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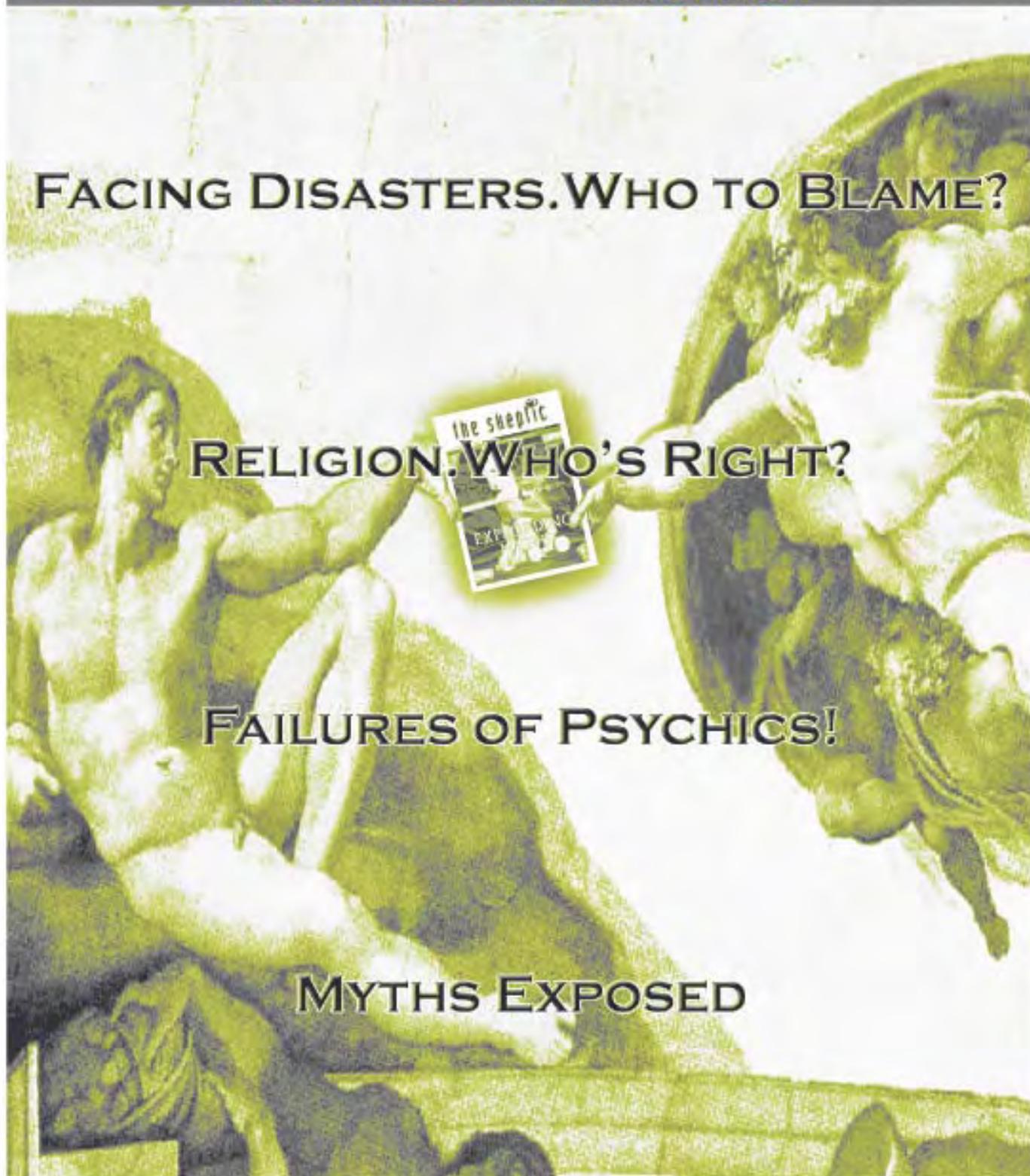
A JOURNAL OF FACT AND OPINION

FACING DISASTERS. WHO TO BLAME?

RELIGION. WHO'S RIGHT?

FAILURES OF PSYCHICS!

MYTHS EXPOSED



the Skeptic

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Who to Blame?

Few people could have remained unaffected by the tragic events that began in the Indian Ocean off Sumatra on the morning of December 26 last year. The tsunami, caused by the shifting of tectonic plates under the sea, cut short a quarter of a million lives, ranking it as one of the most lethal natural disasters in the entire history of our planet.

That this tragedy touched the hearts of many in Australia is attested by the unprecedented generosity of individuals, government and organisations of all sorts in donating to relief efforts, and by the dedication of those who went to the aid of distressed victims. This generosity shows the better part of human nature, however certain religious issues have emerged that are not so benign.

Evidence from neurophysiological research indicates that our genetic make-up makes *homo sapiens* receptive to abstract beliefs that have no rational foundation. This 'faith' usually manifests itself as 'religion', but includes various totalitarian political philosophies that emerged during the 20th Century which, while they ostensibly eschewed supernatural causes, nevertheless embraced many of the trappings and certainly the dogmatism of religion in their application. Observation tends to support this conclusion; throughout history religions have emerged from all cultures at all times and most of them have died out or evolved with the passing of the cultures or of time. Simple logic dictates that the beliefs of **all** religions cannot possibly **all** be right; on the other hand, it is an impeccably rational proposition that all of them could be wrong. There is no evidence to suggest that Faith Brand X has a better explanation of the inexplicable than does Faith Brand Y; there is far more persuasive evidence that all religions, as constructs of the human mind, are prone to fallibility.

This proposed human predisposition to believe, and to invent things in which to believe, has, like most human institutions, resulted in both sublime benefits and grave faults. There can be little doubt that religious devotion has inspired wonderful art, music, architecture and literature, without which the world would be a decidedly poorer place. Nor can there be much doubt that religions can provide comfort to their adherents or can inspire great acts of kindness and sacrifice. But religion (and similar dogmatic beliefs) also has a dark side, with sectarian-inspired conflict, war and genocide remaining as constants throughout human history.

Thus we have seen statements from clerics of various faiths seeking to justify how such violent natural acts as the tsunami fitted with their concept of their particular deity. The tsunami was immaculately ecumenical in its effects, killing tens of thousands of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Sikhs, adherents of many other faiths, sects, new age spirituality, as well as, no doubt, many skeptics, atheists, agnostics, humanists and rationalists, who were unlucky enough to be in its path. It did this without regard to their religious, political or other affiliations, age, sex, state of health, or whether they were good or bad people.

That this caused grave intellectual discomfort to the clerics was evident in the tortured logic they sought to use in their rationalisations. To the obvious skeptical question "How could any hypothetical omniscient, omnipresent and benevolent deity allow such indiscriminate killing?" the answers ranged from "punishment for straying from the true path" (including newborn babies, presumably) to "the Grace of God is shown in the generosity of the response from people" (surely any deity worth his salt could have found a less tragic method of demonstrating

it). But by far the most common response was couched in terms of "God's ways are not our ways and we cannot know the mind of God", which might have sounded more sincere had it not issued from the mouths of those whose lives and livelihoods were precisely dedicated to promulgating and interpreting the mind, actions and words of God.

In passing, several of the more vocal clerics chose to chide those of us, skeptics, atheists, *et al*, who do not subscribe to their notion of deities, implying that we could find no comfort in our scientific view of the world in the face of catastrophe. It might surprise them to learn that what rational people derive from science is not comfort, but understanding. Part of that understanding is that we live on a dynamic planet where natural forces reign supreme; that these insensate forces are neither benign nor malign, they just are — a natural disaster is just that — natural. Sometimes no one is to blame — not even God. It is not the rationalist who is discomfited by such an occurrence, it is those who strive, painfully, to justify the incompatibility of a benevolent deity with an horrific event.

On a personal level, if not comfort, I did derive some satisfaction when the service in which I spent 15 of my younger years, the RAAF, was first on the ground, carrying aid to Sumatra within 48 hours of the disaster, where it continues to provide assistance today. If any comfort comes, it comes from seeing people selflessly doing good when other people are in need. In this case such people are many, and they come from right across the religious and non-religious spectrum.

Barry Williams

Around the Traps

Psychics in the dark

Richard Saunders, whose dedication in visiting psychic fairs goes well beyond the call of duty and might even be considered as cruel and unusual punishment, sent us this story.

Sunday, February 6 saw yet another “Psychic and Alternative Fair”, this time in the Sydney suburb of Hornsby. The usual tarot card readers, clairvoyants, aura readers and alternative healers showed up to provide their services. (Did you know that you can extract the toxins from your body by strapping tea bags to your feet?) I attended a free (after paying \$6 general admission) session of a ‘Spirit Healer’ who did a very slow type of cold reading, involving talking to spirit guides in order to ‘heal’ volunteers from the audience. Strangely, she also ‘cleansed the aura’ by actually touching and stroking the back and arms of the subject — never seen that before.

The ‘highlight’ of the day was the performance of Sharina, the ‘psychic’ star of weekend radio. Her act relies heavily on tarot cards and numbered chopsticks, but I’m afraid her brand of numerology left the audience totally confused and she should think about simplifying it. As I sat there, mentally ticking off various cold reading techniques, (oh, but I’m sure Sharina was getting her information from a heavenly source) to everyone’s surprise, the

power in the auditorium suddenly went off. The blackout effectively ended the show and after 15 minutes of waiting in the dark it was time to go.

Apart from Sharina, I counted at least 15 to 20 other ‘psychics’ and other fortune tellers who also totally failed to foresee this event which directly and adversely affected them.

Also attending was Sue Vanni, who passed on her thoughts on this occurrence to *Column 8* in the *SMH*, which published the following on February 9.:

Avowed sceptic Sue Vanni, of Turramurra, “couldn’t resist” attending Sunday’s Psychic Fair at Hornsby RSL. “I had the last laugh when half-way through the clairvoyant’s show, parts of Hornsby, including the RSL, lost power for 90 minutes. Organisers seemed genuinely taken by surprise. Isn’t it amazing that none of the psychics had predicted the power failure?”

Star crossed

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times for Australian author, Jessica Adams, when she was recently accused of plagiarising an Agatha Christie short story in one she wrote for the magazine, *The Big Issue*. Certainly the affair caused some serious

fluttering in literary dovescotes around the world, but it was not one that would normally have disturbed the even tenor of the quotidian round in the Bunyip’s lair.

But, blow me down and call me Isobel, the story had another dimension that had our skeptical antennae twitching thirty to the dozen (inflation). It seems Ms Adams is not only a prominent author of “chick lit” (whatever that is) she is also a professional astrologer. It hardly requires the little grey cells of M Hercules Porritt for anyone to work out that if the ‘stars’ can send messages, and if astrologers are capable of interpreting those message, then Ms Adams should never have found herself in her present pickle.

NB Every word used in this item has previously been used by someone else. So sue and be damned.

Playing Chicken

During February the good citizens of Newcastle were subjected to a foul plague of fowl crashing through the roofs of their domiciles. Well, to be accurate, only two examples were reported, but had it been your roof, you wouldn’t have been so smug about it. It was not a case of lost migrating poultry passing-out through exhaustion and plummeting to their deaths on the

tiles below. Oh, no! This was far more sinister — they were plucked birds and almost certainly of the frozen variety.

This event caused all sorts of speculation, starting with one that it was an aircraft losing part of its load. As Lady Bracknell might have put it, to lose one chook might be regarded as misfortune, but to lose two looks like carelessness (in any case it is fairly unlikely, as the two cases happened on different days). Others suggested that someone who worked at a factory where trains for NSW Railways were constructed, might be using a hypothetical “chook cannon” (allegedly used to fire bird carcasses at windscreens to test their safety) to launch the birds. Oddly, no one seriously suggested they were the crew of a UFO.

At Skeptics Central we were at first suspicious that Hunter Skeptic supremo, Colin Keay might have been responsible, but that seems unlikely, as Col, who originated in the Shaky Isles would certainly have used frozen kiwis. It remains a mystery, but we have no doubt that The Truth is Out There.

Playing quack

This from James Randi's site www.randi.org.

A new book has been issued by the Prince of Wales' Foundation for Integrated Health, intended to promote alternative health therapies. It's titled, Complementary Health Care: A Guide for Patients, and offers advice on how to find the twelve most popular non-standard therapies, including reflexology, herbal medicine and yoga therapy and it has been distributed to surgeries all over the country.

The book has been condemned as “hair-raisingly flimsy,” “unscientific and potentially dangerous,” “frankly inaccurate” and “over-optimistically misleading” by the UK's leading au-

thority on complementary medicine, Professor Edzard Ernst. Though Ernst says he repeatedly offered to correct the text free of charge, his overtures were rejected. The book encourages the public to resort to unproven treatments, and the costs of production were partly funded by the UK government. One in five Britons now say that they have used herbal or homeopathic medicines, and more are signing up for physical forms of treatment including acupuncture, head massage and aromatherapy.

Randi's succinct summation: *No-
blesse oblige.*

Doug Gregory of Adelaide penned the following poem, that was inspired by a Skeptic mate of his. We like it and thank subscriber, Rog Cooper, for passing it on.

The Sceptic

*He sees only what he sees through his eyes and his
telescope*

No confusion for the sceptic

No false horizon from cards and palms and leaves

No expectation from stars and dice and dreams

No lucky stones or magic for the sceptic

No inspirations from anthems, hymns and prayers

No assistance from all the absent gods

No need to fear the words of prophets

*With a clear conscience and nothing lives forever he
wastes no precious time*

He knows no other truths, the sceptic

*Just the birds who bring his morning and the love of
today.*

Home sweet home

Sometimes here at Skeptics Central, we feel like we are living in the pages of a Jasper Fforde novel. Take the day recently when we opened a renewal from a subscriber to find that she had moved to Treasure Island Avenue and the next one opened was from a subscriber who lived in (down?) Memory Lane. We won't, of course, embarrass our subscribers by naming them, but we suspect they get all sorts of snide comments from their friends.

In passing

We were saddened to learn of the death, last November, of Doris Leadbetter, one of our longest-standing subscribers. Doris, a teacher and librarian with the CSIRO, was a great promoter of science. A staunch Skeptic, her robust good humour and keen sense of the absurd made her contributions to *the Skeptic* and her correspondence a source of delight to those of us lucky enough to have had contact with her. She will be sadly missed.

Found on the Net

I'm currently going through a bad period, New Age-wise. My acupuncturist keeps needling me, I don't see eye-to-eye with my iridologist, my graphologist can't read my writing, I feel manipulated by my chiropractor, my touch therapist won't keep her hands off me, I can't count on my numerologist, my homeopath doesn't give me much of anything, and my psychic healer makes me sick.

Acronymically speaking

Our gratitude to subscriber Doug Irvin of Townsville for the following:

New age is an acronym.

Now Extract Wallet And Give Everything.

Anniversary

In March 1990, Barry Williams volunteered to edit **one** issue of *the Skeptic* as a favour to a friend — this issue is his 60th. Despite this proof of his gross innumeracy, he continues to enjoy the task immensely, and thanks those many readers who have made compli(e)mentary comments over the years.

Bunyip

Facing Disasters

A Skeptic's views of natural disasters

Our regular book reviewer, Rob Hardy, who practices as a psychiatrist in Columbus, Mississippi, had the following essay published in his local paper *The Commercial Dispatch*. We thought it encapsulated the feelings of many Skeptics in the face of the recent tsunami disaster and have Rob's permission to reprint it here.

Like everyone else, I have been trying to make sense of the destruction and death brought by the earthquakes and tsunami. Any disaster like this makes us wonder about our place in the scheme of things. How can such catastrophes happen? We are better equipped to answer the question now than we were when, say, the Lisbon earthquake shook the capital of Portugal in 1755. That earthquake is memorialised forever in the poem Voltaire wrote about it, and in his wonderful *Candide*. Voltaire was disgusted by those who said that the earthquake was sent by God as a lesson. He asked if the citizens of Lisbon were really any naughtier than those of Paris or London. (Perhaps they were even less so, contemporaries might have wanted to think; Lisbon was highly Catholic, as was Portugal overall.) He wanted to know what sort of lesson could be learned by harming people in such an indiscriminate manner.

The urge to find lessons in natural phenomena has not died in the centuries since then. Shlomo Amar, Israel's Sephardi chief rabbi, has said of the tsunami, "This is an expression of God's great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrongdoing — be it people's needless hatred of each other, lack of charity, moral turpitude."

In India, some say that a Hindu religious leader was recently arrested and the tsunami is divine retribution for that offence. Bill Koenig, who describes himself on his website *Watch.org* as a White House correspondent who is "very active in both local and national Christian activities," has explanations. He points out that four of the world's largest earthquake disasters have fallen on Catholic holidays, simultaneities that he thinks are not chance, but a message. He writes also that the nations afflicted by the current disaster have among the world's worst records of persecuting Christians. He also says that the Christians in the region were disproportionately kept from harm, a miracle for which he is thankful.

I can't help thinking that Koenig would have approved of the priests in Lisbon after its earthquake as they roamed the streets to point out those who had brought the earthquake by angering God. Having found them, they hanged them. I



Rob Hardy, from Mississippi, USA is a psychiatrist by profession and a columnist by inclination.

would have trouble believing in his sort of God. This seems to me a terribly inefficient way to send a message. Rather than causing huge waves, and killing thousands of people, some of whom, at least, must have been innocents, any omnipotent supreme being could have been more direct. After all, which government of the region will now look at the numbers of thousands of its dead and reason, "Well, obviously, it is time to stop persecuting those Christians," and then do so? A God who had wanted to send a message might quite a bit more easily have caused heart fibrillations in every individual that was doing the persecuting. This would have had a direct effect of stopping the persecution, it would have killed far fewer and far more deserving people, and the message would have been somewhat more obvious.

Scientific understanding

It ought to be harder to make an argument about God's message now than it used to be. When Lisbon shook to the ground, for instance, no one knew what was happening below the Earth's surface. It was actually quite a reasonable explanation to think that God was doing the shaking; after all, no other known cause could have unleashed such forces. The only subsequent puzzle, which Voltaire, and also Kant, tried to sort out was whether or why God would do such things. Now, however, we know a bit more. Immediately after the current disaster, there were explanations. The ancient process of the shifting of underground plates had caused a sudden earthquake and drop of the ocean floor, and the water simply shifted and made huge waves in response. We didn't know about plate tectonics a hundred years ago, but we do now, and we have good natural explanations for earthquakes and the tsunamis they spawn. It is hard for me to imagine that a God has

tinkered with the natural plate-shifting process to make it go just so, sending a message just where and when he wants it sent. The older explanation, that once the fruit of the forbidden tree was eaten, then bad things started happening on Earth, seems to me equally unsatisfactory. I can't think of a means by which eating a fruit might start the bowels of the Earth to be set in motion, and I can't imagine that a God suddenly thought that this transgression was to be punished by, among other things, setting the continents adrift to bang into each other and cause occasional misery.

Philosophical questions

I don't have any original questions to pose about such issues. Voltaire covered that philosophical territory long ago. Does the God exist who can create such tsunamis, or who endorses them to bring us his opinion? This seems unlikely to me. Of all the people I know, if they could have pressed a button that would have kept the disaster from happening, they would have pressed that button, and unhesitatingly; if there is an omnipotent God, he has plenty of such buttons, but used none. It looks more and more to me as if we live in a natural universe, one understandable (eventually) through physical laws. It seems to me that bad

weather, meteor strikes, and earthquakes are all part of that natural universe, and that they happen, if not randomly, then without regard to whomever they might inconvenience or destroy. I realize that many people believe in a God who sends messages by means of adversity, and even take comfort in such a belief, but the idea of a God directing such stuff makes me far more uncomfortable (and seems far less credible) than the idea that disasters just happen, with no cause beyond the physics involved.

Human reactions

If there is meaning in such disasters, it seems to me as if it is up to us to find it in human terms. It is actually a good sign that a week after such a monumental catastrophe, it is still making headlines. There is a human concern about such an event, which I refuse to see as prurient curiosity about the suffering of others. There has been an outpouring of support, which I refuse to see as any sort of repayment on guilt. I have sent in my little contribution to help, and so have millions of others; let us remember that there is an admirable impulse to help complete strangers, half a world away, with no prospect of recompense. I will be the first to admit that religious feelings may spark such generosity, but I also think that the generosity is there in

its pure form first, for most people, who might put a religious spin on it afterwards. I am not able to add anything new to the ancient discussion of "the problem of evil." The enormous losses those countries have suffered cannot be compensated by any lessons learned, but we still have to take whatever lessons we can. When others suffer, the natural human response is to participate in that suffering, and to try to reduce it; if we might smile at anything within this sad event, we might do so at the human response to it.

Corrections

Lynne Kelly's report in the last issue was headed 'Fourth World Congress'. It was in fact the Fifth.

In the report Lynne used present tense implying that bank accounts are still zeroed and people still disappear in Argentina. She received a note from Alejandro J. Borgo, Editor of *Pensar*, whom she had met at the conference, pointing out that things had improved in that country and concluding:

This is also important because next September we are holding an Iberoamerican Conference on Critical Thinking here in Buenos Aires, and I wouldn't want it that some skeptics from Australia were terrified to come to Argentina. This is not heaven, but neither is hell.



Artificial Sweeteners are Harmful

More myths masticated and spat out

Humans have always enjoyed the taste of sweet foods. If you have a 'sweet tooth' then you are probably quite normal. It has been speculated that we evolved with a sweet tooth because sweet foods (eg fruit, honey) were safe for consumption, while bitter foods may have contained harmful compounds or have unpleasant gastric consequences.

Sugar, which probably originated as a modified grass in New Guinea approximately 10 000 years ago, has been vilified for the last 50 years, without justification. There has been an underlying view that sugar is both harmful and fattening and fits a common belief system that "If it tastes good, it must be bad for you". We now realise that no disease, apart from tooth decay, is linked to sugar consumption. In fact, sensible sugar consumption suits a healthy diet.

Cane sugar is the disaccharide sucrose, comprising a molecule of glucose joined to a molecule of fructose. During digestion this bond is broken, leaving glucose and fructose to be absorbed. Honey is of similar structure, being a mix of sucrose, glucose and fructose. You can see why the chemists were mystified that sugar was presented as inherently evil, yet honey and glucose were a healthy source of "instant energy".

Born of the fear of sugar was the artificial sweetener, to replace sugar in the diet. Of course, it wasn't too long before someone was declaring the dangers of artificial sweeteners and the voice is still loud and clear

today. A quick aside: the food industry hates the expression "artificial sweeteners" as it immediately implies that it is a foreign chemical. In fact, some occur naturally; eg saccharin is found in fruit. Some in the food industry preferred the term "intense sweetener" or "non-nutritive sweetener", but some sweeteners do not fit either description. There now seems to be universal agreement that "sugar substitute" adequately covers the non-sugar sweeteners and makes sense to the public.

The beginnings

The first non-sugar sweetener to be discovered was saccharin in 1879. It was commonly offered to the public as a sugar substitute during the two World Wars when sugar was scarce. Although saccharin is 300 times sweeter than sugar, its metallic bitter aftertaste made it more medicinal than pleasurable. Another sweetener, cyclamate, was discovered in 1937. Cyclamate is 30 times sweeter than sugar. As it worked synergistically with saccharin by enhancing its sweetness and reducing its bitterness, it became a popular addition to the sugar substitutes.

Cyclamate was banned in the US in 1969 after animal experiments, that used massive doses, caused bladder cancer. Most other countries considered cyclamate to be safe in the amount that most people would consume daily. In 1977 saccharin was to be banned as well, which left nothing to sweeten the non-sugar diet drinks that were popular with



Glenn Cardwell, sports dietitian, regular Skeptic columnist and public speaker on meaty matters nutritional.

Nutrition Myth

people with diabetes and weight watchers. A moratorium was demanded and saccharin was permitted to stay in the food supply. Some studies gave animals up to 7.5% of the diet as saccharin, which is the equivalent of giving a human over 100g saccharin a day on a modest diet of 6000 kJ. That is about 300 times the Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) and 3000 times the amount the average human eats today. More on the ADI later.

In May 2000, the National Toxicology Program of the National Institutes of Health (US) no longer listed saccharin as a possible cause of cancer in humans in its 9th edition of the *Report on Carcinogens*. Although large amounts had caused bladder cancer in mice, it was realised that the tumours arose from mechanisms not relevant to humans. The question: "Are you man or mouse?" had been answered. Now go into any mall in the country and ask someone at random whether artificial sweeteners cause cancer and the response will be a definite "Yes". Fear, once established, is hard to eradicate from minds. Only in 2001 did saccharin-containing products in the US no longer have to carry the warning: "Use of this product may be hazardous to your health. This product contains saccharin, which has been determined to cause cancer in laboratory animals".

Aspartame

With frightening stories about saccharin and cyclamate, and with a taste that never matched that of sugar, the search for other sugar substitutes began. In 1965, aspartame was found. With no bitter aftertaste and 200 times sweeter than sugar, this very small protein (actually a di-peptide of the amino acids phenylalanine and aspartic acid) became the most thoroughly researched food additive in the history of the food industry. It soon displaced saccharin and cyclamate from foods that did not require heating or cooking (eg soft drinks and diet yoghurts). When aspartame is heated the two amino acids break apart and

lose their sweetness. Technically, it is a nutritive sweetener because it yields 4 Cals (17 kJ) per gram, but as so little is required, the energy supplied is negligible.

Aspartame was launched onto the market as Nutrasweet or Equal. In 1981 and three years later in Australia. Diet Coke arrived in 1982 with saccharin as the sweetener, but it wasn't long before they changed it to aspartame and triggered the demise of TaB (remember that drink and its stable mate Tresca?). By the way, Diet Coke started life as 'diet Coke' with a lower case 'd' to emphasise the Coke-ness rather than the diet-ness. Things have changed with waistline expansion, as it is now spelled with a capital D.

Phenylalanine warning

There is a warning on products with aspartame alerting the consumer to the presence of phenylalanine. This has concerned a few people. I was on talkback radio, when a caller demanded to know why diet soft drink carried a warning and why should these products be allowed on the market. She was fuming. I explained that the warning only applied to the 1 in 10 000 people who have a condition called Phenylketonuria (PKU). This is a genetic condition in which the body cannot metabolise phenylalanine properly and the rise in phenylalanine causes mental retardation. As aspartame contained phenylalanine, parents with PKU children needed this information.

In western countries newborn babies have a blood sample taken, usually from a heel prick, to check for a range of genetic conditions, including PKU, cystic fibrosis and galactosaemia. If a child has PKU, they are diagnosed within 48 hours. They cannot have breast milk, so go on a special formula low in phenylalanine. The children grow up quite normally without any damage to their brain.

Scare tactics

As aspartame is by far the most common sugar substitute in the food supply, there are frequent scares

created about its use. The US Food and Drug Administration and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) have thoroughly checked the research and found nothing of concern. Should there have been concern in the first place? After all, we are talking about two amino acids, compounds abundant in any food with protein. For example, a 250 mL glass of milk contains 12g protein, of which about 1.5g (1500mg) is phenylalanine and aspartic acid. Compare that to the 187mg the average Australian gets from aspartame each day.

The fuss was more about the methyl group attached to the two amino acids in aspartame, as this gets momentarily converted to methanol, a potentially toxic compound. Fortunately, methanol gets quickly converted to formaldehyde then to carbon dioxide. The levels of methanol were too low to pose a problem. Indeed, tomato juice produces six times the amount of methanol than diet soft drink.

This has not quietened the email hoaxes and the conspiracy theorists. On a regular basis you are likely to get an email with the unsubstantiated claim that aspartame causes Multiple Sclerosis. (I suspect many of the food hoaxes spread by emails are generated by a disgruntled individual or group to affect sales and profits by big multinational companies. I've never seen a nutrition hoax targeting a small local company).

Some people just don't like the concept of a sugar substitute and would prefer to eat as close to 'natural' as possible. I respect that view, but it should never be justified by clinging onto irrational scare stories. As the American Dietetic Association put it in their report on sweeteners: "The issue of sweeteners can engender emotional feelings, which may have greater personal meaning than statistical arguments". Very diplomatically put.

Sweetener consumption

In March 2004 FSANZ released a survey of over 3500 people and their consumption of sugar substitutes.

With two thirds of the population eating sugar substitutes it was important to see if any were consuming very high amounts. On average, all of the sweeteners were consumed at much less than the Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI).

A brief word on the ADI. Researchers determine the lowest dose of any food additive that may cause a health problem over a lifetime of consumption. The ADI is then set at 1% of that level. In other words, you would have to consume 100 times the ADI every day over a lifetime before scientists believe there is a potential for harm. Because everyone is different, and the health of the community is paramount, the ADI allows a 100 fold safety margin. This concept of the ADI is also followed by the Food and Drug Administration in the US.

In this survey, even the top 5% biggest consumers of aspartame could only reach 20% of the ADI (about 500 times less than the amount that may cause a problem). This does not seem to allay the fears of everyone. The only ones who got close to an ADI for a sweetener were people with diabetes who ate a lot of cyclamate-sweetened foods. With the exception of cyclamate, the average consumption of all sweeteners was less than 10% of the ADI.

The report concluded:

Despite the increased consumption of foods containing intense sweeteners ... the majority of Australians and New Zealanders consume these foods that present no appreciable safety risk. However, there was a small proportion of the population in both countries whose exposure to the sweetener cyclamate was above desirable levels.

Other sugar substitutes

All sugar substitutes in food available in Australia and New Zealand have been thoroughly tested and are very unlikely to cause harm. I shall briefly mention just some that are on the market. As they are a smaller proportion of the sugar substitute market compared to aspartame, they seem to generate less interest.

Sucralose, which is much easier to pronounce than its chemical name of trichlorogalactosucrose, is a more

recent sweetener marketed as Splenda. Sucralose is 600 times sweeter than sugar and is made by attaching three chlorine atoms to a molecule of sucrose. This stops most of the sucralose from being absorbed, making it virtually kilojoule-free. It is heat stable so can be used in cooking and baking.

Alitame (trade name Aclame), like aspartame, is a di-peptide, this time comprising alanine and aspartic acid. It is 2000 times sweeter than sugar and heat stable.

Acesulphame K (the K is for potassium) is 200 times sweeter than sugar and its sweetness is not diminished with heating. Although absorbed by the body, most is excreted unchanged in the urine.

Isomalt (trade name Palatinit) is formed from sucrose, with only half the kilojoules. It is tooth-friendly and an ingredient of sugar-free confectionery.

Sugar alcohols (sorbitol, mannitol, xylitol, maltitol, isomalt and lactitol). Due to poor absorption they provide, on average, 8 kJ (2 Cals) per gram and are less sweet than sugar (16 kJ/4 Cals per gram). They are often used as a bulking agent such as in sugar-free confectionery and, as they do not promote tooth decay, are used in sugar-free chewing gum. Too much sorbitol (>15g per serve) can have a laxative effect.

Are sugar substitutes dangerous?

Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggests that sugar substitutes, eaten in the usual amounts, have a benign effect on health. The truth is, there are far bigger dietary concerns affecting our health, with a lack of fruit and vegetables, and too much saturated fat and salt being top of the league. As the public quickly tire of health messages, any scary diet story is always an attractive distraction.

My tip

Please don't think that sugar substitutes will make you lose weight or be immune to tooth decay. You will still

need to be active and eat low-fat for successful weight control and you will still need to brush and floss your teeth. The greatest advantage is probably comes from the diet soft drinks and cordial, and sugar-free confectionery. With the body not being able to adequately compensate for kilojoules in the liquid form, it is easy to over-consume sugar-containing drinks leading to weight gain. That makes diet drinks a better choice for weight control. Sugar-free confectionery is friendlier to teeth. Both types of products are better suited to those with diabetes. Apart from those benefits, the clichés of 'balanced diet' and 'everything in moderation' still hold.

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The Psychic Skeptic:

Part 2

The conclusion of an intrepid investigation into the other side



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What went before

In the previous issue of *the Skeptic* (24:4) I related how I had responded to an advertisement at www.career.com.au seeking a telephone psychic. The American company Absolutely Psychic was offering contractual positions for “only the best psychics”. In keeping with the vogue for technologically savvy psychics, the position also entailed email and chat room readings. The first article revealed how I had passed the initial application round and was therefore eligible to undertake an email reading test. After successfully completing this task, I was invited to participate in a 15-minute online, real-time chat room reading test. This sequel continues with this exposé, to investigate whether Absolutely Psychic’s “extensive screening process” would weed out a skeptic infiltrator!

Now read on

The Internet has encouraged the promotion and proliferation of psychics and psychic companies, giving birth to email and chat room readings. Absolutely Psychic fretted:

Many were stunned when this came into operation. After all, most readers need to hear a voice in order to tune.

However, they quickly rationalised this:

receiving a psychic reading via typing and having the reader type back to you does not block the flow of communication.

Or the flow of money!
(Incidentally, as I write this article, I have just discovered a new British innovation to secure the dependency of clients — Text-A-Psychic. SMS psychic, tarot or astrology readings for only £1.50 per message! Send an SMS to one of the many psychics who suddenly perform this new service and they will send continual messages, charging per reply, until you send the direction ‘stop’. “Like having your own psychic in your pocket!” one ad enthuses. It won’t be long before this new avenue of cash catches on overseas.)

The semi-final test

At the appointed time, and after a psychic warm (reading) up, I signed in to www.absolutelypsychic.com/

testreading.html for my chat room reading debut. The web page noted:

If we are interested in contracting you on our Network, we will contact you after all other applicants have been evaluated. We do not give feedback nor 'follow-ups'. THANKS VERY MUCH! Good Luck.

The following is the chat room reading test in its entirety; it has not been edited for spelling or grammatical errors.

Ann> hi

Karenina> Hello

Ann> how are you doing

Karenina> I am very well, thank you. How are you?

Ann> I will be doing your test with you

Ann> good ty

Karenina> Okay

Ann> Did you have any problems loading the chat room?

Karenina> None at all.

Ann> great great gald to hear that

Karenina> How would you like me to start?

Ann> Karenina I would like you to do your reading how you normally do and feel comfortable with.

Ann> would like to start with a general reading ,focusing more on relaitonships :)

Karenina> I like to meditate briefly...to tune into my clients.

Ann> great sure thing :)

Karenina> I'm hearing from my Angel Guide. Arthur Fitzroy, a bastard son of Henry VIII.

Ann> thats good

Karenina>I have a message from him.

Ann> thats great

Karenina> He said: I stay from the final light to rectify wrongs and help those who seek truth because of the injustice done to me. I have chosen not to enter the final light. I am... an

angel and have exiled myself from love and final peace.

Ann> thats great

Karenina> I have a message. I can see possible turmoil ahead for you...

Ann> oh

Karenina> Either you are already in a loving relationship or will soon be in one, but be wary... ahead of you might be something to challenge this.

Ann> can you tell where? is this a someone that brings the problems about?

Karenina> Yes, my spirit guide, was a strong and passionate man and he can feel you through me. He senses your own passion, but sometimes you can be too giving to your partner.

Ann> yes I know it lol

Karenina> There are three things to remember.

Karenina> 1: If turmoil does come, never pass it off. I sense if you do this, you could become mired in something you don't want.

Ann> k

Karenina> 2. always share yourself with the one you love. When you cut off communications, which I feel you have been doing, you can't love as fully.

Karenina> 3. Take care of your desires and be with someone who takes care of themselves. I feel both you and your former partners have been too giving in the past. When you care for yourself, you come to care for each other more deeply.

Ann> cutting off comunactions from my partner?

Karenina> Yes, because in the past you have been afraid to open up as fully as possible because of past trouble.

Karenina> Always be open when you feel frustration or unrest in your relationship. Circumstances may have made you afraid to be as open as you could.

Ann> some yes right

Ann> we usually talk about almost everything ,can you tell what we are not comunaction about?

Karenina> Your innermost desires. What you need.

Ann>yes what I need

Karenina>I sense something in you which is asking to be shared with your partner. You must express this, lest it fester inside you and you'll become unhappy.

Ann> ok yes true no not want to be come unhappy

Karenina> I feel that you are wary of this and won't let this happen. :)

Ann> your right i will not

Ann> let it happend

Karenina> Feel inside your emotions and realise the lovely potential you can have. I sense you wish something a little more from your partner. Something they are unaware of and something you need. They can give it to you

Ann> i will be careful

Ann> Karenina we need to wrap up ,We have used all our time :) up

Karenina> Thank you for your time Ann. I hope that I have been of some assistance.

Ann> thank you for sharing your time and gifts

Karenina> I feel great positivity for you.

Ann> yes TY

Ann>Positive is good.

I admit that, like a TV cooking show, I had prepared some of this reading beforehand. I came equipped with the 'angel guide' statement. It was amusing to read 'Ann's' nonchalant reaction to this absurd announcement. But 'Arthur Fitzroy' is an historically plausible character. 'Fitzroy', 'son of the king', was the surname given to illegitimate royal children. Henry VIII did have an illegitimate son named Henry Fitzroy with mistress Bessie Blount. Henry Fitzroy was at one stage considered for the status of heir appar-

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ent, above his two legitimate sisters (the future 'Bloody Mary' and Elizabeth I). However, Henry Fitzroy died prematurely of consumption at age 17. 'Arthur' was the name of Henry's elder brother who had died before he could accede the throne (incidentally, Arthur was briefly married to Catherine of Aragon, who would later become Henry VIII's first wife. Their son-less union would instigate much religious and secular change although this is another story altogether!)

Following this introduction, the remainder of the reading was impromptu, a concoction of conceivable and vague assertions about relationships. I found some of Ann's responses, eg. "*thats [sic] great*" and "*thats [sic] good*" to seemingly praise my bizarre statements as making for a convincing and dramatic reading. This was in contrast to her trusting, believing responses to my relationship 'advice'. It is easy to make general 'observations' that people will 'connect with', often with self-deprecating humour, eg.

Karenina>...*sometimes you can be too giving to your partner.*

Ann> *yes I know it lol*

Fortune cookie-like 'warnings' are also effective and often applicable, eg.

Karenina>...*I sense something in you which is asking to be shared with your partner. You must express this, lest it fester inside you and you'll become unhappy.*

Ann> *ok yes true no not want to be come unhappy.*

I thought I'd botched the reading at the following point where 'Ann' challenged me:

Ann> *we usually talk about almost everything, can you tell what we are not communaction [sic] about?*

I realised that, as a believer, she was probably more concerned about what psychic 'knowledge' I had about her partner, rather than this query being a 'trap'. So, I 'empowered' her with the response:

Karenina> *Your innermost desires. What you need.*

Ann> *yes what I need.*

She seemed to accept this with her positive response and repetition of my comment. I hate to admit that it's a minor power trip (and could easily be addictive) to have someone accept your word as 'gospel'!

Again, I made certain to finish on an optimistic, positive note!

Karenina> *I feel great positivity for you. Ann> yes TY*

Ann> *Positive is good.*

Overall, my 'reading' was a ream of nonsensical advice and warnings but 'Ann' seemed to relate to it. At Absolutely Psychic rates, this effort would cost the punter \$US29.95!

A final test

I cringed at the entire experience. Surely this one wouldn't get past the finishing line! However, just because I know myself to be a skeptic, I shouldn't misinterpret this privileged knowledge for their insight. The following day came yet another email. I had passed the third test! I was invited to attempt the fearful, fourth and final test. The ten minute telephone reading test:

Our telephone test will be a short 10 minute phone reading. We will not tell you on the telephone if you passed or failed. We have many applicants to test and must conserve time. We do not provide feedback. If we are interested in you we will contact you via email with our contractual agreement.

The test was scheduled for the following day. It had all been pretty easy — until now. I started to feel psychic stage fright. How could I possibly pass this confrontational test? And with no feedback? I couldn't 'fish for details' or receive the 'positive minimal responses' (as we say in linguistics), the supportive 'mm hmms' that would indicate my accuracy. Silence would normally be interpreted as uncooperative or in a reading, inaccuracy. This would be a

warm, perhaps even a sweaty reading and I needed to consult a professional unpsychic — Ian Rowland. As we all know, our good friend wrote the definitive book on the subject, *The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* (available at www.ianrowland.com), the Bible of Cold Reading! I engaged in a cramming session of research until I was equipped with the concise facts of cold reading. I realised that the lack of a face-to-face encounter could actually act in my favour. All I needed was a pleasant voice, a calm, sympathetic demeanour and to make assertions that would sound meaningful. I could take comfort in Rowland's advice — offer non-specific specific Rainbow Ruses and Fuzzy Facts all washed down with some Fine Flattery. I was as ready as I would ever be.

Somebody blundered

I awaited the appointed hour of my 'interview'. It came and went. Had I been the victim of someone's joke? Did the 'job' really exist? Did the 'psychic panel' re-assess my performance and decided to cull me from the shortlist? I emailed Absolutely Psychic hoping to reschedule the test and learned why the initial test didn't take place. Holly, the test coordinator and a psychic, had dialled the wrong number by mistake. Insert obvious joke here!

Holly did call on time for the second appointment and apologised for misdialling the country code. After a few pleasantries, Holly asked me to give her a general reading, and general it was. I opined that I could feel a sense of the 'circle of life' about her, a "beginning or an end", a "start or finish", a "death or a birth". Perhaps there has been a passing in her family or the family of a friend or acquaintance? Or a birth? Perhaps this message was metaphorical. Maybe she will commence or finish a project. Start or end a relationship? Or does it mark renewal and rejuvenation? I was starting to confuse myself with my circumlocution. Holly remained completely silent, no reaction at all. Admittedly, this was off-putting. I tried to construe this as

her being engrossed in my reading, so that I could maintain my momentum.

So I continued. Knowing that Absolutely Psychic had recently branched out into international contacts I stated that I sensed that Holly had embarked on a new project. I added that this undertaking should prove to be fulfilling and lucrative. I sensed that she had been very busy of late and had less time to devote to friends and family. Feeling confident about making general, future predictions that couldn't be evaluated then and there, I cautioned Holly that this state of affairs could continue for some weeks to months, after which I 'saw' her embarking on a trip or journey of some sort. A trip related in some way to her past or future.

Getting into the swing of things, I was actually disappointed when Holly interrupted me to prematurely end the reading. We were only about 5 minutes into the reading. Her closing words sounded ominous, "I've heard as much as I need to. Thanks." I was a little shocked. I had clearly bombed. I might have fooled these people with a glowing resume, a prepared email reading and a general, informal chat room reading but the real test had exposed me, perhaps not as a skeptic but certainly as a novice. The whole premise for my investigation was seemingly invalidated. It was time to put away my crystal ball.

Success!

Another email awaited me the next day. I could smell the rejection.

Thank you for taking time to apply and test out for our Network. We have purposely constructed this e-mail as we are busy with a million duties to keep business flowing.

My heart sank...until I read the next line.

We would like to offer you an Independently contracted Psychic job with APN.

I got the job! This is the most excited I could ever be about a job I didn't want!

I was provided with a website to download a contract. The website greeted me with:

CONGRATULATIONS! Only 1% of applicants are offered contracting!

The margin of unsuccessful applicants was ever widening!

Another part of their website notes:

OUR SCREENING PROCESS IS EXTENSIVE All readers are thoroughly tested. Take a look at our application <http://www.absolutelypsychic.com/form5.html>. This is only a small portion of our screening process. If a Psychic reader is contracted on our Network, client feedback is a very important factor for the duration of tenure. We have published our statistics in the past. Our clients can bear witness to having seen on AbsolutelyPsychic:

"July 27,2002: " 74 Applicants — 43 Tested — 4 selected" and "September 3 "41 Applicants — 23 Tested — 2 selected."

Yet they need an automated message to inform such a small portion of applicants that they have been successful? My experience leads me to doubt the accuracy of these figures. It is apparent that the company has a lengthy and involved, yet not stringent procedure and a high turnover of 'psychics'.

The job

As a potential employee, I suddenly became privy to insider information. For instance, how much does a telephone psychic get paid? Novice readers are paid 23 cents per minute for a four month probationary period. Subsequent to this period, readers receive a generous four cent per minute pay increase. Using the service can prove to be an expensive exercise. Clients phone a 1-800 line (the equivalent of our 1-900 numbers) and are charged at a rate of \$US1.99 per minute for a phone reading (Surprisingly, this rate is relatively cheap as other comparable companies charge \$US3.99 per

minute yet still only pay their staff around 20 cents per minute). Their website FAQ's note:

I live outside North America. Can I still use the Phone Network? YES! In fact, this is our speciality. We are the only network that has the technology to connect Non North America Clients to North America and Non North America readers without charging you extra and yet offering this service in an on demand fashion.

Let's hope that their overseas clients see through this careful wording and realise this rate does not include international/long distance rates, when a Non-North American caller phones North America. A call to Absolutely Psychic could be a costly mistake indeed. (At a loose calculation, a 15 minute call through this company, including psychic fees and call charges, would amount to about \$A45.)

The claims

Yet, Absolutely Psychic make much of their 'ethical' business practices:

Many Psychic Networks also mix their business with SEX. Most 900 lines operate phone sex lines. Also, many Online Psychic Networks operate in the adult entertainment business.

Not Absolutely Psychic. Their bread and butter is love, not sex:

Jump right in and ask them straight out 'love life?' 95% of readings are love readings and 5% work. One of our readers with a very good sense of humor instantly says to clients 'are we checking your love meter today?'

While Absolutely Psychic offer their new readers a list of helpful 'reading tips', such as these, they don't have a code of ethics.

New consultants serve their probationary period as telephone psychics. After successfully passing, contractors may progress to email and chat room readings. This is a lucrative, multi-billion dollar industry in the United States. A simple 600 word reading, like my test read-

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ing, is charged at \$US59.95 while a 1300 word reading is only \$US79.95! Online chat room readings rake in the cash too. From \$US29.95 for a 15 minute reading through to \$US89.95 for an hour long reading. Like a psychic pyramid scheme, clients receive a free 15 minute reading for every two friends they 'refer' to the company. Clients can also get ripped off in the language of their choice as Absolutely Psychic offer bilingual readers, specialising in Spanish and French.

But what was my decision to be? Should I accept the job and defect to the other side? I could join the lofty ranks of John Edward, Sylvia Brown, Athena Starwoman and Doris Stokes who are (or were) more famous and wealthy than most skeptics. Surely, with my insider knowledge I could be the best of the worst! But, wouldn't I have the skeptics on my tail? "She was one of us!" Aha! I have a shrewd response for that one. "Yes, I was a prominent skeptic, a public and active member, but through this environment of scientific testing and research I came to accept the undeniable proof that psychics do exist...and I am one!" What a selling point! Or perhaps I could convince myself with uncritical, faulty logic that I am, in fact, a psychic. I thought I was a skeptic but passing these rigorous tests qualifies me as a psychic. I simply need to redefine my concept of psychic.

The result

I didn't accept the contractual position. I will remain poor...but ethical. Perhaps I could have accepted the offer and spent each reading disseminating critical thinking

To whom this may concern,

In January of 2004 I applied for a position as 'psychic' through your company. I successfully passed each stage of the Absolutely Psychic screening process, including the application submission, the email reading, the chat room reading and the telephone test. According to your website, this is an incredible feat as, depending on which link I read, only between 1-5.7% of applicants are successful. Finally, I was offered a contractual position as a 'psychic' with Absolutely Psychic.

The purpose of my contact is to inform you that, despite passing your reputedly stringent series of tests, I do not profess any psychic ability and am, in fact, a prominent member of the Australian Skeptics Inc, where I undertake investigations of this nature, to test claims of the paranormal. Employing 'cold and hot reading' skills, amateur psychology and generalisations (and badly at that) were sufficient for me to infiltrate your ranks and be offered a position with your organisation. This does not speak highly of either the legitimacy of your operation or the practice itself.

I would be very interested in any feedback you may have regarding this situation.

Yours Sincerely,

Karen Stollznow,

the 'Psychic Skeptic'.

skills to my clients! I sent the following email to Absolutely Psychic.

As of the publishing deadline date for this issue, 1/2/2005, I have not received any response to my email.

My objective was to see if a supposedly ethical and reputable company, with allegedly high standards, would hire a person without psychic ability. And they did. They hired a skeptic as a psychic. In that I applied for the position, the company presupposed that I am psychic. Their tests did not prove psychic ability. Any thoughtful person with minimal advice-giving skills would have passed. And I do not claim to be psychic. I have no reason to believe others who claim psychic ability. Yet, by the admission of Absolutely Psychic,

successfully passing their test system means that I am placed within the top 1% of psychics!

What is of concern is the overwhelmingly uncritical acceptance of 'psychic' as a valid profession and one through which people can seek legitimate advice. This is an industry with no regulations or accountability. While I undertook some research for this investigation I unearthed several articles from prominent newspapers that did not examine the phenomenon but accepted it unquestioningly and offered readers a psychic shopper's guide to 'choosing the right psychic for you!' Rather than exploring the legitimacy of the practice these articles only distinguished between a 'professional psychic' and what they perceived to be an 'unscrupulous psychic'. The only criteria for the former seemed to be a psychic who offered the best value for money, was

friendly and provided an appropriately mystical ambience. The employee expectations of Absolutely Psychic were no more profound. In hiring a skeptic as a psychic, these companies don't expect more than a credible manner and a 'gift of the gab'. In accepting this, their clients don't expect any more either. As Absolutely Psychic say, "We don't need to say our Psychics are the Best, our clients do all day long!"



Pestiferous Laws

Reporting on a long-running case

Ten years ago I became aware of a new type of gadget on the market that was supposed to eliminate pests and vermin from the home. Called Pest Free, it did not employ chemicals, rather, when plugged into an electricity outlet it produced weakly pulsing magnetic fields:

affecting the sensitive metabolism of pests making your home a no-go zone

and which

create an environment where things such cockroaches, mice and rats cannot eat, sleep or breed.

These and many other extraordinary advertising claims were enough to trigger my bulldust detector and, with the kind assistance of skeptical friends, I publicly questioned the efficacy of the plug-in device. It was not long before the manufacturer reacted and we received formal threats of legal action in a contest fully described in Autumn 1999 issue of *the Skeptic* (19:1) available on the *Great Skeptic CDs*.

In 1999 the Director of the Hunter Public Health Unit, Dr Craig Dalton, demanded proof of the validity of the pseudo-scientific claims made by the

Pest Free manufacturer and the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission opened an investigation into the device. Neither authority received a satisfactory response and Pest Free Australia P/L kept on selling their device. According to the *Newcastle Herald* (2002 January 16):

... the family owned and operated company has since (it commenced) sold more than 250,000 units in Australia.

At \$79.95 per unit plus \$7.50 postage and handling that's big bikkies for a family business! That Australian total presumably omits overseas sales which, in early 2003, earned the company a Federal Government Export Market Development Grant of \$42,336, the second largest grant for the Hunter region (*Newcastle Post*, 2003 January 15). It was claimed in the report that every EMDG dollar granted generated an additional 12 dollars in exports, so there's another half a million.

However the trade had not all been one way. Late in 2001 Mr Ray Connell, managing director of Pest Free Pty Ltd, took out a large newspaper advertisement (*NH* November



Colin Keay, grand panjandrum of the Hunter Skeptics, is a retired (but not retiring) physicist

10) headed “*Let’s keep the real pests out of Australia*” protesting:

the flooding of our domestic market with cheap imported products that are copies of our great Australian brands. They rob us of income and much-needed jobs.

Well, those who export junk can hardly complain if someone else imports similar junk. For three years the wheels of the ACCC slowly rotated until a press release emerged on 15 November 2002 announcing:

ACCC Institutes Against Pest Free Australia Pty Ltd Over its Plug-in Pest Free Device Alleging Misleading Conduct.

The action, in the Federal Court, alleged that Pest Free in its advertising, made false and misleading representations concerning the performance and characteristics of its product in breach of sections 52 and 53(c) of the Trade Practices Act 1974. Eleven examples were cited, all of a biological nature, such as (the device will):

break the breeding and feeding cycles of cockroaches, mice, rats and other noxious or destructive insects and vermin.

Serious doubts

My feeling, backed by opinions of qualified biologists, was that Pest Free would have utmost difficulty proving any of the cited advertising claims. The press release stated that the ACCC sought court orders including, *inter alia*, injunctions, refunds to customers, corrective advertisements, removal of the product from sale, and costs. Wow!

So I waited. Soon, for reasons that were a mystery, the case was transferred from Sydney to the Federal Court in Adelaide where there seemed to be a protracted series of “discovery hearings”. Every few months I phoned the ACCC contact person in Adelaide to find out how much was discovered until in July 2004 I made a discovery that shocked me. I learned that the goal-

posts had been shifted! Instead of Pest Free having to prove that its claims were NOT false and misleading, now the ACCC was required to prove that Pest Free’s claims were in fact false and misleading! There must have been some fancy footwork there on the part of Pest Free’s silks — or breathtaking incompetence on the part of the ACCC’s legal team.

I was so incensed that I wrote formally to the ACCC offering to be an expert witness to disprove one of Pest Free’s advertising claims that was based on false physics. It was not one of the eleven basically biological claims cited in the ACCC action. To be specific, Pest Free’s print ads asserted that their device:

... alters the existing electromagnetic field in your electric wiring, reaching deep into the walls, ceilings, cupboards and crevices affecting the sensitive metabolisms of pests.

I don’t know about the sensitive metabolisms of pests, but the degree of penetration of the feeble magnetic fluctuations of the Pest Free unit is very limited, as I had convincingly demonstrated in a TV demonstration (*A Current Affair*, January 25 1996). I pointed out that the power conductors in normal household wiring are only a few millimetres apart, so the opposing currents produce (by Ampere’s Law) opposing magnetic fields which effectively cancel out only a few centimetres from the cable itself. Moreover, the current drawn by the Pest Free device flows only in the cable between the wall socket (into which the Pest Free is plugged) and the mains supply to the meter box, and does not flow and create a magnetic effect in any other electrical cables throughout the house.

I heard no more from the ACCC until a letter dated December 17 2004 arrived thanking me for my “assistance in this matter” and including a press release dated 11 November — Armistice Day. The press release was headed “*Federal Court Accepts Undertakings on Plug-in Pest Device*”, the undertakings being that Pest Free will:

refrain from making representations that their devices, when operating within a person’s premises, will ...

Here followed a somewhat revised list of the advertising claims set out in the initial press release. Then there were four final paragraphs which I quote verbatim.

The court granted leave for the ACCC to discontinue proceedings against the company and its directors. The court noted that the parties agreed that the discontinuance was without prejudice to previous costs orders in the respondent’s favour and that each party bear its own costs since 30 June 2004.

ACCC Chairman, Mr Graeme Samuel said the ACCC is pleased the proceedings have been settled with the company offering undertakings to the court.

Any claims made as to efficacy or performance characteristics of a product must be accurate and truthful. If a company makes a representation as to a future action it must have a reasonable basis for making the claims.

The ACCC is also aware of similar plug-in devices on the market and is concerned about some of the claims being made in relation to those devices. Sellers of such devices should exercise due diligence to ensure that any claims made about operation or effectiveness have a sound basis in fact, he said.

The faint sounds of wrist-slapping may be distinctly heard from the courtroom.



Sensing Nothing

Taking a look at a shabby and insulting TV show

It is night in the suburbs. A street-lamp pole bears a tattered poster with the photos of three girls, information wanted. Under the bright star-lit sky stands an eldritch Rebecca Gibney.

Many people are reticent to believe in psychic phenomena until there is scientific proof. What many people don't realise is that there already is.

At this, the stars in the sky coalesce into the Greek letter Ψ 'psi'...

Psychic phenomena or 'psi' has been shown to exist in thousands of scientific experiments. Virtually all the scientists who have studied the evidence, even the hard-nosed sceptics, now agree that psi merits serious attention. The question is now no longer 'What proof is there?' but rather 'What does the proof reveal about ourselves and the universe?'

(Accompanying photographs show tests being performed with the words "Princeton University")

Despite Channel Ten billing *Sensing Murder* as a show in which psychics work with police to solve murder cases, the police are not involved with the show, and the section with the psychics only lasts for about a third of the hour-and-a-half show. Just as current affairs shows lure you through the ad-breaks with the

promise of a particularly juicy story that turns out to be right at the end, with *Sensing Murder* you have to sit through interminable re-enactments of the murder. These dramatisations cover not only the murders, but also take a long time to "set the scene", giving the background of the victim and other people involved. Snippets of the re-enactments are shown over and over throughout the rest of the show. Some people report that they found watching these segments quite harrowing and upsetting.

The last third of the show is given over to the work of a team of private investigators. They pick over the bones of the case (which others have gone over many times before) and try to follow up on anything the psychics have said that sounds promising — never very much. To present that part of the show they have a clean-cut young man who sits at a desk and tries to appear suave and deep, yet professional. Unfortunately he comes across as rather stilted. It's hard to imagine him with a team of private investigators in the field, but easier as a wannabe actor.

In the psychic part of the show, middle-aged women with garish dyed hair (wigs?) murmur and gasp as they wander around crime scenes or are given evidence to hold.

Christopher Short is President of the Victorian Skeptics, a place where photographs do not work because of low light levels.

Sensing Nothing

To get the psychics for the show, the *Sensing Murder* team tested over one hundred psychics from around Australia by asking them to provide details from an obscure murder with only a photograph to guide them. They managed to whittle the numbers down to the top five psychics who are used, generally two at a time, on each episode.

Sensing Murder details the following rules:

- ◆ Psychics have been flown from interstate (to minimise exposure to the cases);
- ◆ Psychics have never met;
- ◆ Kept separate from each other at all times;
- ◆ Filmed non-stop in one day;
- ◆ Kept under constant supervision (so they can't research the case);
- ◆ No responses during the reading (from the crew).

Missing the point

So the psychics are shown photographs, pieces of evidence and taken to crime scenes to “pick up the vibes”. Uncannily, despite being told nothing else, the psychics manage to relate all sorts of information that precisely matches the details of the case.

Wait a moment — the information matches the details of the case? The rules above and the business of not telling the psychics which case they are working on seem to be all part of a “game” where we see how many of the known facts the psychics can pick up. Surely this misses the whole point that the psychics are supposed to be providing new information and solving the cases?

In one episode both psychics are given a photograph of the victim. One looks at the photo and starts relating details, but the other declares that she can do the same without seeing the front of the photograph — so it's given to her face down. She starts stroking the photograph and is soon rattling off details as well. Later, she is “permitted” to turn the photo and gives more de-

tails. Assuming these psychics are real, what was the point of this downturned photo stunt?

It all makes it look like some kind of hokey carnival magician's act. If these psychics are really there to solve the case, and not play some game, they should be given all the known information about the case before the episode and then asked to provide new details. What's the point of getting the psychics to guess the victim's name? You wouldn't treat a detective like that! If all their psychic power enables these psychics to do is to relate known details, it's pretty useless, and not a little suspect.

Even though the psychics were flown from interstate, these were not obscure cases. They were reported in the media all over Australia and all of them have had books written about them. Upon being told she is to be flown to another state, a fake psychic would not find it at all difficult to pop down to the library to brush up on her knowledge of that state's infamous unsolved murders.

Inside information

A contact from the crew of *Sensing Murder* has revealed another part of the reason why the psychics did so well at sensing details from the murders. Apparently the psychics were filmed while they were picking up ‘vibes’ about the case and then their comments were matched up against the known facts. The show was subsequently ‘improved’ by editing out the mistakes. The correct statements were left in, as well as those mentioned by both psychics. The crew member was very unimpressed by the psychics' abilities and claimed to feel “morally bankrupt” for having worked on the show.

Perhaps a minute or two — out of such a long programme — has the psychics attempting to answer the big questions to which no-one knows the answers. Invariably their responses turn out to indicate answers that can never be verified. In one episode the missing body was said to be at the bottom of a waste disposal tip, which is so large that it will

never be turned over looking for this body. The psychics said there was a witness to one of the murders — but what can you do if that witness doesn't come forward? A murderer was alleged to work for a particular large hospital — but information about the staff there was unavailable due to privacy laws.

In the episode about the Phillip Island Murders, self-styled “Psychic Detective” Scott Russell-Hill is brought in. He's the only male psychic on the show and is presented in a different way from the others. He's more confident and definite about what's going on. He talks about building up ‘psychic profiles’ of people and ‘vibrations’.

Bizarrely Scott does not employ his own psychic powers but instead turns to that most inconsistent of all New Age arts — numerology. He adds up numbers selected from the victim's birth-date as well as numbers in the death date and notes that they don't match! Despite the evidence being far from conclusive, police and coroner had decided that the murder probably occurred on the 23rd September. But Scott's numerology convinces him that the murder must have occurred on the 22nd — because on that date the victim's “personal vibration peaks”.

One piece of evidence — already known to the police — seems to support this and is waved about as damning ‘overlooked evidence’ that is likely to solve the case. But even before the psychics came on the scene this was known to be a highly confusing case with witnesses and other evidence that didn't fit the official story. Neither the psychics nor *Sensing Murder* attempt to present a theory that links up the evidence, let alone give psychic revelations. Furthermore, why was Scott doing this calculation? We're supposed to believe he is a professional “psychic detective” so he wasn't just doodling around with numbers. He had deliberately set out to compare the accepted day of death with the magic number to see if it

Continued p 27 ...

Psychics Dealt Out

Psychic powers no help in winning large sums

Psychics are rather like moles; they exist in their own dark, subterranean world where, surrounded by gullible believers, they remain largely insulated from reality, rarely emerging to face the light of public scrutiny. Because most psychics go to great lengths to avoid public challenges, it is extremely rare for non-believers to have an opportunity to see them at work; however such an opportunity occurred on Monday August 30 2004, when twenty-six psychics, (Angel Intuitives, Animal Intuitives, Astrologers, Face Readers, Reiki Masters, Tarot Card Readers, Mediums, Psychics, a Shaman and a White Witch), appeared in a special edition of the Channel 7 television quiz show, *Deal or No Deal: Test of the Psychics*.

The Deal

Introducing the show, the compare, Andrew O'Keefe, explained:

As you know Deal or No Deal is predominantly a game of chance. The object of the game is to select the briefcase which has the two million dollars inside, or at least, to keep that briefcase in play for as long as possible as we eliminate all twenty-six briefcases. Now, normally this requires a bit of common

sense, a lot of courage and a massive dose of luck. Tonight, in a psychic experiment we are going to try to eliminate the element of luck because the thing is, no one here knows which amounts are in which brief cases, I don't know, the studio audience doesn't know, the production team doesn't know, the models don't know, but these people on the podium may be able to work it out using only their special abilities; abilities that not even science can explain, and if that's the case we should see the two million dollars go off. Well that's the theory anyway.

With the twenty-six psychic contestants in place on the podium, twenty-six female models entered the studio, each carrying a single sequentially numbered briefcase that contained a nominal monetary prize ranging from fifty cents through to two million dollars.

To select a single contestant to play for the major prize of two million dollars, the psychics were required to answer five questions, (see below). The one scoring the highest and fastest score, was Jacqueline Frazer, a Reiki Master, who, as Andrew announced, "... will now play using her psychic abilities for two million dollars!"

This article, which shows just how inept people who profess a variety of 'psycic' powers are in real life situations, was saved without our noting the author's name. We apologise for the oversight, and ask the author to both forgive us and let us know his/her identity.

Deal Out

AO’K: Now tell me this Jacqueline I know that you are a bit of a Reiki expert. As far as I understand Reiki is the transference of energy through the hands. Is that right?

JF: That’s correct, it’s though your palm chakras and it’s actually a universal healing energy that is available to everyone.

AO’K: What did you do to prepare for today, if anything.

JF: I invoked a lot of Ascended Masters and Archangels.

AO’K: Right.

JF: I did a meditation last night.

AO’K: Yes.

JF: And prayed to all those other beloved people that have passed on before me, relatives and family and anyone else out there who could help.

AO’K: So you think there are some spirit guides here helping us?

JF: I think the full room is full of spirit guides.

To ensure the integrity of the test an independent auditor, Michael Hill of KPMG, had prepared the briefcases independently of the production staff. He appeared via a monitor linkup to explain how he had randomly assigned the respective denominations to the various briefcases. In addition, he explained how, as part of the experiment, he had touched the briefcase containing the two million dollars with a red scarf, and had then placed this scarf in a separate briefcase. This briefcase was given to Jacqueline who removed the scarf and wound it around her left hand.

AO’K: At this initial stage, I know it’s very early do you get any sense from the scarf, any kind of energetic feelings?

JF: Yes.

AO’K: Yep?

JF: Yes.

AO’K: Really. So that quickly you can soak up the energy from...?

JF: Yes, my palm chakras were open and were ready, I have asked to be receiving anything that could come off the scarf, any vibrations, or anything. I am feeling something so we’ll see how we go.

AO’K: Alright, well the time has come then Jacqueline to select the case. I want you to tell me what method you are going to employ and let’s go ahead and select.

JF: Okay, I am going to use Reiki again, and just run my palms over the outside of the cases without touching them.

Armed with the scarf Jacqueline walked amongst the models, momentarily scanning various briefcases. She walked past briefcase #19 briefly before turning back and selecting this briefcase. Andrew explained that as well as choosing the main prize the aim of the game was also to eliminate the other monetary amounts in a series of rounds. This involved Jacqueline eliminating all of the other briefcases, and as long as the amount she had nominated remained in play the selection process could continue. At various times during the selection process Jacqueline would be offered various cash prizes as an incentive to relinquish the briefcase she had chosen. Whenever she nominated a particular briefcase the psychic holding the briefcase was asked to independently nominate the amount they believed was contained within the briefcase. If they correctly guessed the amount within, they would win \$1,000.

Round 1

To commence the first round of the selection process Jacqueline was asked to nominate the briefcase with the lowest amount, (fifty cents), and she nominated briefcase #22.

During the first break the twenty-

five psychics on the podium had taken possession of the briefcases, and the holder of briefcase #22 was identified as Scott Alexander King, an Animal Intuitive. He explained that since he was eight years of age he had been able to see “animal spirits” around people and, since each animal had a certain meaning, this enabled him to ascertain messages or feelings appropriate to the individual enquirer. He hoped”... that Jacqueline was right” that the case contained fifty cents; however, when opened it was found to contain \$250,000. Jacqueline next selected #16. The holder of this case, Yvette, a Psychic, commented that on the previous night she had dreamed about #16 and, in her dream, she saw it contained the two million dollars.

Yvette: I am going for the big one.

AO’K: Two million dollars Yvette thinks she has in the bag. Is it a psychic phenomenally correct answer? No it’s \$75,000; it was a big one!

Jacqueline next selected #11. The holder, Louise, a Clairvoyant, indicated she believed it contained \$50 — it contained \$100.

The next selection was #13. This was held by Roxanne, an Astrologer. When asked if she could pick the contents of the briefcase, she replied, “I have had indications that it might be \$750.” She was correct and won \$1,000 for correctly guessing the amount.

At this point Andrew mentioned that it was normal for some of the participants on the podium to correctly guess the amount in their briefcase.

We have an average on Deal or No Deal of three correct guesses on the podium. So three people take home a thousand dollars in an average game of Deal or No Deal. Hoping to improve upon that in our psychic special.

Jacqueline then chose #17; and Darren divulged that he was a Profiler who used Tarot Cards and spirit guides to assist in locating

missing people. He stated the briefcase contained \$200, when opened it was found to contain \$10,000

The next briefcase selected was #10. Leanne an Angel Intuitive, explained how she energized a deck of special angel cards, which she then shuffled them and selected either one or three cards that provided her with psychic insights. She had consulted her cards and “felt” that her case contained fifty cents. It actually contained \$75.

At the end of the first round Jacqueline was offered a deal of \$26,700 in place of the case she was holding, however she declined to make a deal and indicated she would keep going.

At this point the audience was asked to vote on whether or not they believed briefcase #19 contained the two million dollars. At the conclusion of the vote Andrew commented:

Oh, eighty percent of you are sceptics, where is the magic in this world? I guess it will be our job to change their minds. We want to turn sceptics into believers.

Round 2

After the break Andrew observed:

AO’K: *Can’t help but notice that as well as the scarf you’ve got some crystals in your hand.*

JF: *Certainly have. Yes.*

AO’K: *What are they doing for us?*

JF: *Well they are giving me some energy that I’ve asked them before we started. If they could impart any of their elemental energy to me and let me know if anything is going on with the numbers.*

AO’K: *Getting any vibes?*

JF: *Yes I’m getting a lot of vibes actually.*

In round two Jacqueline had to select five briefcases. Her first selection was #24 which Kara, a Numerologist, indicated contained \$50,000 — it actually held \$25,000;

second choice was # 9 which Rachael Williams, the Shaman, predicted contained \$50,000 — it actually held \$7,500; third choice was #20 held by Maureen, a Medium, who had been receiving messages from her dead husband. She correctly guessed her briefcase contained \$25.00. At her fourth choice, #7, Kerry the White Witch appeared somewhat confused. She thought her briefcase contained \$750. When it was mentioned this had already been selected she tried again. She nominated the amount of \$2,000; Andrew pointed out there was no \$2,000 but there was \$2,500, she agreed, “... that will do”. When this was found to be correct she reacted with an extraordinary open-mouthed display of amazement at guessing the correct amount; The final choice of this round was #25 that Robyn, whose expertise was not mentioned, suggested it contained \$1,000,000 — in fact it contained only \$200

At the end of the second round another bank offer was made to Jacqueline, an amount of \$57,300, which she also declined. Jacqueline stated at this time that she was receiving a message from her guides to, “... keep going, you have nothing to lose.”

Round 3

In the next round Jacqueline had to select four boxes; Her first choice was #1. Brian, a Clairvoyant who was holding the box, indicated it held \$1.00; it actually contained \$50,000; Next was box #18; held by Anita, a Tarot Card Reader who explained that everyone was psychic, but that some are born with their psychic abilities more developed than others. She predicted that her briefcase contained \$50; in fact it contained \$500; next was #4 held by Astro Girl, an Astrologer and relative of the late Athena Starwoman, who confided the incredibly revealing fact that, “The stars tell us that with the Moon in Aquarius there could be something eccentric or unusual happening.” She predicted her briefcase contained \$5,000, when it

actually contained the two million dollars; the next briefcase chosen was #21, and Joyce (no mention of her expertise) predicted it would contain \$5 — it contained \$2.

AO’K: *Do you think that women are more intuitive than men generally?*

JF: *I think, yes, I think women, seeing as women are more emotional, that women are more intuitive I think it’s built into us. Actually Dr Karl has shown that there is a scientific explanation for that too, that a part in a woman’s brain is actually larger than men’s to deal with psychic intuition.*

(We’d be very surprised if Dr Karl (Kruszelnicki), a Skeptic subscriber, has shown any such thing. **Ed**)

The bank then made an offer of \$44,444 Jacqueline again used her psychic powers to check the briefcase and declined to accept the deal. She then proceeded to the fourth round in which she was required to pick three briefcases.

Round 4

Her first choice was #12 held by Simon Turnbull, the head of the Australian Psychic Association, a leading light in the murky world of psychics. He predicted the briefcase contained \$100,000; it actually contained one million dollars.

AO’K: *Oh one million dollars! I thought you were spot on there for a moment. One too many zeroes.*

AO’K: *What is it Jacqueline that you sense when you feel the case? Is it a general aura of greatness or magnitude or are you getting specific numbers?*

JF: *I am not getting any numbers, just that the case does contain something that’s worthwhile.*

Her next selection was #15 held by Shallabelle whose area of psychic expertise was not revealed. She predicted the briefcase contained \$1,000 in fact it contained \$50; Next was

Deal Out

Dadhichi, a Face Reader who predicted his briefcase, #5, contained \$300 — it contained \$100,000.

At this time a new bank offer was made for the amount of \$31,150 — Jacqueline accepted the offer.

This left eight unopened briefcases and the game continued as she nominated further briefcases to open. Craig, a Medium, held #8; he proposed it contained \$5,000 — it contained \$5.00; Dorothy, an Angel Intuitive held #26; she proposed it contained fifty cents — it contained \$1,000; Brett held #14; he proposed it contained \$300 — it contained \$5,000; Janet, a Psychic, held #23; she proposed it contained \$10 — it contained \$300; Thomas, a Clairvoyant and Medium, held #6; he proposed it contained fifty cents — it contained \$1; Vicki, a Psychic, held #2; she proposed it contained \$500,000 — it contained \$10.00

At this point, with two briefcases left, the bank offered Jacqueline the chance to open briefcase #19 and accept whatever amount it contained, however, after again checking the briefcase Jacqueline elected to stick to her previous deal and take the \$31,150

The final briefcase #3, held by Karina, a Clairvoyant was then opened. She intimated it contained fifty cents, in fact when opened it was found to contain \$500,000.

The denouement

This meant that the briefcase chosen by Jacqueline, with the assistance of her various Ascended Masters, Archangels and spirit guides, actually contained only fifty cents! So much for her psychic impressions that the briefcase “contained something worthwhile! Clearly the objectives of Andrew and the show was more about ratings than turning “...sceptics into believers” — yet, despite this, the show did serve a worthwhile purpose. It provided a rare opportunity to see a large number of psychics “at work” and, as they staggered through a comprehensive collection of incorrect guesses, revealed just how incompetent they really are!

The programme revealed firstly their poor level of general knowledge, especially since the questions used to select the principal contestant were all related to aspects of the psychic milieu. They performed rather poorly, especially with question 3! As psychics, they all claim to be clairvoyant, yet only half of them actually knew what the word meant!

Even more revealing as to their complete lack of psychic abilities was their disastrous response to the fifth question! Andrew stressed that:

This is the question that will call upon you to exercise your psychic powers. I have in my pocket, a symbol on a card. I want you to concentrate on myself, or the card, whichever suits your abilities best, and during the ten seconds thinking time give me your answer as to what that symbol is.

Now, even if it had been non-psychics being tested in this fashion, on the basis of random choice alone, one would expect that at least one-third of the group would pick the correct symbol. However, given that these psychics all claim to possess extraordinary powers, something that they widely advertise as providing them with access to hidden knowledge, then one would expect that, statistically, a greater than average number of them would have picked the correct symbol. Yet the fact is they scored far below normal expectations, with only two of the psychics guessing the correct answer.

How they went

Statistically the psychics obtained results that would be bettered 399 times out of 400 by pure chance.* Their score was so abysmally poor that it clearly reveals that these psychics are phonies, with no special powers whatsoever. Their complete lack of psychic powers is further evidenced by their overall performance throughout the show. Overall the selection process involved twenty-six attempts to guess what was within the individual briefcases. While the first contestant has one chance in twenty-six of a correct

guess; the odds improved with each subsequent player. The second player has one chance in twenty-five, and for each subsequent player the odds are reduced until the final player has one chance in two. Calculating the odds for this type of situation, statistically one would expect that, on a long run average, the number of correctly identified boxes would be about 2.9* a figure entirely consistent with the statement by the compere that, “We have an average on *Deal or No Deal* of three correct guesses on the podium.”

This is precisely the same number of psychics who correctly guessed the amounts in the briefcases. The fact that the psychics scored no better than ordinary mundane contestants clearly suggests that their knowledge of hidden information is no better than that of ordinary people.

These psychics revealed much about their real natures during the show. When asked specific questions about the outcome of events they were evasive and non-committal, hedging their answers. Thus, early in the show when Andrew asked Rachael Williams, a Shaman, how much would be won on the show, she responded by saying, “I think someone will go home with a lot of money tonight and I think it will be two million dollars.” In similar fashion when Andrew asked Astro Girl a similar question, she gave a rather vague, uncommitted response, stating that, “... there could be something eccentric or unusual happening.”

These were not the responses of people with special powers to uncover hidden information, or of future events; rather it was an attempt at prevarication. These are the sort of answers one expects from people who, while claiming to have special prescient powers, have no such abilities and are seeking to hide this fact!

While these psychics were only too willing to provide verbose and pretentious explanations of their claimed special skills, their body language revealed that many were rather insecure individuals, uncomfortable when asked to guess the

amount in the briefcases. Aided by the badinage of the compere, they made feeble attempts to bluff their way through, covering up their uncertainties and their glaring errors when they selected incorrect amounts. Even more obvious were the responses of two of those psychics who actually guessed the correct amounts within their briefcases. Roxanne responded with wide-eyed surprise, but most noticeable was Kerry the White Witch. When, after several awkward guesses at the amount in her briefcase, she finally chose correctly, her reaction was one of extremely animated surprise and apparent shock! These were hardly the responses one would expect from skilled practitioners with prescient powers!

The compere spent a great deal of time humorously covering up their obvious ineptitude and inability to pick the correct amounts in their briefcases. For instance, when Scott Alexander King, hoped “Jacqueline was right” in predicting briefcase #22 contained fifty cents, but it was found to contain \$250,000 Andrew laughingly passed over the error by declaring, “Well there was a fifty in there, just a few too many zeroes for our liking.” Likewise when Rachael Williams, the Shaman incorrectly predicted her briefcase contained \$50,000 when in fact it contained \$7,500, he commented “Again there was a fifty in there sandwiched between a seven and a zero.”

What are we to make of Jacqueline who made so many extraordinary claims? What happened to the powerful supernatural beings and spirits she was expecting to assist in her quest?

She had called upon the assistance of Ascended Masters and Archangels, creatures who are considered to be amongst the most powerful beings in the spiritual pantheon. The Ascended Masters are “Celestial beings” (Blavatsky, 1893), which Bennett (1977) described as, “... a special class of men, the Masters of Wisdom, who are treated as the

bearers of a degree of intelligence that is vastly superior to anything attainable by planning, reasoning and organization.” (p. 18).

According to Besant, (1977) the Ascended Masters included, Osiris, Mithra, Krishna, Buddha and Jesus, (p.1). In Judaic and Christian belief, archangels are the highest-ranking angels, (Guiley, 1991), they are considered the most powerful beings in heaven next to God. One must ask why with such outstanding beings on her side, how could she have failed to pick the two million dollars?

As Skeptics we should thank Channel 7 for this production, for although it was presented with a great deal of levity and humour, by exposing these so-called psychics to public gaze it revealed quite clearly that none of them possess even the smallest amount of “psychic powers!”

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* Thanks to Jim Snow for his kind assistance in calculating the statistics on the performance of the contestants.

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really was the death date. And lo-and-behold, it turns out that it wasn't! Since the murder was alleged to have taken place around 3am, the claim isn't particularly outrageous — if the accepted order of events was moved around a little the death could have taken place before midnight.

Insulting

Especially in the Phillip Island episode, there was real scorn for the police work that had gone before. For Scott Russell-Hill, it was blindingly obvious that the murder had occurred on a whole different day from that decided by the formal investigation. He went on to say that the crime scene had been so obviously ‘set up’ that evidence had been placed around as if it were on an episode of *Murder She Wrote*. Perhaps this scorn is in retaliation for the Victorian Police going on the record as saying they will not use psychic assistance.

The biggest insult is the show's suggestion that the police really should be using psychics. On cases where the police have worked for months, they bring in psychics who are supposed to crack the case in a single day. So all that police time was a waste? Could we have solved the matter in a day?

The sober truth

Unfortunately the truth is sobering. It's been many months since these shows were actually filmed. It's been over a year since the Phillip Island episode was filmed and at least two years since the Easey Street pilot episode. Despite the psychic revelations, no progress has been made on any of the cases. Perhaps the broadcast of the episodes will trigger someone's memory and they'll come forward with vital information — we can only hope. Despite the bold claims, the psychics haven't solved these cases — the psychics have helped no one.



One Strange Brotherhood

Searching for sense in an eccentric sect.

Book-length memoir by ex-members of the secretive Exclusive Brethren (EB — sometimes known as the Plymouth Brethren) sect are few and far between. I was once shown such a book by my wife's grandfather, himself a former EB member. That book, cataloguing the stories of several people, was privately printed in a limited edition. New Zealander Ngaire (pronounced Nyree) Thomas's *Behind Closed Doors* (2004) is more freely available and seems from the comments on her website to have attracted a much wider readership.

If ever there was a weird mob, the EBs are it! Founded in the nineteenth century, this small Protestant grouping — around 45,000 worldwide, 9,000 in Australia — has turned the principle of 'separation from evil' into an art form. Several biblical passages (especially *2 Tim 2:19-22*) urge believers to have nothing to do with 'impurity' and 'iniquity' and EBs take this injunction to its limit. Several restrictions are listed and discussed in Thomas's book, but among other things an EB must not eat or drink with non-Brethren, belong to a trade union or professional association, talk with a person who has been expelled from

the EB 'fellowship', live in the same building as a person who is not in fellowship (semi-detached residences are also unacceptable), share a driveway with their neighbour, watch television, movies or video, listen to a radio, go to places of public entertainment, own or operate a computer, own a mobile phone (this is because Satan is 'lord of the air'), or own a pet (pets are regarded as idols, rather than as mere bosses).

EB children must not visit non-Brethren homes. Tertiary education is not permitted and young people must not leave home except to get married. Dating is not permitted at all. Women must not cut their hair but must wear a small bow as a token of their submission to men. In addition, women must not wear slacks or jeans but should wear clothing that is 'comely' though not 'conspicuous'. Men must keep their hair short and are not permitted beards or moustaches. They must remove their watches while attending EB meetings, although women may keep theirs on. There are no mirrors in meeting hall washrooms as they 'encourage vanity'. Red is regarded as a 'worldly colour' and is generally avoided. (Thomas *op cit*,



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passim; 'Plymouth Brethren: Exclusive Raven/Taylor Sect' - <http://www.cloudnet.com/~dwyman/anonymous1.html> - accessed 9/08/2002)

Astonishingly, EBs actively encourage the consumption of alcohol, especially whisky. This counter-intuitive rule is referred to several times in Thomas's book, and was one of the reasons my wife's grandparents left the sect in the early 1960s. I recall being told of a young EB wife returning home to find her husband sharing a Scotch with their four year-old, though I don't know whether official instructions went quite that far; the marriage immediately disintegrated. The Brethren are led by an individual known as the 'Man of God' (MOG) or 'Elect Vessel', and one of these, James Taylor Jr. (MOG 1959-70), had a well-developed taste for whisky. EBs were told that alcohol relaxed inhibitions and that they should drink it and offer it to guests in order to show that they had 'nothing to hide'.

The 'Aberdeen Ambush'

In the later stages of his term as MOG, Taylor's behaviour became erratic. At a gathering in Aberdeen in 1970 he began to call people 'bums' and other offensive names during services. (A transcript and audiotape of his performance is available at <http://peebs.net/> - 'Peeling the onion'.) At this time Taylor was also found in bed with a married EB woman. These episodes caused a major split in Brethren ranks, some arguing that Taylor's behaviour was immoral, while others accepted the official explanation that their leader had merely been testing the faith of his followers. (*Wikipedia* — http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exclusive_Brethren)

Arguing that 'unconfessed sin remains unforgiven', EBs require members to both acknowledge and describe their sins to other Brethren. Public confessions in front of assemblies may also be demanded (one such occasion is outlined below). This practice is a strong indication

that EBs are a cult, although this particular question is not examined here.

EBs generally hold themselves aloof from politics and do not vote. However, in 2004 the sect held prayer meetings and donated money for the re-election of President George W. Bush. *Wikipedia* notes that 'in this they are aligned with America's "Religious Right"'. (The Brethren are, of course, opposed to evolution.) By getting the EBs on side, Republican organisers seem to have squeezed the last drop out of the ultra-conservative Christian constituency. There is certainly a lot of upside for the Democrats if they can produce a candidate even slightly more acceptable to the Christian Right than John Kerry. Hillary Rodham Clinton already seems to have recognised this. (*Melbourne Age*, 27 Jan. 2005)

Are the EBs what most people would call 'true Christians'? Ngairé Thomas was a member of the EB from her birth in 1943 until 1974 and has kept in touch with developments in the sect since that time. Here I would like to recount three stories she tells in her book.

Ngairé's ambition

I was fifteen when I knew that one day I wanted to be a schoolteacher. Dad said this would be out of the question. My school friends were going on to university, but I knew that, for us Exclusives, higher education was now forbidden.

The MOG had recently changed the rules so that Brethren could no longer study to become doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers or any other profession requiring a higher education. Members who already had degrees were expected to renounce them (how this is done I'm not entirely sure.) 'But Dad, I want to go to university, I want to be a teacher', I wailed when he told me of the new edict. 'Universities are dens of iniquity and the Man of God has seen fit to prohibit our young people from entering them.

You will be leaving school at the end of the week', *was his answer.*

Ngairé protested, a rather dangerous tactic against a father who was inclined to belt her whenever she displayed signs of 'independence', a quality condemned in all EBs and especially in females.

'Dad, I am not going to leave school, I don't care about the Exclusive Brethren and their stupid rules ...' Ngairé, your insolent behaviour makes your mother and me very sad' he said, turning on his 'poor me, hang-dog' look ... 'I have arranged an interview for you at the Commercial Bank next Monday. There is no more to be said about it.' (pp. 75-6)

Ngairé's teachers tried to persuade her father to change his mind. This only made things worse, but the story has something of a happy ending, as Ngairé realised that a small income would increase her independence from her family, and later in life even managed to spend some years teaching at a school. (p. 235)

Shamed before the Assembly

I was one who had the unfortunate experience of being brought before the members of the Brethren to be 'dealt with' at a [so-called 'Care' meeting] myself, when I was only about fifteen. It was certainly a terrifying and horrific experience.

One day, a leading Brother from another town visited Ngairé's home and a few minutes later her father summoned her to the lounge room. The visitor began to question her about her relationship with a male cousin. Not seeing any particular harm in it, Ngairé confessed to the two men that she and her cousin had occasionally 'experimented with kissing'.

'So, are you admitting that you have committed fornication with a young man?', asked Dad. 'Well, yes, I suppose I must have', I answered, nodding my head, not knowing what he meant by 'committing

Strange Brotherhood

fornication' ... 'I told you so, and she's not even ashamed of it', said the visiting Brother in a smug, self-satisfied voice. 'This is a matter that should be dealt with by the Assembly in Auckland.'

Sex education in EB homes being close to non-existent, it took some time for Ngaire to discover what fornication actually entailed. In the meantime, her family gave her the silent treatment.

As my matter was now under Assembly investigation, no one wanted to talk to me, not even my mother, and everyone in the family knew I had been unspeakably wicked.

When the night of what she terms her 'humiliation' arrived, an elderly Brother who had discussed the matter with Ngaire and understood the situation, defended her in front of the large meeting:

... [H]e believed I was still a virgin, that I had not committed fornication, and in fact I was somewhat ignorant of the meaning of the word.

Rather than let the matter drop, the Brethren decided to take things further.

Some Brothers were sure that I must be guilty of something, so they went ahead and read Deut. 22:24, a verse in the Old Testament about 'not crying out' ... I think they meant that I should have cried out and said 'No' when my cousin had wanted to kiss me.

Here comes the kicker:

I was given the microphone and told to say I was sorry for not crying out. I stood up in front of about five or six hundred people ... The sea of stern and solemn faces was just a blur in front of me as I apologised for something I didn't do. When I had said I was sorry and had been graciously forgiven by the Brethren, I sat down in my seat and cried with humiliation and shame.

And here comes the super-kicker:

Although it was a very traumatic experience, something good came out of it. At fifteen, although still rather ignorant of some things, I was old enough to know that if it was wrong for my cousin to hug and kiss me, then what my father was doing to me was very, very wrong indeed ... I threatened my father that I would 'cry out' and cause a public scandal ... if he did not stop his inappropriate behaviour ... The abuse ended there and then; he was careful never to touch me again. (pp. 79-85)

Apart from the alcohol issue, another reason that my wife's grandparents left the EB was because of stories they heard at the public confession meetings. I can still remember Grandpa shaking his head slowly and saying in his beautiful Welsh accent, 'Brian, some of them could've gone to jail for twenty years for the things they done.' My wife later told me that he was specifically referring to admissions of incest.

The contraception issue

Abstinence was not [my husband Denis's] strong point. We found it very hard to practise 'Vatican Roulette', the only form of birth control allowed by the Exclusive Brethren. (p. 142)

After the birth of her fourth child, and in the wake of a serious health problem, Ngaire began taking the contraceptive pill. She kept this fact a secret from Denis. After a few years, the Brethren elders (known as 'priests') became suspicious. One night, two priests invited themselves around to discuss another woman's confession that she once gave Ngaire some contraceptive advice, 'something about digging in the garden at the right time of the month'. As you read this, keep reminding yourself that this happened in New Zealand in 1974, and not in Calvin's Geneva.

'Denis', said one of the priests, 'we are very concerned. Ben is four and

a half and Ngaire is not pregnant again yet. What are you doing to prevent it? ... Have you been digging in the garden at certain times of the month, Ngaire?' ... 'No', I answered truthfully. 'The garden is Denis's responsibility. I'm far too busy with the children.' 'Denis, we suspect that Ngaire is doing something to prevent another pregnancy. We are reminding you that you are responsible [for dealing] with this matter.'

After the priests left, Ngaire told Denis about the contraceptives. He asked her to stop taking them but she procrastinated. The priestly visits continued and before long the family was 'shut up'. As Ngaire explains:

If the priests are suspicious of some sort of unconfessed and unforsaken sin, then they would visit that person to take a closer look. If the sinner is unrepentant, or appears to be hiding something, then that person is declared a 'leper'. Because leprosy is contagious, the whole house is 'shut up' so as not to risk contaminating the rest of the congregation. (pp. 156-8)

Essentially, being 'shut up' meant that the family could not attend any EB meetings (normally held daily), nor could they make contact with other EB members. As they were not allowed to maintain friendships with non-Brethren this amounted to complete isolation.

After a week, Ngaire confessed her 'sin' to the priests and the family was 'restored to fellowship'. Throwing her pill supplies out, she became pregnant again almost immediately, to her doctor's alarm. A short time later, the family found itself 'shut up' again over a different matter. The priests recommenced their visits and this time their insistent probing yielded a far-reaching result.

When [we were being] questioned on the subject of intimacy, Denis confessed to being sexually adventurous at times — within the marriage, of course. We both believed

that whatever went on between the sheets, in the privacy of our own locked bedroom, was our own business, but they didn't think so ... We weren't doing anything drastically wrong, but the priests declared otherwise. One of them said, 'We always knew there was something wrong with you Denis, we just didn't know what it was, and now we know' ...

The priests then informed the pair of a new EB rule: 'no sex allowed for couples while shut up'. Denis and Ngaire failed to abide by this condition:

When the priests came to see us the next week, they didn't stay long. Only long enough to ask the dreaded question. 'Did you ...?', began one of the priests. 'No', said Denis, 'No, we didn't.' Denis had told a lie and I was astounded. I had never known Denis to tell a lie ... (pp. 180-1)

Ngaire became so angry that she left the house and tried unsuccessfully to push the priests' parked car down a hill. Denis, however, had an attack of conscience and phoned one of the priests the next day to confess the lie. On the same evening, he received a call to say that the Brethren could no longer 'walk with' either him or Ngaire ie. they were expelled from the sect, Denis for lying and Ngaire for being 'contentious and rebellious'. (p. 182) However, priests continued to visit Denis regularly for the next twenty years, trying to secure his submissive return to the fold. (When some elders tried this with my wife's grandparents, my father-in-law turned the hose on them.) z

What does the term 'Christian' mean today?

Since the [James Taylor Jr.] era the extent of religious belief of EB members has declined. Membership is now a birthright, with almost no religious conviction required. (Wikipedia op cit.)

Ngaire Thomas is a rather good example of this phenomenon. She did not 'invite the Lord Jesus into her heart' until some years after she had left the EBs (at which time she began to move between denominations, with a leaning towards experiential-charismatic ones; this is a common pattern among former sect members.) She led the first 30 years of her life immersed in Brethren doctrine and embalmed in the lifestyle, and yet she dismisses their theology with barely a quail:

For some reason it just didn't happen for me. I found their whole concept of Christianity confusing and irrelevant ... How could I possibly teach my children about the Exclusive Brethren belief system when I knew so little about it myself, and cared even less? (p. 140, pp.142-3)

Nonetheless, Ngaire spends some time considering the question of whether or not EBs are 'Christian', and essentially answers in the affirmative:

I don't want to be unfair to them. As individuals most of them are good, obedient but simple-minded people, and genuinely believe they are doing God's will ... In spite of public opinion and media reports, it would be fair comment that generally they live a type of high quality Christian life ... (p.19)

They zealously strive to be worthy Christians, according to their restricted understanding of the Bible. (pp. 177-8)

Humphreys and Ward, authors of *Religious Bodies in Australia* and rock-solid Calvinists, raise a query about whether the EBs are wholeheartedly Trinitarian, but have no problem in classifying them as Christian. Indeed, I doubt if any taxonomist of religion would classify them as non-Christian, except for other isolationist sects who regard everyone but themselves as non-Christian.

But the taxonomists tend to make their classifications on the basis of stated belief. If your denomination, sect or cult calls itself 'Christian', claims to believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and particularly if it accepts that he became the saviour of all mankind through his substitutionary death on the cross, your church or other grouping will be listed in texts as 'Christian'.

However, the secondary, colloquial meaning of 'Christian' concerns itself with actions and attitudes rather than stated beliefs. The *OED* defines a Christian as a person who 'shows the qualities associated with Christ's teaching', and even more precisely, as a person who is 'fair, kind and decent'. In recent times, this popular understanding of the term 'Christian' has been thoroughly subverted by extremist sects and religiously-based political organisations. People describing themselves as 'Christians' now invite a degree of suspicion. With certain honourable exceptions, 'fair, kind and decent' Christians have been replaced in the public eye by rancorous, vindictive and theocratic ones.

On this basis, EBs are not 'old-fashioned Christians' at all. People who can be so cruel to vulnerable members of their own community deserve to be called a lot of things. But 'Christian' is not one of them.

Note

Ngaire Thomas's book is obtainable from www.behind-closed-doors.org or from CCG Ministries 50 Carcoola St., Nollamara, WA 6061



The Skeptical Potter

**Skepticism and morality not
absent from children's
fantasy.**



Daniel Stewart has degrees in theology and science (psychology). A former parish clergyman, he now is a postgraduate research student at the Queensland University of Technology in the area of road safety.

Normally I don't make predictions for they are usually wrong. However, the following predictions will be more accurate than those of any psychic this year. I predict that on July 16 (or near then) there will be a far larger than usual number of people buying books. You may even find, upon going to your local Dymocks or Angus & Robertson, queues of people eager to procure a book about a "half-blood". I also predict that all four members of my family will want to read the same book at the same time. A further prediction is that the father (me) will more strictly enforce homework routines and bedtime rules on children for the lightly camouflaged purpose of reading the aforementioned book without interruption. Teachers will rejoice that their charges are willingly reading a book of substantial length. On the other hand, Christian fundamentalists and skeptics will join in wailing and the gnashing of teeth.

Okay, the final prediction may be a bit too strong, but has a basis of some substance. That substance is that some skeptics seem concerned about a series of books about wizards and witches, perhaps because they might promote uncritical acceptance of magic and magical beings, about the same reason why fundamentalist

Christians oppose the same books. That may be a tad unfair on the skeptics. What is fair to say is that a problem fundamentalists (of any sort) have is that they cannot tell the difference between a good story and the message that the story may be delivering.

There are two current series of children's books that have very different styles. Both series are good yarns that deliver positive lessons about skeptical thinking, and other prosocial behaviours.

A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket (a pseudonym) has a quirky intellectual style, while the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling are damn good adventure stories. The sixth Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, is the subject of my predictions.

There are similarities between the two series. Both have orphans as central characters (Harry himself, the Baudelaire children) who have or had cruel guardians (Dursleys, Count Olaf). Inevitably the children have to face the forces of evil, deal with bumbling adults, and overcome perilous situations. But the face of evil is not always clear cut, and as each series moves on, there are increasing incidents of ambiguity, and trickier moral dilemmas to resolve.

To succeed the children need to be skeptical as they use good research and planning skills.

The balance of this essay is divided into three parts. The next two parts will briefly review each series of books and note some of the skeptical lessons in each that should be clear to any reader, adult or child. The final part will focus on fundamentalism. Why fundamentalism? As books that should bring joy to skeptics they have lessons fundamentalists hate.

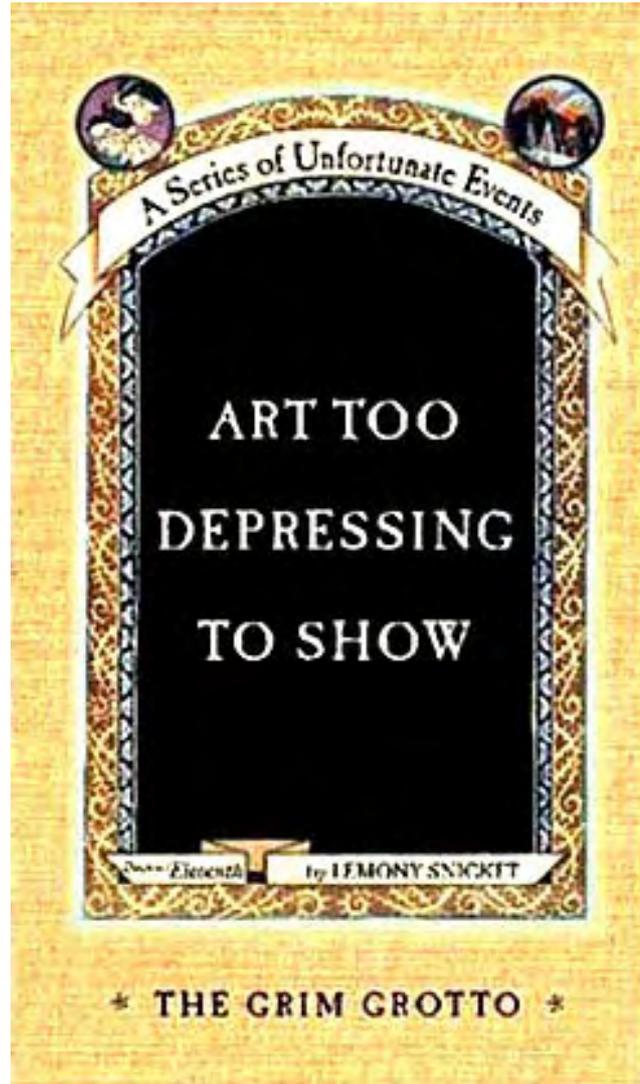
A Series of Unfortunate Events

Dear Reader,

Unless you are a slug, a sea anemone, or mildew, you probably prefer not to be damp. You might also prefer not to read this book, in which the Baudelaire siblings encounter an unpleasant amount of dampness as they descend into the depths of despair, underwater.

So begins the letter from Lemony Snicket on the back cover of *Book the Eleventh, The Grim Grotto*. As mentioned above, the series is quirky. Snicket turns out to be a character in the story: as the Baudelaires discover about *Book the Eighth*, Snicket is creating a file on them so that all people will know they are innocent. This is necessary because the newspaper *The Daily Punctilio* is totally incompetent. The reporter's main concern is creating an attention grabbing headline: "I can see the headline now: 'MURDERER ATTEMPTS TO MURDER MURDERER.' Wait until the readers of *The Daily Punctilio* see this!" (*The Hostile Hospital*, p.209).

The readers of the book know that the only reason people think the Baudelaires are murderers is because it was in *The Daily Punctilio*. It was a story created by Count Olaf based on shoddy evidence he planted



when disguised as a detective. But he was a 'detective', and the reporter swallowed Olaf's story. Meanwhile Klaus Baudelaire was pretending to murder his "murderous" sister so one of Olaf's associates would not murder her. Confused? Well, the simple message is that you should not take stories at face value. Find out what really happened, find out the history of the incident, don't just take the word of a 'Count', or a newspaper.

Each of the Baudelaire children has particular skills. Violet, who is 14 turning 15, is an inventor. She uses science and ingenuity to create devices that ensure the children survive burning buildings, deadly leeches, and other horrors. At times the science is pushed to a ridiculous extent. As a child in Brisbane, on hot days I could make paper burn using sunlight and a magnifying glass —

Violet did a similar thing at night using moonlight (*Book the Third, The Wide Window*): a ridiculous extension of schoolboy pyromania. But there is always a certain logic and Violet always explains to her siblings the cause and effect relationship the device is exploiting.

Klaus, 12 coming on 13, is an avid reader with a great memory. From obscure books of science and poetry he can solve mysteries that will help the children escape the clutches of Count Olaf. Baby Sunny has four sharp teeth, excellent for any cutting work. Through the series she learns to walk, begins to talk, and develops her own skeptical and ingenious mind.

When Violet was 14 the Baudelaire parents died when the family mansion burnt to the ground. A banker by the name of Mr Poe is meant to oversee the children's affairs and arrange suitable guardians. While Mr Poe is honest and has the children's interest at heart, he is incompetent. In

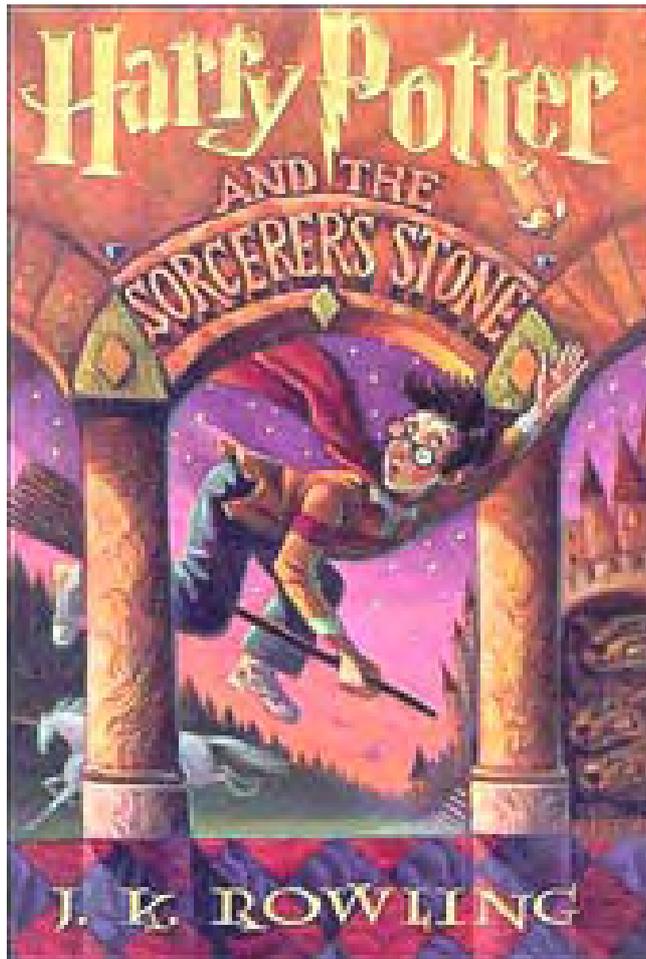
the face of that incompetence the Baudelaires have to defend themselves against Count Olaf.

Count Olaf, a distant relative, was the children's first guardian. But his only interest is getting hold of the fortune the children will inherit when Violet turns 18. Count Olaf has disguised himself in many ways in an endeavour to trick his way to the children's fortune. When he disguised himself as Captain Sham who ran a boat hire business, the children were the first to see through the disguise (*The Wide Window*). Convincing the adults was a problem. After all, Captain Sham had a business card to prove his identity! The Baudelaires used their skeptical thinking to see through this ruse, and the readers are invited to think in the same skeptical way. Because of the varied experiences where peo-

ple were not as they seemed, the Baudelaires learnt not to make assumptions about people, or when they had to make assumptions, to remember that they were assumptions.

The Lemony Snicket books are a great exploration of language with many words explained in quirky ways. The same word can have different meanings depending on how it is said, when, and by whom. Popular sayings are also played with. In *The Hostile Hospital* “no news is good news” is tossed around. Because the “Volunteers Fighting Disease” believe that no news is good news, the children could take refuge with them because they had not read *The Daily Punctilio*. That was a good excuse for the author to spend several pages discussing the shortcomings of the saying.

Book the Tenth (The Slippery Slope) and *Book the Eleventh (The Grim Grotto)* begin to tackle post-modernism. The Baudelaires have already learnt that, for them to escape the evil clutches of Count Olaf, rules need to be bent. In the eighth book, instead of giving Hal the real keys, the children gave him fake ones, so that they could explore the Library of Records for the Snicket file (*The Hostile Hospital*). But where does one cross the line of rule breaking to become like Count Olaf? The Baudelaires decided that setting a trap to take Olaf’s girlfriend hostage crossed that line (*The Slippery Slope*). Just as the Baudelaires were about to escape Olaf again they had a morally charged discussion with another orphan, Fiona (*The Grim Grotto*). Essentially, if there is good and bad in each person, then are there good people to side with? Post-modernism may well say no, the Baudelaires decided yes, and made a high risk escape. May there be *Book the Twelfth* to explore the issue further.



Harry Potter

When I read the first Harry Potter book it struck me that Harry was a great example of Christian living! He risked his life so that, for unselfish reasons, he could fight for good against the forces of evil. In the final fight in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (First book) the critical factor that brought Harry victory was love. Sure, a preacher might need to mention that Christians are not wizards, but worshippers of Jesus: however, fundamentalists were too concerned about magic to discover what the story was really about.

Many of the lessons from the Lemony Snicket books are found in the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling. These lessons include: being aware of the assumptions you make (just because Prof Snape is nasty to Harry does not mean he wants to kill him rather than keep him alive); do your

research well; some rules need to be bent or broken; and no one is perfect (not even long dead parents whom you dream about).

Divination is tackled not only in *the Skeptic*, but both series of books attack one or more forms of that charade. In Lemony Snicket’s *The Carnivorous Carnival*, the magic lighting in Madam Lulu’s crystal ball turned out to be a mirror and pulley system that Violet pulled apart for one of her inventions.

In their third year at Hogwarts school Harry and his best mates, Ron and Hermione, start attending Divination with Professor Trelawney. The first class was reading tea leaves. Harry could see a “load of soggy brown stuff” (p. 116, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*) in Ron’s cup, and Ron could see a bowler hat in Harry’s, perhaps he was heading for the Ministry of Magic! Professor Trelawney decided the

bowler hat was actually a falcon, which meant that Harry had a deadly enemy. Scholarly Hermione responded “But everyone knows that’.... ‘Well, they do. Everybody knows about Harry and You-know-who (Lord Voldemort)” (p.117). Trelawney then went on to see a club, a skull, and the grim, the last of which meant death. Hermione denied it looked like the grim.

The children’s next class was transfiguration. When Professor McGonagall had heard they had just had their first divination class, she said:

Ah, of course. There is no need to say any more, Miss [Hermione] Granger. Tell me, which one of you will be dying this year? [Harry owned up] I see. Then you should know, Potter, that Sybill Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death

omens is her favourite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues - Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it... You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off your homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in. (pp.120-121)

There is a strong social agenda in the Harry Potter books. The half-blood prince in the forthcoming book would likely be a person who has one muggle (non-magic parent), and a parent who is a wizard or witch. The forces of evil, led by Voldemort, want a world of pure bloods only. Of course, there are ironies galore here. Harry, who is a pure blood, had no inkling he was a wizard until he was 11. Hermione, who has two muggle parents, is the brightest student at Hogwarts school and brilliant at doing magic. Ron's family is full blood, but is detested for defending the rights of half-bloods and muggles. Filch, the school caretaker, is a full-blood who can do no magic, which probably explains his foul temper. As in the real world, no simple line can be drawn between race, class, or heritage. Making assumptions on birth and background is very risky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione succeed when they challenge assumptions and use skeptical thinking in their research and planning to overcome Voldemort.

Fundamentalism

In my experience, fundamentalists have three characteristics: they can't see the wood for the trees; they believe in black and white; and they describe in black and white. This assessment comes from five years of theological study, ten years as a parish clergyman, and six subsequent years enjoying not having to placate fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists cannot see the wood for the trees (literalism). For Christian fundamentalists *Genesis* is how the world came about; they can-

not see it as a "parable" about God's love and creativeness, and human specialness. Harry Potter books are about witches and wizards, so they cannot see it as a story of how the Christian ideals of love, justice, and sacrifice triumph over evil. Of course, a skeptical fundamentalist (if there is such a thing!), will only see magic rather than the story of how skeptical thinking helps Harry and his mates triumph.

Fundamentalists believe in black and white (dualism): There is good or evil, Christian or pagan, freedom lover or terrorist, you are either for us or agin us, skeptic or gullible. In this belief system it is not possible to be a bit of both. Shades, colours, and in-betweens are out. For Christian fundamentalists this is despite the stories of Jesus befriending sinful women, Roman collaborators (tax collectors), pagan women, and unclean men ("lepers"). Christians, of all people, should know we are neither black nor white, after all, the claim is we are made in the image of God, but corrupted by sin. Fundamentalists may pay lip service to this, but quickly fall into "them and us" incantations. Lemony Snicket writes of a world where there are many shades of grey between the black and the white, while J. K. Rowling has added an array of colours. Both much better reflect the dilemmas we face in the real world than any fundamentalist tract I know.

Fundamentalists describe in black and white (legalism): because it is written it must be so. Because it is written that Jesus turned water into wine, it must be so, regardless of the meaning of the story. Because it was written in *The Daily Punctilio* then the Baudelaires must be murderers and arsonists (Harry faced similar problems in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*). Because it is written down as a law, then there must be gravity. Because there is a law against murder, murder must be wrong. The error is in the direction. The statements should read more like: Because there is gravity, a law has been written down to describe it.

Because society believes murder is wrong, we have laws prohibiting it. However, two problems now arise.

First problem: the world is an incredibly varied and complex place, with shades and colours merging into one another, there is gradual change rather than dramatic shifts, and long chains of cause and effect, rather than simple start and finish points. In one town where I was a preacher we had a monthly evening worship which I shared with a lay preacher. One month she would preach it was simply "black and white". The next month I would preach that what is written is in black and white, now we need to apply it to a world of all shades and colours. In other words: How well can a human language, however inspired, fully describe what is out there?

Second problem: how incidents, objects, and forces are perceived, thought about, and recorded is imperfect. As skeptics we know that the scientific method provides the best method for overcoming perceptual and conceptual problems. When Potter and his mates, or the Baudelaires, are overwhelmed by dilemmas and confusing evidence, it is clear, logical, skeptical thinking that clears the way. As a skeptic battling fundamentalism I am happy for my children to read the next instalments of both series of books.

Notes

There are currently five books in the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, with a sixth due in July 2005. There are to be seven books in the series, which is published by Bloomsbury.

The Series of Unfortunate Events by "Lemony Snicket" currently includes eleven books. They are published by HarperCollins.



Escaping the Gravitational Pull of the Gospels

Challenging the conventional wisdom on a controversial topic

Every Christmas and Easter the leading media publish “authoritative” articles illuminating aspects of the Christian story. So, for example, last Christmas *The Times* (London) carried a piece by “the world’s leading Gospel scholar”, Professor Geza Vermes, giving us the “real” story of Christmas and in America, *Time* magazine devoted their cover story to the “secrets” of the Nativity. Such pieces are regularly supplemented by books and TV documentaries such as the BBC’s *Son of God* series and any number of others earnestly investigating “The Virgin Mary”, “The Disciples” or “The Mystery of the Wise Men” and “The Star of Bethlehem”. Then, last Easter, Mel Gibson’s maverick blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ* was released and has since become one of the biggest grossing films ever (in more senses than one!). Under such an avalanche of ecclesiastical information we should now all be extremely well informed about Jesus and Christianity. But we’re not! And the reason we’re so ill informed is that virtually every book, article, film or documentary suffers from the same fundamental fatal flaw — they all draw their portrait of Jesus almost exclusively from the Gospels.

It may reasonably be asked what

could possibly be wrong with that but the problem that no one seems to appreciate is that the Gospels are not our very earliest Christian records. Just as we would expect an archeologist to dig down to the deepest levels to give us a true picture so we should also expect historians or theologians to consult the earliest written records of Christianity. However, almost without exception they become fixated on the Gospels and virtually ignore the very earliest or independent Christian evidence from Paul and others and this gives us a very distorted and inaccurate picture.

Before examining the implications of this fatal flaw it must be remarked that even this incomplete Gospel evidence is often handled in a very careless fashion. For instance Gibson’s film shows a flashback to the famous “woman taken in adultery” incident. This moral of “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone” is an irresistible favourite with preachers and program producers alike but it takes only the most rudimentary research to discover that this story does not appear in any of the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel (most annotated Bibles tell us this!) so must have been invented (or “borrowed” from else-

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where) and incorporated into the Bible hundreds of years later! Similarly, the famous words from the cross, “Father forgive them etc....” rest on very dubious manuscript evidence.

It is also very striking that supposedly definitive sources such as the BBC (in their *Son of God* series), the *Time* article and no less an “authority” than Professor Geza Vermes himself, all blithely cite the Jewish historian Josephus as independent evidence of Jesus’s life, but all fail to tell us that the authenticity of the passage has been under suspicion for centuries and in the light of modern research, must be dismissed as a clumsy Christian forgery inserted into Josephus’s work. Amongst many other reasons for this conclusion are the facts that the passage about Jesus is intrusive into Josephus’s narrative (where he is discussing misfortunes that befell the Jews); that an orthodox Jew could not plausibly have written such a glowing testimonial to Christianity (which he does not otherwise mention) and that Christians themselves do not begin to quote the passage until several centuries later, when many of their predecessors knew Josephus’s work well and would have found the passage very useful. It is also significant that another Jewish historian of the same era, Justus of Tiberias, made no mention of Jesus whatever and, like Josephus, he also came from Galilee.

The Nature of the Gospels

Before applying the proper historical method and consulting the records in chronological order we should also be aware what sort of documents the gospels are ... and are not. Contrary to popular belief the so called synoptic gospels are not independent eyewitness accounts written by companions or disciples of Jesus, but essentially copies and elaborations of Mark, which itself was obviously written outside Palestine in a Greek speaking environment (it has only a hazy idea of Galilean geography, it has to explain Jewish customs to its

readers — sometimes inaccurately! — and it draws all its *Old Testament* quotations from the Greek “Septuagint” translation which often misrepresents the Hebrew original! This leads to the absurd situation at 7:1-23 where Mark has Jesus arguing with the Pharisees using a mistranslation of their own scriptures!). John rests on similar traditions but often varies wildly from the others. The first gospel, Mark, can be dated to AD70 at the earliest but, from internal clues, more probably to about AD90.

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The other synoptic Gospels and John would then have been written within the last decade of the first century. They were all originally anonymous and only acquired their familiar names sometime in the 2nd century.

If we can now escape the apparently irresistible gravitational attraction of the gospels and consult the very earliest Christian writings of Paul and others we will be astonished to discover a dramatically dif-

ferent picture of Jesus — the Jesus of the very first Christians. Here we must abandon all the assumptions we’ve gleaned from the gospels (which did not then exist) and come to terms with the eyewitness testimony of Paul and his contemporaries. When we follow this proper chronological line of historical enquiry and begin at the beginning we should perhaps expect that, if true, the gospel narratives will be authenticated. If so we are in for a shock because the early Christians corroborate virtually nothing that we have previously taken for granted from the Gospels.

The Ignorance of the Early Christians

None of the very first Christians know anything about an annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel and they know of no Virgin Birth, Star of Bethlehem, Wise Men, Herod, slaughter of the innocents or the flight into Egypt. In fact they know nothing at all of a Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem or Nazareth. They are equally unhelpful about Jesus’s adult adventures for they know of no disciples, friends or earthly enemies, nor of any baptism by John in the Jordan; they don’t mention or quote any teachings, parables or sermons or morals in fact they attribute no ethical instruction to the earthly Jesus at all! Nor do they seem to know of any healings of the blind or lame or lepers, nor do they mention any of Jesus’s especially spectacular miracles like bringing the dead to life, changing water to wine, feeding five thousand, stilling the storm or walking on water. They know of no temptation in the wilderness or dialogue with the Devil, no exorcisms nor evil spirits falling down in fear before Jesus: in fact quite the opposite for Paul taught that Jesus lived a life of such obscure humility that even the “evil angels” who engineered his crucifixion failed to recognize him until too late when they were overpowered by his resurrection! These are particularly striking contradictions of the gospels where Jesus is

portrayed as a figure of fame, power and authority who inspires respect and fear among the spirits and whose crucifixion was orchestrated by the Jews and or Pilate.

When we come to the central events of Jesus's whole career, his crucifixion and resurrection the early Christians again know nothing of the times, places or circumstances. They mention nothing of Gethsemane, no betrayal by Judas (they merely say Jesus "was delivered up" for crucifixion), no denial, no trials, no scourging, no judgement by Pilate, no Roman soldiers, no Golgotha or vigil at the cross, no last words — nothing! In fact the very first Christians give no indication whatever even that Jerusalem was the place of Jesus' execution and nothing in their evidence requires us to believe the event occurred in Pilate's time but could have happened at any time in the preceding several centuries! Certainly none of them write as if it was a recent event within their lifetimes.

Their concept of the resurrection also stands in stark contrast to what we are normally taught for Paul appears to have believed that after three days Jesus ascended directly to Heaven without any intervening time on earth and he certainly doesn't cite any empty tomb. Those he appeared to are also very different — "the twelve" (there being only eleven at that stage in the gospel's story) and "500" of whom the gospels know nothing. There are even good grounds for doubting the usual assumption that the "Cephas" he appeared to can be equated to the Gospel's Peter.

Just as Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection could have occurred in the distant past, so the early Christians give us no cause to believe his reappearances occurred immediately afterwards for he could have stayed in Heaven for centuries. What was immensely significant to them was their belief that Jesus' reappearances signalled the imminent end of the world — "the end of days", whereas in the Gospels his reappear-

ances precede his ascension, which marks the beginning of an indefinite wait for his second coming (some 2000 years so far!).

A Pioneering Theologian going boldly

The one person who has boldly pioneered and meticulously explored the pre gospel Christians' concept of Jesus is G. A. Wells, Emeritus Professor of German at London University (and to whom I am much indebted) and, to paraphrase the crux of his thesis, he argues that the early Christians are so completely silent or in significant disagreement about the events that were subsequently recorded in the gospels as to suggest that these events were unknown to them though they could not have been unaware of them had they really occurred.

Some striking examples of this can be seen in Paul's writings. We saw, for instance that he does not mention Peter's denial of Christ, yet he had ample motive to do so in his bitter quarrel with Cephas in Antioch (assuming him to be Peter) who he calls a hypocrite over food laws, and citing this incident (or Jesus calling him Satan!) would surely have discredited his opponent. If we argue (unconvincingly, for he elsewhere advocates certain opponents be castrated!) that Paul was too charitable to stoop to such abuse, we must ask why he never mentioned anything to Peter's credit either: That he was supposedly promised the keys of the Kingdom or could walk on water would surely deserve at least a passing reference but nowhere does Paul give any indication that Cephas (or Peter) had any association with the earthly Jesus whatsoever! It is also striking that Paul could here have settled the argument in his favour by quoting Jesus' words about all foods being clean, but in this matter and others where he had strong motive to cite Jesus, he seems utterly unaware that His gospel words would have supported him. Paul characteristically draws support for his arguments from the *Old Testament* NOT

from the earthly Jesus. The reasonable inference here is that none of this was available to Paul because none of it had really happened.

Paul famously and proudly described himself as the apostle to the gentiles and was quite relaxed about keeping the Jewish law. He could not then have known that Jesus supposedly told his disciples to "go nowhere among the gentiles" and that "Heaven and earth shall pass away" before "one iota" of the law shall be changed! Elsewhere (also in Matthew!), Jesus says Christianity is to be preached to all the nations and that the Jewish law can be set aside, but Paul doesn't cite this as authority for his mission either!

Paul sums up the whole rule of life as "love your neighbour as yourself" but he seems unaware that Jesus supposedly taught the same maxim. Similarly, Paul urged people not to repay evil for evil; to bless those who persecute you and judge not; and to pay your taxes but he never appeals to Jesus' authority when he allegedly urged the same things!

Early Christians or Al Qaeda

Paul respected Roman law and said that Roman governors only punish wrongdoers. Could he then have believed that Pilate (who he never mentions anyway) recently crucified Christ? Furthermore, he reports many years of continuing contact with the Jerusalem Christians who were evidently quite untroubled by the authorities. Had these authorities recently had to execute Jesus as a dangerous revolutionary it is quite implausible that his senior lieutenants would have then been allowed to continue the very same work in the very same city! It would be like Al Qaeda setting up shop in New York! However, if they worshipped some vague spiritual Jesus who may have lived long ago then the authorities would have been quite indifferent to, or ignorant of their activities. That they DID worship the same Jesus as Paul preached (*ie*, one who once lived obscurely on earth at

some indeterminate time and place, seemingly not in Jerusalem or within their lifetimes) can be seen from the fact they were able to shake hands on their message. Paul could never have done this if they disagreed for he was habitually abusive to opponents.

Theologians' Response

In sum, then, it can be seen that when we escape the gravitational pull of the gospels and enter the world of the earliest Christians we are in a foreign country, indeed on an alien planet! And one that has been almost entirely unobserved and unexplored except by Professor Wells. Though Wells's challenging thesis has been either studiously ignored or else misrepresented and given a straw rebuttal, here and there some theologians are just beginning to express some unease at the dramatic discontinuity between Paul and the gospels. (That Paul's view is typical and pervasive throughout all early Christian literature is almost entirely unnoticed as yet.) As early as 1938, P. L Couchard noted that one of the very earliest "fossils" of Christian belief (the hymn fragment in *Philippians*) contained "no historical Jesus the Nazorean". However, only much more recently has the problem again been fleetingly confronted, thus Professor E Kasemann (Professor of New Testament at Tübingen) remarks perplexedly that Paul's silence about the circumstances of the crucifixion, which is the core of his whole mission, is "positively shocking". Another German theologian, Erich Grasser also admitted "the thoroughly enigmatic fact" that early Christianity appeared to have no real hold on the Jesus of history.

More commonly, however, theologians exhibit indifference or complacency about the dramatic discordance between the concepts of the first Christians and the gospels. Martina Jansen, for instance, admits the "question of the continuity between Jesus and Paul ... is a difficult

one" and what words of Jesus may be hidden in Paul's letters "is to a considerable extent open". Despairingly Wells remarks, "thus do theologians casually allude to an issue which is really of prime importance to any study of Christian origins". Other theologians seem not to appreciate the problem at all. So Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham and an indefatigable advocate of the traditional Gospel story, carelessly and misleadingly maintains repeatedly that Paul preached "Jesus of Nazareth" when in fact he never once mentioned the place!

Geza Vermes, for all his authority, even makes the extraordinary claim that Paul cannot be treated as a principal witness to Jesus "because he did not know him", but as if Mark and the other gospel writers knew him either! Even more amazingly he then says Paul "metamorphosed" the gospel's picture of Jesus as if Paul somehow changed records that did not appear until after his death!

Professor Wells (after a stint as a coal miner!) was originally destined for the priesthood but first had to decide, "if he could really believe what he was required to preach". It is perhaps ironic that his journey from Christianity to atheism has made him into one of the world's foremost authorities on early Christian history! Theology is notorious for the obscurity of much of its theorizing but his many books are refreshing beacons of clarity. With a hint of humour he approvingly quotes one of his own inspirations, the German theologian Wrede, who in echo of the Beatitudes remarked, "Blessed are the unpretentious in speech, for they shall be understood"! Wells has himself written widely on language eg, *Critique of Pure Verbiage*, *The Origin of Language*, *What's in a Name?* and exhibits little patience with untouchable icons of linguistics like Professors Stephen Pinker or Noam Chomsky. His works encompass an amazing breadth of scholarship — for instance the bibliography for his 1986

Did Jesus Exist? runs to nearly 450 references! His manner of debate is unfailingly urbane and courteous.

Meanwhile, blissfully unaware of the seismic shocks that his work must eventually unleash, Christianity has been preoccupied with issues such as women priests, homosexual bishops, charismatic fundamentalism and abuse scandals. None of those seem very important compared to the issue of whether the gospels' Jesus ever existed and whether the underpinnings of 2000 years of western thought and culture has all been founded on a fallacy!

In the end we must surely ask ourselves, "If the very first Christians knew so little about Jesus, what possible grounds do we have for believing he ever existed?"

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Resting on Shaky Ground

A personal investigation of faith

This is an extract from my new book, *The Confession of an Unrepentant Lesbian Ex-Mormon*. As well as telling the story of my trip to Utah (the Mormon Zion), it also explores some of my internal wrestling with the theological wrongness I was raised with. It is my fond hope that this book will offend equally across the spiritual spectrum from Atheist to Zealot.

The *New Testament* as we know it was only put together in AD325 at the Council of Nicea. Before that time, all the various Christian congregations had their own gospels that they used. It's thought that there were up to 200 gospels floating around before that time, and that some of them asserted that Jesus was the Son of God, whereas others said that he was merely a mortal prophet. At the Council of Nicea those gospels were culled down to the four we know today, and the Church tried to gather up and destroy all the rest. Anyone who doubted the new orthodoxy was declared a heretic and killed. At that same council, legend has it that they actually put it to a vote to determine whether Jesus was the Son of God or just a prophet. Depending which

version of history you read, it was either a tied vote and Constantine cast the deciding vote that Jesus was the actual Son of God, or Constantine held the vote, smoked out the dissenters and then sent them away for a while. While they were away he held the vote again and was able to claim that the vote for Christ's divinity was unanimous. Either way, it served Constantine's political ends to have Jesus emerge as a divinity, not a prophet.

I almost fell off my chair when I read this. If opinion was so divided way back then, so much closer to the time that Jesus lived, how on earth could people in the twentieth century be so unshakably sure that Jesus was the Son of God? How could you be sure of anything, when you read about that council? Wouldn't that put a few question marks next to your deeply held beliefs? If the whole structure of institutional homophobia rests on the shaky ground of four little verses within the Bible, the Bible itself rests on even shakier ground.

Just quietly, ever since I read that I've been amused by the seeming contradictions that it imposes on the Protestant faiths. Some of them are more than happy to rail against the

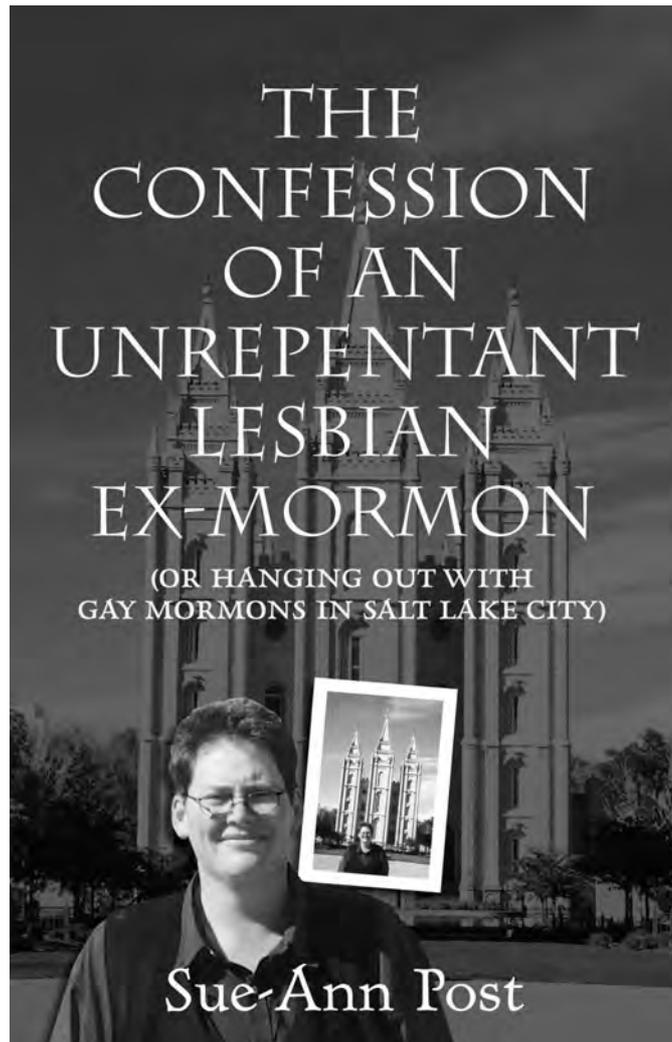


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Church of Rome and call it all sorts of rude names over the centuries, up to and including denouncing it as The Great Whore Of Babylon, but none of them seem to have ever questioned the validity of the Bible itself. They may have their own interpretations of the Bible, they may see things in a very different way to the Catholic Church but they use essentially the same book and don't seem to have minded the fiddling with the gospels that was done in AD325. They are in effect, accepting the judgments made by the very people they profess to despise. Illogical, is it not? You'd think they would have made some sort of attempt to go back to original sources and reconstruct a version of the Bible more amenable to their new version of the faith. I know the early Church tried to destroy all those remnants, but in the twentieth century they started getting access to earlier forms of the gospels in the shape of the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea scrolls. Plenty of material to work with there, but they don't seem to have taken up the challenge.

In whose image?

All in all these arguments suited me much better. By standing back from the Bible and seeing it as a complex, contradictory, myth-ridden document written by mortal, fallible men with an agenda, at a specific point in our history, it made a lot more sense. Believers may say that we have been made in the image of God, but in truth it is much more accurate to say that we have made God in the image of us, with all our pettiness, jealousy and vengefulness intact. All the venom and hatred directed towards women and sexual freedom only makes sense when you see it as a late Stone Age reaction against the



goddess worshipping sex cults that preceded it. The Biblical admonition against homosexuality only becomes understandable when you realise they were written by members of a small nomadic tribe who were desperately trying to build up their numbers and become more powerful. The virtues of embracing self-denial and suffering only make sense when you find out that early Christianity was affected by eastern asceticism courtesy of Jainist monks from India who travelled to courts in Syria, Egypt, Macedonia and Persia. The Jainists believed that desire only leads to suffering and that desire, pleasure and ambition are all mirages anyway. The only way forward was through self-discipline, self-denial and control over the flesh and the noblest way for a Jainist to die, was through self-imposed starvation. Many of the festivals and rituals of

Christianity including the eggs at Easter and the tree at Christmas were ripped off from the pagans and adapted by the Church for their own ends, in order to keep their early converts happy. These are some of the currents and influences swirling beneath the surface of Christianity, and until they are acknowledged, none of it really makes any sense.

In fact the further you step back from Christianity, the more you look at the overarching sweep of God's eternal plan, the more illogical and cruel it seems. Christians are forever banging on about how Jesus Died For YOU! About His divine sacrifice and how if it hadn't been for Him taking upon Himself all our sins, we'd all be condemned to Hell. But the more questions you ask, the murkier the theology gets. So Jesus died for my sins. Okay, so that means that if I believe in Him, all the naughty things I've

done in this life are wiped away? Well no. You're still held accountable for them, Jesus actually died to remove the taint of Original Sin. And where did original sin come from? When naughty Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. But hang on, wasn't that actually part of the plan? If Eve hadn't eaten the fruit, Adam and Eve would still be in the Garden of Eden and God's plan would be stalled. They had to eat the fruit, get expelled and then start having babies or none of us would be here talking about all this crap. Eve was effectively forced into Original Sin. It was a necessary step but then she and everyone else was punished for it. Bit of a nasty trick don't you think? And just like poor old Judas' dilemma. For the Crucifixion to take place, Jesus had to be betrayed by one of his followers. But when Judas betrayed Christ and did exactly what

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God had intended, God then turned around and Judas was sent straight to Hell. It's really not fair at all. God's eternal plan seems to contain all sorts of doublebinds, tricks and traps. He wrote the rules of the game; surely it could have been played so that people could perform their divinely appointed tasks without them then being punished for achieving exactly what God wanted in the first place? It makes no sense.

Rationalising the irrational

I feel the same sense of frustration when I hear religious types try to rationalise apparently senseless deaths. No one seems to want to believe that good people can die in car accidents, or from cancer, or from accidental overdoses without some good reason. Random chance just doesn't fit in to a worldview where God determines everything and everything has a reason. If they died tragically, it must serve some unknown aim of God. It may hurt the people who get left behind, but some comfort can be taken from the fact that God doesn't let things like that happen without a divine purpose. Every time I hear that sort of thing, I can't get the image out of my head of a vast, shiny meat grinder being attended to by hundreds of angels, feeding in all those poor dead souls. I can almost hear them shouting out orders, *'Quick, we need another dozen junkies and a few dozen car accident victims, a gross of famine babies and just a handful of teenage cancer sufferers or this recipe will be never be ready on time!'* This is an ugly image I know, and it always grosses people out, but I just can't accept that every ugly thing that happens in this world can somehow be made pretty by the simple addition of God and His remarkable, illogical and totally unbelievable plan. I don't buy any of the necessary bastardry that it seems to entail and it made me an-



Casting a coin into the Reflecting Pool in Salt Lake City

gry for a very long time. But I think you've already guessed that.

By now some of you might be thinking, 'Ah the aged and hoary "Why is there Evil in the world?" argument. That old thing'. And you'd be right. This argument is usually answered in the short form by the existence of free will. That by our conscious choices we allow evil into the world. My question is this: are these great, supernatural and infinite powers of Good and Evil of equal power or is Good ultimately more powerful than Evil? If they are of equal power, then why have they decided to fight their eternal battles through disposable meat-monkey puppets like us? Couldn't they sort this out like grown-ups? And if Good is ultimately more powerful than Evil, existed prior to the creation of Evil and in fact created Evil in the first place, then I don't care how you dress it up, Evil is in the service of Good. If the presence of Evil is a necessary part of God's eternal plan, then Evil is essentially an employee of Good. A bit like a faithful old retainer who allows himself to be beaten at chess by his master, yet again. 'Good game sir. Well played'. Or in-

deed, a bit like how Satan and God were amiably chatting together in the *Book of Job*. In either case, evil isn't our fault. We didn't create it, we didn't let it loose and it's not our employee. I don't object to being held responsible for my own petty sins and bad behaviour but I refuse to be accountable for the existence of some mythical Primeval Evil.

Over the years I managed to get my own personal denunciation of Christianity down to a cool twenty seconds. It runs something like this; *'Most people forget that Jesus wasn't actually a Christian. That only started with St Paul after Jesus' death. Jesus was a Jew. As far as he knew, he was fulfilling Jewish law. Now the Jews didn't believe him, so why should we?'* Pretty impressive

eh? Again, it's a pity it only works for people who already agree with me. Sadly, my choice of profession seems to work against me when I formulate such thoughts and try and present them seriously. People just look at me and say things like, *'Oh you're such a comedian. You would say things like that wouldn't you?'*

Notes

The Confession of an Unrepentant Lesbian Ex-Mormon is published by ABC Books and is available at all good bookstores.

Skeptics in Melbourne can catch Sue-Ann Post's live show *Jesus Loves Me, He Just Hates What I'm Doing* at the Melbourne Comedy Festival from March 25 to April 17 (Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only) at the Melbourne Town Hall. There will be an Auslan interpreter on Sunday April 3. Bookings through Ticketmaster7: 1300 660 013.



Language Lapses

Further reports from the linguistic fringe



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Fun in France!

Since the days of ‘numerophonology’, several more pieces of linguistic weirdness arising out of France have come to my attention (thanks to Jacques Guy for some of this). One involves some ideas put forward by Henri Boudet in the context of the background to Dan Brown’s much-discussed novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Boudet thought that English was a ‘pure’, sacred ancestor language from pre-Babel antiquity, and indeed also a Celtic language like Gaelic, Breton and Welsh, which it is not, of course (but if it predated Babel, how could it be Celtic specifically in any case?). Both Tracy Twyman in her journal on these matters and Brown himself echo these claims, suggesting that English is especially ‘pure’ and fits in very well with the codes allegedly used by the Templars in connection with the relevant sites. The idea that English is ‘pure’ is even stranger than the idea (partly shared with eg MJ Harper) that it is very ancient. The vocabulary, the phonology and even the grammar of English are very mixed because of the wide-ranging activities and the sociolinguistic attitudes of its users.

Another ludicrous French theory is that of Marcel Locquin, who be-

lieves that many words in all human languages can be analysed into syllables with one consonant and one vowel (all these consonants and vowels being common in French!). These syllables exist in pairs, each having the same vowel and consonant, one with the vowel first and one with the consonant first (eg [ab] and [ba]). The members of each such pair have partly opposed primeval meanings, eg [ab] means ‘separated by difference’, ‘contrasting’ etc, while [ba] means ‘separated by space’, ‘far apart’. There are many other claims of this kind (see earlier instalments). Like all such authors, Locquin gives himself every chance of finding bogus cognates by using such short items, but he still has to fudge in places! Of course, most of his etymologies conflict with well-established ones. Overall, he gives us no good reason to accept his claims, although they seem — alarmingly — to be taken seriously by some in France, which has been a major centre for serious linguistics. (Locquin also grossly misuses the basic term phoneme — again, as do many).

A third French writer with very odd ideas was Fernand Crombette (1880-1970), who held that the Earth is the centre of the universe after all

The Good Word

and that this can be demonstrated not only through science but also through the wholesale reinterpretation of the Hebrew scriptures and various other ancient texts via Coptic, the language which developed out of Ancient Egyptian. (Shades of 'Dave' and such!) Mercifully, these ideas do not seem to be respected in France.

Lexi-linking!

The very strange thinker 'Doc' Shields promoted the notion of 'lexi-linking', which involves words and corresponding types of real-world entities somehow coming to be genuinely associated across a range of locations and situations on the basis of repeated usage. In other words, if people use a given word enough in connection with some concept (often not apparently connected), this gathers its own momentum; the world changes and the word-thing nexus arises again and again, seemingly by coincidence. Lexi-linking is thus a type of 'consilience'. Of course, how this could happen is not clear (though Sheldrake would have suggestions). I came across this idea in Shields' cryptozoological writings while researching an article on cryptozoology and linguistics. But it applies more widely.

Loren Coleman's 'Fortean' colleague Jim Brandon decided that eg the place-name (La) Fayette(-ville) had become linked with a whole range of 'weird' phenomena in the USA. Part of this effect involves the stem *fay* or *fey* in its sense 'fairy', 'enchantment' etc. Brandon wrote an entire book on this notion (*The Rebirth Of Pan*). I must say that I doubt if the stats would support such a proposal. In such cases it is all too easy to be inadvertently tendentious once one has formed the idea of a link.

Accents

Talking foreign, see *Fortean Times* 180 on 'foreign accent syndrome', the rare phenomenon in which adults — often after a head injury — manifest

a new accent. While intriguing, this is not especially controversial *per se*.

In some special cases, however, the accent is said to be a specific known accent to which the new user has never been much exposed. But accents — like all specific features of languages — are learned in interac-

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tion; and, although some real linguists have come embarrassingly close to saying otherwise, everything we know about language acquisition suggests that speaking with an identifiable accent without learning it is impossible. (Compare alleged cases of 'xenoglossia', knowledge of entire languages that one has not learned — in this life at any rate!) It is no surprise that there are no properly confirmed cases of the special type. At best the idiosyncratic new accent is somewhat reminiscent of a known one — or else the patient had been exposed to a known accent at an earlier date.

More on musical hallucinations

Anthony Gordon (*Fortean Times* 180) responded to my comments (173) on his earlier material (170). My point

of criticism was that grammar and other abstract aspects of language cannot have arisen (directly) from musical hallucinations, and this stands. Gordon instead raised the issue of whether any universally-shared features of human language at these levels of analysis are genetically inherited, either by way of a Chomsky-style language acquisition device or by way of a more diffused set of mechanisms. He believes that all such features are instead derived from experience. This issue is one which I did not address and upon which linguists (including psychologically-trained psycholinguists) remain divided.

Many non-Chomskyan linguists would essentially agree with Gordon here; others believe that there are relevant linguistic universals which involve inherited general psychological mechanisms (for analysing experience); etc. Of course, and as an example given by Gordon and involving the deaf illustrates, the acquisition of the specific grammars of individual languages (spoken or signed) requires exposure to suitable data (so too the acquisition of their specific phonologies). But not even a hard-line Chomskyan would dispute that, and it is not the point here. (See above on accent acquisition.) And until the more abstract grammatical (and phonological) systems and structures did emerge, by whatever means, phonetic systems *per se* — arising out of musical hallucinations or from any other source — would not qualify as languages. The emergence of the more abstract systems is crucial for any theory of the origin of language itself.

Sealspeak

As reported in the popular press, Tecumseh Fitch (Uni of St Andrews, Scotland) has been working on animal communication suggestive of pre-linguistic ability and thus of interest in the context of the evolution of human language. The most promising material so far involves seals, which are able to imitate speech sounds to a surprising de-

gree. Fitch clearly knows linguistics to a high level, and it appears that his conceptualisation and theorising are sound; but non-linguists should note that even some of the scholarly summaries of this work arguably do not adequately distinguish between phonation (the production of speech sounds) and spoken language. The former is a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the latter; it is manifested by eg mynah birds, which surely have no linguistic ability/potential. Fitch is, in fact, concerned to study the various aspects of human language one at a time from his comparative standpoint. We await further results eagerly. (There are also reports involving alleged language use by prairie-dogs; watch this space!)

The search for the Ursprache continues (1)

I am grateful to Cyn Witkus for bringing to my attention another fringe claim involving the identification of a known ancient or contemporary language as the common ancestor of all human languages. Polat Kaya thinks the Ursprache was Turkish, Edo Nyland says Basque, etc, etc.

Joseph Yahuda, supported by Konstantinos Efstathios-Georganas and others, thinks it was (Ancient) Greek. Initially (1982), Yahuda's claim was that Hebrew specifically is disguised Greek, almost all of its words being composed of one or more distorted Greek roots. This was later extended to the identification of Greek as an overall Ursprache and thus to denial of the existence of Proto-Indo-European as an ancestor for Greek and other languages. In addition, examples of early pre-linguistic symbolisation from the Aegean area are (not for the first time) reinterpreted as involving the Greek al phabet. The undoubted Phoenician origin of this alphabet is also denied and it is wrongly stated

that it is derived from the syllabic Linear B script used to write Greek around 1500 BCE (which of course contradicts the view that it was used much earlier!).

The profound intellectual achievements of ancient Greek civilisation encourage other extreme viewpoints. Nonsensically, Greek is said (here and elsewhere) to be the only language in which there is an 'aetiological' (natural) relationship between words and the things to which they refer; in all other languages, such relationships are largely arbitrary (as in fact they are in Greek too). Greek is thus supposed to be uniquely suited to logic, computing, etc. Indeed, computer scientists are — quite wrongly — cited in support of these claims. (Of course, similar claims have been made for other languages, eg Aymara.)

Most of these claims are actually refuted by evidence. Also, the 'evidence' in favour of the central claim is of the usual unsystematic, superficial and speculative kind and is largely confined to vocabulary rather than structure; it is totally inadequate. In addition, Yahuda *et al* criticise some mainstream positions without adequate understanding. Testimonials regarding the authors' linguistic expertise (as opposed to language-learning ability) are clearly meaningless. As usual, 'bigoted' orthodox scholars are accused of suppression; but they have simply ignored palpable nonsense. Greek is a great language with a great literature, and Greeks are rightly proud of it, and of their history. But Greek is still only one more normal language when all is said and done, and ludicrous exaggeration can only harm things.

This also applies to various extreme Greek attacks on the Slavic-speaking ethnic group and state which calls itself Macedonia(n) and has its capital at Skopje. Because the name is of Greek origin and

some of the territory was at one time Greek, the entire identity of the Slavic speakers is sometimes treated as fraudulent, in a very provocative manner. (But this is not to say that Macedonian sources have necessarily reported the relevant history truthfully and fairly — or that the hellenophone minority in the country has been dealt with in a wholly ideal manner. Such is not always the way in post-Warsaw Pact Eastern Europe.)

The search for the Ursprache continues (2)

Patrick Ryan is a 'stronger' version of John McWhorter: working from the inevitable Sumerian, reconstructed Proto-Indo-European and other ancient languages, he believes that he can reconstruct many features of 'Proto-Language', a world Ursprache. The work is quite scholarly but involves a number of specific (often non-standard) decisions on controversial issues (eg, the reality of Nostratic), upon which Ryan's pronouncements are more forthright than the state of the arguments permits (eg, he simply accepts Manaster-Ramer's criticisms of Ringe; but the centre of gravity of scholarly opinion remains close to Ringe's position). Of course, the standard view is that Proto-World (if there was one such language) existed so early — and Ryan accepts an approximate date of 100,000 BCE which is widely regarded as not unreasonable — that its specific features are irrecoverable (at least with any methods currently known). And, so far, the world of linguistic scholarship has not accepted Ryan's proposals to the contrary, any more than those of Swadesh or Landsberg in the 60s and 70s.



An Amazing Journey

Clarity and style from a master craftsman

***The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution*, Richard Dawkins, Wiedenfeld & Nicolson**

A few years ago, Martin Amis wrote *Time's Arrow*, a novel in which much of the action went backward, from present to past. In the 2000 movie *Memento*, the climactic scene was at the beginning, and subsequent ones went further and further into the past to explain what had happened. Now Richard Dawkins has written a fine, big book of backwards natural history, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution*.

In it, he starts with humans. He makes clear in these pages that all the living things now on the planet are just as 'advanced' as we are, and by starting with humans he is not making the mistake of insisting that evolution has produced humans as the aim and the culmination of any sort of directed effort. He is taking an "arbitrary, but forgivably preferred, starting point." Then in a grand narrative, he goes back three billion years as a pilgrimage. Indeed, he has taken Chaucer as a model, starting with today and going back to a primordial Canterbury. Along the backwards path, we pilgrims are joined by the branches that are also marching back in time.

First, the chimps and bonobos join us six million years ago, then the gorillas, then orang-utans. In 39 steps, we meet all the living things

that took different paths from us, but who in a backwards flow join us again, rodents, shrews, birds, amphibians, fish, insects, worms, corals, fungi, plants, all the way back to bacteria and to the very start of molecular replication that created our living world. For all Dawkins's scientific astuteness, this is a pleasing romantic conceit, telling a lesson of unity in living things that can only increase our admiration for how far we and all of our fellow creatures have come.

Nonetheless, there is, within the book's 600 pages and 39 reunions, plenty of scientific pedagogy, delivered with the clarity for which Dawkins is famed. At each of the 39 steps, we meet the "concestors" who are joining us; this is Dawkins's coinage for "common ancestors", and we get to hear their stories. This is as in Chaucer, except here we have "The Lungfish's Tale," "The Sponge's Tale," and so on. Dawkins has, thankfully, declined to write these in a fictive first person, but instead has used the tales to impress us with nature's versatility, to illustrate points made by Darwin himself, or to explain genetic drift, the importance of sex, or the role plate tectonics played in evolution.

He often gives specifics about the animals involved. You know, for instance, that our stomachs use acid to start the digestion of what we have eaten, and this is true for anteaters



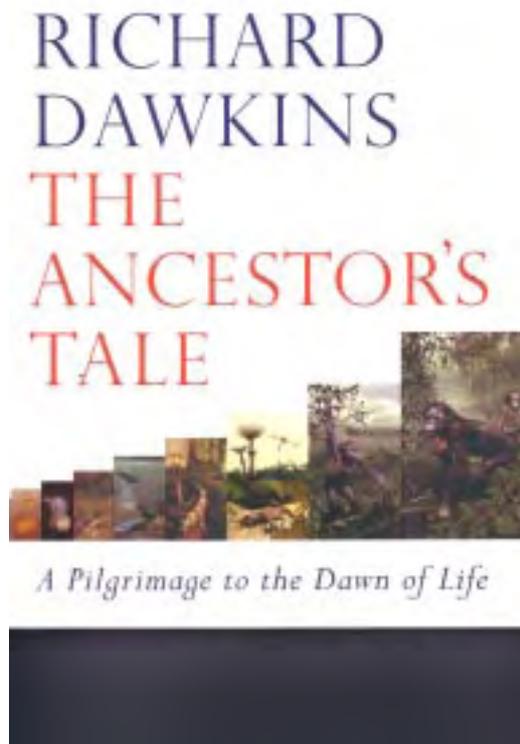
Rob Hardy, from Mississippi, USA, is a regular book reviewer for the Skeptic.

as well. However, anteaters don't make their own acid. They don't need to make it, and so have lost the capacity to do so. The acid they use is the formic acid, from the swallowed ants themselves. "This is typical of the opportunism of natural selection," Dawkins writes, and there are countless other examples given here. In explaining how dodos lost their power of flight, or cave fishes their ability to see, he shows that the resources saved can be spent on other activities that would make it more likely to get progeny into the future. Natural selection "... is always tinkering, here shrinking a bit, there expanding a bit, constantly adjusting, putting on and taking off, optimising immediate reproductive success."

With the unification of the different lines back into the past, this is a story of biological unity. Of course everyone knows how closely related we are to chimpanzees, but for some genes, like blood type, you might be related more closely to some chimps than you are to some humans. This sort of unsettling closeness is all through the book. The "hox" genes that instruct a human body to make an eye, for instance, are the same genes that instruct a fly body to do so. The eyes are vastly different, but the genetic instruction "place eye here" could be swapped from one species to another. Each gene of any organism has branched along its own tree, not necessarily the same as the branches of descendants in the tree of life, but in astonishing continuity.

This gives Dawkins a chance to lecture us on the "tyranny of the discontinuous mind" within "The Grasshopper's Tale". It might be a tale of grasshoppers, some of whom differ only in the frequency of their mating songs but will happily and successfully breed together if they can be fooled to take an off-frequency mate. All human races (a term that biologists cannot clearly define) can interbreed between themselves, producing a spectrum, not discontinuities, of racial characteristics, but we are reluctant to give up

our language of specific, discontinuous categories. We are an amazingly uniform species if you take into account all our genes, and we are also amazingly variable "in superficial features which are trivial but conspicuous: discrimination fodder."



Another theme of the tales here is that our fellow species are not in anyway primitive "lower" organisms. Once the pilgrims get back over five million years ago, they meet the cnidarians, which include the jellyfish, among our most distant animal cousins. The tentacles dangle "harpoon" cells, with the harpoon being "probably the most complicated piece of apparatus inside any cell anywhere in the animal or plant kingdoms." A literal hair trigger will explode the cell, shooting a coiled strand with injection needle into whatever caused the explosion, and delivering poison. Snakes, spiders, and others have organs to inject poison, but the jellyfish has it down to thousands of individual cells operating independently.

This book is beautifully laid out, although for most of the animals there are only line drawings, with a

few black and white photographs. The graphic at the beginning of each of the 39 steps shows how far we have come in the pilgrimage, its timing, and who is joining at that particular rendezvous.

In a way, it is a shame that

Dawkins has to deal with being probably the most famous and productive atheist on the planet. Once *The Ancestor's Tale* was released, reviews praising it on Amazon immediately started accumulating "unhelpful" votes, a response that is relatively muted whenever other biologists produce books about science, not faith. Religious fundamentalists consistently misrepresent his views; more than once he chidingly addresses creationists, asking them to refrain from taking what he has just written out of context. There are a few pages devoted to debunking "intelligent design", and in a fascinating aside, Dawkins explains that the "gaps" in the fossil record seized upon by creationists not only are insubstantial, there are no gaps in the genetic sequences of species, the sorts of descent that the pilgrims traverse here. We could now study evolution without

fossils at all.

It is too bad that literalists cannot agree with the many believers who see no real contradiction between evolution and the Bible, but this is not a book of polemics. It is just a unique way to explain how wonderfully well science has come to understand how evolution works. Part of that lesson is that we don't nearly understand everything. In yet another frequent theme, this time remarking on (of all things) why jellyfish on a lake in the Palau Islands go from one side to the other during the day, he says there isn't a good explanation. This is not an admission of defeat, but of delight: "The lesson of the tale must be that the living world offers much that we don't yet understand, and that is exciting in itself."



Where Do We Go From Here?

Looking to the future with optimism, if....

***Going Native*, Michael Archer & Bob Beale; Hodder, 358 pages**

“...many Australians continue to live, manage their land and exploit their natural resources entirely in the here and now, as if there were no tomorrow and no yesterday... closeted in de-natured suburbs and high-rise apartments, many Aussies have lost most sense of linkage with the grand and rich web of life and time.”

In January 1788 Captain Arthur Phillip ordered the ships of the First Fleet to anchor in Sydney Harbour. He must have thought to himself, something like a weary ‘so far, so good’. We can imagine the mixed emotions of the native onlookers. Whether they were amazed or afraid, they were soon to learn that when two civilizations meet, it is rarely to the advantage of the less advanced.

The Fleet appeared like a time machine. Gunpowder and chronometers faced a culture that had been in place long before the Pyramids, but was still in the stone age. The natives could not stop the massive experiment that was about to begin — the widespread application of English ways to a very different place. We can understand the ten-

dency to continue how it was done ‘at home’. There was little time for research. Paddington received the architecture of Yorkshire because the builders already had those plans. The approach to agriculture was equally unquestioning but more destructive. With the imported domestic animals and crops came pests, pathogens and weeds in “a grunting, lowing, neighing, crowing, chirping, snarling, buzzing, self-replicating and world altering avalanche.”

The message of this book is that we have damaged our environment so much that we must get moving with practical measures immediately. We must not let sentimentality or self indulgence get in the way. The path that these authors describe is not cluttered with sacred cows. Take the widespread taboo against exploiting kangaroos and other native animals. (Note that few extend this ban to the yummy native things like yabbis and lobsters.) Because they belong in our countryside, native animals are exactly what we should be raising.

How does this sit with notions of animal welfare? The authors are certainly not supporting the interpretation of *Genesis* whereby animals are here at our disposal ‘by the grace of god’ for any purpose including entertainment. The suffering of



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animals must be minimised, but the harvesting of kangaroos must be evaluated fairly and not through misinformation proliferated by some animal liberationists:

...animal rights is an unnatural intellectual construct that has no counterpart in the real world of healthy functional ecosystems... an echo of an imagined Edenic world where no creature was eaten by any other because there was no death before Adam sinned.

The answer is not as simple as turning vegetarian and growing everything organically. There are good reasons why we evolved to be omnivorous. It's possible to be a vegetarian and stay healthy but it requires a lot more focus on the diet and a lifestyle that is relatively privileged by world standards. Do you know a vegetarian who does not take supplements? The only vegan I know requires vitamin B injections more often than I get a haircut. Organic farming is a nice idea but such tucker costs a lot more and there is simply not enough arable land to

feed the world by organic means. Prepare for a test of your beliefs on many issues, from genetic engineering to fire management. And prepare for new ideas — *eg* that the most potent symbol of our alienation from the environment is the bushwalker's rucksack!

This book is about the need to understand our environment; to get the most out of it; to avoid pointless damage; and to stop missing opportunities. Why can't we value our land like we revere sport? We have Thorpie and Warnie but it is foreigners who are way ahead in benefiting from macadamias (USA), eucalypt oil (Portugal), breeder's rights on waratahs (New Zealand) etc etc. We have done damage by farming the wrong things and the solution lies with the native plants and animals that we have ignored. Native animals and native plants.

The authors oppose attempts to quarantine our forests. Unfortunately, too many people confuse land clearing, with harvesting and management of a forest. Clearing destroys the forest but management

preserves it. The answer is not to think by way of two categories — exploited land here and National Parks there (usually the leftovers).

We're not talking about ultimately turning farms into conservation zones, but rather multiple-use areas where nature conservation goes hand in hand with more traditional farming, the sustainable harvesting of natural resources, safe mining practices and ecotourism.

It would take some space to go through the numerous well justified recommendations in this book. I say: buy it; read it; and keep it where you keep other literary milestones. The ABC and especially ABC Radio regularly gives us documentaries of high quality. My prediction for say, 20 years hence, is that there will be a documentary about the Australian environment and we will hear it begin with a reference to this book, followed by discussion of how its lessons were heeded or ignored.



Memoirs of a Country Doctor

Death of a Slaughterman And other stories by a Doctor from the country; Brian T. O'Sullivan. Available from the Author btos@powerup.com.au

Brian T.O'Sullivan's book touches on his experiences from childhood in the 1930s, where he grew up on a property in Western Queensland, to boarding school, University and two years as an intern at Brisbane General Hospital. Then 10 years in a District Hospital in Upper Burnett, and finally in a group practice in the Western Suburbs of Brisbane. His

formative experiences, growing up in rural Australia, will strike a chord with anyone of a similar vintage from a similar background.

Most of the stories arise from his 10 years in Monto District Hospital where he lived with his family and was the Medical Superintendent and only Doctor. Monto was a primary producing area, having mining of coal, copper and gold, five sawmills, and extensive forestry plantations in the mountains, population of 5,000 and the highest birthrate per capita in Australia at that time. Some of Brian's experiences have already been published in *the Skeptic*

He relates many interesting, illuminating and colourful experiences, spanning nearly fifty years, about the vast spectrum of human nature, medical emergencies and conditions. His compassionate way of dealing with many of the situations that arise makes one reminisce back to "the good old days" when the local GP did a bit of everything, while at the same time being very glad that the scientific side of medical practice has progressed in the past 50 years.

Ros Fekitoa

Literalism v Literature

Darwin's birthday seemed like a good time to reflect on how the nonsense of creationism still infects our society. Like those moles in holes at the fun fair, every time you think you have whacked it on the head it pops up again somewhere else, sometimes with another name like "intelligent design".

There was a period of less than seventy years from the middle of the 16th century until the start of the 17th during which three literary anthologies were produced. These three works of art are so fundamental to the way that the English language is spoken today that it is impossible to imagine how we would talk to each other if these works had not existed. They provide an enormous number of the cliches and expressions which we use in everyday speech and which allow us to use short-cuts in language without having to explain everything we say in words of one syllable. The first of these books was an instruction manual, but it contained what is probably the best known poem ever written in the English language. The book was *The Book of Common Prayer*.



Peter Bowditch

The other two anthologies are similar to each other. Both contain stories about historical figures, both have stories which illustrate how morality can work and how people can (and should) behave in various circumstances, and both contain wonderful literary passages with the force to generate spontaneous and powerful mental images in the reader's mind. Both address the idea that people have the power to choose between good and evil, and both talk about how conflict can be resolved and redemption achieved. One of these books is the *Works of William Shakespeare*, the other is the *King James Version* of the Bible. A passing knowledge of both is a requisite quality of anyone claiming to be a literate, educated English speaker.

The big difference between these two works is that nobody thinks that all the words and stories in Shakespeare are true, but millions believe that everything in the Bible is true. If a history student were to quote Shakespeare in an essay about Richard III or one of the Henries and the teacher marked him down for it there would be no outcry, no picket lines outside the school, and no demands for balance and equal time for opposing theories of history. Anyone who tried to complain would be looked at kindly and dismissed as a fool or an attention seeker. School boards would not even put the matter on the agenda. If, however, that same student were to submit an essay in biology saying that dogs are in no way related to cats because they are of different created kinds, or a geology assignment stating that the Himalayas and the Grand Canyon were both less than 10,000 years

old, or an astronomy paper with the calculation that the universe is 12,000 light years in diameter and to base these claims on the contents of the Bible, we would be encouraged to accept these as being examples of the predictions of a scientific theory which demands fair consideration in the classroom.

I have been questioned several times by friends and acquaintances about why I would ever have bothered to read the Bible. My answer is what I said above about the literary canon. Sometimes they will go on to ask why I would bother with the Bible if I don't believe the contents. My reply to that is that I can appreciate *Missa solemnis in C* by Mozart, *Pieta* by Michelangelo or *Madonna dell Granduca* by Raphael without having to believe in the literal existence of the subject matter. Two of my favourite films are *Casablanca* and *Terminator II*, but I don't have to believe in the literal existence of Rick Blaine or John Connor to detect the ways in which both stories address the issues of morality and the choices people can make about right and wrong.

The Bible with its stories and myths is part of the collective consciousness of our civilisation. So are the works of Shakespeare. It is a pity that so many people are seduced by the siren call to unshakeable belief in the unbelievable. If only there was a way to stop their ears with wax, but maybe I have strayed into another set of myths. There are so many of them around, and all equally true. But that's just a theory of mine.



Do Self-Help Books for Psychological Problems Actually Help?

If you start experiencing a psychological problem like depression or marital discord, you might think about reading a self-help book specific to your problem. There are a wide range of books from which to choose. *The Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Materials in Mental Health* by Norcross and colleagues (2003) groups hundreds of self-help books by problem (eg, obsessive-compulsive disorder) and gives a summary and rating for each. Some self-help bestsellers of recent years include David Burns' *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* (1999) and John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: a Practical Guide to Improving Communication and Getting What You Want Out of a Relationship* (1992).

Self-help books typically include a description of a problem, examples of people who have overcome the problem, and strategies to use when attacking the problem. For instance, *Overcoming Shyness and Social Phobia* by Ronald Rapee uses actual case histories to illustrate social phobia and then recommends dozens of strategies such as testing anxiety-provoking thoughts, setting small improvement goals initially, and using realistic, positive thoughts to gradually expand social behaviour.

Mental health care providers often suggest a self-help book as a

supplement to treatment (Adams & Pitre, 2000; Pantalon, Lubetkin, & Fishman, 1995). Studies of the value of self-help books recommended to an individual by a mental health professional show that on average they help people significantly; further, they typically help as much as psychotherapy does (McEndree-Smith, Floyd, & Scogin, 2003). Think about that for a moment. Reading a book helps as much as seeing a psychologist several times!

Self-help books can have great advantages over psychological or medical treatment in that they (a) are cheap or free (if borrowed from a library), (b) are convenient — you can read them any time, with no waiting, (c) can be obtained quickly, eg, by post if necessary, and (d) are often written by specialists or even world leaders in treatment of a particular problem. Self-help books can also have some disadvantages in that they do not provide the individualized treatment and social support a mental health professional might.

No one knows exactly how self-help books help. There could be a placebo effect (“Finally I’m getting the help I need to stop smoking”), the many examples of people with the same problem may help a person feel better (“I’m not the only depressed person on earth”), the examples of people overcoming the problem may provide inspiration or increase self-efficacy in the reader (“If she can walk out of her house alone, so can I”), or the reader may use the strategies suggested (“I’ll

listen to her and summarize what she says before I say anything else”).

Do the books help when no professional is involved in selecting or recommending the book for a particular individual? No one knows that. How helpful self-selected books are may vary with the problem, the person, and the book.

In seeking answers to these questions, psychology student Fiona Green and I are soliciting personal experiences from individuals who have read a self-help book with the aim of overcoming a psychological disorder. We want to start answering questions about whether self-help books help in the absence of a professional, and, if so, how they help.

Self-Help Books for a Weighty and Somewhat Psychological Problem

Diet and weight-loss books are among the most popular self-help books. Who hasn’t heard of the Atkins diet? This diet, made popular by various best sellers written by Dr Atkins, including *Atkins for Life: The Complete Controlled Carb Program for Permanent Weight Loss and Good Health*, involves eating a great deal of protein and little carbohydrate. Some physicians consider the diet dangerous because it can increase cholesterol and decrease calcium, among other undesirable effects (Physician’s Committee for Responsible Medicine, undated). After Dr Atkins died in 2004 while clinically obese (Bone, 2004), the South Beach

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Continued p 53 ...

Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n Roll

How a brave woman set out to cut through the misinformation undergrowth



Loretta Marron has degrees in science and business and hails from Burpengary in Queensland.

In mid-2004, we were contacted by a new subscriber from Queensland, who sought our assistance in exposing the many medical and other myths that were being published in features and advertisements in magazines aimed at Seniors in the population. She particularly asked for advice on a booklet she was producing for Seniors that would alert them to various dubious products and services offered to them. *The Skeptic's* medical experts were delighted to give her advice and to review her publication.

Loretta Marron has persevered with her quest and we have asked her to tell us about her activities, for which we have the utmost admiration. She has done so below and she asks for feedback from interested *Skeptics*.

The events and opportunities of 2004 led me on an evolutionary journey that was fuelled by my passion for 'seeking medical evidence'. It also helped me cope with the

shock of being diagnosed with cancer. A year that started with really bad news has ended with something really good: two great new information sources that I believe will help GPs, their patients and their families.

The journey started when a well-meaning friend (an agricultural scientist, no less) told me she had read a book *Sharks Don't Get Cancer*, and that shark cartilage shrank cancerous tumours. I was in the middle of radiotherapy following cancer surgery, and like anyone in that situation, eager to get well. But I had heard of the author, William Lane, and his fake claims. I'm grateful that my friend cared enough about me (misguided though she was) to offer the suggestion, so I promised myself that I would deal with this issue when I was in a better frame of mind.

A few months later when my life started again, I posted my friend a bulky package, along with a short note thanking her for her support, and suggesting that she might find the contents interesting. I had included several printouts, one from a

Quack Watch website, which states that in December 1999 the US Food and Drug Administration sought a permanent injunction against Lane for unproven claims, and another printout detailing the research that shows sharks **do** get cancer. The next time we met she thanked me and she apologised for her earlier advice. Her response supported my belief that most people do want to know the facts.

I find the Internet a great source of information if you can find it amongst the quackery and sales. To help other people like myself, I put my computer skills to work and produced a booklet called *Handy Health Hints for Seniors*. It contains some brief medical advice (mostly common sense — I'm not a doctor), backed up by some great health websites. I received considerable advice and guidance from family, friends, several enthusiastic skeptics and some amazing GPs.

It took my mind off my medical condition and gave me a new focus. I became a woman with a mission. Spending many hours on the internet I selected a range of well researched medical websites sorting

fact from fiction; I was Don Quixote against the windmill, David against Goliath, St George against the dragon, and undoubtedly a very boring individual.

When I finally finished the booklet, being quite pleased with the final result, I showed my months of hard work to my own GP, Dr Joanne Woodford. I also sent a few copies to my local library and copies to my surgeon and my oncologist — both whom will see me regularly for many years to come — and the webmasters of the links I used.

My GP immediately asked for 100 copies of the booklet. My local library asked me to co-partner in a training course for seniors and a Melbourne psychiatrist, Dr David Horgan, suggested that I should widen the scope of my booklet to include families, and change my training medium to the internet. He offered me the website www.healthinformation.com.au. The journey continued.

The latter part of 2004 was spent learning, searching and making choices as I scanned through thousands web links. Under the guidance of my GP, I now believe I have

set up an easy-to-use directory containing a selection of over 300 evidence-based health websites from Australia and overseas, covering both orthodox medicine and natural therapies. I also added two research libraries and an encyclopaedia link. Major sections include 'Sexual Health' and 'Drugs and Alcohol'.

I sent out the prototype to everyone I know and many others, and while I was waiting for feedback, I set up www.senioryears.com.au, a website which includes information on most topics people might have an interest in, from fun to finances, when heading for retirement.

By the way, if you look carefully in the 'Activities – Indoor' section you will find dancing. Hence the title, 'Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll' — it's all there and much, much more.

You can contact Loretta and provide her with feedback at her web sites:

www.healthinformation.com.au

www.senioryears.com.au

...Self Help from p 51

Diet, promoted by Dr. Agatston's *The South Beach Diet: The Delicious, Doctor-Designed, Foolproof Plan for Fast and Health Weight Loss*, seized the limelight, with its suggestions to eliminate bad carbohydrates such as those in highly processed foods and soft drinks.

Unfortunately, there appears to be no evidence that diet books actually help people lose weight over the long run unless combined with an in-person treatment program (Womble, Wong, & Wadden, 2002). While it is easy to read a book, it is hard to make the lifelong changes in calorie intake and calorie burn-up essential to losing weight and not regaining it. In this regard, in-person psychological treatments for obesity tend to produce long-term benefits (beyond

one year) of only one or two kilograms of weight loss (Norris et al., 2004).

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Forum

When the Cheering Had to Stop

In the last issue (24:4) we carried a piece by Jon Jermey “Two Cheers for Alternative Medicine” in which he questioned why Skeptics and medical practitioners were so dismissive of some such claims. We hoped this would generate a response from our readers. As the following will indicate, we were not disappointed.

Need for proper accreditation

*Sonnie Hopkins
Tascott NSW*

Last December, as a first-timer to an Australian Skeptics national conference, I was pleased to note the level of concern regarding the credibility of claims by some members of the ‘alternative medicine’ industry.

In the early nineties when, in Victoria, I headed vocational education and training Applied Science, I fought hard to have accredited only those health-related courses that deliver scientifically-supported outcomes (accreditation delivers nationally recognised credentials with the potential for public funding). I

was unsuccessful. I was informed from ‘the top’ that a course had only to be able to provide the learning outcomes that the industry views as essential to tasks of the job; not that those tasks be credible or ethically sustainable.

At the time, federal and state governments were looking to expand vocational education and training through, *inter alia*, improved provision for sections of industry that had traditionally had little formal training, and to give private training providers, alongside TAFE, the potential to access public funding and award nationally recognised qualifications. Given these aims, there was little enthusiasm for causes which would go against them. Since that time the pressure for ‘bums on seats’ especially self-funding ones — across post secondary education, has increased the potential for practitioners of alternative medicine to claim legitimacy based on the status of their course provider.

I feel partially responsible. In the eighties I contributed to the development of a set of criteria for a TAFE course to be accredited in Victoria. With little modification, these criteria later became the national ones. We assumed that only courses supported by a sound body of knowledge, and which are for legitimate purposes would be re-

ferred by TAFE authorities for accreditation. We were right in the latter assumption but wrong in the former. Of course, these criteria had to serve all industry sectors, not just the health and other science-based ones. So defining, for the purposes of accreditation, what constitutes a sound body of knowledge would perhaps have been unachievable had we attempted it.

Notwithstanding, I believe that we should be challenging accrediting bodies, both across and within education and training institutions, to require for accreditation that health industry-related courses be centred on scientifically-demonstrated, efficacious treatment.

Whilst on the subject of alternative medicine I take this opportunity to comment in response to Jon Jermey’s article (24:4 pp 59-60). Many of the substances on pharmacy and supermarket shelves are not alternative medicines but are pharmacological agents for which scientific judgment has been made that they are safe enough not to require medical supervision. Some others are dietary supplements rather than drugs. Unless false claims are being made, these can be viewed as falling under mainstream medicine/dietetics. Of the rest I would guess that some of the ‘herbals’ contain active substances — plants historically have been the

main source of effective drugs. But they constitute alternative medicine because the claims made for them lack adequate scientifically-established support.

Jon refers to the variability in effectiveness of medications between individuals. This does not suggest something unscientific about them. Rather, research shows us that therapeutic effects — and toxic ones — vary across individuals for a host of reasons, like differences in ‘receptors’ which could be as a consequence of variation in things like density, numbers and chemical constituency, differences in blood supply, in enzyme-induced breakdown, in absorption and excretion, etc. Indeed, this variability underscores the importance of scientific study, where self-medication takes place; dosages must be ones that are effective for almost everybody without serious toxicity for anybody. For those substances for which this is not possible the clinician may adjust dosage on an individual basis.

Nor is the placebo effect unscientific. We know that some of those who seek treatment will get better anyway, whilst some others will do so if they believe they are being treated because, presumably, of stepping up of their own healing mechanisms or a psychosomatic factor in their condition. It would not be alternative medicine were a properly qualified clinician on occasions to draw on this knowledge as a ‘first resort’, either to withhold treatment or to prescribe a pharmacologically-inactive substance.

Muddled thinking

*David Kiernan
Balgowlah NSW*

I am very disappointed in the quality of thinking exhibited by the author of “Two Cheers for Alternative

Medicine”. Actually, I **do** disagree with much of what he writes when he advocates trying alternative medicine for the placebo effect. In fact, if he were a doctor, what he suggests is considered frankly unethical and may well lead to legal action, depending on the outcome.

Why on earth doesn’t he approach conventional medicine in the same way when he seeks the placebo effect? Even if he doesn’t match the conventional treatment to the disease in any way at all, at least he knows about the documented side effects! Instead of assuming, and asking the reader to assume, that all non-pharmaceutical preparations are totally inactive, I would suggest he tries thinking the **opposite**. It is much more scientific and safer for him, too.

To be fair to the alternative medicine industry, these herbs and “natural” treatments often are “bioactive” — in other words there is an effect other than placebo. The problem is, this effect may or may not be what you are hoping for. Sometimes the bioactivity is too weak (*eg* the anti-infective effect of garlic tablets). Sometimes it is not relevant (*eg* foul smell from using yoghurt to treat thrush in the vagina). Sometimes it is idiosyncratic (rare and unpredictable — *eg* fatal fulminant hepatitis from taking a dose of echinacea).

I think the author has fallen into the trap of feeling the topics of medicine and alternate medicine are far simpler than they are. He confuses variable genetic expression with biochemistry. He tells me “perhaps your genes are different”. Well, Jon, luckily they are. Examples of his silliness include comparing his daughter’s severe IGE mediated reaction to one peanut and his mild discomfort after eating 50, to justify trying alternative products in order to gain any old unknown and unquantified biochemical reaction, hoping for one of benefit. Is the man mad or just stupid? No, wait, to be fair, he **assumes** that

the alternative products are only of placebo value to start with!!!!

The placebo effect is well known in medicine and useful. It may be as high as 40% of any given treatment of any type (including no treatment, just reassurance). One should be most careful how one uses it as a doctor. The same should apply to lay people, and the way Jon Jerney is approaching real bioactive products is stupid and irrational. Use alternative products, not because you assume they don’t work, but because you think they do have some benefit and the side effects and risk profile of trying something unknown are acceptable to you.

And don’t classify charcoal in with alternative treatments for irritable bowel, please. Considering jaw disease in cases of tinnitus is also not “unconventional”, even if you weren’t aware of it after seeing a specialist. When you are next looking for placebo effect, Jon, try some of the harmless old remedies (like warm drinks with lemon for colds) that have been around centuries longer than manufactured alternative medical preparations or conventional products. These don’t cost you \$35 a pop, but I guarantee you as a doctor that they will work — don’t burn yourself, though. While you are trying them, please donate the financial difference to the starving in the Third World.

Skeptical stance?

*William Verhoef,
Mooroolbark, VIC*

Jon Jerney (“Two Cheers...” 24:4) says that the common view of among skeptics seems to be that Alternative Medicine is useless junk produced and marketed by ruthless profiteers taking advantage of sick and anxious people. which was his

own view originally treatment, just reassurance.). I would challenge this assertion. Most skeptics would consider the purveyors of Alternative Medicine as being mostly intelligent, but deluded about the usefulness of their products (sometimes, however, they are downright nutty). If Jon held that unjustifiable view previously, it seems his pendulum has now swung a bit too far to the other side.

Jon makes a poor start by suggesting that we should not exclude preparations just because they are totally ineffective — because they could still have a valuable placebo effect! I am hoping, at the very least, that he will require that they be shown to be harmless as well as useless.

In any case, if the placebo effect is to be accepted as a reason to use a product, we may as well accept all forms of quackery. Why should homeopathy be excluded? He adds that skeptics “have a lot of trouble coming to terms with the placebo effect”. Again, what is the basis of his assertion? He seems to be just assuming that most present day skeptics are thinking like he used to think ten years ago! Most skeptics, in fact, use the placebo effect to explain how alternative medicine preparations can, at times, seem to have a beneficial effect. It is also why skeptics require that placebo controlled trials are used to evaluate alternative medicine preparations. Also, it seems that placebos can be used to trick Jon’s subconscious mind. Well, I suppose as long as they don’t tell him it’s a placebo — sugar pills called “horny goat weed”, with an appropriate spiel, should do just fine.

Next he reveals his misunderstanding of the statistical analysis of medical trials. He gives the example of 50 patients: 40 are not affected by the treatment, five are made worse, and five are improved. He then states his opinion that the five who were improved should continue to take the treatment. The problem is that, if this trial were to

be repeated at a later date with the same subjects and with the same treatment but the subjects not told that the same treatment was being used, very likely a different set of five subjects would show improvement.

He also backs self-experimentation. This is essentially a trial of one. It is anecdotal evidence and this is extraordinarily unreliable. He proposes going through a whole string of treatments that have been promoted for the ‘flu’ until one is found that works. Does he not understand confounding variables? Each episode is different: different virus, different circumstances, different prior state of health, concurrent illnesses etc. How could he ever come to a reasonable conclusion about what helps and what doesn’t help? Also, does he have any idea of the extraordinarily large number of treatments that have been promoted as a treatment for the ‘flu’? Jon is willing to try ten to find one that works. Even a hundred! But, can everyone, individually, really go through the whole list of possible treatments? If not, which ones should we choose and which should we leave out? Which should we try first and why? In any case, how often does the average person get the ‘flu’ in a lifetime? My last episode was more than ten years ago. Maybe he actually meant “the common cold”. And charcoal tablets for IBS. Let me guess that his main symptom is diarrhoea — if so, it will be no surprise that charcoal tablets help.

Finally, he has found that exercises and a plate to hold his jaw straight at night has reduced his tinnitus by 80%. Perhaps it did. Perhaps he was going to get better anyway. Perhaps it was a placebo effect (actually, this would be acceptable to him wouldn’t it?) That’s the problem with anecdotes; you never know what’s going on. Even double-blind placebo controlled trials require a great deal of caution regarding interpretation of results. The possibility of methodological

errors means that they need to be repeated before the evidence supporting the treatment can be accepted.

Jon’s previous skeptical stance was unjustifiable and, contrary to what he says, my impression is that it is not the average skeptic’s stance. But his realization of this fact has caused him to now look at alternative medicine in a less than skeptical light to say the least.

Anecdotal support

*Ron Marke
Bellingen NSW*

In response to Jon Jermey’s interesting article “Two Cheers for Alternative Medicine!” in the last issue, my following points may be of interest to readers.

I know people who have resorted to ‘alternative’ medicine to either cure themselves or control symptoms of ill-health. One lady I know quite well, after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and having refused surgery and chemotherapy, put herself on the alternative stuff such as green barley, multivitamins and a number of herbal preparations. Within six to nine months the tumour in her breast had shrunk and later her specialist pronounced that she was cancer free. That was ten years ago. Can one say that she had spontaneous remission? The placebo effect? Coincidence? Or what she was taking did cure her? The lady is still around.

A retired friend of mine contracted lung cancer. His father-in-law, who did not believe much in orthodox medicine, persuaded him not to have chemotherapy or radiation treatment but instead brewed pawpaw leaves and got him to drink the bitter juice. The last I heard of him that he was in remission. I was

somewhat skeptical about this but concluded that the evidence for this is inconclusive. I never found out because I lost touch with the fellow.

I have heard of similar stories and, indeed, I possess published testimonials in my file, of people curing themselves of cancer by eating pawpaw fruit and drinking pawpaw juice made from the plant's leaves, or of one documented case of a Queensland man who cured himself of cancer by radically changing his diet and taking quite a number of natural preparations. He almost died from his cancer after receiving chemotherapy and radiation. This man is an active business person and enjoys excellent health. Was this man's self-medication the effect of a placebo, spontaneous remission or just lucky? I am quite convinced that his 'alternative' self-medication pulled him away from death's door.

However, I would like to stress here that most testimonials I have read in books and leaflets are completely inconclusive and not very convincing.

I presently know a lady with lupus disease. Every day she treats her disease with massive doses of Vitamin C, 1000mg cod liver oil and multivitamins. She doesn't have any problems and has the lupus under control. Her doctor knows about this and he approves. She won't take pharmaceutical drugs because they do not work. She tells me that if she goes off her natural medicine, she gets into trouble. I think her case is quite convincing — and conclusive.

Orthodox medicine works for some, not for others. For example, a close friend of mine told me about her friend who was told by her specialist there would be no point in her receiving chemotherapy for her advanced cervical cancer and that she only had about four weeks to live. She immediately demanded chemotherapy, got it, and within twelve months she was clear of cancer. She died seven years later, not from cancer but from something else. Did she have spontaneous remission? The placebo effect? Or

chance? I think the chemotherapy worked in her case.

A lot of older men experience enlarged prostates with the result that they have to get out of bed three or four times a night to have a pee. I read that a herbal tea called *Epilobium* (from a willow herb named *Epilobium parviflorum*), drunk about twice a day, settles this problem. I tried it and it seems to work. Zinc is also good for the prostate.

My present position in relation to 'alternative' medicine is this:

yes, I think that some of the 'alternative' medicine is beneficial to good human health; but most likely the majority of it could be sheer nonsense and wishful thinking.

It seems that most doctors are unaware about the drugs they prescribe have on affecting nutrition. Quite a number of drugs prevent, or deplete, the absorption of vital nutrients in food, and hence people have trouble being restored to good health. A case can be argued for supplements to be prescribed when patients are taking certain drugs.

We do need more thorough research to test the efficacy of the 'alternative' stuff. Who is going to finance and test it? That is the question.

A bit of integrity needed

*Matthew Birmingham
North Nowra NSW*

I must take issue with John Jerme's suggestion (24:4) that as skeptics we should give alternative medicine our approval. His article contains a number of examples of muddled thinking, including some that are not only scientifically unsound but ethically unsound as well. He makes it clear that he is quite happy to deceive himself, or to

be deceived by others, if it makes him feel better. While I will not argue with his right to live that way if he chooses, it is amazing that he apparently expects such an attitude to catch on among skeptics.

Jerme employs a tactic common among those who defend the indefensible, drawing an inappropriate analogy by favourably comparing alternative medicine to a passer-by's smile regarding therapeutic effect. In doing so he even calls the effect of the smile irrational. The analogy fails for several reasons, not least of which is the fact that there are real evolutionary and biochemical reasons why smiling makes us feel better. Delusion and deceit are not involved - I have never heard of anyone being duped out of \$39.95 for a smile.

Jerme also gives his approval to exaggerated and dishonest claims and high pricing on intrinsically useless products, as such a tactic makes a buyer think that they are really getting the 'good oil', making it a more effective placebo. He either has very loose ethics or he is simply unaware that not everyone is as eager to be deceived as he apparently is. I know - and I am sure I can speak for many others here - that I would be furious if I paid good money for a medical product, based on its proponent's claims, only to find that the claims were lies and the manufacturers were using those lies to grow fat on my money. For people posing as health professionals to take it upon themselves to deceive others "for their own good" and to receive payment for that deceit is reprehensible. That Jon Jerme is comfortable with such a situation suggests that his health concerns are not very serious or that he has more money than sense.

More evidence of muddled thinking can be seen in the lessons he takes away from clinical research. He gives an hypothetical example of a trial involving fifty people receiving "Treatment X", which results in five getting worse, five getting bet-

ter and forty remaining the same. The control group yields the same result. Jermeý's verdict: Treatment X really worked for five people due to their unique biochemistry, and if he was one of those five he would want to know where he could get more of the stuff! He appears to be unaware of the implications of this conclusion. Since the treatment and control groups both reported the same improvements, the magically selective Treatment X managed to select the five people in the group that would have got better anyway. That's pretty tricky stuff!

But then there's the question of why Jermeý would want more of it. Having established that he was one of the lucky few (that would have got better anyway) he can quit the treatment and save his money. But that could be risky; there were five people taking nothing who got worse. Hmm, what to do?

This farce only serves to show that, in discovering truth, there really is no alternative to sound scientific reasoning and honest disclosure. Of course, Jermeý's conclusion cannot be absolutely ruled out, but there is nothing in his example to propose such a conclusion.

Roland Seidel's question "How can we tell from make believe", posed often in *the Skeptic*, comes to mind.

The society in which Jermeý's suggestions can work is a society that causes skeptics to shudder. His suggestions are reliant on the continued existence of dishonesty, ignorance and gullibility - the very things skeptics are trying to eradicate.

I have not exhausted the errors and confusions in Jermeý's article, but I think I can rest my case.



Society, Medicine and Alternative Medicine

Reader questions whether orthodox medicine is immune to skepticism

The Skeptic has recently published articles criticising Alternative Medicine, but leaving mainstream (allopathic) medicine looking like a saint. Hence, a need for a critical review of mainstream medicine.

Mainstream medicine may well be more effective than alternative medicine, but it is not without its problems. Refusing to acknowledge those problems means that we not only give its critics ammunition to use in their arguments, but we let these problems persist.

Alternative vs. Mainstream Medicine

Many criticisms of mainstream medicine are shared with alternative medicine, but each has its own problems.

Frequently it's better to let a disease run its course rather than intervene. "Treating" diseases becomes a knee-jerk reaction. In fact, much of the previously identified placebo improvement has been suggested to be the result of the natural history of the disease (including 'regression to the mean'). This does not deny that there is a placebo effect — but it informs us that the real word is not so simple.

Alternate practitioners might claim to "emphasise the body's ability to heal itself", but invariably "help the process along" — otherwise there would be no need for their involvement. But AltMed and Mainstream medicine *both* abuse definitions of "healing" and "treatment" — both have an incentive to define more and more things as needing "treatment".

Both mainstream and alternative medicine are businesses, pushed



John August

along by the profit motive — and have comparable turnovers. Mainstream medicine includes not-for-profit hospitals, and there does not seem to be anything comparable in AltMed. However, these not-for-profit entities are serviced by profit-making firms, and their employees are remunerated for their efforts. So, while there are differences, the urge to turn a profit influences both mainstream and AltMed.

The criticisms of mainstream medicine are quiet but discernible in its own press. “Success stories” and “breakthroughs” are promoted by drug companies and others through both paid promotion and whatever free coverage they can obtain. The *Medical Journal of Australia* promotes its reports to the mainstream media — both its good and bad reviews, but this relies on the mainstream media itself, and the “success stories” are heard more loudly. But, in contrast, the only critical review from within alternate medicine is of mainstream medicine — not of itself. There’s no “critical analysis” to even get lost in the morass.

While we can imagine improving the regulation of mainstream medicine, alternative medicine does not even have something comparable to this basic (if problematic) regulation.

Mainstream medicine has a priesthood, endorsed by law. Alternate Practitioners do of course try to portray themselves as experts, and perhaps use obscure jargon to impress; but it’s a definite contrast to the legal monopoly, structures and the imposing jargon of mainstream medicine.

There has been an inquiry into the registration of Alternative Medical Practitioners. It’s a distortion to tar all alternative practitioners with the same brush. Some do claim to be able cure all diseases — they are perhaps at the lunatic fringe. But some label themselves as “complementary” practitioners rather than “alternative” practitioners, not claiming to cure the “serious” stuff — at least, not by themselves. And some have advocated registration of their own profession to Government.

They’ve pointed out to the Government the economic size of the industry — it’s not something which just Skeptics point out. So when I point to the lack of accountability in AltMed, keep in mind not all AltMed practitioners like it that way.

But it was hard to figure out how to register alternative practitioners, given their great diversity and the lack of a single body able to speak for them. Even if they were registered, mainstream medicine would still have its “priesthood” — becoming an alternative practitioner would invariably involve less time, with the extra hurdles needed to become a mainstream practitioner serving to control supply and maintain the priesthood (and just maybe, increasing the quality of service ...)

Surgeons, Experts and Airline Pilots

AltMed have criticised mainstream medicine as being an elite, and Skeptics have replied by saying we would not want amateurs flying passenger aircraft and similarly medicine as an expert profession is justified.

However, whatever happens to the passengers will almost certainly happen to the pilot too. When the future of the provider and the customer are so intimately linked, there’s no hazard. It’s different for doctors.

The effectiveness of pilots is carefully regulated and reviewed, along with the number of hours a pilot can fly before rest. It’s similar for long haul truck drivers.

Some doctors tell you stories about their internships, going without sleep for ridiculous periods of time, and seem to celebrate it. Their initiation into the priesthood. But it’s a helluva contrast to people who fly aircraft.

The Tito report noted a claim that the:

... performance handicap on a doctor who had been working continuously for 24 hours was about equivalent to the performance handicap from having a blood alcohol level of 0.1% or twice the legal limit for driving.

Also:

Fatigue has also been identified as a significant contributing factor in the administration of wrong drugs in anaesthesia.

The Tito report says that the medical culture contains an unrealistic expectation about work during fatigue, one that it is better off without. This sort of argument is used by the alternative medicine movement. It has some validity. (But I am told by Dr Peter Arnold that the European Economic Community have brought in restricted hours and this is beginning to be implemented in Australia.)

However, it’s worse for AltMed. People sometimes die as the result of bad advice received from alternate practitioners; but more frequently, a treatment is not successful. The practitioner will say “You’ve come to me late, but I’ll do what I can” — and so they have an out. But there’s no single event which can be identified.

But, the analogy to pilots has a problem in that pilots are a lot more regulated than the medical profession. George Bernard Shaw said “all professions are a conspiracy against the laity”. It’s an issue, certainly. But with AltMed, you are leaving things to a group which is even less accountable.

The net effect of medicine

Intervention where you would die otherwise, such as severe burns, motor vehicle accidents or terminal illness has to provide a reduction in mortality. Further, there are many cases where a heart bypass has given people many additional years of life they would otherwise not have had.

Things become more problematic as we depart from these clear examples. The more we justify intervention in terms of a risk of a mishap in the future rather than a clear current problem, the more obscure the benefit becomes. Then there’s an intervention which improves the quality of life, rather than reducing mortality — such as cataract surgery - or indeed, Barry’s knees. (There is some analysis which is done in terms

of “QUALYs” - QUality Adjusted Life Years).

It is possible for many problems to be hidden below the surface — profiteering, distortion, and cover-ups — and it is also possible that these negatives might be masked by other positives.

Regulations, Improvements?

It is claimed that things have recently gotten better, the regulation of doctors, the commitment to education and other factors mean we have a new situation. However, if you go back a few years, people were saying exactly the same thing — “It was bad, but we’ve sorted it out now”. Nobody ever seems to say “It’s bad now, maybe we’ll get it sorted out in a few years”. (1)

This is the “arrogance of the present” — that these times are the most crucial times in history, and we’ve finally got it all sorted out. In contrast, there’s also nostalgia for better times (2). It depends on who is talking.

Professor Nik Bogduk (Newcastle University) has noted that as soon as one dodgy process is put to rest, another springs up. Looking at Chelmsford and the recent Campbelltown-Liverpool (hospital) fatalities, it seems it has not been the processes of improving regulation which uncovered these critical problems, but rather whistle blowers applying pressure through the media. Further, the Medical Consumer’s Association claim that changes to legislation mean that members of the public can no longer access the infor-

mation they used to uncover Chelmsford (At least in NSW).

There’s the claim that the analogy to airline pilots is quite close, because a mistake can cost a doctor his or her career. This is still short of the pilot’s life — but regardless, we still need to uncover the mistake and take action — and recent history does not inspire confidence. There’s less ambiguity when a pilot makes a mistake.

Dr Peter Mansfield, of ‘Healthy Skepticism’, a group which scrutinises the promotion of medicines by drug companies (www.healthyskepticism.org), says that while there may have been some shift towards “evidence based medicine” (an improvement), this has been dwarfed by the increasing size of the drug market, with the associated increase in marketing and promotion.

Doctors and their overall effect on mortality

Sometimes you hear about “Doctors going on strike and mortality rates declining”. This has been observed, but it is a measurement artifact rather than anything representative. Doctors do not seem to have ever gone on strike on *all* services, including emergency services, and the effect was the result of critical health problems being temporarily delayed.

The most recent example I know of was in Israel in 2000; Avi Yisraeli, director general of the Hadassah Medical Organization, commented in the June 2000 issue of *BMJ*:

Mortality is not the only measure of harm to health. Lack of medical intervention can lead to disability, pain, and reduced functioning. Elective surgery can bring about a great improvement in a patient’s condition, but it can also mean disability and death in the weakest patients. And patients who do not undergo diagnosis or surgery now could decline or die in a few months due to the postponement.

Interestingly, life expectancy and infant deaths show no correlation

with the number of doctors *per capita*. Japan, with the smallest number of doctors, has the lowest infant mortality and highest life expectancy; Spain with the most doctors has comparable infant mortality and life expectancy to Australia (according to a WHO study reported in *Australia’s Health 1990*’).

In Australia, we have disadvantaged groups such as aborigines who have an increased mortality in spite of the benefits of medical intervention in other population groups. Much as medical intervention such as motor vehicle accidents and heart bypass is positive, poverty can also have a significant effect on mortality. It’s a matter of definition of whether poverty which impacts on health might be more properly called a health or poverty issue.

Internationally, it could be that health resources are unevenly distributed and increased mortality results from factors unrelated to health care. It’s clear that other factors than health expenditure (as evidenced by doctors per capita) must have a significant impact on mortality.

Resource allocation and priorities within medicine

Frequently we cure a problem which could have been avoided in the first place. For example, campaigns to keep people fit, so reducing heart attacks. Only a handful of dollars goes towards prevention for each hundred towards cure (*Too Much Medicine*, p 243).

There are problems with priorities and the lack of follow through. One example was the preparation of clinical guidelines on lower urinary tract symptoms which were not then distributed.

In the novel *Enigma* by Robert Harris, set at the Bletchley Park code-breaking establishment, people contemplated that a shortage of pencils would mean that servicepeople’s lives would be lost. It was an example of how cost cutting in particular places could have a disproportionate effect.

Resources must be applied with

Footnote 1 : Some other asymmetries in non-medical life include people worrying about what happens after they die, while no-one puzzles over where they came from. Also, people tell you to turn off your mobile at the start of a talk, but don’t remind you to turn it back on.

Footnote 2 : Two statements along these lines from non-medical fields include : “We could get to the Moon back then, but couldn’t do it now”, and “The founding parents were able to get their head around the relevant constitutional issues, but we couldn’t do it today”.

care in order to be cost-effective. But the manner in which costs seem to have been cut is disturbing. Certainly, ongoing almost finished positive initiatives should not be cut in favour of new ones.

In addition, powerful drugs can *reduce* the health of someone who suffers from a mild version of the disease, because the drug itself is an assault on the body. Misapplied, medicine can *reduce* health. Perhaps this happens through naive good intentions; but equally there could be profiteering through over-servicing.

Medicine as a proportion of GDP; its place in society and the economy

Medicine, while useful, can take away from the other parts of our life. If we were taxed heavily and had long lifespans, we might find that our lives were barren with nothing to do ...

Dr Lionel Wilson, a former president of the AMA, commented in the 1995 book *Quality Management in Health Care*, noted that:

Paradoxically, increasing health care expenditures may soon become one of the greatest threats to people's quality of life and even to their health.

In the cut and thrust, of everyday life, we can focus on this crisis or that crisis, and lose track of the broader truth that health takes away from the things that we could in principle enjoy if we were healthy.

Conclusion

My main conclusion is that mainstream medicine is problematic, and not without its sins. But even being susceptible to vagaries of individual and corporate selfishness, abuse of definitions, errors of convenient perception and the vagaries of regulation and resource allocation, it still makes some attempt to be scientific. Alternative Medicine rarely even approaches the flawed standard set by mainstream medicine. But this is no reason to ignore the problems of mainstream medicine.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans, Dr Peter Arnold and Andrew Alan of the Medical Consumer's Association for assistance in developing this article.

An important reference was *Too Much Medicine*, Ray Moynihan, ABC Books, 1998, in addition to other references cited within the text.

Editor responds

I don't think the Skeptic has ever claimed that the practice of medicine in Australia is either perfect or beyond criticism. Indeed, one only needs to take note of the print and electronic media over a period to be made aware of many problems in the practice, and more especially the administration, of health care services in most states. The factors causing this may be economic, political, bureaucratic or any of a number of similar problems or combinations thereof, all of which lie outside the remit of the Skeptic.

We are only peripherally concerned with the administration and somewhat more so with the regulation of such practices. For example, both orthodox and alternative medicine claim to be addressing the same problems, but whereas the practice of orthodox medicine is highly regulated and practitioners can be called to account for any failings in their practice, little such regulation is evident with the practice of alternative medicine, and where it exists it is not pursued with much rigour. Our complaint is that the same standards of accountability should apply to anyone purporting to carry out the same functions.

However, our real concerns with alternative v orthodox medicine lie not with the practices of health care, but with the science that underpins each modality. Medical science, as with any other, is an imperfect discipline, but it has a methodology which allows some degree of confidence in the results it proposes, which find (or should) their way into medical practice. Of course mistakes will be made,

but the scientific approach (clinical trials, double blind testing, etc) is one which allows mistakes, or their effects, to be corrected as further research reveals further information. In orthodox medicine, diagnosis and treatment are entirely separate entities, each requiring particular skills and knowledge.

Alternative medicine, on the other hand, relies to a very large degree on anecdote, testimonial and in many cases the "antiquity effect" (ie, 'my grandmother swore by it', or 'it has been around for centuries'). As such, there is no in-built corrective mechanism to prevent errors or preclude their recurrence. Furthermore, alternative medicine, even when it works as a treatment (as herbal treatments, for instance, sometimes might) has no diagnostic ability whatever. There is little or no science in the field of alternative medicine and, in fact, its practitioners frequently decry science (or 'western' science as they misleadingly term it) as a proper method of determining the efficacy or otherwise of their claimed treatments. This assertion is disingenuous, to say the least.

Finally John draws a false analogy between medicine and aviation. It is not that Skeptics would worry about flying with a pilot whose personal beliefs might tend towards the mystical that concerns us; as long as the pilot is competent and conscientious, his personal beliefs are irrelevant. The analogy Skeptics draw is to flying in an aircraft designed either by someone skilled in the field of aeronautics or by someone who firmly believes that all one needs to do to keep it flying is to propitiate the demons.

Both forms of health care suffer from problems, but they are distinctly different problems. To a large extent the problems of the orthodox are those rooted in the mundane world of politics, economics and human fallibility. The problems of alternative practice are much more fundamental and lie in the nature of belief unmoderated by evidence.

Barry Williams

Vic Skeptics – Events of 2004

The busy Victorian branch year began with the visit of John Edward to Australia. Mentalist magician, Mark Mayer, launched an official objection to Mr Edward's publicity under the Trade Descriptions Act. It had the desired effect of focusing critical media attention on the visit. Vic Skeptics supported Mark with TV and radio responses and with our own publicity.

We also took a stall at the City of Yarra Community Day among tarot card readers, reflexologists, naturopaths and the like. The bed of nails and Mark Mayer's baffling "mind illusions" drew crowds of appreciative, interesting and engaging people to the stall.

Another early 2004 engagement was a psychology teachers' conference; Lynne Kelly and Vic Committee had supported teachers in their objections to an unfortunate and now infamous VCE Psychology exam question which postulated that to survive the bed of nails or firewalking unharmed, an altered state of consciousness was required. We said categorically "tain't so". The Science Teachers' Association of Victoria (STAV) invited us to demonstrate. Lynne Kelly gave the best possible practical exposition of Cold Reading to the youngish crowd of practising psychology teachers. She provided numerous intimate one-to-one readings, using her prop of "Tauromancy". At all stages, her clients were made aware that Lynne was employing psychological and communicative, rather than Psychic skills. They were still very impressed.

We've had an increasing involvement with science education. During the year, with the enthusiastic assistance and logistic support of Rich-



Robyn and Mark Abrahams, with Rosemary Sceats and Peter Hogan

ard Saunders, Barry Williams and the Sydney mob, we cooperated with STAV in a variety of ways, including a repeat appearance at the annual Primary Science Teachers' Conference. Events like this convince us that not only are most of the teaching participants "on side" and supportive of the Skeptical message, but that the commercial presenters — booksellers, planetarium operators, classroom equipment entrepreneurs and the like, are intelligent and astute people, often with fascinating backgrounds and a well-developed knowledge of Skeptical issues.

Courtesy of the Skeptics Science and Education Foundation, we organised sponsorship for sixty bursaries awarded as a result of STAV's annual Science Talent Search. Australian Skeptics is one of three major sponsors of this event, to which it has an on-going commitment.

At STAVCON, Victoria's annual science teachers conference, we represented the skeptical view to 1000 Victorian science teachers from government and independent schools. With our Australian Skeptics showbags we distributed a lot of useful stuff to a lot of schools, including about two hundred of the Water Divining DVDs.

We also responded to an invitation from STAV to provide original photo-

copiable class material on topics of mutual interest to Skeptics and science teachers. This is mailed out as an insert in 1200 copies of each edition of the journal *Lab Talk*, and thus gives us a direct interface with schools. The latest edition of *Lab Talk* was an exception; we provided twelve pages of Darwin Day activities within the magazine itself.

Our public speakers for 2004 included Bob Nixon (Water Divining), Dr Steve Bassler (Alternate and Orthodox Medicine), Lynne Kelly (The Human Face of Skepticism), Barry Johnson (Gold Detecting Scams) and Marc Abrahams (The Ig-nobel Prizes). We are continuing with our Public Events program in 2005.

The Victorian Skeptics website www.keypoint.com.au~skeptics/, launched in 2004, together with the Vic News yahoo group http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vic_skeptics_news/ provides a reliable guide to our activities.

For Victorian readers who are interested in meeting and talking with other Skeptics, our pub social is always held on the Third Monday of each month. For March 21 and April 18 2005, the venue will be The Beehive Hotel, Barkers Rd, Hawthorn from 6 pm .

Victorians interested in taking a more active interest in Skeptical activities:

- *consult either of the links above,
- ***Email:** feedback@skeptics.com.au
- ***Phone:** 1800 666 996
- ***Mail:** Vic Skeptics

GPO Box 5166 Melbourne 3001

Ken Greatorex

Letters

Good education

Leonard Colquhoun
Invermay TAS

Among the stories from the South and SE Asian tsunami catastrophes, there are some of the “We’ve survived only because So’n’so was with us” genre; the link below tells one of them:

Hundreds of people owe their lives to the fact that an 11-year-old schoolgirl was fortunate enough to attend a school which still taught geography, instead of the current fad for the ideologically-raddled, content-free SoSE courses which take up time and space in so many schools:

<http://www.smh.com.au/text/articles/2005/01/02/1104601245551.html>

Full marks to the teacher involved, Andrew Kearney — sounds like my kind of teacher. And an elephant stamp for the schoolgirl Tilly.

Of course, were this letter published in many other forums, there’d be predictable howls of outrage about “cramming young people’s minds with useless facts instead of teaching them how to think”, but readers of “The False Bits from Humbug” in the latest volume *the Skeptic* (24:4 pp 22-31) would see it immediately as a False Dichotomy; they’d understand that it is entirely feasible for schools to teach culturally significant knowledge AND to “teach students to think” at the same time. They’d know it is not at all an either/or, gum-chewing or walking thing.

Fooled by an expert

Guy Burns
Devonport TAS

Anthony Wheeler put together a pretty good story in “How Reliable is our Consciousness?” (24:3) There I was reading p23, “Count the number of ‘F’s in this sentence... Don’t read on until you have counted for yourself.” In my periphery vision I could see a new paragraph coming up with a box around it and I assumed there lay the answer and explanation. So I carefully avoided looking ahead and as instructed counted the number of ‘F’s in the sentence, “Count the number of ‘F’s in this sentence.” Nothing difficult about that — answer one. When I came to the boxed paragraph I realised that that was the sentence I was supposed to read. Again, no difficulty. But it turned out I got the wrong number both times. Mr Wheeler got me twice.

More about Mead

Mark Newbrook
Wirral UK

James Gerrand (24:4, pp 64-65) continues to misdirect and overstate his comments on Freeman and Mead: I stand by my judgement that Clark’s earlier article was one-sided and indeed by my view that Freeman seriously over-interpreted some of the evidence.

We all know that matters of science are decided by the evidence rather than by voting per se. However, in many cases, including this present case, experts and other careful commentators are seriously divided on the interpretation of the evidence. This situation should be acknowledged by those who comment further, especially where they are not themselves qualified in the relevant subjects. Clark talked as if only a very few of the relevant experts would disagree with his assessment of this present case and as if it was clear that this disagreement was badly motivated; I accurately observed that all of this was misleading. For his part, Gerrand naively talks as if the evidence is conclusive and dismisses alternative interpretations, however expertly grounded.

It is obvious that my comment about the one-sided view of this matter which many Melbourne Skeptics had received before the 1999 debate was not intended as a criticism of that debate, as Gerrand suggests, or indeed as a criticism of any person, but simply as a true statement about the situation which (in my view very unfortunately) had previously come to prevail.

Despite Gerrand’s strong record of skeptical activity (which I admire), most people I spoke to after the debate shared my view that in this case he had to be seen as a fervent supporter of Freeman, a view which I think continues to be borne out every time he comments. (I do accept that Rubinstein appeared no less fervent than Gerrand; in fairness, I should have stated that.)

Most people also shared my view that the debate had been rather even, with neither party clearly winning. There was in fact a swing against Freeman between the initial and final straw polls, which (perhaps ironically) were instigated at Gerrand's suggestion. (I grant that the audience was smaller by the end, but I know of no reason to think that Freeman supporters would be more likely to leave early.)

Rubinstein's case was based in large part on his view that Freeman had clearly misinterpreted existing evidence, rather than on new evidence; Gerrand's comment on evidence is thus unfair. Gardner is fully entitled to his view, which has to be taken seriously, but he himself is not expert in this area, and his presentation too appears one-sided (note his wording as quoted).

I can recommend some even-handed accounts of this controversy, eg that of Hellman in *Great Feuds In Science* (John Wiley, 1998).

After the Conference

Some thoughts on the convention.

We must give one cheer for Creationists and promoters of the Moon hoax. The Creationists have prompted the biologists to come up with models of how something as complex as an eye could have evolved, (and also the "bombardier beetle"). Never mind that the Creationists would probably ignore this in their own presentations, but I don't imagine the biologists would have developed these models without prompting.

Phil Plait illustrated just what an amazing world we live in, with shadows and reflections doing strange things we would never notice. And it's only the efforts of the Moon Hoaxers, in identifying supposedly odd things on the Moon, that open our eyes up to the fascinating world around us.

But the thing which got my goat was Professor Ian Plimer and his criticism of the Greenhouse effect and Greens generally. The last *Skeptic* commented that a debate was not the

best forum for communicating these ideas, but perhaps a lot of it was Prof Plimer. He was attacking the person, not the ball — I saw it and so did several others at the convention. The strange thing is, if Prof Plimer did perceive himself as correct, why was he not gracious enough to avoid ad-hominem attacks? Sure, the guy from Greenpeace lost it, but you can't blame him. I don't plan to question Prof Plimer on the geological facts he put forth. But there were a lot of incidental points he made, together with the interpretations he put on the geological facts, which I challenge.

He spoke of the risk of nuclear war, which was rapidly replaced by concern about the greenhouse effect. Well, if you assume both were of concern, and you worry about the most pressing problem at any time, it makes perfect sense.

Before the Great War, opinion was the different sides would be held in peace through their firepower aimed at each other. That didn't happen. It was an important precedent, a warning for the age of nuclear deterrence which would follow.

And we got close to nuclear war several times. On 26 September 1983, the USSR control centre had a false alarm, and it was only the actions of Colonel Stanislav Petrov who prevented war. And then we have the Cuban missile crisis, and several other close calls.

This is clearly an issue for historical debate, and not something I can do justice to in this letter; it was strange to see Prof Plimer so casually dismiss these concerns.

He criticised the Greens for speaking in terms of media grabs. But, who is to blame for this? I think more the superficial media for making causes operate this way. It points to a broader problem with society. And it doesn't necessarily mean their points are wrong — it just underlines the communication difficulties they operate under.

Certainly, we've had significant geological temperature changes. But Prof Plimer's argument seems a lot like saying that because there are natural bushfires we don't need to worry about

man-made ones. He points to the greater life that would result from a greenhouse effect, but seems to confuse a settled equilibrium state with the change along the way to reach it. We may well be on a knife edge for natural dramatic temperature changes — but that's no reason to want to push our luck ...

The influence a greenhouse effect would have on life on earth generally is different to the impact on human society along the way. It's a selfish concern for humans as compared to life at large, but it's a very natural concern. It does point to a ruberiness in the definition of what is a "green" issue — the future of life generally or disruptions to our particular human society? (But heck — a lot of ideas are rubbery when you look closely.)

There are several possibilities for a slight man-made temperature rise triggering a much larger temperature increase — the release of methane hydride from the ocean depths, or a decline in the Amazon rainforest biomass which becomes linked with climate change in a vicious circle (The Amazon is not a static system, it is growing each year, a net absorption of carbon from the atmosphere. If this were to stop or reverse ...).

Certainly, the evidence of a temperature rise is difficult to find — and Prof Plimer did have a point about the gases released by volcanoes, though I'd imagine they would be more chemically reactive and wonder how long they would persist, or what the chance is of them triggering other events. Of all Prof Plimer's points, it was the only one that has a chance of surviving examination. I don't think that's positive.

But, we do know that burning fossil fuels is going to put more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (which might be partly absorbed by the ocean and increasing vegetative biomass), and that this is a greenhouse gas. While it is difficult to find a temperature increase, I seem to recall there being evidence for an increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere ...

What sense are we to make of this logical link in the absence of an observed temperature increase? That's

an issue for discussion. What are we to be skeptical about? New claims, or things taken for granted? Regardless, maybe we'd be better off attacking the ball and not the person.

Sins

Gary Goldberg
Silver Spring, MD, USA

I would add another sin to Lynne Kelly's list of skeptics' sins in 24:4, "Preaching to the Choir".

What good is skepticism if we keep it to ourselves? To continue with the religious metaphor, we need to evangelize. Spread the word. Complain to the media when they get it wrong. I note with gratification that the Australian Skeptics seem to be able to get the media's attention. Here in the US, I wonder if our skeptical organizations even try. I rarely read of any complaints made by CSICOP, its sister skeptical organizations, or affiliated skeptics.

Warning

A warning has been received from our Nigerian correspondent, Leo Igwe.

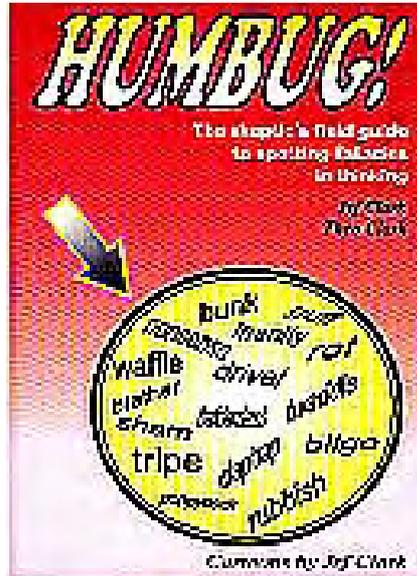
Dear Barry
Just to inform you that 419ers have infiltrated the Nigerian postal system They steal and alter cheques So in case theres any ' donations' in response to our appeal the cheques should be concealed very well or preferably the amount should be sent by WESTERN UNION.
Leo



Eureka Prizes

This issue contains a flyer promoting the Australian Museum Eureka Prizes which will be announced in August. Among the Prizes is the **Australian Skeptics Eureka Prize for Critical Thinking**. Readers are invited to nominate for consideration those people whose research or teaching methods promote the aims listed under our Prize. Nominations close on May 13, and more details can be obtained from the Australian Museum web site: www.amonline.net.au/eureka.

Blatant Plug



Jef Clark, with his son Theo, has written a number of articles published in past issues on the topic of how to spot fallacies in thinking. Readers will remember the trouble Jef had with his university in publishing his book, *Humbug!* We are pleased to announce that Jef has succeeded in his endeavours and his book is now in print.

The book identifies, discusses and explores (with examples of 35 fallacies in thinking. Each fallacy is treated with an underlying seriousness, which is leavened where appropriate with irony, whimsy, sarcasm and liberal doses of satirical commentary. The authors' intention was to entertain as well as to inform. They take their ideas seriously, but not themselves y (a bit like *the Skeptic* in fact).

We will be purchasing a supply of the books and they will shortly be available from our online shop at \$16.50

A Gift to You

As promised in past issues, we will soon be dispatching a gift to all our current subscribers (apart from the four who specifically asked not to be included) one handy cloth bag with Skeptics logos and inspiring messages inscribed thereon. We hope you will display them at every opportunity to alert others to the great benefits of Skepticism.

The *Great Skeptic CD*²

We all knew it had to come to an end sometime, and now that day is upon us — the *Great Skeptic CD*, that wonderful compilation of all issues of the *Skeptic* from 1981 to 2000 (plus much more) has ceased to be. We have sold out. (No, not our principles — the disc.)

Don't despair if you missed out, however, because the good news is that the *Great Skeptic CD*² is NOW on sale (details on the web site). It contains not only all the text of the previous best seller, but another three years of the *Skeptic*, plus even more extra works, and it has been made even more user-friendly. (So friendly, in fact, that it will almost certainly wag its tail and lick your face.)

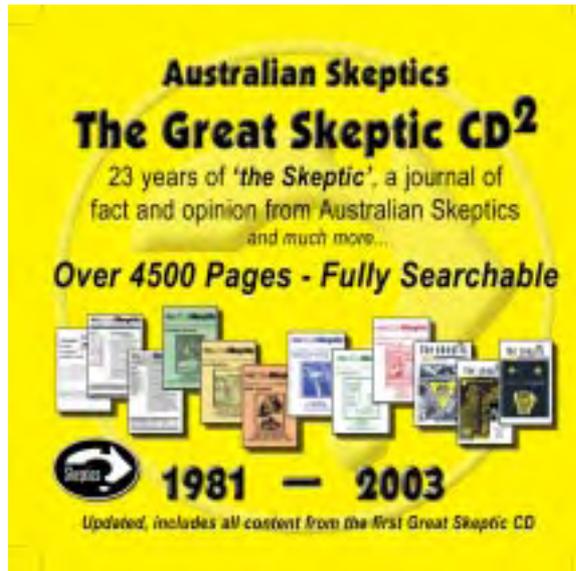
Ah, we hear you cry, *but do you expect me, having forked out \$55 to buy CD*¹, to again cough up a

similar sum to get this new and improved version, even if you are including a set of steak knives?

No you don't — if you don't already have one it will still cost \$55, but if you were one of those adventurous individuals who got in on the ground floor, then we will let you have the new improved *Great Skeptic CD*² (with hexachlorophenol enhancers and polarised theodolites) for **only \$25**.

How will we know if you have the old version? We could ask you to send it back — but we'd rather you donate it to a local school or library — so we'll simply leave it to your conscience. Trusting Skeptics, aren't we?

And don't forget, you can still get the *Skeptics Water Divining* Video Tape for \$20 and the DVD for \$30 (reduced to clear).



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