten years ago after a good forty odd years of marriage to the same man. So how did my sister and mother deal with this blatantly erroneous prediction? Wouldn't it be reasonable to admit that the psychic had been wrong? Wouldn't it make sense to admit that the psychic had stuffed up on the one definite testable non-generalised prediction that she had made? Wouldn't it be logical to feel that at least this psychic (even if not all psychics) was a crank? Of course not.

They justified this obvious mistake by suggesting that the marriage had not been especially happy (although I never knew this aunt particularly well, from my experience the marriage was not especially unhappy either). Furthermore, they suggested that some people would not have stuck with the situation, and the marriage in that case *would* have ended in a divorce. Therefore the psychic had in fact been correct!

This is clearly another example of

## Letters

### **An opportunity for readers to air their views, vent their spleen or generally sound off about items that have appeared in *the Skeptic*, or anything else that has taken their Skeptical fancy.**

how believers will do anything to verify the claims made by psychics. My sisters and mother have at least three things working in their favour when evaluating such situations,

- (i) they are only small time psychic believers;
- (ii) they are not mentally deficient; and
- (iii) they are closely related to two clear thinking sceptics.

Yet despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary they still vindicated a psychic they had never seen or met.

It thus becomes clear how it would be virtually impossible to convince a true believer that the information being peddled by their friendly neighbourhood psychic was really no more than a load of expensive nonsense.

**John O'Neill.  
Burwood VIC**

## Crucifixions

I have often travelled to the Philippines, and in recent years became aware of the phenomenon of Penitents. I came to recognise three categories :

1. those who carry a cross in procession;
2. the Flagellants; and
3. those who allow themselves to be crucified - normally understood to be a 'nailing to a cross through the hands and feet' as Jesus is thought to have undergone.

Flagellants are easy to track down. I can reliably say that I have now seen numerous examples. They are typically youngish men who can be seen in public, individually or in groups, during the pre-Easter period. They rhythmically pummel their bared backs with a device consisting of a whip handle which sports about half a meter of thong, to which is attached a bundle of a dozen or so cylindrical rods of wood or bamboo, 10-15 cm long.

At some point before, during or after the whipping, six cuts are made in the whipped area. I have seen this

done with razor blades. I have also seen souvenirs sold which are wooden paddles into which six shards of glass have been embedded.

After the whipping (which is occasionally done by someone else), the blood is rinsed off the back. I have seen gruesome, very bloodied backs washed clean, straight after the whipping, to reveal only mildly irritated skin and scars from incisions made in previous years.

Crucifixions are more elusive

In 1995, I approached a parish priest (whose skill in English was adequate and better than that of the general run of Filipinos) to ask where one might see a crucifixion. He not only said that they don't have crucifixions, but claimed the same about Flagellants (a dozen or so of whom I had already seen performing within half a km of his church). With that as my guide, I decided to seek a different source of information.

I did however, happen to speak to another priest about it - he claimed that all signs of wounds inflicted during penitence 'miraculously' disappear. On other topics of conversation he had seemed quite sensible, well-informed and articulate.

In 1996, I travelled to a site on a volcanic ash-heap on (the sacred) Mt Banahaw, where according to my adamant informant and guide, crucifixions routinely happen on Good Friday. I found no sign of such an event there, and the locals denied such activity.

In 1997, I was intending to go to a place north of Manila, but was seduced into believing someone who said that he had seen a crucifixion the previous year in St Pedro, south of Manila. I chose that option in order to avoid the nightmarish traffic jams encountered in crossing Manila from south to north.

Having been persuaded I would need to come early, I actually attended a Sinaculo (a kind of a Passion Play) on Maundy Thursday and was introduced to the person who was to be crucified the following day. He told me that it would be a 'mock crucifixion' (meaning an imitation, *not* real). I lost interest at that point in staying for the events of next day. However, it was too late to make plans to travel to an alternative crucifixion site.

On returning to Australia I saw a full page advertisement by the Philippine Department of Tourism in a Filipino newspaper which listed the *coming* events of Holy Week 1997. Amongst about 50 entries, it mentioned only two locations for *real* crucifixions, viz - Castillejos in Zambales and Cutud in Pampanga. Reports in

Filipino newspapers after Good Friday 1997 also seemed to confirm Cutud as realistically probable site. A search of the Internet repeated those reports and added others. In April 1998, the Philippine Airlines in-flight magazine featured an article about crucifixions which claimed that Cutud was the only town where real crucifixions happen. I decided on Cutud for my next try.

To avoid being held up in traffic, I timed my arrival in Pampanga for Wednesday before Good Friday. On the next day, Thursday, I surveyed the crucifixion site. In a dusty field that had been a rice paddy before Mt Pinatubo erupted in 1991, but is now 'covered' several feet deep with lahar, (volcanic mud flow), a stage 20' x 20' x 5' had been erected to the right side of a round rise, some 2' high. This 'Golgotha' had a circular fence around it with an entrance; inside were three concrete blocks holding supports for crosses.

On Good Friday, many people filed onto and off the stage. There I saw a woman sitting in a chair, and perplexed, I left to claim my pride of place outside the fence from where I would have a clear view to the crosses, but where I was exposed to the torrid sun beating down relentlessly on my video camera and the waiting spectators. It was 10 am and soon after, the place I claimed would have been occupied by others. At 11 am a cross arose on the stage, with the woman in spectacular garb tied to it.

I was *not* in a vantage point for the stage, and the many people milling about on the stage obscured all activity below head-height. I could see that each arm of the woman was bound to the crossbeam at her biceps and halfway between her elbow and wrist. Amid much fanfare and to-do, I saw a nail placed in her open right palm and two taps of a hammer were applied. After about 20 minutes during which the woman wailed, shouted, sang, and preached, she was taken down.

By noon, the enclosure of Golgotha was teeming with cameramen and others, so hope of seeing anything below head-height had vanished. Sure enough, a man with a loud hailer apparently asked those people on Golgotha to crouch or stay low, but that had effect for no more than ten seconds when everyone was upright again and craning their necks for a view.

In succession 11 youngish men rose into sight on a cross, with arms bound like the woman had been, but also with nails clearly visible in the palms of both hands. I saw no blood. After about five minutes, grimaces and

groans from the crucified signalled the lowering of the crosses. By the time the tenth cross arose, it was clear to me that whatever control there may have been over who entered the Golgotha enclosure must have been lifted, so I went in also, and got to stand over the foot end of a cross while a teenager was being nailed. Some fluid was first sprinkled along the length of the cross-upright.

Again I saw two taps of a hammer on the nail. I committed a serious omission by not inspecting the crosses, abandoned at the end, for nail holes. I did get to see the hands of at least one chap who had been nailed, and although he held wads of gauze to his palms, the backs of his hands were intact. In one case I saw some bandaging over feet. All three crosses had foot platforms for the 'fanatics' (as crucifixants are called) to stand on.

There seems to be no reason to believe that any body 'hung from the cross by nails'. So where is the 'mystery', other than the motivation for such a display?

I would be very pleased to see a response to this article, with factual information on the following :

1. are local anaesthetics applied beforehand?
2. are pain killers used afterwards?
3. does immobilisation of the arms cut the circulation to prevent bleeding?
4. about the medical follow up of the wounds healing (or otherwise);
5. about the perception that the nails actually go through the hands;
6. the training of, and instructions to, those who do the nailing etc;
7. the vetting of the would-be crucified.

**Joseph Philippa  
Ultimo NSW**

Joseph has requested that anyone wishing to contact him with feedback, do so on his email address.

joseph.philippa@tafensw.edu.au

## Money making schemes

After reading some of the articles in my latest *Skeptic* (18 : 2), I am moved to congratulate all your contributors on their efforts: the inside story of the fan-forced spook reminded of a plate-throwing poltergeist that terrorised the kitchen staff of a well known restaurant until ...The camera never

lies, unlike the kitchen hand who was caught flicking pottery over his shoulder, who did. Proving yet again stories like these should be taken with a grain of salt.

The pieces on alternative health care professionals made me sick: why are people happy to pay up to \$100/hour to see these people, and not cough up even a \$5 co-payment to see a conventionally qualified medical practitioner?

To Mr Lead I offer the following "Money is the root of all evil". I'm referring to "The Lead Balloon", by the way, not the "God and Mammon" debate, for which this may be equally apposite. As far as "get-rich-quick" schemes are concerned (all of them, not just tax-driven ones), I believe human greed, not paranormal-style gullibility is the cause.

In another life I was an audit manager for the Tax Office [ATO] and it was my joy to run several of these Amway "business" audits - unfortunately failing to cross paths with the aforementioned Mr Lead. The ATO called this work "running a scoping project": a small but statistically significant number of sample audits were done, out of a very large pool of identified cases to isolate the major issues for future large scale audits. Clearly, the spectrum included hopefuls, wanting to be the next star - I personally know someone who is very successful at it - as well as deliberate cheats who knew what they were doing was wrong and, yes, many (I hesitate to say the majority) who were put onto it by shonky tax agents as a "good idea".

As for Amway and its child - System 21, I think it's now called - much as I detest the American-style motivational hoo-ha that goes with them, at least do sell real products to real people. What are worse are the clearly artificial primary production schemes: trees that bear no fruit for seven or even twelve years, but try to give all years' "prepaid" interest deduction in the first one or two years and then sneak most of the money back to the "investors", or an IVF breeding program for cattle that don't exist, or ones where the deductions are 98% sure to be disallowed (I've seen both, and in the second the promoter ran off with the investors' money anyway). I'll keep out of the religious taxation debate, though (at least for now).

And I feel it my duty to let all Skeptics know about the next Big Thing to look out for - smudging. Apparently it's a service performed by Native Americans, or was that Central American or Mayans, to remove negative forces left in a building by years of previous occupants.

It's now becoming big business for those initiated into its secrets, or who have adopted the parts that suit them. Finally I feel obliged to warn everyone that a community minded man with a religious *bent* (emphasis intended) and time to post about 1000 pages at his website - much of it as rhyming pseudo-philosophy - has seen a vision of a giant wall of water 350 metres high striking the east coast of Australia soon. The only date bandied around seemed to be 23 August, so if it's true *the Skeptic's* offices will by now be either beachside, or maybe part of a new underwater theme park. I'll be staying put in Neutral Bay, with the diving gear handy. I've written enough, particularly as this letter probably won't be printed (but let me know if you do find room for some of it).

**Bernard Kellerman  
Neutral Bay NSW**

## Amway/scamway

I'm new to the Australian Skeptics, but boastfully say not new to skepticism. I work in a design lab in a big telecommunications company, writing software and building hardware for those little "extra's"; it's a lot more work than it would first seem. I'm only young, at 20, but hey, I'll argue full time against the spoon benders and propagators of anti-science, with of course an open mind to their theories. I'm involved in a number of mailing lists, (Internet based forums). This is a little detail of who I am. Below, for your enjoyment, is an interesting experience that I had recently.

Wednesday, July 8. I was home from work with a nasty bout of 'flu. My head was stuffed up, and because of the medication I was on, I couldn't think coherently. A knock at my door, and there stood a well-presented salesman, who proceeded to ask me a series of questions. At the time they seemed reasonable to me. Things like: how would I like to save up to thirty percent on my grocery bills; how would I like to have my groceries paid for for me, etc. In Retrospect they were all leading questions, but at the time I was in no condition to think clearly, and I neglected to ask straight away what company he was selling for. This led to the statement that he would return at a later date, because "Boy, have I got an offer for you". At the time I said he was wasting his time, and would probably get nowhere.

He returned in two weeks, and

again knocked on my door, this time at 8pm. I was in a much better condition by then. He presented his sales spiel, and at no time did he mention Amway. I asked what company he was selling for, and he presented a business card, with a company name, (Not Amway), and contact details. It wasn't until I said "I'm sceptical of get-rich schemes like this; it smacks of an Amway type scheme". His response was almost instantaneous with "What, have you got a problem with Amway?" This caused me a little consternation, until the penny dropped and the great light dawned. I whipped out my copy of *the Skeptic* and dug through until I found the article entitled "The Lead balloon", which I showed him. He stated that what was here in print was all true, and then carried on with his sales spiel. Well, that's optimism for you!

One thing I pride myself on, is that I'll listen to any theory or spiel, no matter how bizarre, and attempt an objective analysis of it. So I listened to him. And then emailed Greg Keogh at the Skeptics Web Site, inquiring into further articles and explaining the situation at hand. Through the inimitable network that the Skeptics seem to have, I was told to contact Richard Lead. This I did, and though he was then on holidays, he later answered me. While waiting, I turned to the internet, and researched the Amway phenomenon, finding a number of interesting analyses, both generic and case specific, that seemed to indicate that there was a fundamental discrepancy between what was said, and what really happened. Of particular note was an article on how the actual Amway sales spiel worked. All these articles I downloaded, and printed, for the gentleman's perusal. That evening there was another door knocker, who also was selling Amway. Whether she was acting in concert with the first or not, I do not know, but again I repeated that it was a waste of her time, trying to sell this to me, but again she persisted. It presented a unique opportunity to observe whether the documentation regarding the methodology of the spiel was correct.

Next visit paid by the first bloke, he finally gave me some documentation to support his assertions, and drew lots of pretty circles all over the place, telling me how I could make a fortune by selling to my friends and family. (The circles incidentally represent people you know and how the business will branch off in an example of seemingly exponential growth.) And thus the hype began. I would not be making money from them, he said (well how do I make a fortune then?), but would be offering them the same

opportunity as I had. As with most salesmen, the talk was all of best case scenarios, with the example figures universally high ones. He offered to take me to a meeting, and I would have gone out of interest, had not my uncertain working hours negated any kind of long term planning. Instead, he lent me a video tape, and an audio cassette, and left, telling me that even people like "Bill Gates" used Amway, and that he was recently in Australia talking to an Amway conference. I don't know enough to be able to dispute that statement, but could find no evidence to support it, but as Carl Sagan said, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence".

The video and audio tapes gave me a chance to while away the wee small hours taking a closer look at what was said, and how. I must say that in my opinion (and I'm no expert on the subject, I just try to use common sense) the language was all highly stirring and I would venture to say very conducive to grandiose visions. There was very little solid evidence presented to support the case argued, and it relied upon implied evidence. (The standard type spiel, dogs have four legs, therefore that cat's a dog). The next evening the lady come around again and tried the same, almost word for word, sales pitch. When I explained that the statement, "Listen to these tapes over and over again" could be likened to a primitive form of "brainwashing" type activity, I was told that it was, but that it helped motivate them, and those that didn't listen usually failed in their venture. Hmmmm, it's sounding more and more like a religion to me....

On their last visit paid, I'd had enough, and showed them, (they both came together) all the sceptical documents regarding Amway. I was told, without their bothering to read it, that the information was false; that I'd passed up an opportunity that would never be offered to me again; and that I didn't know what I was missing out on. I thought that in doing them the courtesy of reading their documents, I would be returned the same. When I mentioned I was a Skeptic, I was told to stop playing games with their organisation.

I'd like to offer some tentative conclusions. The sales pitch is very easy to believe, it appeals to subtle emotive issues, and not so subtle ones. It does use the pseudoreligious type principal of "all pulling together to help each other out". There are discrepancies within their documentation, for example a proposed 30% saving, changes from page to page, within the one pamphlet. And finally I'd like to say that as with any busi-

ness, if you want to get rich from Amway you'll have to work damned hard. I don't doubt it is possible to make money at this scheme, but I would argue that, by and large, it would almost never be as simple as it seems. A final note, where the economic examples are used, the salesman goes fast, very fast, and gently brushes over the facts, questions are not encouraged. When you question their own success rate, there is very little response of the positive kind. Overall a very curious experience, and one where blind acceptance will lead to being dragged into this pseudo religious buying group.

Keep up the good work as one of the few thinking magazines out there in this world of anti-thought.

**Adam Gould**  
Bayswater VIC

## Scientism

I agree with James Gerrand that in Michael O'Rourke's attack on JG's alleged scientism (*Letters* 18/2) MOR appears to be working with a rather narrow definition of the notion of 'science'. Nevertheless, it must be said that there are legitimate and important areas of enquiry where science (in a broader sense) really does not appear to be the most appropriate framework (or even a usable one). For instance, even within my own essentially empirical field of linguistics, many scholars hold that some sub-fields (notably semantics) are amenable only to careful, systematic description, not to the development of what might reasonably be called 'theory', and certainly not to predictive theories of a scientific type. And in some other (nonempirical) areas of thought, especially some of those which have traditionally formed the subject matter of analytical philosophy, it seems even clearer that science is not applicable. How, for instance, would one discuss general issues in ethical theory in a scientific framework? Or (*pace* JG) the existence or otherwise of a transcendent God? Or the philosophy of science itself (this latter example shows the absurdity of extreme scientism)? It seems to me that the point is made - unless all such issues/areas of thought are simply deemed illegitimate (as some groups of scientific philosophers once suggested). This does not, of course, invalidate JG's point that *some* issues once deemed inaccessible to science (and therefore handled only within philosophy, etc) may come to be amenable to scientific study as knowledge advances.

Note that the method of investigation is *not* the main point in these examples (even though it is relevant). Indeed, it could be argued that in focusing so heavily on method both writers are unduly narrowing their debating ground.

**Mark Newbrook**  
Dept of Linguistics  
Monash University

## Exposing Exposure

Editor of *Exposure* magazine, David Summers is an unashamed fan of Pauline Hanson and One Nation. In the June/July issue of his magazine he answered the critics of his policy of providing Ms Hanson with a forum, and carried a lengthy interview with her. The article itself was nothing new, and needs no comment. More noteworthy is the fact that, at the time of publication, Mr Summers was the endorsed One Nation candidate for the seat of Noosa. Nowhere in the magazine is this information made known to the readers.

Since this sets a nasty precedent for editors, I now formally warn the editor of this esteemed journal that should leading members of the BOF party (Bearded Old Farts) begin to appear in its pages I shall write an article for *Nexus* and expose everything.

**Bob Nixon**  
Macleod VIC

We note that things have changed a bit since Bob wrote this letter. Mr Summers was disendorsed as the One Nation candidate, after the media became aware that one of the wall-to-wall conspiracies being promulgated in *Exposure* held that the present Pope had sold some of the poisonous chemicals used in gas chambers to the Nazi regime in Germany prior to WWII. We can only assume that this particular conspiracy (among the even more implausible ones that are the stock-in-trade of the magazine) was politically unacceptable because it may have turned off Catholic voters.

Despite his disendorsement, Mr Summers still managed to poll around 15% of the votes in the Noosa seat in the Qld election. He was later involved in court proceedings against One Nation, and, in a more recent edition of *Exposure* he was somewhat more critical of that party. Keep tuned for more exciting developments. **Ed**

## Tiwkuf I

Unlike James Marchant, I am very new subscriber to *the Skeptic* yet I'm compelled to respond to his article "The Great Pyramid of Tiwkuf" (18/2).

This cleverly composed expose on the mathematical genius of the Tiwkuf does wonderfully exquisite justice to the maxim "baffle 'em with science".

It, in my opinion, highlights indubitably, one thing ... use enough BIG words that few have even heard of, let alone understood and you will encounter little opposition from the uncritical, unthinking masses every time.

James, here's a challenge for you. Calculate the odds of acceptance v rejection of your "facts" had you delivered your hypothesis to the rigorous scrutiny of women's (oops, sorry) popular, glossy magazine readers instead.

I suggest the only flaw (or folly) in your theory is where you chose to publish, having forfeited the opportunity for handsome financial rewards!

**Bronwyn Monahan**  
Bangor NSW

## Tiwkuf II

I found the article by James Marchant on Tiwkuf (18/2) interesting. I admit I was well into para 2 of his "factual" information before I realised, "this bloke is taking the ssip". Oh well, a lot of us have to accept that there are times when there is no doubt we have Tiwkuf blood in our veins, and that a sense of humour is vital for a Skeptic.

**Jim Snowdon**  
Croydon VIC

## Legs, legs, legs

This is a reply to a letter by Gavan O'Connor on p 72 of the winter 1998 issue.

I work in a historical picture archive (Mary Evans Picture Library), and discreetly trousered furniture-legs is something we are frequently asked for. We have no *serious* pictures which depict it, but we *do* have a cartoon mocking the practice, published in a satirical magazine called *The Tomahawk* in April 1868.

I would imagine there would have been no point to the satire if there

wasn't a reality to be satirical about, so I expect some day to find a non-satirical reference, perhaps in a guide to household decoration.

**Hilary Evans**  
London, England

## Legs again

I have just received my copy of *the Skeptic* (18/2). Gavan O'Connor expresses curiosity about whether the claim that in Victorian England piano legs were covered is supported by evidence. Just on the off chance that nobody else has responded, may I draw attention to the urban legends web site, which has a page specifically devoted to this issue -

[www.urbanlegends.com/misc/victorian\\_legs.html](http://www.urbanlegends.com/misc/victorian_legs.html).

The researched conclusion of the author of the page is (in summary) that while drapery etc was common in Victorian parlours, its purpose would seem to have had nothing to do with a misplaced fear of mahogany pornography. Pity, really. Makes a great story.

**Ross Martin**  
Camp Hill QLD

## More legs

In his letter (18/2) Gavin O'Connor questions my comment "In Victorian England even piano legs were covered". This practice was not so crude as to cover the offending limbs with silk stockings. That would convert innocent nudity into salacious pornography. The convention was to drape a decorative silken shawl over the top of the grand piano. One tassled corner would hang down over the exposed front leg, thus maintaining Victorian decorum.

**Sydney Bockner**  
Crafers SA

## Puttin' on the Ritz

John Winkle recently (*Letters* 18/1) invited me to put forward a bit more detail of Ritzian theory. I'm going to do this, but in the spirit of a tour guide, not an anthropologist. I'm not going to be putting forward much in the way of why Ritzian theory explains things this way, or how it accords with the experimental

evidence. Further, I'm not going to distinguish between Ritz's original theory and some speculative developments. I think this is reasonable because I need to be concise and readable, and because it answers John's enquiry in the spirit in which it was made.

First, time dilation and time travel. Ritzian theory presumes that time and space are constant and linear everywhere. There is no velocity dependent time dilation. Unlike Relativity, there is no "leg up" for time travel. It does not enter the theory, nor is it a consequence of the theory. The world is therefore a slightly more dull place. While there may still be avenues for time travel, they have no bearing on Ritzian theory. Unlike Relativity, Ritzian theory does not have difficult things like time paradoxes arising from it.

Next, we have warped spacetime and black holes. There is no such thing as warped space - it is linear. As far as black holes go, there is a Ritzian analogue, the Ritzian Dark Object (RDO). This does not rely on warped space, but presumes a Newtonian style gravitational effect on light. While a RDO has an escape velocity greater than that of light, it does not have a singularity or warping of space. It is a simple very dense physical body with an escape velocity greater than that of light. A Newtonian style gravitational effect on light is presumed, while in General Relativity (GR) this gravitational effect is a consequence of the theory. This is a theoretical strength of GR. However, the experimental evidence for black holes is not definitive. We have evidence for an object whose escape velocity is greater than light, but it is GR which lets us conclude that this is a black hole with a singularity and warped space. We see an emission spectrum; this emission spectrum does accord with GR, but when we look at the mathematics we find it is 90% fluid dynamics and 10% a General Relativistic correction. It should be understood that Ritzian gravity does not behave like conventional gravity - so it is quite possible it will fill in the 10% correction by its own means.

An incidental point is that John Michell published a model for what he called "dark stars", objects whose gravity was strong enough to stop the outwards passage of light, in 1783. Relativists claim that GR predicted black holes before they were discovered. Certainly, GR may have developed a better mathematical model, but I do think they are being mischievous in claiming "prediction". (Thanks to Eric Baird for this point).

As we do not have black holes, we do not have the space time diagrams which GR develops for them. The notion of parallel universes develops from such space time diagrams for rotating black holes. In Ritzian theory we do not have space time diagrams; "black holes" are just physical objects. As a result, we do not have problems of parallel universes. We have just one universe, and that's it.

Quantum Mechanics (QM) does, however, have some interpretations which result in parallel universes. Ritzian theory does not comment on this, and your own interpretation of QM will have to guide you here. Like Relativity, Ritzian theory and QM will eventually have to meet; just what will happen is unknown, but I suspect the marriage will be easier than that presently between QM and Relativity.

Next, we have wormholes. Wormholes are a consequence of GR's view of space and time being a combined entity called "spacetime". Spacetime operates in accord with certain equations, and one solution of those equations are things called wormholes.

In Ritzian theory, space and time are separate entities, both linear, so we will never have odd things like wormholes developing.

Lastly, there is cosmology, concepts like dark matter, and so on. I'm not really in a position to comment on how a Ritzian view would differ.

However, many of these ideas are consequences of the application of spacetime to the universe. To the extent that spacetime is central to the idea, a Ritzian universe would be different. To the extent that these ideas can be mapped over to a changing force on a background of Newtonian space, they may carry over to Ritzian theory.

Compared to Relativity, Ritzian theory does have a different bag of costs and benefits. Certainly, GR has a more detailed model of how gravity effects light. But GR has parallel universes, time travel, spacetime and so on. Further, Ritzian theory could well model light better - after all, Relativity has had an army of physicists working on it for numerous years, something Ritzian theory cannot compete with. Relativity changes time and space. Ritzian theory changes other things - for example, our ideas of force and energy. Energy is a particular example. For low velocity, a whole collection of particles (like the atoms in a lump of metal, in continuous motion) can have a well defined energy.

However, for high velocities we can no longer think of energy being an aggregate quantity - we must con-

## About our authors

sider each possible collision separately. Energy is, after all, a derived quantity. We do not measure "energy", we measure other things (velocity, temperature, etc.) from which we derive a measure of energy. Relativity, for all its smoke and mirrors about changes relative to the observer, has the same consequence - we must consider all possible collisions separately. The same consequence, reached via different paths.

I do not deny that Relativity "explains" phenomena. You may have to do some intellectual somersaults along the way, but it does "explain" them. However, I would also say that that is not the only issue.

John August

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## Writing for the Skeptic

Thank you to all our contributors, whose efforts are what make our magazine what it is. After more than 18 years of publication, we are now in the fortunate position of receiving more letters and other contributions than we can accommodate in one issue, which is a position every editor strives to achieve.

If you wish to write for *the Skeptic*, here are a few rules we request you observe wherever possible:

If you send a disc, we can read most formats, but later Windows programmes baffle our Mac. Please save the article as a text file.

Please do not attempt to format your contribution to fit our pages. It is much easier for us to format plain text.

If you e-mail your contribution as an attachment, again please save it as text, not as .doc or other format.

We now have a plain paper fax, so you can fax us articles that we can scan.

Hard copies of articles scan well if laser or bubble printed. Dot matrix printed documents cause our scanner to become catatonic. Please send originals and not photocopies.

Please send a brief biography with longer contributions. (We need some facts on which to base our insults in the Author's column.)

Above all, please keep those cards and letters rolling in. It will be a very thin magazine if I have to write it all myself.

And thank you all again.

Barry Williams  
Editor

**Amanda Barnier** is doing postdoctoral psychological research at UNSW, and was the winner of the 1997 Aust Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking.

**Sydney Bockner** is an Adelaide psychiatrist and regular contributor.

**Richard Cadena**, a member of Vic Skeptics, hails from Usania, a small principality that lies between Canada and Mexico. He is also a computer consultant.

**John Foley**, Scourge of the Mediquacks, has a cuddly furry body, a bill like a duck and a poisoned spur on his hind leg. It doesn't pay to mess with him.

**Brynn Hibbert** is Professor of Chemistry at UNSW, and a semiprofessional expert witness.

**Colin Keay**, *le grande fromage* of the Hunter Skeptics has had more rocks named after him than many psychics have in their heads.

**Philip Latey** is a practising and realistic osteopath from Sydney. Unlike many of his colleagues, he refuses to call himself Dr.

**Allan Lang**, Adelaide's answer to Beau Brummel, has read more books on Nostradamus than Nostradamus did on Allan Lang. This, we believe, is a record.

**Mark Lawson** is a journalist who works on the *Financial Review*.

**Richard Lead**, feral accountant and treasurer of NSW Skeptics, is shown in a photograph on page 4 without a glass in his hand. This is a paranormal event.

**Lindsay Moore** is a solicitor practising in West Wyalong. In a past life, he was the Law Agent (solicitor) for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Australia, so he knows whereof he speaks.

**Bob Nixon** is the new vice president of Vic Skeptics, where he is also responsible for the challenge. He claims that overseeing vice will present no challenge to him.

**John O'Neill** is a Victorian teacher, considered by some to be an endangered species.

**Steve Roberts**, when he is not washing his hair, edits the Vic Skeptics newsletter and speaks knowingly about UFO claims.

**Linden Salter-Duke** votes, and soon she will have to vote for a state parliament, because she lives in Darwin. We don't think she is all that postmodern, because we can understand her.

**Roland Seidel** has just been deposed as president of Vic Skeptics, in a palace coup which he also engineered. He will continue to baffle readers with his mathematical puzzles.

**Andrew Stewart** is at the Department of Mathematics at ANU.

**Karen Stollznov**, member of the NSW Skeptics committee, is amazingly healthy considering all her illnesses. She is looking forward to the day when her eyes turn blue.

**Sir Jim R Wallaby** recently retired as the Reader in Engineering at the University of Hardknox. He read the meters.

**J.T. Wearne** is a retired biochemist who lives in Fremantle, the well-known WA skiing resort.

**Barry Williams** has often been referred to as a "Renaissance Man", not because he is very clever, but because he looks like he was born then.

**Harry Edwards**. This is the first issue of *the Skeptic* since it was published on parchment that has not contained an item from Harry - that'll teach him to go overseas for three months. Mind you, he did leave an item for us, but it seems to have disappeared down a black hole (or *the Skeptic* dog). Anyway, he got his picture on the first page, so he can't complain. We have no doubt he will be back, refreshed and better than ever in the next issue.

## Notice

# New overseas publications

### *The Scientific Review Of Alternative Medicine*

In recent years a wide range of unconventional therapies has appeared on the public scene. These are offered as "alternative" or "complementary" to mainstream medicine. And they include everything from herbal medicines, homeopathy, and aromatherapy to the use of acupuncture, therapeutic touch, prayer at a distance, faith healing, chelation therapy, and "miraculous" cancer cures.

There is, therefore, a need for objective, scientific critiques of the claims of "alternative" or non-compensation medicine. This conclusion seems inescapable because:

- There is a lack of readily available, reliable information about the efficacy of such treatments. This impairs people's free choice and increases risks to their health. The potential harm is incalculable but appears to be growing. The trend is abetted by those who promote unproven treatments, especially those who are naive, greedy, or unscrupulous.
- The media all too often dote on controversial and false claims but unfortunately provide few careful, critical examinations of them, usually preferring to titillate, pander, or entertain. Often what the public hears is anecdotal testimony of people allegedly cured, not the results of scientific research. Many best-selling books promote the power of such alleged healings, but they hardly pass the scrutiny of peer review.
- Several new journals devoted exclusively to "alternative" medicine have appeared recently, but they merely advocate unconventional treatments and rarely assess them objectively.
- Both the public and some medical professionals seem unaware that credible, scientific assessments of many

"alternative" medicine claims already exist and that new evaluations based on available information are possible.

- There is a critical need to test new claims before they are marketed to the public.

The *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*—the first peer-reviewed journal dedicated entirely to the scientific, rational evaluations of unconventional health claims. Its purpose is to apply the best tools of science and reason to determine the validity of hypotheses and the effectiveness of treatments. It will dismiss no claim *a priori*, but consider it on its merits. It will reject no claim because it fits, or fails to fit, some paradigm. It will, using scientific methods and reasonable criteria, seek justified answers to two questions: "Is it true?" and "Does this treatment work?" It will call for double-blind controlled trials of "alternative" therapies.

We call for physicians, scientists, health practitioners, and citizens everywhere to support this important venture to advance scientific medicine and to expand the benefits of people's free and informed choice.

*The Scientific Review Of Alternative Medicine*, is published biannually by:

**Prometheus Books,  
59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst, NY 14228-2197.**

**Subscription information:  
US\$50 (individuals in the US and Canada)  
US\$90 (institutions and overseas) per year  
Ph (US) (716) 691-0133, fax (716) 691-0137.**

**Back issues: US\$30.**

Manuscripts and all editorial correspondence should be directed to Wallace Sampson, MD, SRAM, 841 Santa Rita Ave., Los Altos, CA 94022; e-mail: 76453.1565@compuserve.com.

### *The Skeptical Intelligencer*

*The Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine published by the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE), a UK skeptical organization. Each 70+ page edition contains high quality articles for the intelligent lay reader on paranormal, pseudoscientific and anti-scientific claims.

The current issue includes articles on: a new British newspaper astrology study; a British alien abduction case; Loch Ness Monster claims; the origins of the Vampire myth; and the clinical findings in three cases of alleged zombification in Haiti. Future issues will contain articles on: JFK conspiracy theories; recent research into the psychology of ghosts and hauntings; complementary medicine; parapsychological research; and the philosophical justification of the commitment to critical thinking.

A subscription to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* costs £15 per year. Please send payments in Pounds Sterling (cash or instruments of payment) to:

ASKE,

15 Ramsden Wood Road, Walsden, Todmorden,  
Lancs, OL14 7UD, United Kingdom.

## Other recommended publications:

### *Skeptical Inquirer*

PO Box 703  
Amherst NY 14226-0703 USA  
Published by CSICOP,  
Bimonthly  
Annual subscription (overseas) (US)\$45.00

### *Skeptic*

PO Box 338  
Altadena CA 91001 USA  
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Quarterly  
Annual Subscription (overseas) (US)\$50.00