Challenging Beliefs

Ghost Mining

Skepticism in Africa

The Persuaders and Their Pills

Ask Your Pharmacist?

Mind Myths? Contrary Arguments

Dr. Karl Kruszelnicki
Skeptic of the Year

Australian Skeptics
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Cover art by Richard Saunders
The prominent use of the word ‘sceptic/skeptic’ in the media, often in association with rather peculiar ideas, has caused some to question whether we should consider changing the name of our organisation. I would argue that skepticism is a very useful rational mental tool under any circumstance, even when the position one espouses is ultimately untenable; I would further argue that skepticism is no less important when one’s views are strongly supported by the evidence.

One example of the use of ‘sceptic’ was in relation to a South Australian court appeal by a man who had been convicted of wilfully infecting women with HIV/AIDS. The defence called two witnesses who asserted that there was no evidence that HIV caused AIDS, or even that the virus existed — they were described in the press (and by themselves) as “HIV sceptics”. Arrayed against them was a battery of highly qualified experts who exposed their claims to critical scrutiny and who questioned their expertise. At press time the case has not been decided.

It would not be at all surprising if many of the things presently ‘known’ about HIV and AIDS were later found to be in error, and one would expect that the scientists doing the research would apply the tool of skepticism to their own work, for that is the way science progresses. While the people who deny any association between the virus and the disease are entitled to be skeptical that the connection has been established, they are not entitled to conclude that there is no such association, at least unless they have good evidence of their own to support their conclusion.

Personally I believe that the case for HIV causing AIDS has been established but as, like the majority of Skeptics, I have no qualifications in medical or biological sciences, my belief is not grounded in any deep understanding of the science involved. It comes about for a variety of reasons; the mounting evidence in favour of the hypothesis, the advances made in treatment of the disease, but probably most powerfully because I am more likely to favour the views of people whose expertise I have come to respect (Sir Gus Nossal, for instance), rather than people of whom I have never heard. That’s a natural reaction, but it’s not particularly skeptical. We all, even Skeptics, have our own prejudices.

We should, of course, be skeptical of accepting propositions based purely on ‘consensus’, even if it is a consensus of the best minds in the field at any moment. I have little doubt that the consensus among physicists in the late 19th Century would have been that “everything to be discovered has been discovered”, yet a few short years into the new century Max Planck, Albert Einstein, et al showed that the surface of discovery had barely been scratched.

Closer to home, for much of the latter half of the 20th Century the consensus about causes of stomach and intestinal ulcers was that they were caused by stress, excessive acid and other life style factors, and the disease was treated accordingly. Barry Marshall and Robin Warren of
Perth were skeptical of this consensus and their long and detailed research showed that the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori* played a key role in the development of these ulcers. For their discovery they were awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize in Medicine.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that simply being skeptical of the consensus is sufficient to have your ideas proven correct (they didn’t all laugh at Galileo). In most cases consensus opinions are closer to the truth than those of their critics, but in the end it is evidence that proves a scientific proposition, not popularity.

That brings us to a current major issue that goes under the broad heading of ‘Climate Change’. This is not a single problem at all, but a hierarchy of highly complex and related issues, the solutions to which are not simply a matter for any particular scientific discipline, nor even in some cases, for science at all. Partly this arises from the many and various issues involved:

- **Is the globe warming and if so, by how much?**
- **Are human activities a (or the) major contributing factor?**
- **What part do naturally occurring events, or cyclical factors play?**
- **What are the short- and long-term effects?**
- **What can be done about it?**

A vital and contentious topic, bound to affect us all, it involves many experts in many different fields, so how can we lay people know who is telling us the truth? None of us has the time, nor the desire, to become expert in all the disparate disciplines necessary to understand the problems, let alone the solutions. As Skeptics, however, we should all be able to recognise spurious arguments when they are presented, and there is no shortage of them in this debate — on all sides.

The very complexity of the problems, together with the widespread lack of understanding of the processes of science in both the population at large and the media, means that there is a temptation to rely on spin and hype to sell the message.

Regrettably this often results in reputable scientists (and other experts) impugning the motives or questioning the *bona fides* of equally reputable scientists who disagree with them on their conclusions. We have all seen charges that scientists are ‘toeing the party line’ to ensure continuing funding, or being ‘in the pay of big oil’ to disparage the findings. There might well be cases of each, but it is by no means universal on either side and we would do well to recognise that.

That there are genuine scientific disagreements regarding many of the issues encompassed by this whole debate should come as a surprise to no one. Science progresses precisely because different people have different perspectives, but we should also recognise that scientists, like everyone else, have their own prejudices and not everything they do or think is ‘scientific’. In the end, as always, it is the evidence, not the spin, that will decides the case.

Above all we should beware of falling for any ‘One True Answer’; in the past, that sort of thing has led to the Inquisition, Auschwitz, the Gulag and equally horrible ‘Final Solutions’.

In all it is safer by far to be a Skeptic.

**Changes**

We hope you find the improvements in the appearance of the Skeptic to your taste. We thank the many subscribers who offered suggestions for improvement, and in particular our gratitude to Tim and Hilda Mendham, Guy Burns, Richard Saunders and, as always, Steve Roberts, all of whose professional expertise made the revamping task more pleasant than it might have been. Please feel free to let us know what you think.

**Barry Williams**
Around the Traps

Memo to all journalism schools

No person should be allowed to graduate from your school until they have learned the accurate meaning of the word “ancestor”.

The proximate cause of this diatribe was a front page article in *The Australian* (March 12, headed “Feelings high at English bridge claim”, by Peter Lalor. It concerned a claim by an English engineering firm that the final design for the Sydney Harbour Bridge was completed by one of their engineers, Ralph Freeman, and not by the Australian, Dr J J C Bradfield, as popularly supposed (and celebrated in a soft drink advertisement).

That controversy aside, the article states, inter alia, “... in a move that has angered Bradfield's ancestors, including his grandson Peter ...”. This from a journalist and author who has just published a book on the history of the Bridge. It is not clear whether Peter Lalor, journalist, is related to Peter Lalor, leader of the Eureka miners, but it is a racing certainty that the former is not an ancestor of the latter.

This is by no means the first time that we have noted this misuse of the word; even Auntie ABC has been guilty on more than one occasion.

In life not many things are certain, but one thing that is, is that every living thing (including journalists) has an unbroken string of ancestors stretching back to the very first living organism that hatched in the primordial slime (or was cobbled together by a busy deity one Thursday arvo in October 4004 BC).

Your parents, grand parents, great grandparents and an extraordinary number of preceding greats, were all your ancestors. Your children, grandchildren, etc, are your “descendants”. It is moot whether some people (journalists, for instance) should be allowed to have any descendants, but descendants are the ones who carry your genes into the future.

Dr J J C Bradfield was born in 1867 and died in 1943. The chance, therefore, of his having any living ancestors is very remote indeed. (Unless someone has really invented a Time Machine, in which case all bets are off.)

Costly advice

For those who are tempted to think that irrational New Age beliefs are simply harmless diversions, the recent case of a Melbourne woman might be instructive. Allison Lunney sought help for her serious marriage problems from a “psychic line”. She found sympathy and support, but it came at a price. The price was $5.50 a minute, and because she was hooked, she ran up more than $80,000 in calls — paid for from money she stole from her employer.

She pleaded guilty to 12 charges of theft and one count of false accounting that totalled more than $157,000, from the company where she was employed as an office administrator responsible for accounts and banking.

Although she had repaid some of the money, she was sentenced to two years’ jail, suspended for three years, and put on a community-based order with a condition that she do 200 hours of unpaid work.

Pop pill – pop off?

It seems that those of us who have long thought the habit of taking excessive amounts of vitamins has a deleterious effect on the hip pocket, even if otherwise harmless, might have erred on the side of optimism. If a report in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, is accurate, vitamin pills could be doing more harm than good.

Based on low-bias trials involving more than 180,000 people, research conducted by the Cochrane Collaboration found that supplements as a whole increased the death rate by 5 per cent — vitamin A by 16 per cent, beta carotene by 7 per cent, and vitamin E by 4 per cent.
The team concluded: Our findings contradict the findings of observational studies claiming that antioxidants improve health.

They go on to say ... there are several possible explanations. One is that oxidative stress is not the cause of conditions such as heart disease for which it has been blamed, but may be a consequence of such conditions. Alternatively, by eliminating free radicals we may interfere with essential defensive mechanisms.

But the team adds that they examined only the use of synthetic vitamins, and their findings should not be translated to fruit and vegetables.

The British Heart Foundation, in concert with Australian Skeptics, urges people not to take supplements but to concentrate instead on eating a healthy diet.

Voyance not so clair

Those who read James Randi’s website (www.randi.org) will be well aware of the TV ‘clairvoyant’ Sylvia Browne. Browne, who makes much of her alleged assistance to police and relatives in missing person or murder cases, has recently had more exposure that she would have wished.

First there was the case of a young lad, Shawn Hornbeck, who went missing in 2002. A few months later, she told his parents that “he is no longer with us” and described where his body could be found. However, Shawn was found alive and well a few weeks ago, living just miles away from his home with a man who has been charged with his abduction.

Further, Randi reports, in 2002, Browne told the daughters of Lynda McClelland who had disappeared in 2000, that she was alive, that she’d wandered off after having a nervous breakdown, and she’d had been taken to Orlando, Florida by a man with the initials “M.J.” Subsequently it was learned that the woman had been murdered the same day she’d disappeared and had been buried less than two miles from her home in Pennsylvania.

Unforeseen circumstances

Even less successful was the York Psychic Museum, set up by well known British astrologer Jonathan Cainer in 2003, which has shut due to unforeseen circumstances. It seems the Museum had been attracting only around 100 people a week, which is hardly sufficient to keep the werewolf from the door.

Cainer reckons he might be back in business in a year or so, but according to the York Press he cautioned:

If you are asking me for predictions when exactly it will open up again, then it is hard to say. Although I'm in the prediction business, I don't believe you can make predictions about things you are close to.

Quite!

Stargazing

We can't vouch for the accuracy of this story, but if it's not true it should be. It is claimed that a South Carolina planetarium and a local astronomy club recently held a viewing of a lunar eclipse on a Thursday evening. The planetarium then received many complaints from parents who could not understand why the eclipse viewing was held on a school night that prevented students from attending. They demanded to know why the eclipse was not held on the weekend when their children could stay up late. Oh dear.

Pear-shaped

Back in the late 1970s, Princeton University set up the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) laboratory to study the effects of human consciousness on various physical processes — anomalies that some thought would ‘prove’ the existence of assorted paranormal effects.

Much of its work concentrated on testing the ability to consciously influence the output of random number generators. It later became part of the Global Consciousness Project and some claims were made that major disasters, eg, 9/11, or the Boxing Day Tsunami, were presaged by ‘deviations from randomness’, thereby indicating a ‘global consciousness’.

However, like most research into the paranormal, the results were sketchy at best and now, after 28 years of not finding very much at all, the laboratory is to be closed.

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Prima Donna

Thanks to subscriber Dixie Lee, who sent us the latest “your guaranteed lottery numbers” offer from a psych who goes under the improbable name of Marie Callas. We wonder if she also sings Tosca?
Challenging Beliefs

We’ve all done it: whenever we have access to a group of students we inevitably end up passing around a questionnaire asking them “do you believe in ghosts?” (Anon, 1988a, b; Grey, 1988; Frasier, 1992a, b; Bridgstock, 2002). We then use the feedback to draw up tables of figures, compare them to other published polls of beliefs in weird fringes, and pronounce “What a surprise!” — our sample is just like everyone else’s. And lament the sorry state of science education that allows such a large number of unfounded beliefs to persist.

If the education industry isn’t going to give young consumers the science skills necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff, the placebo effect from the pharmaceutical cures, it is a case for the Australian Skeptics. But what are we going to do about it?

This is the usual rhetoric. But hold fast there young feller. Let’s go back a step: What did that questionnaire showing such large numbers of believers in pseudo-tripe really tell us?

Beliefs and knowledge

A belief (or attitude) is something we hold to be true without actual knowledge. If we experience the heat of the gas flame by putting our hand in it then we know flames are painful. As a child our parents may have told us to beware of sharp knives in case we cut ourselves; as a result we believe sharp knives are dangerous. We may test components of this belief by seeing what happens when we pull the sharp edge of the blade along our sister’s shoe. Wow — it cuts the shoe! And that experience supports our belief that sharp knives are capable of cutting us. But without the experience of actually pushing the blade into our flesh it is still a belief; a belief that may be true, or not.

Beliefs are not all equal

While our students have ticked those boxes telling us which paranormal possibilities they believe in, the attitudes they have expressed will vary in strength (‘I definitely believe in faith healing, and maybe some UFOs are alien spacecraft’), in frequency (‘I don’t think a day passes without faith healing cropping up in conversation or at least my thoughts, and I read an article on interpreting UFOs once’), and whether they are qualified (‘I think faith healing is great for most illnesses, though I have doubts about some of the pastors practising it’).

Although these three characteristics of a belief are related, they do not necessarily always correlate highly. A strong belief in UFOs argued vehemently at social gatherings may not be related to a highly
frequent attitude; this belief may only be expressed in the presence of challenging unbelievers who need to be converted, or by the occasional need to defend one’s own publicly-stated position.

The most important attribute of attitude is its strength, and this in turn is affected by how important we consider our attitude (‘sure I believe in ghosts, but they don’t have any effect on our world’), by how much of a vested interest we have in it (‘I spent $18,000 last year on a ‘ghost hunting’ holiday; of course I believe in ghosts’), and by how much we know about it (‘I must have a dozen books and hundreds of catalogued articles on ghosts’).

So one person’s belief in ghosts may be very weak; for them ghosts are not important, they have invested little money in supporting their belief, and know very little about it. But for another respondent ticking the same, single box in our survey, their belief in ghosts may be very important to them, buttressed by a great investment of money, time and effort, and based upon a considerable knowledge of the subject. In our survey both of these ticks would be counted the same as equivalent believers.

**Beliefs and behaviour**

Not all beliefs necessarily produce consequent behaviours (‘Sure I believe in ghosts, but it’s not a factor when choosing a house to buy.’ And this is where surveys of students most often fall down mighty heavily.

A classic demonstration of the lack of correlation between beliefs and behaviours comes from the 1930s in the USA when prejudice against Asians was common. A Chinese couple travelled across the continent, dining out along the way. Of 184 restaurants patronised not one turned the Chinese couple away. But when surveyed by post six months later 90% of those restaurants replying said they would not serve Chinese customers. Hence although prejudice in this case was common, it was not strong enough to produce the commensurate behaviour.

There are flaws in this study; nevertheless the conclusion is that the belief held does not necessarily predict the behaviour observed. Indeed belief is a poor predictor of behaviour (the mean correlation in 88 studies is 0.38, which on a scale of ‘0’ to ‘1’ is pretty low).

The lack of correlation between beliefs and behaviour is an important point. Just because you approve of chiropractors being reimbursed by medical insurers does not necessarily mean you will seek one for treatment. I’ll emphasise this point with another example.

There is growing acceptance of the reality of global warming, and the consequent serious possibility of sea levels rising. Nevertheless, the price of houses in our major cities continues to rise, even though most major cities in the world are on rivers and coastal harbours within a few metres of sea level. And although the UK spent one thousand million pounds on a barrage across the River Thames to prevent London flooding from this, and other, reasons, London is still a popular and expensive place to live.

The biggest reason for the lack of correlation between beliefs and behaviour is the need to take into account the strength of the belief: the stronger the belief, the greater the correlation with behaviour. Asking students whether they believe in telepathy a little bit/strongly/very strongly is a crude estimate of the strength of their belief. A better question would focus on their behaviour: ‘Would you buy a telepathy-blocking device to keep your thoughts private?’

A second reason for the lack of correlation is the context, the situation, in which the behaviour is looked for. Most important here is the subject’s perception of how others expect them to behave. A client of an acupuncturist is hardly like to voice support for this pseudomedicine in a meeting of skeptics whose strong anti-acupuncture views are already known. In other company, say in their work place tea room, they may not hesitate to endorse the practice.

**Persuasion: Changing others’ beliefs**

I’m sorry to say this but changing others’ beliefs is a huge business in Australia and overseas. This is most familiar as advertising. Whether advertising for commercial products (magnetic energy polarisers to purify your tap water), or services (thousands of customers have enjoyed the benefits of chiropractic treatment – why not you?), political parties (vote ‘green’ for more biodiversity), or to change attitudes (grow native plants in your garden and you too can have weird children running around in funny fairy costumes) — changing others’ beliefs is common practice in our society.

Changing the beliefs of others, or ‘persuasion’, consists of four elements: the source, message, channel and receiver.

The source is usually the person trying to persuade others. Often, as in advertising, a surrogate is used. Persuasion is most effective when the apparent source has high credibility with the audience due to their expertise, trustworthiness and likeability.

- Expertise is enhanced by listing your degrees, your training, etc. Hence many alternative health practitioners call themselves ‘Dr’ and list their qualifications. ‘Creation scientists’ are the masters of creating apparent expertise: Dr Wilder Smith with his ‘three earned doctorates’ is a classic. (Rarely asked is the question: Why would anyone bother to earn three doctorate degrees? Haven’t they got a professional life to get on with? Einstein never even had one earned doctorate, and he didn’t do too badly in the high-achievement/change-the-way-the-world-thinks department!) The whole ‘debate’ thing with creation science vs evolution is all about the
creation scientists attaining apparent expertise and hence credibility.

- **Trustworthiness** can be demonstrated by referring to your number of clients or subscribers (‘thousands have benefited already — join them in having your aura massaged today’), and is enhanced when the source is impartial (‘independent tests have shown that Bowen Therapy cures more headaches than aspirin’ — the fact that aspirin doesn’t claim to cure any headaches is irrelevant to the Bowen Therapists). I think the creation scientists’ infamous The Quote Book had some effect in making them appear more trustworthy than their ground-shifting equivocal evolutionist opponents.

- **Likeability** of the source is often important, and includes physical attractiveness (Bob Hawke v John Howard?) and similarity (car salesmen will often identify some point they have in common with the customer). Again, the creation scientists come over as far more likeable: less academic and more on the audience’s level. And hopefully the evolutionist will get so frustrated they will lose their temper, which will boost the reasonable, conciliatory creation scientist’s likeability even more.

Most businesses use a proxy source, a spokesperson. Have you ever seen the chief executive officer of Telstra advertising telecommunication services? Instead they use anonymous actors. Pele, the absolutely great footballer, is a huge anonymous actors. Pele, the absolutely great footballer, is a huge

Many campaigns are based on scares and fear: anti-nuclear power, anti-smoking, and even deodorants (fear of embarrassment) often use scare and fear. Anti-recycled water fears, not arguments, recently defeated a referendum in Toowoomba. And effectively arousing fear in listeners and readers works when the consequences are portrayed as serious, unpleasant, probable and avoidable.

Repetition is a most effective strategy, making a statement appear more valid. Repeat your message often enough, and some will believe it. This is part of the reason belief in UFOs is so common, the message that UFOs exist is repeated so much in movies (Crop Circles, Independence Day, Mars Attacks!, Star Trek, ET, Signs), TV documentaries, magazine articles, and so on that consumers start to believe it may be true. Likewise astrology and ghosts.

Channel options include making use of personal contact, or via television or radio. Direct mail, mail drops, emails, audio-tapes and billboards are among many other options. Most new subscribers to the Skeptic, I suspect, are introduced by personal contact. But it is hard to isolate just one channel, since personal contact will be more effective if the recipient is already familiar with at least the name from other channels like billboards.

Characteristics of the receiver also affect persuadability. Forewarning the receiver and the receiver’s initial attitude are more important factors than the receivers’ personality or intelligence.

Forewarning that persuasion will occur tends to reduce resistance, as in entering a shop you know the salesman will try to make a sale. So advertising a meeting as presenting the case for scepticism about ghostly hauntings may result in more of the audience being persuaded that maybe ‘ghosts’ are not the best explanation for the observed phenomena.

Existing conflicting attitudes strongly held are hardest to change, especially where they mesh with other similar attitudes that would also need revision.

**Attitude formation and change**

Changing others’ attitudes is big business as I have already said, and as such has been studied widely and in depth. There are several main theories of how attitudes can be changed.

**Learning Theory** appears in three guises: In classical conditioning (as in Pavlov’s dogs) a product is linked to pleasant emotional responses. Pavlov linked the ring of a bell to food, and pretty soon the dogs would salivate whenever they heard the bell ring. Sex works for many (drink a certain flavoured milk and young ladies wearing very little will surround you), while in other instances likeable actors (use a certain brand of hair dye and you will be as beautiful and successful as Andie MacDowell), and cherished events like the Olympics (buy my photocopier and you will be part of a worldwide team) may be used.

**Operant Conditioning** works when we express our attitude, and the agreement of others reinforces...
our attitude (and disagreement punishes us, weakening the strength of our attitude). This comfort we gain from others agreeing with our attitude crops up repeatedly, and is why peers put pressure on nonconformists (I’ve just seen a television advertisement for an ice-cream based on mocking this truism by reversing it). Operant conditioning is why smokers pressure nonsmokers to join them in their habit. We all need others to agree with us; and when they do our own attitudes are reinforced.

Observational Conditioning, or peer pressure, occurs when you adopt attitudes that you hear expressed by others, which explains why so many attitudes often are similar within families, particularly political when they are strong enough to be a regular feature of family conversation. Hence teachers, coaches, and celebrities have an effect when they voice their attitudes; and hence the opposition to homosexual teachers for fear they will influence the children they teach.

Such observational conditioning has been found to be an important factor in juries reaching their unanimous decision: it is more important to some jurors to agree with others than to be correct. And their agreement feeds back to reinforce the beliefs of others (operant conditioning).

Dissonance Theory, an alternative to learning theory, predicts that when one person holds several attitudes that conflict with each other, creating psychological discomfort, one or more of these existing attitudes are likely to changed to reduce the dissonance, the discomfort.

A key experiment involved subjects performing a dull task. Afterwards they were asked to tell a third person that the task was fun. To lie. Half of the subjects were paid $5 to do so, the other half were paid $120. Afterwards the subjects were questioned as to how dull/fun the task really was. Common sense and Learning Theory predicts the $120 group of subjects would say it really was more fun. However, the results were as predicted by Dissonance Theory: the $5 group claimed to have had more fun.

The reason given was that the $120 group had good reason for lying (the $120 bribe); the $120 being a good reason for behaving contrary to their true attitude. With such a good reason for lying little dissonance (being bored contradicting the fun they said they had had) had been created. However the $5 group had had little reason to behave inconsistently ($5 was not much of a bribe to lie about the fun-level), and experienced high dissonance (saying a dull task was fun). They reduced this dissonance when questioned afterwards by revising their true opinion on the task to one that was less dull/more fun. Their saying that the task really was fun did not create dissonance with paucity of the bribe.

The biggest problem with Dissonance Theory is the variation in people’s need for their attitudes to be consistent, producing results that are less reliable and harder to predict. I wonder if sceptics have a greater need for their attitudes to be consistent than non-sceptics?

Effort Justification Theory is similar: your opinion of an experience is affected by the effort you made to participate. After waiting a long time to enter a restaurant you will have a higher opinion of the meal — how else can you justify having endured the long wait? (The wait to be served at Scaloppini’s is terrible, and the prices are huge — but the food is absolutely divine! The wonderful food makes the wait and the service all worthwhile.)

No wonder we have such a poor opinion of fast food, despite the fact we keep buying it: if the experience involves little effort and little cost then it cannot be worth that much. Hence we must have a poor opinion of the food.

Maybe we should make the Skeptic much harder for readers to obtain so that they appreciate receiving it more?

Self-Perception Theory was proposed as a better explanation than Dissonance Theory in explaining why people believe their own lies. The basis is the inference of your attitude from your behaviour. According to Self-Perception Theory, $5 is not enough of a bribe to make me lie, so if I am saying that the task was fun I must really have found the task more fun than I realised at the time. (Why would one group find a boring task more fun than another based on a later bribe to say they found it fun?) Like dissonance theory Self-Perception Theory suggests “If I said it, it must be true”, but for different reasons.

Subsequent studies suggest that Self-Perception Theory is most applicable when subjects do not have well-defined attitudes on the issue, and so supplements Dissonance Theory rather than replaces it. This may be important to swinging voters: if we could get the ‘unde-
Challenging Beliefs

cided’ to repeat “Psychic healing is utter nonsense” twenty times before bed each night, Self-Perception Theory predicts that some will adopt the attitude that psychic healing is utter nonsense.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model presents two routes to persuasion: the central route occurs when the subject carefully ponders the content and logic of the message. The peripheral route is taken when non-message factors like likeability and credibility are influential.

So evolutionists approach Creation-Evolution debates believing the central route, a carefully reasoned explanation, will suffice. While politicians frame their television advertisements to exploit the peripheral route. Politicians’ focus on the peripheral route is demonstrated by the ALP’s current (2007) effort to increase their credibility on economic issues.

A politician campaigning with carefully researched papers thoughtfully analysing complex issues, printed for voters to read, is taking the central route (Australian politicians certainly do this in their policy documents). Another candidate investing in bands, flag-waving, emotional slogans and celebrity endorsements (sounds like the American political rallies I have seen reported) is taking the peripheral route. The former central route is likely to result in a more enduring change in attitude, but relies on voters thinking about the message subsequently. The former is also more likely to produce a change in attitude that drives a commensurate change in behaviour. The latter peripheral route may produce only a temporary attitude, but as long as it lasts the journey to the ballot box, that is all that counts.

Conclusion

So not all beliefs are equal, and existing beliefs can be changed.

If we are to change the attitudes of those that believe in pseudo-scientific paranormal nonsense (as defined by our beliefs) maybe we should:

- Measure beliefs in a supportive context, that encourage respondents to reveal their true attitudes.
- Focus only on frequent and unqualified beliefs that are strong enough to result in behaviours (like actually buying ‘liver detoxification’ products rather than just saying they sound like a good idea).
- Focus on beliefs whose strength comes from their being considered important, that believers have a vested interest in, and that they are knowledgeable about.

In persuading our target audience to change their beliefs:

- Use a source with high credibility due to their expertise (put some books on a shelf in the background), trustworthiness (a deep voice and a sincere expression, ex-newsreaders preferred), and likeability (female celebrities wearing not very much, or male celebrities in dinner suits).
- Use a message that contains: All sides to an argument (UFOs are often Venus, or meteorites, or low-flying ‘planes, or reflections), or only our strongest arguments (most UFOs are Venus), depending on how likely our targets are to be swayed by apparent doubt; makes use of scares and fear (can you get AIDS from acupuncture needles?, and has anyone seriously studied the side-effects of aromatherapy shampoos?); is repetitive [are we ready for a sceptical TV series (SSI – Skeptical Scene Investigator, coming to a channel near you!), a major movie (SSI the Movie – the search for Atlantis) with possible sequels (SSI 27 newly released!), a tie-in magazine (SSI Weekly), comics (Can Super-Skeptic save the world in just one episode?), and well-placed leaks to newspapers that will Madame Ovary fool the SSI team, or is she just a love interest for Ben?)]; and send our message out over multiple channels: billboards, newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, e-mails, movies, radio, postal fliers and imaginative crop circles.
- The message should be in multiple forms: carefully reasoned and thoroughly explained for our intellectual targets, and strongly emotive with a soundtrack and celebrities for those less literate.
- Priming the receiver (this series will change your beliefs for ever!) and suggesting support from other beliefs (if you believe in UFOs, you must believe The Masked Skeptic!).
- Adopt peer pressure by showing thousands of wildly-cheering supporters agreeing with us.
- And (my own contribution)... lots of exclamation points and Capital Letters! (If it works so well for them, why shouldn’t we make use of it?)

References


Prime time current affairs shows are often a source of annoyance to skeptics, especially when they report uncritically on whacky claims by psychics and pseudo-scientists. However, I must admit I occasionally find myself cheering on these shows when they expose scams.

A recent example of current affairs television exposing a scam was in airing the claims of anonymous insiders from an SMS chat service. The chat service was advertised on late-night TV as putting real single men and women in touch with each other to flirt, with the implied possibility of meeting. However, the insider revealed that her job was to answer SMS text messages, via computer, in such a way as to string customers along to reply (at a cost of around $5 per message to the unsuspecting customer). In doing this, she was ‘flirting’ with around 20 different men at once using 20 different names.

But, dating and flirting are not the only SMS games in town. SMS now seems to be the medium of choice for, among other things, mediums — as well as psychics, astrologers, and numerologists. There are two SMS services that have recently appeared that I think should worry skeptics: Name compatibility ratings and daily horoscopes.

Name Compatibility SMS services
In doing a little internet-based research for this article, I discovered that there are lots of businesses that are willing to take people’s money in exchange for an SMS text message concerning romantic compatibility. Many of these businesses are operated by people claiming psychic powers. However, there is one particular ‘service’ I would like to talk about in some detail because its late-night advertising raised my hackles and those of some of my undergraduate psychology students at the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

Some people may have seen the late-night ads I’m talking about, they went something like this “Numerologists and psychologists agree that names play an important role in love, compatibility, and the success of relationships”. The ads then went on to show something like someone texting two names to the service and receiving a reply that gave a percentage score to indicate their compatibility (eg, 86%). Like many such SMS services, the prices per message were not what I’d call cheap.

A student drew this to my attention on a university internet discussion board, saying ‘I don’t think I have ever heard of research in psychology where they have said that Bobs and Janes go really well...’
together and will have a successful relationship! Does it bug anyone else? I think it’s interesting that this pseudoscience is being flaunted as psychology. — Beth. As you can see, she particularly took issue at the incredible claims made by these ads being publicly linked to psychology and psychologists. I had to agree.

Like most academic disciplines, psychology had some undeniably unscientific beginnings. In the early days of psychology, unscientific psychoanalytic ideas were mainstream. Nowadays psychology students get taught about Freud in the same way that medical students get taught about blood-letting and the four humours (out of historical curiosity, and perhaps as a cautionary example). Psychology now defines itself as the scientific study of human behaviour and mental processes. In doing this, it uses scientific methods of experimentation; systematically and objectively testing theories against evidence.

By contrast with psychology, numerology is not a science. True enough, people devised counting and arithmetic to describe nature — it’s helpful for a shepherd to know how many sheep they had yesterday, and how many they have today. However, it is also true that if you play with numbers enough you’d find seemingly meaningful, but coincidental, patterns. Numerology attempts to predict personality and the future from numbers derived from people’s names and birthdays. Yet, there doesn’t seem to be any viable underlying theory to explain why this should work and no reliable evidence that it works (Carroll, 2007). Moreover, numerology has no way of distinguishing accidental and meaningful numerical patterns from each other (Stewart, 1995).

Numerologists and psychologists most likely agree, for the same reasons, that food, air, and water are vital for survival. However, anyone saying that psychologists and numerologist agree on anything about human behaviour is simply saying that, through pure chance, or perhaps blind luck, numerologists may have got something right, or psychologists got something wrong. Yet this is what the name compatibility SMS ad did. To paraphrase a common movie disclaimer: any similarity between any psychological and numerological theories is purely coincidental. However, to be fair, the student’s comment that she was unaware of research linking names to compatibility does not mean that no such research exists.

**Compatibility research**

There is actually some very interesting name and compatibility research. What I find most interesting is that people have a preference for other people with similar names. For example, people are more likely to marry someone with the same first initials as themselves than you’d expect by chance (Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004). Last year I was invited to two weddings: Nadine and Nigel was one, Maria and Michael was the other. However, the trends observed in marriage records are not strong — and the next three weddings I’m invited to are Vanessa and Gavin, George and Maree, and Meredith and Dion. My honours student last year (Sylvia Kocan) did an interesting study where she found that this ‘name-letter-preference effect’ may be explained by most people having high self-esteem, which leads them to prefer objects and other people with associations to themselves. Psychology research has consistently shown that the evidence favours the conventional wisdom: ‘birds of a feather flock together’, but not the conventional wisdom: ‘opposites attract’ (Cialdini, 1993). People tend to be more similar to their partners than to a randomly-chosen stranger in age, education, values, ethnicity, socio-economic status, attitudes, and many other characteristics. So a preference for similar names shouldn’t be entirely unexpected.

Here’s a quote from my honours students’ literature review:

**implicit egotism** [liking one’s self without being aware of it] *plays a part in interpersonal attraction, with a finding that an individual is more likely [than expected by chance] to marry a similarly-named person* (Jones et al, 2004). More specifically, an archival analysis of marriage records found that before they got married, significantly more couples (than expected), share the first initial of their surname, share the complete surname, or had similar first names (eg, Carl and Carla). This American study did offer alternative explanations such as proximity, that by being grouped together in an educational setting like sharing a homeroom in high school (which is segregated by surnames), would affect how often people of similar names saw each other; ultimately affecting the interpersonal relationship. This alternative, however, is discounted when Texas data revealed a larger surname effect for couples born several years apart (Jones et al, 2004). Age disparity means the couples would have attended different grades, therefore different homerooms. The latter study also accounted for possible ethnic matching by examining a Latino population and still finding a significant first-initial matching effect.

Several experiments suggest a relationship between implicit egotism and life decisions, like where one chooses to live or one’s chosen occupation. For example, people named Denise or Dennis are over represented among dentists (Pelham et al, 2002). Furthermore, a disproportionate amount of people share first or last name letters with the name of the place they live in (eg, more Penny’s than expected, live in Pennsylvania) (Pelham et al, 2002).

When the student named Beth commented that there’s no research showing that ‘Bobs and Janes’ going well together, as far as I know she was right — in that there’s no research that’s quite so specific about particular names. However, there are reasons to believe that ‘Bobs and Janes’ may go well together (rather than quickly tire of each other). After all, couples do tend to be of the same cultural or ethnic background more often than you’d expect if people in the world were paired at random. As such, you’d expect there’d be more couples

**Stupid Message Service**

...
named ‘Bob and Jane’ than ‘Bob and Wei’ or ‘Ahmed and Jane’.

The SMS service’s advertising said that it would rate couple’s potential success. If success is defined by longevity of relationships, then research linking names to this seems to be missing entirely. So perhaps we should consider whether a pairing of ‘Bob and Jane’ would be more economically successful than other couples.

Well, psychology research has found that people have more positive connotations about conventional names than unusual (or unusually spelled) names (Garwood et al., 1980; Mehrabian & Piercy, 1993). These name connotations may effect how people are treated by others, so ‘Jane’ may prosper in situations where her evaluation by other people matters (eg, job interviews) more than someone named ‘Jaiynn’ or ‘Apple’ (apologies to Gwyneth Paltrow).

Correlation or cause?

In addition, an economist has recently found that some names are associated with socioeconomic status, particularly, in the US ‘white’ names. Even controlling for most other variables African Americans with ‘white’ names (like Bob) do better economically than those with ‘black’ names (like LeShawn) — explicit and subtle societal prejudices no doubt play a role in this phenomenon (Levitt & Dubner, 2005).

In the US, Caucasian people do better economically than people from other most ethnic groups — Jane and Bob are Caucasian names. As such, if we really stretch our assumptions (after all, some Jane’s are not Caucasian, and a Caucasian Jane could move to India, where her name would be uncommon) we might guess that ‘Bob and Jane’ may have a better chance than some other people in some cultures of being an affluent couple. However, you’d be very hard pressed to put a percentage number on this, let alone one that would allow for individual differences.

Considering all this name and compatibility research, we have to ask a few questions, the first one is: where is the causality? Most of the research I have quoted is correlational. But, just because certain phenomena go together, it does not mean that one causes the other. Not to put too fine a point on it, you aren’t going to make your child rich by naming him Bill Gates. And, if you’re parent to a Charles, do you need to find him a Camilla as his future wife to ensure his happiness? If you had a potential romantic couple where one person is aged 80 years and another is aged 20, you could fairly safely guess that there will be some serious incompatibility in relation to physical health, life experience, values, and education. However, the numbers 80 and 20 are not, in themselves, the cause of any incompatibility; they are an arbitrary labelling of age.

Similarly, you may find that people are more likely to be called Bob or Jane because they are raised in households with similar values, socioeconomic-status, ethnicity, etc. The names themselves may not cause compatibility, but the similar backgrounds that led to the selection of those names by the couple’s parents may have an impact. Thus, even if names could in some way predict compatibility, they may not be the cause of it.

Next, we need to ask whether we can generalize from the research to the wider population. The studies of conventional and unconventional names, for example, involved people rating names on a questionnaire in a laboratory, would it really apply to real life?

Effect size

From there, we’d have to ask how big is the effect? The correlation between height and IQ, provides an easy example of where an effect that is statistically significant in a large group of people is next to meaningless for making predictions about individuals. Large scale studies (often with more than 10,000 people in them) have shown that height and IQ, are significantly, but weakly, positively correlated. That is, taller people tend to be smarter. However, there are many problems. First, males and females don’t differ in average IQ, even though men are on average taller than women. Second, individual differences are so great that with any randomly-chosen pair of people the chance of the taller one being smarter is barely above 50%.

Finally, the predictive power of this weak correlation is so small that it’s useless in a practical sense. For example, if you had someone of average height and IQ (average IQ is 100) and you wanted to raise their IQ to 130 (gifted level) you’d need to find a way to make them 14 feet tall (Cohen, 1994) — maybe a medieval rack?

The research I’ve talked about shows minor trends over large samples of people. Most couples have mismatched names, but having even a few percent more than would be expected by chance of couples with matched names (or initials) could cause a significant result in a large sample. But can you really predict a perfect partner from that? Furthermore, trends from large studies don’t fully account for individual differences. Jane would better off dating a nice man named Xyilote than a complete bastard called Bob. As such, my opinion as a psychology academic is that you could not possibly make accurate percentage compatibility estimates (with very fine distinctions of one or two percent) if you were simply given two names and you had no other details about the people whatsoever.1

To sum up the name compatibility SMS concept: I don’t think that the psychological research is sufficiently clear to give an exact percentage estimate of compatibility for two people based solely on their names. As such, I think that the ad for the

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1. Nonetheless, if the people promoting this service would like to share any research they’ve used to devise their compatibility ratings with readers of the Skeptic then I hope the editor would accommodate them.
particular SMS service that claimed numerologists and psychologists agree that names are important for predicting compatibility has misrepresented psychology. With this in mind, I wrote the following email to the peak professional body for antipodean psychologists:

The Australian Psychological Society (APS).

Sent: Sunday, 26 November 2006 4:01 PM

To: ‘media@psychology.org.au’

Subject: fraudulent advertising

I just saw an ad on TV for a service that sends a compatibility rating (expressed as a percentage) via sms to people who send in their own name and that of their partner. This ad claims that ‘numerologists and psychologists agree’ that names indicate compatibility. This sms service is charging high prices per message for a service that seems to have no basis in fact. I find it particularly disturbing that this ‘service’ seems to be associating itself with endorsement from psychologists. I think the APS need to make a public statement disavowing this service and a complaint to the advertising standards and/or fair trading authorities.

Guy

At the time of writing this article, I have had exactly no reply from the APS to my comments, and I could not locate a media release about this issue. Still, I have not seen the ad on TV in the last month, but I suspect that this is not a result of my email to the APS. In the mean time, a new SMS scourge has beset TV advertising in its place, that worn old chestnut: astrology.

Daily Horoscope SMSs

First-time readers of the Skeptic may be unaware of some of the reasons why astrological predictions and personality profiles seem to work, and some of the evidence from scientific research into astrology. Now is as good a time as any for a quick summary.

The reasons why astrology seems to work are many and varied, but there are two main ones worth mentioning. First, people tend to remember the ‘hits’ and ignore the ‘misses’. That is, they remember when something comes true but not when a prediction that was made never eventuates (Gilovich, 1991). Thus, an astrological prediction that comes true is seen as supporting astrology, but failures aren’t recalled.

Humans are very much like other animals in this respect, we pay attention to things that happen much more than things that don’t. Perhaps this is why you can train a pigeon to peck a button that lights up in order to get food, but, no matter how much you try, you can’t get a pigeon to peck a button that fails to light up in order to get food (Gilbert, 2006).

Because people tend to not notice what’s missing, I’d bet that most people haven’t considered that astrology is generally absent from places where is should be if it did, in fact, work. What I mean, is that if astrology predicts personality and the future, you’d see it employed everywhere, but you don’t; and, the fact it isn’t there would most likely go unnoticed by most people.

Here are some concrete examples.

If astrology accurately predicted personality we would see it used by Human Resources professionals in recruitment and selection for jobs. If astrology predicted the financial future we would see it widely employed by stockbrokers to predict the markets. If astrology predicted the future of human behaviour opinion pollsters and market researchers would be out of a job — or would change their methods to use astrology. We, and typical astrology believers, usually don’t notice any of these absences of astrology from daily life. Not noticing what isn’t there is a normal part of human psychological functioning (Gilbert, 2006), so none of us should feel bad about it. However, now that I’ve drawn this to your attention, you should notice that these vital absences of astrology from daily life fail to recommend it as a useful pursuit.

A second reason why people believe astrological predictions and profiles is related to the first: we are biased in what we count as a ‘hit’. Because people tend to have positive self-esteem, we tend to believe nice things that are said about us (albeit that there’s a limit to our gullibility — see Cialdini, 1993). Horoscopes tend to say nice things about us — we are caring, worthy, nice, special, smart people — which, of course, we believe (Hamilton, 2001).

In addition, horoscopes are sufficiently vague, and people are sufficiently good at finding meaning, that there’s sure to be a ‘hit’ somewhere to be found if you’re looking for one. Often, astrological personality profiles will describe people with one-size-fits all descriptions such as: ‘Sometimes you are outgoing and sociable, while at other times you are cautious and reserved’. If you look carefully, you’ll see that this description could be taken as a ‘hit’ for people with either introverted or extroverted personalities.

Truisms

Sometimes horoscopes don’t even need to rely on the normal workings of human psychology to make predictions appear true. Instead, they use truisms as if they were predictions. As a teenager I distinctly recall reading a newspaper horoscope that said: ‘some people with disagree with your controversial ideas.’ Of course, no one would disagree with your uncontroverisal ones.

As for the evidence concerning astrology’s claims, I’d like to direct readers to a previous article I contributed to the Skeptic for a brief summary (see Curtis, 2004). In that article I pointed to a range of evidence contradicting, or not supporting, the claims of astrology. As an example, a recent study showed that 2,101 people born less than 5 minutes apart on average did not display the similarities in behaviour and personality predicted by astrology (Dean & Kelly, 2003).

Now, back to the SMSs. Recently, I have seen two different TV ads for daily astrology/horoscope subscrip-
tion SMS services. One of these was for a gentleman named Milton Black — I did not get the details of the other. The website of Milton Black (who claims to be Australia’s leading astrologer and psychic) offers SMS astrology, numerology, and compatibility ratings. He offers this service free for the first 5 days and at a rate of $5 per 5-days thereafter. In considering these charges, readers should keep in mind that this is for an on-going subscription that users must cancel if they wish to discontinue receiving, and paying for, messages.

I tried to take up Milton Black’s free offer so that I could report on the content of the SMSs. However, it seems that my mobile phone is incompatible with his service. This phenomenon was mysteriously similar to the way Uri Geller’s powers abandon him in the mere presence of skeptics, and is perhaps worthy of investigation in itself. As such, I can’t tell you whether Milton Black’s SMS horoscopes are brilliantly insightful and precise, or whether they are like all the other astrological predictions made thus far in recorded history. Other readers are free (at least for the first 5 days) to try this for themselves.

Milton Black’s SMS service is an example of an on-going subscription service. Other astrologers offer SMS astrology profiles and predictions on-demand, which means that people could rack up bigger bills more quickly. For example, on the website of Kerry Kulkens (who claims to be Australia’s best-known psychic astrolgregator) there are 28 different SMS services from which people can obtain astrology and other ‘readings’.

All SMSs are charged at $4 for each sent and received. Her 1900 voice number charges $5.50 per minute ($330/hour), which would be a good hourly rate for a lawyer. I’d like to invite readers to compare this rate with the $75/hour that Medicare rebates for the services of a psychologist with 6-years of formal training and government-accredited professional registration. Kulkens’s and Black’s SMS services seem to be the tip of the iceberg, as it is fairly easy to find other instant or subscription SMS horoscope services online or in the phonebook.

As I said, there seem to be more objective reasons to doubt astrology than to believe that it makes true observations about the world. As such, it seems an awful shame that such expensive products appear to be both unregulated and without any kind of warnings about their efficacy.

**Conclusion**

In the United States, people advertising their services as psychics or astrologers accompany their advertising, in small print, with a disclaimer: ‘for entertainment purposes only.’ This, I think, signals to consumers that these services are not to be taken seriously, and are probably not reliable. I am not sure whether the typical US disclaimer is imposed by law, whether it is pre-empting legal liability, or whether it is the result of a previously successful liability claims. Regardless, I’d definitely like to see something similar used in Australia for pseudoscientific enterprise like SMS name-compatibility ratings and astrological predictions.

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4. Struck and White’s excellent writing guide The Elements of Style points out that the word ‘purposes’ is probably redundant in a context such as this. I’d argue that the word ‘entertainment’ is too.

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**References**


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2. Ms Kulkens died two years ago, so her predictions must really be from ‘beyond’.

3. Anyone who has seen the Skeptic’s previous list of people claiming status as Australia’s best, leading, etc, psychic should find this amusing.
Welcome to Sunnydale


Advocates for Survivors of Child Abuse (ASCA) wants to see the reality of ritual abuse recognised, survivors of ritual abuse heeded, and reports of ritual abuse investigated. This report has been produced to document the existence of ritual abuse in Australia and to lend weight to the stories of the survivors.

We all know about satanic cults, because we’ve seen the movies — Rosemary’s Baby, The Omen, any Hammer film, and so on. We may even have read the rather more explicit and detailed books by reputed survivors of such cults explaining, for example, how children are born without birth certificates to be sacrificed on ritual altars. The iconography comes readily to hand. The report makes a real attempt to stay away from these images, but they’re still lurking in the back of our heads as we read the report.

The summary of the report’s main points says:

• Ritual abuse occurs in Australia. Ritualy abusive groups have been uncovered during police investigations in Australia, and group members have been successfully prosecuted before a court of law.

• Ritual abuse is a core practice within subcultures of extreme criminality. Ritual abuse is a practice closely associated with child prostitution, child pornography, and drug smuggling.

• Ritual abuse is a complex crime and perpetrators are difficult to categorise. The intersection of familial abuse, torture, organised paedophilia and ‘cultic’ ritual puts such perpetrators in a unique category.

• Victims of ritual abuse are children and adults from all walks of life. As a consequence of having endured extreme levels of torture and trauma, victims frequently experience a diversity of complex mental and physical health issues and needs, which characteristically go unmet.

• A culture of disbelief compromises the human rights of survivors. A culture of ignorance and denial on behalf of authorities and the community prevents ritual abuse survivors from realising their basic rights to safety, health and justice.

The last point is the most contentious. The report wants to shift the default setting on claims of satanic abuse from ‘improbable’ to ‘common’. If the report’s message was taken seriously, it might help some people. I believe, however, it would do more harm than good. While some people are probably being abused in circumstances that have something to do with ritual, and they may be helped, it is extremely unlikely that there are satanic cults in Australia that have ritual abuse as part of their liturgy, and going looking for them is almost certainly a waste of effort and a diversion of scarce resources.
**Definition**

The first problem with the report is the issue of definition. When the report says “The intersection of familial abuse, torture, organised paedophilia and ‘cultic’ ritual puts such perpetrators in a unique category” this is a classical example of begging the question. Given that we have unquestioned evidence of widespread familial abuse, occasional instances of torture, some instances of paedophilia that extends beyond single family units and may thus be called organised, and given, even, that there are occasional cultic elements, does that constitute a category?

The intersection of familial abuse, torture, organised paedophilia, and ‘cultic’ ritual, places ritually abusive perpetrators in a category of their own. A 1994 survey of cases of organised child abuse investigated by police and social services found that 44% of respondents were unable to fit the case into a predefined category such as ‘cult’ or ‘paedophile ring’ (Gallagher, Hughes et al 1996), which suggests that current criminological typologies may be inadequate. (p13)

Among the examples given are: infants terrorised into silence during baby-sitting sessions by a family friend; children exploited by an abusive day care attendant; a vulnerable child trafficked into a paedophile ring while in institutional care; the Canadian wife battered and terrorised into compliance by her ritually abusive husband; the small-time American drug runner ritually tortured for non-payment of debts; the young Australian who joins an occult group that isn’t everything it seems; or the Mexican teenager trafficked into sexual slavery in America for $200 who lives in fear of the ‘occult powers’ of her captor. (13)

These are completely different and unrelated abusive behaviours. If they’re different things, lining them up side by side does not make them a category. If they are occasionally paired, that still doesn’t make them a meaningful category that can be applied to other cases. Even if they actually do all occur in the one case, that still doesn’t necessarily prove the existence of a category, an entity, or a reason for public concern, rather than a horrible coincidence. The report accepts the reality of ritual abuse as a category, and then accepts a lot of different situations as roughly the same kind of thing.

**Ritual**

The difference between satanic rituals and the things that Fred West did in Gloucester is ‘cultic elements’, and they, too, are rather hard to pin down. The basic referent for what constitutes ritual is the Catholic Church in its glory days — rites, sacraments, services, liturgies, theologies, heresies, canon law, the full banana. How far can you thin these out and still have a cult, rather than a club or a gang or a ring? It’s a basic and important question. If Satanism was applying to the tax office for religious exemptions, what would it put forward to support its case? The practice of sexual abuse, by itself, would be unlikely to convince the tribunal; but little else has been brought forward.

The report refers to “the misuse of ritual in the context of sexual abuse”, a definition capable of covering everything from sacrificing children on altars to burning incense sticks during date rape.

Ritual is an important aspect of cultures and subcultures. In ritual abuse it is a way of expressing and transmitting the beliefs, practices and worldviews of a perpetrator group. The rape and torture of children and adults is structured around ‘metaphysical’ symbols and actions that differ between groups. However, a common foundation underlies all acts of ritual abuse: the ‘celebration’ of the power of the perpetrator at the expense of the body and soul of the victim. (p14)

The trouble with this formulation is that:
(a) expressing and transmitting the beliefs, practices and worldviews of a group generally involves (as with the Catholics) a wide range of beliefs and practices and rules and mores, rather than one very bad habit; and
(b) the ‘celebration’ of the power of the perpetrator at the expense of the body and soul of the victim isn’t particular to ritual abuse — it also appears to be a feature of, for example, P&O cruises.

Ritual abuse groups don’t seem to exhibit many of the characteristics of other cults, and many things that aren’t cults share characteristics with ritual abuse groups. The identifying features aren’t unique to the category.

There are features that would be uniquely identifying; for example, the report quotes one writer as saying:

> An occult belief system deals with the problem of cognitive dissonance not by redefining sexual abuse as harmless or desired by the victim, but by reversing ‘good’ and ‘evil’. From this Sadeian perspective, cruelty and violence are ‘natural’ to man and denials of this essential truth are mere hypocrisy. (p 14)

That would be a clear distinction, but as very few abusers are really up on philosophical speculation it would also mean that there wasn’t very much ritual abuse about. The situation is thus complicated by the introduction of ‘instrumental’ ritual, where:

> the ultimate function of ritual abuse is that of camouflage. In Australia and overseas, constructive efforts on behalf of tortured and trafficked children have often been derailed by disbelief and scepticism generated by the bizarre ritualistic practices of the perpetrators. (p15)

In this formulation the abusers don’t believe the ritual themselves, they just use it to muddy the waters. This is possible, certainly, but it’s just not the same thing as a Sadean will to power.

**Evidence**

The last quote brings out the real difficulties of the formulation. Normally, bizarre stories are met with scepticism (and skepticism), for perfectly appropriate reasons; bizarre stories are, by definition, less
probable than ordinary stories. This rule will only be reversed if there is evidence that what we call bizarre is in fact of frequent occurrence. And before we actually look at any evidence, we must consider what kind of evidence would in fact strengthen the case for a category of ritual abuse.

The report puts forward several Australian cases to demonstrate the existence of the problem. Assuming them all to be true, they still present difficulties.

In 1991, Perth police stated that they had proven a link between ‘organised child sex abuse and devil worship’ following the conviction on 22 counts of indecent assault of a perpetrator recruited into a ritually abusive group as a teenager).

But how organised can child abuse be if only one person was convicted?

In 1998, the Supreme Court found that self-described ‘traditionalist witch’ Robert Angus Fletcher had sexually and physically abused two minors, forced one of them into prostitution and then attempted to have both murdered to stop them giving evidence against him. He told the girls that their rape and torture was part of their initiation into a group called the ‘dark coven’.

But why didn’t anybody pursue the other members of the coven, if there was one?

In 2004, former primary school teacher and National Party official, Garry Robin Ford, was jailed for eight years for ‘sexually abusing teenage boys during pagan rituals to initiate them into a group dubbed the White Brotherhood.’ (p15)

But why didn’t anybody pursue the other members of the Brotherhood, if there was one?

The existence of a group cannot be proved by the conviction of an individual. It’s not impossible to identify criminal groups where they occur — the Purana task force has successfully mapped the existence of several criminal ‘families’. Nobody has ever rounded up as many as two members of a ritual abuse association.

The rest of the evidence is either consistent with other non-fatal sex clubs:

- Ritual abuse pornography has been cited by police officers, judges and lawyers;
- Purpose-built ritual abuse infrastructure has been uncovered in ritual abuse cases in the United States, England and Switzerland;
- Ritual sites with human remains, children’s clothes, animal skeletons, knives, blood-stained daggers, candles contaminated with faecal matter, robes, jars of blood, masks and other ritual paraphernalia has been found in connection to ritual abuse cases in the United States, England and Europe. (p16)

Or relies on one’s confidence in the profession of therapy:

- A survey of 98 social workers, psychologists and counsellors based in Melbourne identified 153 cases of ritual abuse in the decade from 1985 to 1995;
- Professionals report ritually abused clients from all around the world;
- The majority of clinicians working with ritually abused clients believe their clients’ experiences to be true;
- A 1999 survey of social workers, counsellors and psychologists in Melbourne found that 85% believed ritual abuse to be an indication of genuine trauma;
- In one study, 30% of professionals working in the field of ritual abuse reported various forms of intimidation and threats, including abusive phone calls;
- In 1994, the majority of clinicians responding to an editorial call for papers on ritual abuse stated that they were too frightened to speak in print about their ritually abused clients. (p16)

Reasons why

If counsellors accept the word of their clients who claim to have been ritually abused (as the report asks them to) then they will believe their client’s experiences to be true, and they will then fear for their own lives. This adds little to the evidence of the clients — and it is here that the trail tends to peter out.

Many people say they have been ritually abused. The report suggests that they have been unable to have their abusers prosecuted because of any or all of the following:

- **The nature of torture**: Ritual abuse victims, due to the neuropsychology of extreme trauma, are often unable to provide the detailed disclosures that the police and judiciary require in order to provide assistance. This effectively excludes victims from standard police assistance, and discredits them in the eyes of other agencies.

- **The silence of victims**: Since childhood, victims are taught that they have been complicit in the activities of the group, and that they will be harmed if they reveal their abuse or the activities of the group. The resulting shame, terror and guilt means that victims often strive to protect the perpetrators from prosecution.

- **Investigative inadequacies**: The police are not finding ritual abuse networks because they aren’t specifically looking for them. Similarly, police often do not recognise victims when they do surface, since they receive limited training in trauma, sexual abuse or organised sexual exploitation.

- **Ignorance and disbelief**: Ritual abuse perpetrators have demonstrated a preference for torture techniques, such as electrocution and near-drowning, which do not leave a mark. Whilst some survivors may present with ritualistic burns and scars congruent with ritual abuse, others may have no ‘proof’ of their ordeal beyond what they can disclose. In both cases, the extremity of their story means that ritual abuse survivors face the dual victimisation of the perpetrators, and the incredulity of a society that refuses to believe their traumatic histories.

- **[Pressure]**: In Australia, investigators’ phones are tapped, cars are run off the road, mail is tampered with, and families are threatened. A former NSW policeman who was involved in ritual abuse cases stated: ‘As soon as you find someone willing to talk, and they want to talk, they could end up at the bottom of the harbour.’ (p19)
Well, yes, but — if ritual abuse victims are often unable to provide detailed disclosures, this means that they sometimes are able. If victims often strive to protect the perpetrators from prosecution, that means that they sometimes don’t. If police often do not recognise victims when they do surface, that means that they sometimes do. If ritually abusive perpetrators have demonstrated a preference for torture techniques which do not leave a mark, that means that some survivors present with ritualistic burns and scars. These arguments don’t just have to be sufficient to cover most cases, they have to be able to cover all of them.

Extraordinary claims require fairly thorough explanations, and claims that in Australia, investigators’ phones are tapped, cars are run off the road, mail is tampered with, and families are threatened by people who aren’t associated with large drug dealers, do require more background as to why the investigators—who don’t suffer from the neuropsychology of extreme trauma, who don’t strive to protect the perpetrators from prosecution, who do recognise victims when they do surface — don’t take their troubles to the police successfully.

Issues of evidence do include the status of ‘recovered memory’:

For years I had a strange jerk in my left arm and had no idea why. I was always pulling away when ever I felt triggered by anxiety or terror. It was only when the memories of the abuse came up that I realised that they were using electricity to force me to comply with their demands. This was especially true when I was forced to harm other, younger kiddies. Electricity is a great motivator and leaves no scars.


but this is so much a side issue that I shall not address it here.

The evidence, in short, is less than overwhelming. It has to be said that in its survey of the evidence the report is careful not to exaggerate its strength; all the problems are on clear view. However, after setting out this equivocal evidence, the report then proceeds to discuss the issue as if every element of the indictment has been made out in full. The remainder of the report carries us right into the middle of the Hammer Films scenario.

The perpetrators are all-powerful, all-knowing, and much more efficient than the ordinary police or the medical system.

R ritual abuse perpetrators use torture techniques that are designed to break down, control, and ‘re-educate’ victims.

Perpetrators manipulate trauma and dissociation to control their victims. When human beings dissociate, they often enter a state where they are momentarily separated from sensations of pain or fear, but they also become automatically obedient and highly suggestible.

Perpetrators use torture and drugs to create this dissociative state and exploit it. Some indoctrination focuses on ingraining the ritually abusive belief system into the victim, as well as post-hypnotic ‘rules’ to prevent the victim from speaking about their abuse. Conditioning is used to shape a victim’s thought patterns.

Perpetrators use classical conditioning techniques to groom victims to respond unconsciously to specific words, symbols, gestures or music. Once exposed to a ‘trigger’, victims may uncontrollably dissociate, switch into a different personality, or feel the urge to self-harm, commit suicide or return to the group.

Perpetrator groups use a ‘cycle’ of annual dates in which specific ritualistic traumas take place... the victim’s birthday, Christmas, full moons, and the solstices and equinoxes. Victims learn to associate these dates with ritual abuse, and may experience uncontrollable urges to return to the group on these dates. (p27)

If true (and I note in passing that none of the Australian cases cited as evidence suggest anything of the sort), this amounts to a claim that satanic abuse practitioners have achieved much better outcomes than any other psychological practitioners, much more reliably, on a much wider range of subjects. No other conditioning experiment has ever been able to claim comparable results. In the outside world, away from the candles and the electric shocks, reliable posthypnotic suggestibility is a fantasy that can’t get most people to stop smoking, let alone forget a murder. I can see why this line of thinking would appeal to psychologists, who would be glad of any evidence that any of their techniques work at all, but I’m not obliged to accept it myself.

Common Themes

The Report refers to Common Themes:

• Violent rituals: Initiations, mock-marriages, mock-funerals, fake surgery, ritualised rape, ritualised torture.

• Torture: Sexual assault, abduction, use of drugs, pills and injections, forced to ingest filth, tied up, starvation, sleep deprivation, electric shocks, use of snakes or insects, suffocation, burned, hypnotism, use of needles, hanging, spinning.

• Organised sexual exploitation: Victims prostituted, used in pornography, sex with adults, group sex, sex with animals, other children and corpses.

• Props and symbols: Blood, knives, altars, circles, animal parts, human parts, fire, corpses, ropes, pentagrams, urine, faeces, graves, torches, bones, coffins, insects, animal horns, razor blades.

• Extreme fetishes and paraphilias: Sadomasochistic paraphernalia, paedophilia, sadism, torture, coprophagia, bestiality, role-playing, slavery, domination, ritualism.

• Supernatural beliefs: Belief in omniscience of perpetrator group, belief that perpetrators have ‘magical’ powers, belief that perpetrators can monitor thoughts of victims, performance of ritualised rape and ‘sex magic’, ritualisms performed on ‘significant’ dates or events.
• **Simulations of the death experience:** Live burials, near-strangulation, near-drowning, electrocution, torture into unconsciousness, drugging into unconsciousness, encouragement of self-mutilation.

• **Performance of the death experience:** Ritual murder, sacrifice of animals, ritual abortions, necrophilia, necrophagia.

• **Terrorisation:** Threats of harm to self and others, threats of abandonment, stalking via the phone/email/in person, home invasions, pets killed, house vandalised with blood and animal flesh.

• **Bonding mechanisms:** Victims given ‘new’ parents, victims rescued by ‘good’ perpetrator; victims forced to perpetrate against other victims, victims told they are ‘evil’ and ‘deserve’ the abuse.

• **Role-playing:** Perpetrators wearing robes, masks, horns, costumes, ‘professional’ uniforms, victims made to wear robes, victims painted white or red.

• **Extreme secrecy:** Operant conditioning and psychological coercion used to enforce silence of victims, code words used to refer to perpetrators, abuse, places of abuse, drugs used to disorientate victims, blindfolds, capsicum spray in the eyes to blind victims. (p.28)

I can believe in any one of these things, or even several, coinciding with sexual abuse in any given case; I cannot accept that the evidence will support any systematic association between all of them.

These themes have been drawn from the personal experiences of the authors, as well as clinical studies, case histories and the testimony of clinicians, and court cases (p.28)

**Report failures**

The authors of this report, that is, claim to have histories that feature these abuses. I would be greatly assisted by their accounts of how their own statements were received by the police; but there the report fails me.

I’d also like to know how many authors there are, and how far their experiences are mutually supportive. How many ritual abuse groups are they themselves attesting to? What is their estimate of the incidence and the prevalence of ritual abuse? The report cites that figure of 153 cases of ritual abuse known to therapists in Melbourne. It’s not suggested that any evidence is mutually reinforcing, so that’s presumably 150 separate groups, at (say) 25 people per group (it would surely be difficult to keep up a steady routine of occult ritual services with many fewer, given people’s other commitments) for a total of 3,000, and if only one case in five comes to the attention of the therapists (a conservative estimate) that would imply a total cult population of 15,000 in a city of two million people, or almost one person in every hundred. I find that hard to believe.

At the end of the report, that is, I fall into the stigmatised group of Vocal commentators in the media and academia [who] have persisted with claims that ritual abuse does not exist, and that those who claim otherwise are ‘hysterical’ or ‘making it up’. (p.22)

The publicly available evidence does not support the frequent occurrence of these abusive groups. The explanations as to why they are not exposed require a large number of improbable assumptions. To believe that frequent wide-ranging cults with highly televocal practices can stay hidden from all exposure requires the repeal of Murphy’s Law. If the Exclusive Brethren can’t keep a lid on their secrets, nobody can; and the EB have been having an almost daily appearance on the front pages for months.

I might be held back from making an issue of my dissent if I believed that in doing so I risked damaging vulnerable people (and anybody making a claim of ritual abuse unquestionably falls into that category). I believe, however, that:

1. if the claims are not true, it damages the people concerned to behave as if they were true; and
2. even if a proportion of the claims of ritual abuse are true, the evidence suggests that proposed remedies like trauma counselling would be likely to make the trauma even worse.

If the claims made in this report were true, life in Melbourne would be very like living in Buffy Summer’s Sunnydale, and we would hear our own school swimming coaches saying Sunnydale-like things like “If we can focus, keep discipline, and not have quite as many mysterious deaths, Sunnydale is gunna rule!”

You cannot re-evaluate the basically law-abiding (or at least undiabolical) nature of the average person, one of the basic elements of our society, and still suggest that everything else in our society would go on normally. If there were satanic cults operating freely within our suburbs, this would have an effect on church attendance, voting patterns, pet choices, TV watching, supermarket sales — almost everything. Instead, these stories are an internal drama fuelled by a detailed but incoherent public mythology.

The fundamental problem with the concept of ritual abuse is that you only need a group explanation for a behaviour when people are doing things that they don’t want to. If you observe people not eating pork, or not eating fish on a Friday, you may look for an explanation in the nature of their religious beliefs. If you observe people eating pork and fish, on the other hand, you don’t need any hypothesis at all. The history of the twentieth century suggests that there are many people who would very much like to abuse others, horribly. There’s no need to hypothesize a social organisation that tells them to do it. Without such an organisation, there’s no ritual abuse; there’s just abuse.
It is December 2004 and Peter Stokes of the Melbourne Salt Shakers 'Christian ethics' group is being interviewed by Gary Fishlock, editor of the Sydney gay publication SX. At one stage, Fishlock:

... can't help pointing out to Peter that many of the Bible's passages are ambiguous, open to interpretation and mistranslation and have been taken out of context both historically and culturally, and that this is acknowledged by many people who know and understand the Bible well.

Stokes calmly replies that 'theological revisionism is nothing new', elaborating as follows:

Once a person feels able to disbelieve or revise one piece of scripture then there really is no reason why they should not change any or all of it to suit themselves. (Salt Shakers E-News, 16 Mar, 2005)

In the course of his Channel 4 documentary Who Wrote the Bible?, recently shown on SBS, British theologian Robert Beckford asks a very conservative Jew for his opinion of the 'JEDP' or 'documentary' hypothesis. This refers to the idea that the first five books of the Bible were not written by Moses but were instead derived from a number of different sources. The Jewish man hunches his shoulders, looks at the ground and then grins. He's read nothing about such an idea and it strikes him as 'naïve'. Later, Beckford expresses concern that the man declined to 'engage with the scholarship'. He seems slightly puzzled about this.

In April 2006 Bill Muehlenberg, formerly with the National Civic Council's 'Australian Family Association' and now a Religious Right freelancer, takes issue with Beckford's series:

... [I]n the Beckford version of things, the five Books of Moses weren't written by Moses at all, but by four anonymous writers [sic], each with his own particular view to promote.

Muehlenberg asserts that this hypothesis has now been 'largely abandoned by Old Testament scholars'. Nor does he like the critical stance that Beckford adopts towards the New Testament, claiming that 'very few credible New Testament scholars would take that position' and that Beckford continually ignores 'the wealth of contemporary biblical scholarship that is out there'. ('ABC's Easter assault on Christianity', News Weekly, 29 Apr. 2006, 4)

A few minutes on Google will rapidly convince you that all of Muehlenberg's assertions are wrong. So is he telling us fibs? Not at all. It's just that the Old Testament scholars he's talking about are conservative evangelical Old Testament scholars, the 'credible New Testament scholars' are also conservative evangelicals, and of course...
the ‘wealth of contemporary biblical scholarship’ is also essentially fundamentalist in nature. On this reading, modern critical scholars aren’t really scholars at all, but rather, mere ‘liberal theologians who are quite happy to debunk the Bible and challenge orthodox theology.’ Critical scholarship simply doesn’t count.

Baseline

What we are talking about here is a ‘baseline’ problem. Whereas most modern researchers try to follow the evidence wherever it leads, conservative Christians (and the conservative adherents of many other religions) pursue lines of evidence only so far as this evidence does not contradict the basic beliefs mandated by their holy texts. In the case of conservative Christians, scientific research, educational research, biblical research — all of these are just fine as long as they don't clash with the ‘foundational truths of scripture’. The ethical, but otherwise unfettered pursuit of knowledge is no longer the researcher’s point of departure. The Bible is the baseline.

Jonathan Sarfati of Creation Science Ministries (formerly Answers in Genesis) has put this position explicitly:

… [T]he ministry’s axioms are the propositions of the Bible, not the theories of fallible scientists. (Technical Journal 12[2], c. mid-1998, 150)

The word ‘axiom’ can mean either a widely-accepted principle or, as in geometry, a self-evident truth and I strongly suspect that Sarfati is using it in the latter sense. But just how self-evident is this baseline? Sarfati obviously thinks that the propositions of the Bible are both accessible (Scripture is supposed to be ‘perspicuous’, or easily understood) and absolutely clear-cut. But most of the world's Christians don’t agree with him on this. The Catholic Church, for example, holds that its magisterium, or teaching authority, plays an essential role in the correct interpretation of the Bible and its ‘propositions’.

Smaller Christian bodies also often claim the right to make definitive decisions about scriptural propositions. Diane Wilson (2002) gives this account of how such questions are dealt with by the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ own teaching authority, the Watchtower Society (Sarfati would probably deny that Jehovah’s Witnesses are true Christians, but he can rest assured that the feeling is mutual):

… [T]he Watchtower Society's response to sincere questions often does cause problems. Once questions are voiced, the questioner is all too often told that he or she is to accept whatever the Society teaches and is not to ‘reason’ about it, but must blindly and dogmatically fully accept whatever is taught. The individual’s reason, they stress, is ‘human reasoning’, but the Watchtower’s reasoning is ‘God’s reasoning’. (Awakening of a Jehovah’s Witness [Prometheus], 293)

God’s reasoning

So not only are conservative Christian researchers supposed to work from a different baseline: they seem to have a choice of baselines depending on whether they’re Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jonathan Sarfati, etc. To pursue one of Diane Wilson’s points, it would be a great help if we knew something about ‘God’s reasoning’. He seems to like the idea of reasoning: ‘Come now, and let us reason together’ he says in Isaiah 1:18, but unfortunately it’s all downhill from there.

We'll pass over one troubling passage: ‘[M]y thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways’ (Isaiah 55:8), but we can’t skip around Paul’s observation to the Corinthians: ‘For the foolishness of God is wiser than men’s wisdom …’ (1 Cor, 1:25) Rather than engage in speculation about what this might mean, I’ll hand over to Hans Peter Royer, head of the Capernwray Bible College, Taunernhof, Austria, who recently enlightened a Queensland audience in the following terms:

[Royer] said that in Corinth where two-thirds of the people were slaves and 1,000 people were temple prostitutes, Paul preached nothing but the cross for 18 months and many people became followers of Jesus Christ. But in Athens, a city of intellectuals, the people would not listen — and perished — because the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom … (To make the cross intellectually acceptable empties it of its power. ‘It sounds stupid. It is foolishness. But it works.’ (Helen Woodall ‘Going God’s way’, New Life, 27 Apr. 2006)

‘God’s foolishness’ begins to look increasingly like an obscurantist ploy. Royer confirmed this impression when at another meeting [he] spoke of the many convincing proofs that Jesus was alive and that we should not need many proofs — or any.’

The ‘propositions of the Bible’ seem to be an unsatisfactory basis for serious research of any kind — imprecise, somewhat protean depending on whose version of the propositions we are talking about, and all with a healthy dose of anti-intellectualism thrown in. Some conservative evangelicals actually seem afraid of the research process itself, or perhaps of what it might uncover.

Enlightenment

It all gets back to the deep-seated fundamentalist desire to ‘repeal the Enlightenment’. I used to feel that this phrase exaggerated conservative evangelical rejection of so much of modernity, but I no longer think so. One of my favourite proto-fundamentalists is Rev Samuel Andrews who, in 1898, wrote a book entitled Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict. Andrews was quite sure that the reappearance of Christ was at hand and had no trouble in listing the ‘tendencies’ preparing the way for the ‘Antichrist’ who would precede him: liberal Christianity, biblical criticism, modern science, modern literature, etc.

The most interesting thing about Andrews was the way in which he
resolved ‘the problem of modernism’. No half-measures here:

Andrews reinterpreted the conflict between modernism and biblical faith in such a way as to leave no doubt where God-fearing Christians’ loyalties must lie. His constituency no longer had to trouble themselves with reasoned refutations of modernism’s intellectual claims. Instead, all modern science and philosophy could be dismissed outright as an act of religious loyalty. (Robert Fuller [1995] Naming the Antichrist [OUP], 117)

Simple, isn’t it? Just cut the Gordian knot. On a literal reading of the Bible, modern science and biblical criticism, etc, simply can’t be right and therefore why waste time arguing with their proponents?

Andrews felt no obligation to examine the academic soundness of biblical scholars’ conclusions … He was certain that ‘this overthrow of the faith of men in the Bible is a great step forward in preparing the way for the Antichrist.’ Once his readers knew that biblical scholarship was the work of the Antichrist, it would not be necessary to inquire any further into its academic merits. (118)

Bob Jones University

The rapid advance of secularisation in the West during the past century has rendered a ‘pure’ Andrews-style approach virtually untenable. Only a fundamentalist audience will accept the bald assurance that anything contradicting the Bible must be wrong. Instead, conservative evangelical speakers and authors present their arguments in a pseudo-scientific style, their articles often laden with abstracts, appendices and long lists of references. Popularisers of the neo-creationist notion of Intelligent Design are very good at this.

However, there are still some educational institutions that follow Andrews’ precepts right down the line. One of these is the well-known Bob Jones University (BJU) in Greenville, South Carolina:

Research and analytical thinking [have] never ranked as high priorities at [BJU]. Conceiving their mission to be one of protection [of the faith] and indoctrination, the Joneses [Senior and Junior] did not place much value upon scholarship if it did not buttress what was already regarded as the truth. (Mark Taylor Dalhouse [1996] An Island in the Lake of Fire [University of Georgia Press], 70)

Bob Jones Sr once remarked that every time the university hired an academic with a PhD, they had to hold an evangelical revival to offset his secularising influence. For BJU, knowledge or truth was not something to be discovered through enquiry, but rather something that had been revealed and preserved in the past for faithful transmission to future generations. (120) Education itself was an inculcation process, intended to transmit religiously-established (ie, biblical baseline) values and uphold the social order. (123) Whatever teachers did, they must not substitute ‘multiple, ever-shifting human constructs for absolute, eternal verities’. (128) (Compare this with Jonathan Sarfati’s assertion about creationist ‘axioms’, quoted above.) ‘Uncertainty is eliminated. Decision making and critical thinking are kept to a minimum.’ (146)

It’s worth noting that the educational publications of BJU Press are widely used by Christian ‘homeschooling’ parents in Australia.

Conclusion

Fundamentalist reasoning about subjects like evolution or biblical criticism is invariably specious at heart because it focuses on an irrelevant factor, namely the biblical baseline. Sometimes this is glaringly obvious, as with Rev Samuel Andrews and Bob Jones University. At other times it’s quite well disguised, as with many advocates of Intelligent Design; and usually it’s somewhere in between, as with the three items that opened this article.

Reading the arguments of the baseliners is quite unlike reading, say, Richard Dawkins, Peter Singer or Carl Sagan who generally attack the opposition head-on and with great rigour. Instead you’ll find enveloping clouds of non sequiturs, ad hominem positions, lots of circular reasoning, inventive insults and regurgitation of long-discredited ‘facts’, together with a final, ringing assertion that yet again, the Bible has been ‘proven true’. Conservative evangelines’ point of departure doubles as their conclusion.

Although I’d only recommend it to masochists, you can occasionally induce feelings of doubt in some fundamentalists by honing in on the baseline itself. To use Robert Beckford’s term, you must make them ‘engage with the scholarship’:

• Why do you reject the documentary hypothesis?
• What is your evidence for the existence of Moses, Abraham, Jesus?
• Why is the story of the woman taken in adultery included in the Bible? etc

and then nail them every time they give a baseline answer eg, .... I know Moses existed because it says so in the Bible ...

Generally they’ll walk away but a surprising number will admit they’ve learned something from the experience. And one of them even thanked me.

Deadline for next issue, May 1
Pharmaceutical manufacturers that try to encourage us to pop more pills are among the most powerful and wealthy companies in the world. The industry is worth US$500–550 billion and this is expected to rise to $700 billion by 2008. “In 2004, Pfizer, the largest drug company, had a profit margin of nearly 22 percent of sales ($53 billion). The same year, it spent 32 percent of sales on marketing and administration and only 15 percent on R&D [research and development].”¹ In 2002 the Australian government spent AU$1.4 billion on prescription drugs and it is continually growing.² The Economist says the pharmaceutical industry “is a business to die for”. The median profit of the nine pharmaceutical companies among the Fortune 500 list had a median profit margin of 16 per cent of sales in 2004. The median profit for the other companies listed was around 5 per cent. The prospects for pharmaceuticals seem bright indeed, as populations in rich countries get older and more people suffer from chronic conditions that need drug treatment,³ but unfortunately for these firms there are very few new drugs coming through, so most are marketing ‘me-too’ versions of already established drugs which only offer marginal improvements in treatment.

Australians have the reputation of being great pill-poppers, which the advertisers and media all know, and trade on. So we are consistently bombarded with advertisements for pills and potions and articles promoting health fads, while the media regularly portray scientific breakthroughs as if there is endless medical progress towards solving all our health problems. The result is that, even in our prime, we worry that we might fall ill or worry that we are not as well as we think we ought to be.

Categories of drugs

Two broad categories of drugs are marketed by the pharmaceutical industry: those that require a prescription and those that are sold over the counter in retail outlets. Although the strategies are slightly different for each category, press releases are among the most successful tactics and any report of a wonderful new drug (or over-the-counter product) should be viewed with great scepticism by both the public and the medical profession. The new drug may indeed be wonderful but because the news is primarily aimed at increasing the company’s market share, more often than not, the news will turn out to be premature, exaggerated, or designed to create unwarranted fears about ordinary conditions.

Although we like to think that our doctor’s prescribing habits would not

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be influenced by advertising, there is evidence that many doctors are. Direct to consumer advertising of prescription drugs is not allowed in Australia, but it is in the USA and New Zealand. The objective of this kind of advertising is to encourage people to request a particular drug when attending their physician. Research undertaken in three American cities used actors trained as patients, who presented with symptoms of major or minor depression. Those who requested a prescription for an unspecified antidepressant drug received it 40 per cent of the time, but when they specified a particular brand, they received it 55 per cent of the time — potentially increasing sales by 37 per cent. In countries such as Australia, where drugs are only allowed to be promoted to the medical profession, drug manufacturers have devised marketing strategies to overcome this and these are well illustrated by the case history of a drug used to relieve arthritis pain.

Case study

In 2004, the drug company, Merck, voluntarily withdrew an anti-inflammatory arthritis drug (Vioxx) from the market. Merck had been investigating whether Vioxx would also slow down the development of cancers, but found that patients taking it for 18 months had increased the risk of heart attack and strokes. In the same year during a congressional hearing it was reported that 40,000 Americans had died from heart attacks after taking Vioxx.

How did this unfortunate state of affairs come about? At least part of the reason was the effectiveness of Merck’s marketing campaign. In the USA the media campaign that accompanied its release cost US$160 million. Vioxx was trumpeted as a new anti-inflammatory that would not cause gastric bleeding in the way that older style drugs did, even though it was no better at relieving pain than aspirin and other older, cheaper arthritis painkillers. It was hailed as a wonderful breakthrough simply because the manufacturers claimed that Vioxx did not induce any serious gastric problems.

What transpired is an example of how marketing and advertising can even influence the watchdogs that are supposed to protect us. The campaign successfully convinced many doctors, and the public, that Vioxx (and other drugs in a similar class) were the answer for arthritis sufferers. Patients rushed to their doctors to ask about it and doctors wrote hundreds of thousands of prescriptions.

The intriguing thing is that the original trial of Vioxx had shown an increased risk of heart attacks attached to the drug. But in that first trial Vioxx was being compared to Naproxen, one of the earlier arthritis drugs that seemed to act like aspirin. Both Naproxen and Vioxx were thought to be less likely to cause inflammation or bleeding in the stomach than older anti-inflammatory medicines, so researchers wanted to find out which of the two was the more effective.

It was already well-known that aspirin helps to prevent heart attacks and stroke. The group taking Vioxx were shown to have four times the risk of heart attacks and strokes than the group taking Naproxen. Instead of concluding that Vioxx harms the heart, the researchers drew the conclusion that Naproxen must have protected against heart attacks and strokes just like aspirin. “But of course, without testing that hypothesis, it was simply a self-serving speculation.”

At that time a few specialists were so worried by the researchers’ conclusions they asked Merck for more information, but the company failed to supply any additional details about the design of the study and its statistics.

The initial direct-to-consumer advertising campaign was so successful in gaining public and medical support that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) rushed its approval through. Although there was no direct-to-consumer advertising in Australia, the campaign’s success in America percolated through to this country and Vioxx and other similar drugs were approved for listing on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in 2000. Some of the expert advisers to the PBS were opposed to the listing, but they were overruled by the then Minister for Health, Dr Michael Wooldridge. Merck’s campaign had engendered so much faith in this new category of drugs that Dr Wooldridge told reporters that listing them was the biggest single important decision the PBS had made in 52 years! He went on to say that the drugs had dramatically fewer side effects and that was a great advance!

About 18 months later, following a damaging report from the FDA, the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration finally banned Vioxx’s use and warned against the use of similar drugs. By 2004, 25 million prescriptions had been written for these drugs, costing the taxpayer, through the PBS, nearly $800 million.

We will never know how many Australian patients suffered serious side effects, because the reporting mechanism in this country is voluntary, and most GPs are too busy to take the time and trouble to report them. In 2005 it was suggested that lower doses may not produce any side effects and, since most Australians had been taking lower doses than the Americans, perhaps the serious effects were fewer.

Bald facts

The baldness awareness campaign further exemplifies the strategies used where direct-consumer-advertising is not allowed. Moyihan and others reported on this in the British Medical Journal in 2002. The following is a summary of what they said. First, a hair growth drug called Propecia was approved as a prescription drug by the PBS. At the time it
was first marketed in Australia, leading newspapers carried stories about the terrible emotional trauma associated with hair loss. An article in The Australian featured a ‘new study suggesting that a third of all men experienced some degree of hair loss.’ This story included comments by concerned experts and the news that an International Hair Study Institute had been established. The story suggested that losing hair could lead to panic and other emotional difficulties and even impact on job prospects.

The article did not reveal that Merck, the pharmaceutical company marketing Propecia had funded both the study and the International Hair Study Institute. Edelman (a global public relations organization) had supplied the experts quoted in the newspaper article. This was not mentioned—although the public relations firm did give this information in their publicity materials, the writer of the newspaper article chose to ignore it. Around the same time a series of advertisements appeared in other newspapers and magazines. The ads advised men who were losing hair to consult their doctor, and by this time GPs had had a call from a company rep who gave them pamphlet about the new wonder drug so that when their patients said there was a new prescription drug for hair loss the doctor was well prepared.

Of course the advertisements did not mention the prescription drug or the company promoting it—that would be direct-to-consumer advertising. The ads simply implied that hair loss was a serious condition for which doctors had a new treatment. The company argued that it did not describe baldness as an illness and pointed out that men have a legitimate right to be made aware of scientifically proven options to stop hair loss. True! The irony is that baldness does not seem to be the problem it once was. There are many well-known bald people that seem to have very successful careers and other men actually shave their heads to increase their masculine image.

Companies call this marketing strategy a ‘disease awareness campaign.’ Of course, it suits drug companies to use such terms, which they justify by claiming they are raising public awareness of under-diagnosed and under-treated problems. But to clinical pharmacologists it is ‘disease mongering’—they believe it is selling sickness.9 To expand the market, essentially healthy people are targeted by making the ordinary ailments of life, or personal or social problems appear to require medical treatment with a prescription drug. Mild symptoms (like loss of hair) are portrayed as portents of a serious condition requiring treatment. The prevalence of the problem is ‘spun’ so that it appears to affect many people in the community.

**Hard cases**

A key strategy in the Australian campaign to market a drug for the prevention of erectile dysfunction was also to make the condition seem as widespread as possible.10 In 2001, double-page advertisements told Australians that 39 per cent of men visiting general practitioners have erection problems. The “ad” featured an unhappy couple, apparently in their thirties or forties, seated on opposite sides of a double bed. The accompanying text said: “Erection problems are hard to talk about, but easy to treat.”

The prevalence of the problem was exaggerated in two ways: first by the way the percentage of those affected was calculated, and then by the age range implied in the picture. The 39 per cent said to have erection problems was based on a legitimate survey. But this figure was calculated by adding the number of men that had only occasionally experienced erection difficulties to those who reported consistent problems. So the figure of 39 per cent was obviously intended to exaggerate the prevalence of the problem.

The “spin” did not stop there. In the same survey, the average age of men reporting consistent erection problems was 71 years—not the 30- or 40-year-olds depicted in the advertisement. Another survey, to which the advertisement did not refer, gave the age range a different perspective: about 64 per cent of men in their seventies reported erection problems but only three per cent of men in their forties. Because of the emergence of several competitors marketing similar drugs, the company was trying to shift the market to include those with sporadic difficulties.11 In Australia this ad has been replaced with others, the latest of which does not depict men and women but bears a visual message—the images are bent bananas.

The original advertisement did not mention that it was funded by Pfizer, the manufacturer of Viagra. The fine print cited a host organization, “Impotence Australia” but failed to mention that it was funded by a grant of AU$200,000 from Pfizer: A Pfizer spokesman told...
Moynihan and colleagues “the best consumer is an educated consumer ...Who better than the manufacturer to help this process?” 12

Indeed!

**Public relations**

What does do these campaigns tell us about the marketing of drugs? In Australia prescription drugs can not be advertised to consumers, so pharmaceutical companies have developed five strategies to overcome this hurdle. All five were aimed at influencing prescribing habits, one way or another. First of all, the big companies spent large sums on public relations firms that can produce press releases about an exciting new drug breakthrough. Since this tactic seems to help secure money for further research, quite often research centres will also employ public relations experts to announce their latest research findings.

Newspapers, radio programs and television shows love the term ‘breakthrough’—it is so redolent of immediacy and progress. Between 1992 and 1994, 31 cancer “breakthroughs” were announced in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In 2003, a group of investigative reporters contacted experts in cancer research to find out if these announcements had been supported by further research. Of the 31 reported, only eight had reached the stage of being incorporated into medical practice, and while 16 were still considered to be potential breakthroughs, three had been abandoned for lack of confirming evidence, and the other four were considered questionable. Thus, unfortunately, the promised breakthrough seldom matches reality. It is notable that this study was conducted by journalists at *The Age*, a newspaper that belongs in the same media stable as the *SMH*. 13

The press releases are designed to draw attention to the latest treatment, which is presented as a scientific ‘breakthrough’ and, as in the Propecia case, to create fears about a condition or disease. This effectively ensures that a very wide section of the public is influenced to ask their doctor about the drug. The companies also hope to influence ministers of health and government agencies—as we have seen, the Vioxx campaign influence was effective in this regard.

Second, when promoting its products, the pharmaceutical industry not only co-opts the media to spread the word, where possible they co-opt experts—stacking advisory boards with their own scientists is one example.

Third, so that each doctor will be ready to supply the drug in response to patients’ requests for the latest ‘wonder’ drug, a squadron of drug reps call on GPs and leave pamphlets and free samples.

Other tactics are aimed directly at the medical profession and are not so obvious to the public. Drug companies fund scientific societies and medical conferences where their representatives take the opportunity to convince doctors that their products are not only the newest, they are the best. As part of this strategy, doctors receive invitations to conventions and symposia in magnificent resorts where they are wined and dined—all well-funded by drug companies. Scientists from the pharmaceutical companies present conference papers (quite legitimately) on the drug trials they have undertaken, which help to authenticate a drug’s benefits. And, so that a new drug will have additional scientific validity, drug company scientists publish their research in refereed journals (again quite legitimately), although now most journals require a declaration of competing or conflicting interests.

**Food for thought**

Over-the-counter medicines are also strenuously marketed—a prime example is dietary supplements. Here, middle class, well-educated women are often the main target. An Australian survey shows that buyers of over-the-counter remedies are most likely to be females between the ages of 15 and 45. By comparison with non-users, they are more likely to be better educated, have a higher economic status, and have a higher household income. 14 Since these women are likely to be savvy consumers, they know that the biggest killers are cancer, heart conditions, and strokes. To ensure their health is maintained they go to the gym, take up walking or jogging and pop a few dietary supplements. When advertisers address their pitch to this group, they suggest that they are busy people, living in a fast food society, and since they cannot possibly have the time or capacity to ensure they are getting sufficient nutrients in their diet, they should be taking dietary supplements.

Advertisers claim that strenuous exercise increases the need for some extra vitamins and minerals. This is true, but after exercise our body tells us to eat, so any loss is usually replaced by increased food intake. Some advertisements subtly suggest that the body cannot store water-soluble vitamins, so daily replacements are required. But this is not true. Water-soluble vitamins, like B complex and C, can be stored in the body for several weeks. 15 Vitamins such as C, E, and betacarotene (which the body converts to vitamin A) are often advertised as antioxidants. These block the action of free radicals in the body and are thought to prevent heart disease, cancer and aging.

This idea was originally suggested in the early 1990s on the basis of two epidemiological studies. Unfortunately, numerous double-blind trials have failed to support the benefits of taking additional antioxidants, with a few exceptions. A study that followed 22,000 physicians for 12 years found no difference in cancer or cardiac disease rates between users and non-users of betacarotene. 16 The results of recent systematic and meta-analysis of 14 trials that together included over 170,000 participants were even more disappointing.
The trials involved the use of beta-carotene, vitamins A, C, and E, and the mineral selenium, as antioxidants to prevent cancer. None of the antioxidants had any effect on stomach, large bowel, or liver cancer, apart from selenium, which did appear to have a beneficial effect on liver cancer. Some research has shown that vitamin E can help prevent atherosclerosis, but it has anticoagulant properties that can cause excessive bleeding, and one study that those who took vitamin E had a higher frequency of haemorrhagic stroke. So the verdict on vitamin E is, if you do take it, be careful not to overdose.

Another way advertisers try to widen their market for dietary supplements and other remedies is by using the phrase ‘may help’, followed by a list of possible complaints as an aid to self-diagnosis. Such advertisements suggest that all and sundry need medication for dozens of assorted complaints. Internet sellers are particularly prone to suggesting that every system in our body needs stimulation or support by extra nutrients.

One advertisement concerns a product called PD Combination Key Product. This product “supplements the body’s own digestive secretions” and “each tablet contains 325 mg of betaine HCl, supplying hydrochloric acid and 65 mg of pepsin, a natural protein digesting enzyme.” If we are uncertain which body system needs support, all we need to do is fill in a “systems/lifestyle questionnaire” and help will be forthcoming. Virtually all bodily systems are catered for on this website list: respiratory, glandular, circulatory, nervous, intestinal (as well as digestive), the immune system, and the body’s structures (hair, skin, nails, bones, muscles, tendons, and ligaments). Collectively, such advertisements are not much different from those that appeared in the heyday of quackery in the 17th century. During that era an advertisement for New Canada Balsam said it was for “Weaknesses in either Sex, Whether Occasioned by Excesses, Ill-habits or Diseases.” What could be more inclusive than that?

Most developed countries have laws regarding efficacy claims for remedies classed as dietary supplements. Since these are considered “low-risk” medicines, statutory bodies do not require research into their efficacy. Therefore, any claim about efficacy is considered to be unsubstantiated, and statements that supplements treat specific diseases are not allowed. A standard disclaimer is required which must say that the product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease. Are you sceptical enough to read the fine print?

References

8. ABC Background Briefing, 10 April 2005.
10. Roy Moynihan, I. Heath & D. Henry, Selling sickness: How the drug companies are turning us all into patients, p. 889–90.
20. The questionnaire now requires registration by name and email address, so the actual content may have changed.
State Route 49 wends its way through the historic mining towns of the California Gold Rush. Like the San Francisco football team, this highway takes its name from the Forty-Niners, the influx of some 90,000 gold seekers who travelled to California during 1849. Infected with ‘gold fever’, these prospectors braved the seas, or the treacherous California Trail, in the hope of finding their fortune in gold in the Wild West.

During the Gold Rush, the town of Jackson was a popular mining camp and pit stop on the road to more prosperous areas, such as Sacramento. Today, Jackson is classified as a ‘semi-Ghost town’. Enroute to Lake Tahoe and a nearby casino, the sleepy town is still a tourist pit stop, with a not-so-sleepy pub. Keeping the West wild, many of the locals and those passing through can be found at the National Hotel on a Saturday night. Could this ghost town have any ghosts?

Built in 1862, some seven years after the Gold Rush ended, the National Hotel is reputedly rich in ghosts. Along with many pub and hotel patrons, the owner and staff have witnessed some strange occurrences. Is there a rational explanation for these phenomena, or is this proof of the paranormal? A group of self-proclaimed ‘paranormal investigators’ planned to go ghost mining at the National Hotel, and I had the opportunity to observe the investigation. Would the investigators strike it rich with a sighting, or would this ghost rush only unearth fool’s ghost?

Evidence is all

Is a paranormal investigator a skeptic or a believer? With dual connotations, both ‘sides’ can stake claim to this title — the difference is in the investigative approach. In this case, we have a claim: the National Hotel is haunted. What evidence do we have to support this claim? As is usual with alleged hauntings, all that exists is anecdotal ‘evidence’. Therefore, the evidence is also the claim. Therefore, there is no evidence. This investigation was an attempt to gather evidence. However, for the paranormal investigator (believer), the evidence is usually in the eye of the beholder.

Apparantly this is not the first group to investigate the hotel. A bartender at the pub confirmed that several other groups have previously explored the hotel, their findings proving that it is “certifiably” haunted. As the only skeptic amongst a group of self-proclaimed psychics, mediums and intuitives, I looked forward to assessing what or who was certifiable.

Prior to the investigation, members of the paranormal group buzzed that the hotel is home to between 20 and 30 ghostly guests. I did a
A further two parties. Overall, the members, this was a claim shared by day and started to meet the group the hotel. "When I arrived on the hers the "most haunted room in the hotel". I was informed, called to arrange my accommodation. Planning weeks ahead, I event. So far, all the group had to work with were the following few anecdotes:

- A guest found the covers of the bed pulled back and an indent, as though someone had sat on the bed.
- In one room, a maid was "held down on the bed when she was trying to make it".
- A guest reported that a "spirit" followed her down a staircase. (N.B. this claim was made by a medium).

It is easy to think of some simple, rational explanations for each of these events. In scenario 1, did the guest or someone else with access to the room create the indent on the bed? In scenario 2, did the maid somehow fall onto the bed? In scenario 3, was there another guest using the staircase? (We also have to question the medium’s reliability, as the purpose of her visit was to write an entry for a book). Furthermore, these accounts have probably been embellished with each retelling.

**Preliminaries**

This was to be an overnight investigation. Planning weeks ahead, I called to arrange my accommodation, requesting the "most haunted room in the hotel". I was informed, "there isn’t one. There’s lots of activity everywhere". Yet strangely, later that week, the event organiser claimed that she had secured for herself the "most haunted room in the hotel". When I arrived on the day and started to meet the group members, this was a claim shared by a further two parties. Overall, the second floor of the three storeys is reputedly the mother lode of paranormal activity. We were all allocated rooms on this floor. At any rate, I was allocated the John Wayne suite, and to prove this, there was an enormous cardboard cut-out of Wayne in the room.

I was immediately cornered by a few members of the group. A not-so-intuitive intuitive mistook me for an intuitive. “I can tell that you’re an intuitive. What are your skills?” Always the paranormal wowser, I explained that I am a skeptic, and my skills are analysis and critical thinking. “But your aura is blue”, came the incongruous reply. Well, my coat was anyway.

Herein began an impromptu reading. Did I have a daughter? (No). Then I will have a daughter. Did I grow up near a large space? (Yes, near a suburban park. This is not an uncommon thing. Was this reflecting a stereotype that all Australians live in wide open spaces in the country?). The reader snapped out of her reverie and the reading resumed. I was told that I like to travel (What a giveaway my accent is!). I am a seeker in life. (I’d just explained that I’m an open-minded skeptic).

The intuitive occasionally gesticulated as she spoke. I realised that her gestures contained some sign language. Wow, I thought…what a powerful cold reading I could perform on you! The reading ended when she announced, “You know…I’m a skeptic too. I’m skeptical of myself”. Not skeptical enough, I mused.

The hotel was littered with copies of the National Enquirer, revealing the owner’s inclination. As I was flicking through these, a woman approached me and introduced herself as an intuitive, claiming “I used to see dead people when I was a kid.” I countered that many children create imaginary friends. She insisted, “Well, my parents were worried because I spoke about being friends with old men”.

It was still early afternoon and the investigation was not due to commence until 1.30 am. We had to wait until the band finished, the pub closed and the patrons had left. The group whiled away the hours, exploring the hotel and doing tarot and psychometry readings for each other. Some checked out the town and the casino. What is a paranormal investigator to do, with hours to kill and a pub downstairs? Adding to the uncontrolled environment, some of the group were to be found in the pub, enjoying the live band and a drink, or two. This was fast becoming an evening of ghosts, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll.

In the bar I chatted with a long-term staff member. I found out that I’m not the only Australian to have ever graced the hotel. Aussies will find the bars, wherever they are. I asked about the stories connected
with the hotel and was informed that most of the locals believe that it is haunted. Skeptical himself, he still values these stories as part of the folkloric history of the hotel. Over the years he has heard stories of the phantom sounds of people gambling, singing and laughing. Most recently, the owners heard an extremely loud crashing noise, as though a piece of furniture had fallen over. Curiously, a different version was relayed to me by another staff member. In this second iteration, the owners heard the sound of broken glass or broken wood (although these two sounds are very distinct). In both tales, the owner and staff searched the premises, but couldn’t find the source of the noise. In a 3-storey, 33-room hotel full of guests and with a busy pub downstairs, how could the staff be everywhere at once to determine the source? Furthermore, the hotel is located at the intersection of two major freeways, and with the busy backdrop of the downtown area, the noise may have originated outside. The lack of an immediate explanation is not proof of the paranormal.

Investigation

At around 1.30 am a group of about 30 people assembled in the hall of the second floor. Everyone had some sort of investigative ‘tool’, from video cameras and hand-held recorders, to Electro Magnetic Field (EMF) readers and ‘tempguns’ (temperature gauges). These gadgets attempt to give a scientific basis to the investigation. They detect normally occurring phenomena that are misconstrued as ‘proof’ of paranormal activity.

We were split into three teams to investigate the three floors. At this stage we couldn’t view the pub area as the police were there, following up on a brawl. I was allocated a group that was to monitor the third floor. The group leader gave us a pre-hunt pep talk, “Remember guys, about 90% of what happens can be explained and only about 10% is paranormal”. As we were about to start, she asked, “where is the skeptic?” Someone had dobbed on me! I raised my hand and she assured me, “I’m on your side”.

The intuitive who provided me with a reading was in my team. She was the focal point in the group, providing a running commentary of all that she ‘saw’. The ‘Blue Lady’ had returned. “I’m seeing a blue lady. She’s dressed in old fashioned clothing. She’s very aggressive. She’s saying, “Go away!” She’s very angry that we’re here”. I asked where the ‘Blue Lady’ was and curiously, the intuitive crouched down, pointing low towards the corner of a door.

She ‘saw’ lots of apparitions that none of the rest of us could see. Apparently, we were also in the company of a shy “Pink Lady”. There was also an “Orange Lady”. There was a barking dog, possibly a poodle. There were two wayward children, screaming and arguing. There was another lone, quiet little girl. There was an indigenous American, in full tribal regalia (perhaps this was motivated by the ‘Indian’ statue on display in the pub). There was a man smelling of beer and wearing a cowboy hat and boots. Like an episode of Romper Room, the intuitive could ‘see’ Veronica, Jeffrey, Cindy, Scott and Peter. The living were clearly outnumbered by the dead.

The intuitive was very open to suggestion. I joked that one of the rooms looked like a brothel, draped in red velvet and with tacky faux ‘opulence’. Later on, she claimed that one of the female spirits was a prostitute and had taken her clients to this room. There was proof too. A fellow sat down on a chaise longue in the room and claimed that he felt a sudden pressure on his thighs, as though someone sat down on his lap. Then he felt as though he was being groped by invisible hands. In the name of empirical research, another fellow tested the chair with great determination for at least 20 minutes…to no avail. These two men got off lightly. In this same room, a few females claimed to feel their hair pulled or their face “poked”. It turns out that this room is named The Bordello Room, honouring the ‘red light’
district that was once near the hotel. This is a theme only. It’s not as though John Wayne had ever stayed in my room (but apparently, he once lost a poker game in the bar!).

In another example of suggestion, the intuitive was accosted by a man who also claimed to be intuitive. He reported seeing an “angry man”, a troubled spirit who mumbled incoherently as he marched up and down the hallway. However, it was this ‘intuitive’ patron who was incoherent, and extremely intoxicated. In a cringe worthy gaffe, the intuitive took this suggestion and embellished it. “Yes, I can see him too. He is smoking a cigar and telling us to ‘Get out!’”. Unable to intuit that the patron was drunk, despite the fact that he stumbled and clutched at his head, another intuitive asked him, “What’s wrong?” The fellow complained that he suffers from headaches when there are too many ghosts around.

It wasn’t just the patrons who had ‘a few’. Clearly, some of the investigators were mixing spirits with spirits. It was almost 4am, and some were still snapping photographs of empty rooms and ‘enticing’ the spirits, demanding that they “reveal” themselves to the group. Others were falling asleep on barstools in the pub and on chairs in the hallways. The investigation was over.

Results

What were the results of the investigation? Of the hundreds of photographs taken, none revealed any ghosts. Several investigators reported ‘orbs’ (circular patterns of light that commonly appear on photographs), but no self-respecting ghost hunter perceives these as ‘evidence’ anymore. Orbs are so passé! Orbs appeared in many of the photographs that I took, and no surprises there...the hotel was dusty, stale and dark. Some took multiple images of the same scene, to “avoid misinterpretation”, and wondered why the orbs were not fixed in every shot. This was cited as ‘proof’ that the orbs were spirits, but is clearly due to the movement of dust particles.

The various cameras didn’t detect anything unusual, only revealing mundane images of bedrooms, hallways and furniture. The only person who ‘saw’ anything was the intuitive, who professed to see an exhaustive array of ‘spirits’. However, her claims are unreliable, as suggested by her corroboration of the inebriated patron’s prank, a ‘vision’ of an “angry man”. A few people claimed to feel ‘cold spots’, ‘hot spots’, ‘sad spots’ and reported feeling an inexplicable “thickness” in the air. The possible explanations are unexciting. The investigation took place between 1.30-4.30 am, on a cold night, in a warm hotel, with 30 investigators who were tired, drinking coffee, energy drinks, and some, alcohol.

However, there was some exciting news. According to the group leader, the investigation had elicited “2 pretty concrete EVP’s (sic) so far!” Electronic Voice Phenomena are recorded sounds that are interpreted as speech and reputed to be paranormal in origin. Taking a snippet of a recording, listeners attempt to recognise isolated words and phrases that are often believed to be alien contact or messages from the dead. Gibberish is often conveniently perceived as an alien or foreign language. Usually, there are many external influences and the hearer has to sort any unusual sounds from conversations and background noise. Often, the sounds aren’t audible during the actual recording. EVPs are in the ear of the beharer, they are subjective interpretations. This is the audio version of pareidolia (ie, seeing faces on places other than heads). Other examples can be explained away as radio interference, or simply, human voices.

Proof?

What EVP ‘proof’ did the investigators have? There were two alleged EVPs, recorded by two different investigators. I was not present during either taping. The first EVP was a twelve-second snippet of interaction between the intuitive and a ‘spirit’ (the actual EVP can be heard on my website, at: www.bad-language.com/evp).

Spirit: ‘Chill, chill’...

Intuitive (overlapped slightly) Okay.

Hello. We need to know...um...what’s your name?

Can you tell us?

Spirit: (Two fast, short breaths)

Intuitive (overlapping slightly) Okay.

So...do you like any of us?
Clearly, the spirit didn’t like any of them, as the spirit’s conversation ended here. The initial ‘utterance’ sounded like the gravelly, cancerous throat-like strains of Sylvia Browne. While this sounded like the repetition of the English word chill, this made no sense as any kind of message, or in the context. Interpreted as speech, this was just a meaningless sound.

The two staccato-like breaths sounded feminine. There was a slight overlapping between the dialogue of the ‘spirit’ and the intuitive, so that eliminated the intuitive as the source. However, I learnt that there were at least two other people present in the room, a female, and the male recording the episode. The door to the room was also open, allowing for outside interference. All around, there were groups holding conversations, and a live band playing downstairs. This is proof (not so) positive.

The second EVP was even less convincing. This featured a human voice asking the ‘spirit’, “Hey, how ya doing?” with no reply, and a clear conversation held in the background. A few of the investigators claimed that they could hear a mumble on the recording. Throughout the investigation, others claimed to hear strange whispers, laughing or cries, but no one produced any recordings of these.

One investigator initially claimed to have recorded the sounds of an “an old time piano playing”. In a pleasing display of skepticism, the owner of this ‘EVP’ eventually deduced that it was not a piano, but the sound made by another member’s video camera as it was switched on.

Conclusion
This was a highly biased, uncontrolled investigation that did not produce any proof. The ‘results’ were not analysed using critical thinking skills. The participants should have entered into the investigation asking the question, ‘is there anything paranormal here?’ Instead, many of the investigators started with the premise, ‘there is something paranormal here’, and went into the investigation, determined to prove this belief. As an example of confirmation bias, many believed that something was there, and, sure enough, they ‘found’ it. Every occurrence was rationalised as a paranormal event, but there was no actual analysis. Where science would normally begin, this investigation ended.

The conclusions of this extremely superficial investigation were that the National Hotel is haunted, on the basis of the two examples of Electronic Voice Phenomena, the ‘visual evidence’ provided by the intuitive, and any other anecdotal evidence. The group plans to take their ‘findings’ to the owners of the hotel, to confirm the mutual belief that it is haunted. There is a popular stereotypical saying that, ‘For the believer, no proof is enough’. However, for some of these paranormal investigators, it seems that ‘everything is proof’.

Karen’s Research
Karen Stollznow’s research at UC Berkeley, is part of the Script Encoding Initiative (SEI), a project that aims to encode endangered writing systems into the Unicode Standard (the universal computing standard specifying the representation of text in all modern software). Simply, this is to preserve these scripts so that they can be used on computers, in a universally standardised format.

So far, Unicode has mostly focused on the world’s major modern scripts, such as the Latin and Cyrillic Alphabets. The SEI is the voice for ancient scripts and living minority scripts. These need to be preserved in a modern format (not just any created font but a universal standard). If they aren’t preserved in this way, all we’ll have left to attest to these scripts are a few extant examples such as inscribed tablets, coins, tattered scrolls and fading samples of handwritten writing. They will effectively become incompatible with modern technology, and redundant.

The project is currently working to encode about 80 endangered scripts from all around the world. These represent a diverse range of language families, and the many different types of scripts (eg, alphabets represent sounds and ideographs represent ideas). Some are historical writing systems (eg, Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the Linear A) and others are modern scripts (eg, Balinese and Tulu).

This conservation is of linguistic, historical, educational and cultural importance. Encoding these scripts can help to promote native-language education, literacy, research and publication. Scripts are systems of meaning, but they are also artefacts and artworks.

These scripts are fascinating and each one has a story to tell. For example, some of the scripts are undeciphered, such as Rongo Rongo from Easter Island. For 500 years Nu Shu (“women’s writing”) was a secret script in China, used solely by women. The Bassa script was used in parts of Liberia and Sierra Leone to avoid slave traders. The script almost died out when colonial forces banned its use. The SEI is also trying to encode artificial scripts such as J.R. Tolkien’s Tengwar script.

The project website can be viewed at: www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/sei/index.htm
In November, I traveled to Senegal, the Gambia and Sierra Leone to meet scientists and skeptics and to explore the prospects of skepticism in these countries.

In Senegal I met Prof Fadel Niang of the Ecole Superieur Polytechnique in Dakar. Fadel heads the Center for Inquiry-Senegal, the only organization of its kind that promotes reason and science in the country. Like most countries in Africa, Senegal is a deeply religious society — 95% Muslim, 5% Catholic.

Traditional life is mired in myths, superstition and taboos. For instance, in some communities, people do not go to market on Wednesdays or cut their hair on Saturdays. They believe that such actions would lead to death and misfortune — these beliefs have gone unchallenged for centuries. CFI-Senegal has set up programs to promote critical thinking and scientific outlook among the Wolof people. There is no doubt that the Center faces a herculean task.

In the Gambia I met with leaders of the science club at the University of the Gambia. We discussed the prevalence of superstition in the country and how we can tackle it. They told me how seers and marabouts exploit poor ignorant folks by manipulating commonsensical knowledge and data. One of the most common superstitious beliefs in the Gambia is witchcraft — the belief that people can harm others through spiritual, occult and supernatural means. Witches are said to cause diseases, accidents and death.

The students told me that they were brought up to fear owls. An owl is believed to be a witch with the power to kill or harm human beings, so children are told to kill it wherever they see it. The students were excited to hear about a movement that promotes reason, science and critical thinking. They asked me to send them science and skeptic books and magazines. I gave them copies of *The Skeptic* and *The Skeptical Inquirer*.

While in the Gambia I met a witchdoctor selling charms in the ferry. Through an interpreter I understood that the charms were an antidote to poison and snake bites. Some people, mostly women, bought charms from him, but I told people that they should not patronize peddlers of such paranormal wares unless they can prove or demonstrate the efficacy of their claims. In Africa, people believe that juju and charms can protect them from gunshots, infertility, business failure, premature death and diseases. Even with all the charms and amulets Africans use, the continent is still ravaged by hunger, poverty, famine and preventable diseases.

In Sierra Leone I met with skeptics who are doing whatever they can to keep alive the ideals of reason, science and critical thinking under very difficult circumstances.

Leo Igwe, a regular *Skeptic* correspondent, runs the Nigerian Skeptics. Anyone who wishes to support his efforts can contact Leo at nskepticleo@yahoo.com
Since the war, the country has witnessed a proliferation of irrational beliefs and paranormal claims. Alternative medicine men are promoting their dubious therapies, while Christian evangelists are organizing crusades promising the salvation, miracles and breakthroughs ‘in Jesus’ Name’. In fact paranormals are having a field day as the people grapple with the task of reconstructing and rehabilitating their nation.

There is no place this is more evident than in the country’s only university. We visited the science department at the Fourah Bay College and met Mr Okoni-Williams of the Department of Biological Sciences. We discussed how the faculty staff and students could partner with the skeptics movement to promote critical thinking and scientific temper.

After a quick glance at a copy of the September/October 2006 edition of the Skeptical Inquirer — this edition focused on DNA and Evolution among other topics — Mr Okoni-Williams said he welcomed the proposal. But that (he was very emphatic about this) he would not accept any idea that would distort his Christianity He teaches genetics and evolution, but he said that ‘as a born again Christian’ he ‘believes in the Bible and the creation’. He went on to lecture us on how the teachings of the Bible were superior to those of the sciences.

One of the tragedies of the scientific enterprise in Africa is that trained scientists denigrate science and instead celebrate and profess pseudo science. Africa needs scientists like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould to promote public appreciation and understanding of the scientific outlook.

In Senegal, the Gambia and Sierra Leone, there was palpable evidence of how religious hogwash and paranormal claims are undermining the growth and development of the region. Superstition systematically robs Africans of the good they would have achieved and enjoyed by thinking critically and scientifically, and by basing their lives, thoughts, actions and decisions on facts and evidence.

In Senegal I met many people begging in the name of Allah. The beggars were not asking Allah for help. Instead they were asking commuters and passers-by to give them alms so that Allah would bless them in return. If Allah can bless anyone who gives alms to the poor, why can’t he/she bless the poor directly so that they could get off the streets and save the resources of people, most of whom are living on less than one dollar a day?

But I know that when it comes to matters concerning religion most Africans do not want to think or apply their common sense. They always want to be ‘faithful’, hence Africa has become a continent where most people are not only filled with faith but are fooled in the name of faith.

While in the Gambia I bought the October edition of the New African. It had a supplement on Nigeria’s Deeper Life Church, founded 30 years ago by a mathematician and former university lecturer, Pastor W. F. Kumuyi.

In an interview published in the magazine, Kumuyi claimed to have healed many people through his prayers. “The blind had their eyes opened. A boy, who had no bone in one leg, had his bone recreated by God there and then. Another boy had a rotten hip, they brought him there and while we prayed God repaired every thing there and then.”

Kumuyi further claimed to have performed miracles in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Sierra Leone. But if Kumuyi really believes that his prayers can recreate bones, why didn’t he visit the Amputees Camp in Grafton while he was in Sierra Leone and pray so that God would recreate the bones of these people whose hands and legs were chopped off by rebels during the war? They are really the people who need the miracle of bone recreation and repair. But Kumuyi did not and, I am sure, he would never try to put his God to the test by visiting Grafton.

This is a clear pointer to the fact the Africa needs a viable skepticism movement to challenge, confront and expose these fraudsters, parading themselves as faith healers and witch-doctors. Without proactive skeptics groups, mass exploitation, gullibility and nincoompoopery will continue to reign on the continent of Africa.

Already there are some skeptics groups and individual activists on campuses and communities across the region. But they are too few to confront the enormous tasks ahead of them. African skeptics are doubting, debunking and debating under very difficult and antagonistic circumstances. So they need your help.

African skeptics need books and magazines to nourish, inspire and motivate them. They need training opportunities to equip them with skeptical tools and techniques. The skeptical cause in Africa is too important to be left to the few Africans who are currently championing it. So I invite you to join efforts with us and help make skepticism happen on the African continent. The civilization you help save could one day become your own or that of your children.
Dumb, Dumber & Really Dumb at the ABC

Is a National Cultural Institution growing senile?

In the Spring 2005 issue, we asked “what is going on at the ABC?” We went on to say that following on from the decidedly daft program Second Opinion, Rachael Kohn’s program The Spirit of Things claimed that so-called ‘forensic psychic’ Alison DuBois had helped police and the FBI solve murders, and we showed that this claim is demonstrably false. One would have thought that our ridicule would persuade the powers-that-be in the ABC to be more careful in future not to arouse the ire of the Skeptic.

Alas, there’s no fool like an ABC fool. Hardly had our ink dried, but your ABC, at great expense to the poor bleeding taxpayer, ran a complete series called Psychic Investigators, from 30 November 2006 to 8 February 2007. Now call me a skeptical old curmudgeon if you will, but surely one would expect that the ABC would have run some sort of accuracy rule over programs on offer, if only to ensure that the ABC runs programs that conform to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983 Section 6 which says that:

Charter of the Corporation (1)
The functions of the Corporation are:
(a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard…
and the ABC Code of Practice which says in Section 5:

Factual Programs.

5.2 Every effort must be made to ensure that the factual content of such programs is accurate and in context and does not misrepresent viewpoints.

Suspecting that the ABC had not run some sort of accuracy rule over the series, I offered to the editor to view the entire series and analyse it to see if it was of a high standard, was accurate and did not misrepresent viewpoints. “Yes please” said your editor, “just let me get back to the Ashes Series.”

So I recorded the series of Psychic Investigators, and what did I find? I found:

• Nowhere in the series did a ‘psychic’ solve a crime. Every crime depicted here was solved through ordinary police work, the developments of new technologies such as a national computerised fingerprint database and DNA profiling, and through the confessions of people involved in the crimes.
• Nowhere in the series was any ‘psychic’s’ claim subjected to any verification. In every episode, ‘psychics’ claimed to have special insight into the crimes and the perpetrators, in one case claiming 120 hits, but the program makers never subjected these claims to any sort of scrutiny. Everything they said was accepted without a quibble. In some cases, the claims were made in interviews 20 years after the crime; surely that would raise some
suspicion that the ‘hits’ were made after reading newspapers.

- Nowhere in the series did a policeman concede that a ‘psychic’ helped to solve a crime, although in two episodes they did come close to that. However, they would say that wouldn’t they: in one case the detective married the ‘psychic’ and in the other the detective was subjected to such ridicule in the office that I suspect she said that to justify her involving the ‘psychic’. Even then all she said was that the ‘psychic’ ‘enhanced the investigation’, whatever that means.

- In Episode 2, a policeman being interviewed said ‘Would we have solved the crime without consulting the psychic?’ Without anyone answering the question, the scene and the narration went elsewhere. The viewer is left to make his or her own assessments, which if one is rather gullible, the selective presentation of facts might led him or her to a ‘yes.’

- Nowhere in the series did the producers specifically claim that a psychic solved, or helped solve, a crime. By interweaving two sets of facts, (psychic claims and crime scene facts) the producers imply that they are related, a poor example of logic, and a misrepresentation that would encourage people into believing ‘psychics’ solve crimes and locate missing people, as I learned early in my 30 years in Search And Rescue, further traumatises the bereaved and wastes the time of police and searchers.

The ABC has done a great mischief here, compounding the mischief of Rachael Kohn’s program The Spirit of Things. The ABC should show a series which scrutinises the claims of ‘psychics’, the result would lead to less trauma for the bereaved, but that is clearly not what the ABC is interested in. The ABC claims to be conforming to the ABC Code of Practice which says in Section 5:

5.1 The ABC is committed to providing programs of relevance and diversity which reflect a wide range of audience interests, beliefs and perspectives.

So that’s all right then, even if a program is absolute trash, is inaccurate, does misrepresent, and does not conform to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act and the ABC Code of Practice, the Code of Practice has a contradictory escape clause that commits the ABC to programs which reflect any interest, belief and perspective, no matter how bizarre, and no matter how much trauma they cause. It’s only money after all; why waste it on schools and hospitals. Following on from Psychic Investigators, we will soon be seeing a steady stream of whackos sprout their cases for paedophilia, aliens building the Moon, and my old favourite, the Flat Earth.

On the 7:30 Report, during a piece on global warming and coral bleaching, Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, of Qld University said: ‘… well, there are places for flat-earthers.... How right he was, but I don’t think the Professor had the ABC in mind. Pity.

Furthermore

On a related theme, on February 26, the long-running and usually excellent ABC programme, Australian Story, aired a piece about the still unsolved disappearance, in 2003, of 13 year-old Sunshine Coast boy, Daniel Morcombe. It was a heart-wrenching story, cataloguing the pain and suffering of a family losing a child under mysterious circumstances, consisting of interviews with the parents and police officers who had been involved with the case.

During the course of the programme, the officer in charge of the investigation, Detective Superintendent John Maloney, said “We have hundreds and hundreds of stories there that come in and we investigate them all, try and substantiate whether there is any truth in them.” However, as we learned from Bret Christian’s Skeptic article “Murders and Clairvoyants” (24:1), it is highly likely that many of the stories the police heard would not have come from witnesses who might have seen something, nor from people who might have known something about possible perpetrators, but from self-proclaimed psychics.

People whose unsubstantiated ‘feelings’ or ‘visions’, no matter how well-meant, could only have added to the distress of a grieving family and to the work load of an over stretched police force.

It’s a pity that the ABC which, in the face of many complaints so strenuously defended its decision to show Psychic Investigators, could not have included information about how psychics behave in real investigations in a real documentary about real people.
Sometimes the strangest things get you thinking. A dear friend, Shona, was recently diagnosed with a brain tumour, benign thankfully, but growing. Surgery was the only option. Now I didn’t want to make this about myself; sure I was devastated, but Shona was the one who had to go through the surgery, deal with the pain and cope with the fear of having someone poking around inside her skull. Still, I was upset and such emotions are not diminished by the notion that someone else is feeling worse than you are. I wasn’t handling it well at all; three days with inadequate sleep, little food and a gnawing anxiety that grew day by day, made it obvious to anyone who spoke to me that I was reaching the limits of what I could endure both physically and mentally.

There were many well-wishers, pep talks and hugs from people acting as people tend to in these situations — with outpourings of love. But through it all I was acutely aware of how many people offered to send my friend ‘positive energy’. One girl in particular, living in Canada, claimed to be sending this energy every night before she went to bed. That got me thinking. What exactly is positive energy?

Clearly, within this context, the word positive refers to an attitude, simple good-willed thoughts that are supposed to aid Shona’s ordeal in ways not clearly specified. Of course, energy has no basic philosophy, no ethics, it does not care if you’ve been naughty or nice, and it lacks empathy in the same way it lacks thought. Like much New Age jargon, the word ‘positive’ has been borrowed directly from science. Energy certainly can be positive, not in reference to any intrinsic glass half-full/half-empty properties it might possess, but to its electrical charge. Now the power of thought does seem to have an effect on the healing process; it is usually referred to as psychosomaticism and though, as yet, the evidence for it is inconclusive, at least a scientific dialogue is present. But the psychosomatic process comes from within, whereas my Canadian friend’s energy was being ‘projected’ over a considerable distance. Just what exactly was this energy supposed to be?

Of the four fundamental forces in the universe, two tend to avoid the life of a commuter. Both the weak and strong nuclear forces operate over very small distances; in the case of the weak force its range is around $10^{-18}$ meters, which is about 0.1% of the diameter of a proton. The strong force’s propensity for travel is more variable but certainly it is not going to win any prizes for long distance athletics. Gravity travels over long distances, although the particle that carries this energy, the graviton, has yet to be found and remains theoretical. Gravity however is a very weak force and the amount of gravity that my Canadian friend’s head can
generate would be too small to measure.

That leaves electromagnetic radiation as the only likely candidate for positive energy. Electromagnetic radiation, like Heinz products, comes in a number of varieties, and it is the type of energy that human beings are most intimately familiar with, not least because it forms the visible spectrum that we refer to simply as light. Since it is reasonable to assume that my Canadian friend's forehead does not light up like a beacon when she sends this positive energy, we can remove the visually perceivable wavelengths — around 380 to 780 nm — from the equation. We can also remove a whole host of other wavelengths; any gamma or X-rays emitted from someone's head would destroy the tissue of the brain and irradiate anyone and anything unfortunate enough to be in close proximity to the 'sender'. Magnetic projection would cause paperclips to leap from desks, and form a rather unusual crown around our New Ager's head. Again, it is reasonable to assume that this isn't happening to my Canadian friend.

But the brain does produce electromagnetic (em) energy, in the form of electromagnetic oscillations, referred to as Alpha, Beta, Delta or Theta waves; the Alpha waves are most commonly associated with theories about telepathy, making them a likely candidate for 'positive energy'. It hardly needs saying in a magazine called the Skeptic that parapsychological studies in this area have been characterized by deception, fraud, incompetence in setting up controlled experiments and evaluating statistical data, but let's be kind and allow for the assumption that human beings can transmit Alpha waves over distance.

Alpha waves, like all forms of em energy, travel at the speed of light — 300,000 kilometres per second. My Canadian friend lives roughly 18,000 km from Western Australia so her Alpha Wave would take only 0.06 seconds to reach Shona. Not too shabby!

Unfortunately for Shona, the Earth is a sphere and em energy tends to travel in a straight line. As escape velocity on the surface of the Earth is 11 km per second, the Alpha wave would simply shoot off into space. Poor Shona.

For this positive energy to reach her at all it would have to steer itself around the curvature of the Earth, not something that energy is usually wont to do; exceptionally massive gravitational wells can pull energy off course but the Earth does not even come close to being massive enough to have any noticeable effect on the route of em radiation. What is worse (for Shona) my Canadian friend has never met her and knows little of her location other than the fact that, like me, she lives in WA, an area of some 2,529,875 sq km. Her Alpha wave would have to make a couple of phone calls when it arrived in order to find Shona. It is inherently absurd.

New Age healing, with its crystals and chanting, appeals to the emotional, and quite natural, fear that humans have of their own mortality. It relies on romanticised, facile concepts, easily understood, packaged and sold to people en masse. It is also very selective. No one is interested in practising the medieval art of drilling holes in heads to let out demons, allowing themselves instead to be steered towards the far more exotic practices of other cultures. Iridology, Ayurveda or homeopathic treatments have seen something of a renaissance in recent years.

Part of the appeal of New Age medicine is that scientific medicine remains an imperfect art. Diseases exist for which little or no treatment is available, and doctors must occasionally inform patients that their condition, fatal or otherwise, is beyond their means to cure.

Crystals undertake to bring their mysterious energies to bear upon a problem, promising so much and rarely taking the time to record what it has failed to deliver. Nor is it always benign; those unfortunate enough to be diagnosed with terminal cancer will find the Internet awash with miracle cures that for a 'small fee' will denude the desperate of their money in order to divulge the secret. The power of positive thought, the consumption of excessive amounts of listeria-ridden cheese or herbal ointments 'from the Yangtze valley', all are available from people who possess the conviction that their product works but who lack the altruism to share it for free.

The practice and use of such remedies is inherently cowardly — psychic healers, upon learning of a brain tumour, run to doctors as quickly as the rationalists do. Their healing powers suddenly become 'complementary' and though the crystals might still hang over the bed, it is the doctors who will do the surgery.

And if all this sounds a little flippant, a little too upbeat, it is because three days ago the brilliant surgeons of Sir Charles Gardiner hospital in WA operated on Shona, removing the tumour and saving her life. This morning she was well enough to be wheeled down to a café and sit and drink some coffee with me. Thirty or forty years ago, Shona's tumour; if they had found it at all, would have killed her within a year.

Science is like a pebble, rolling down a hill whose gradient increases into infinity. Unlike the proverbial rolling stone this one does gather moss, each fleck of which is added to the collective knowledge, increasing our understanding of the universe in some small but significant way. It was science that saved Shona's life, science that created the kettle that boiled the water for the coffee we drank and science that will allow me to transmit this article to Barry Williams for review and publication.

And although my Canadian friend had nothing but good intentions, and though I truly appreciated the sentiment, I can't help but be glad that the medical profession long ago realized her Alpha waves were of no use to anyone but herself. They sat down and worked out solutions to mortal ailments using rationalism instead of mysticism.

If they hadn't, my days of sharing a coffee with my dear, sweet friend would have been numbered. And I'd have had one less reason to smile when I woke up this morning.

Makes you think, no?
When I arrived in Australia in 1968, I used to ‘play the clubs’ of NSW with a Comedy and Magic act, which was once described as “Good and Original”, however the problem was that the parts that were good weren’t original … and the parts that were original weren’t good. Amongst other bits it featured a routine about “Signs” — things like Stainless Steel Sinks … doesn’t everyone know that? and Ears pierced while you wait ... tell me, what’s the alternative? … and my particular favourite which used to adorn the escalator on the lower platform at Wynyard Station Dogs Must be Carried on Moving Staircase … sometimes it can take up to 40 minutes to find a dog to carry! Well you get the idea.

I’m not sure if it was that, or joining the Skeptics that has fuelled this lifelong interest in things that are ‘Funny Ha Ha’ or ‘Funny Peculiar’ but it has certainly generated a healthy skeptical interest in the intended meaning of the written (and spoken) word and a strong belief that truth is stranger, and often much funnier, than fiction.

Last year I decided to take a trip back to the UK, via magicians’ conventions in the USA and Sweden, to visit with family and friends. In Nottingham I met up with two University drinking buddies, Margaret and Wendy, and met, for only the second time, Margaret’s husband Julian who, before winning the Queens Medal and retiring a few years ago, was head of the Nottingham Vice Squad. He took great pleasure in showing me an article from the Nottingham News which reported that:

**Despite complaints from local residents, an S&M (Sadism and Masochism) Club in Stapleford had escaped the law thanks to being issued with a license to operate as a physiotherapy centre’. ‘We’d like to close them down’ said a police spokesman ‘but our hands are tied’.

With that kind of positive action from the Police it’s no wonder that there has been a four-fold increase in Massage Parlours in the Nottingham area in the last few years.

Football hooliganism is still rampant in the UK and normally, therefore, it would be Liverpool Football Club who’d be apologizing to the residents of Skegness for trashing their town after Liverpool won (or lost) an FA cup match there. However, in a twist of fate, the local Skegness newspaper had to apologize to all Liverpool fans when, in their match report, they stated that the song, which has become the anthem for Liverpool, was in fact You’ll Never Walk Alone and not, as they had reported, You’ll Never Walk Again.

Skegness is a seaside resort (some say a last resort) on the Lincolnshire coast. It justifiably boasts Seven Miles of Golden Sand, but unfortunately is extremely windy for most of the summer. The spin doctors have used this to create the town motto, Skegness is Bracing.

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Steve Walker, master magician, comedian and Skeptic, was born in the Yorkshire village of Wedlock — well actually just outside it. His grandfather was psychic as he knew exactly when he was going to die — mind you, a judge told him.
In a desperate attempt to segue smoothly to the next item, the apology, plus the “bracing” wind reminds me of a trip to Wellington, New Zealand about a year ago, where I managed to visit on the only day of the year that the famous cable car was closed for its annual maintenance.

Beside the sign was another note which apologetically said, We regret that our Windspeed Indicator is not working as it was blown away in the recent gales.

Last words

“I have news 6 feet deep … That sounds like grave news” The Goon Show

Obituaries and epitaphs hold a certain fascination for me and I was recently made aware of the obituary of Frank Shackelton Fergus which appeared in the UK Daily Telegraph around the turn of the millennium.

Poor Frank died aged 89, but according to the researcher he will be best remembered for being … the first man [or woman] to X-ray a duck billed platypus.

Peter O’Toole was recently on the David Letterman Show and when asked what he would like on his headstone he told the following story.

Many years ago he had a leather jacket that became his favourite casual wear due to the fact that it was stained with all manner of things, including Guinness, red wine, vomit and other debris, too humorous to mention, every drip and dreg reminding him of only happy times. His wife, at the time, decided, unbeknownst to him, to have the jacket dry cleaned and when it returned it had a note from Ycamore Dry Cleaners attached which stated:

It distresses us to return work that is less than perfect.

It was right then and there that O’Toole decided that would be for him, a most fitting epitaph.

The most famous gravestone in recent years would have to be that of Terence “Spike” Milligan which simply says, I told you I was ill.

Milligan of course was the ultimate wordsmith genius when it came to finding alternative meanings. Take for example his description of his first theatrical agent, who promised he would make Spike a “star”, however he warned Spike that: On the ladder of success it is necessary to start on the bottom rung. Spike commented, Not only did I not believe him, but if his bottom rung I wouldn’t answer it.

Trouble at ‘t mill

Visiting my hometown of Dewsbury in Yorkshire I was appalled to see the state of the old, yet majestic, Pioneer Building, not only once a Picture Palace of splendour both inside and out, but also the holder of the town’s box office record for a weeks takings for the movie The Robe. This former temple of dreams and back row co-ed college for snogging and groping, had fallen into disrepair together with the adjacent Co-op shops. The majority of the shops being unused and with the remaining three joined together to sell cheap furniture with tatty signs strung everywhere saying Closing Down Sale, 80% off and suchlike.

Two of the many signs gained my attention, the first said, SALE … Last Week …. Once I’d got my brain around the fact that it was the last week of the sale rather than they were advertising a sale that took place last week, I noticed the following:

Commode Chairs £30 … Stools £10.

My wife, Ann, was joining me in the UK for the last month of the trip and since I was first to arrive I had to check on various possible excursions that were available to us. Prague, Ireland, Jersey and Paris were mentioned as possibilities. This was just after the terrorist alert and stringent restrictions had been quickly put in place for carry-on luggage, basically saying no liquids of any kind, and everything carried on board had to be in a transparent plastic bag. As the time progressed the restrictions were relaxed almost daily so I checked the various websites to update myself and was surprised to find at Southwest Air the following paragraph: Parachutes are allowed in checked or carry-on luggage but not allowed to be worn in flight. We decided against flying to Jersey.

The local WH Smiths had a large travel section so I bought a book on Prague which tells me among other places of interest that the Museum of Communism is located in Wenceslas Square … above McDonalds and next to the Casino!

This sounds somewhat similar to the Exhibition of Nazi Memorabilia that opened recently in Berlin. After the grand opening ceremony the official party went down the road and invaded a Polish Restaurant. [I’m sorry I made that up]

We did however go to Ireland, flying Luton to Waterford, with Aer Arann, and I’m happy to report that rumours the plane stopped at the Isle of Man to take on wood were unfounded. We had a wonderful time and at a party after the local agricultural show in Pilstown (between Waterford and Limerick), a Piltown resident [That’s a Piltown Man not Piltdown Man] tried to teach me the basics of Irish Dancing, which Dave Allen always reckoned was invented in a pub in Dublin when the toilet door got jammed shut. The man said it was really easy ‘cos the hands and arms did nothing but just hang there. All that was necessary, he assured me, was to … get your left leg right then you’ve only got your right leg left to get right.

My efforts to partake in this activity were as a result of reading The Irish Gazette which stated that: Most newcomers to Ireland respect Irish culture. They want to fit in and contribute to their new home by attending Irish language classes and playing traditional Irish music.

Special mention must therefore be given to Nigerian-born Irish Monopoly champion Ekedumayo Badmus, who represented Ireland in the Monopoly world championships in 2000, for going a little beyond the call of duty when he … changed his
surname to O’Badmus to sound more Irish.

Returning to England’s green and pleasant land [sounds better than flying back into Manchester] I noted in the newsagents that Prima magazine contained an article titled “463 Ways to make Christmas Simple”, The Sussex Express advised you could:

Win Free Tickets to see the First Life-size Knitted Garden

and that the Independent on Sunday reported A Welsh tortoise has been recaptured 1.8 miles from home after 8 months “on the run”!

I also managed to watch an episode of Q.I. [which stands for Quite Interesting], now in its fourth series, with Stephen Fry hosting and Allan Davies as the permanent panel member. The QI website states that the program:

... could loosely be described as a comedy panel quiz. However, none of the stellar line-up of comedians is expected to be able to answer any questions, and if anyone ends up with a positive score, they can be very happy with their performance. Points are awarded for being interesting or funny (and, very occasionally, right) but points are deducted for answers which merely repeat common misconceptions and urban myth.

I even emailed the people responsible for this show [the producer is John Lloyd famous for, among other great shows, Black Adder] which I’m sure would appeal greatly to Skeptics, and I urged them to sell it to Australia. I even received a reply asking me which channel I thought would be the most suitable.

Typical of the of questions asked was one in reference to the results of a survey that appeared in the British Medical Journal stating:

Most obese adults, who have chosen surgery and experienced complications, including death, have been satisfied with their choice.

Let me finish on a story about the UK postal service. This kind of story seems to occur every year in England so it could be generated by their PR department however if you have read Bill Bryson’s Notes from a Small Island [and by the way, you should] he had a high regard for the UK Post for being able to deliver letters to him that were merely addressed Bill Bryson, Author, Yorkshire, England.

Here’s the latest story.

A postman successfully delivered a letter marked only with a name, a map of South West England and the words ‘Somewhere Here’. A sketch on the envelope showed Cornwall, Devon and Somerset with an arrow pointing towards a dot.

The postal staff worked out that the intended town was Bude in North Cornwall and they recognized the name as Peter O’Leary. The letter was from a former colleague who was trying to get back in touch but unfortunately for Mr O’Leary the sender failed to include his own address!

By the way, I did get to Paris; I took a cab from my London Hotel and asked the driver for the London to Paris train terminal. He looked at me, smiled and said, ‘You’re a Star? ’ Well I said modestly, ‘I’ve been on TV in Australia but I’m no Rolf Harris’.

It was with a red face and much embarrassment that I paid him quickly when he dropped me at the “EUROSTAR” check in.

Thanks for your indulgence.

Sydney Dinner Meetings 2007

Sydney Skeptics and visitors can enjoy performances by Steve Walker and his prestidigitational pals at the NSW Skeptics Magic Night at the Chatswood Club, 11 Help St, Chatswood on Saturday, October 13.

Following the sell-out performance of our first Dinner with Dr Karl Kruszelnicki on February 24, patrons are advised to book early for the following events.

May 19
Prof Fred Watson, Astronomer-in-Charge, Anglo-Australian Telescope, Siding Spring, popular science broadcaster (and folk singer) will address the State of the Universe.

July 28
Dr Tim Entwisle, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, will ask Are plants immortal, and how do they feel about it?

Oct 13
Magic Night, with Steve Walker, Peter Rodgers and friends will amaze and amuse you with their magical skills.

Details of all dinners, on-line reservations plus functions conducted by all Skeptics branches can be found at:

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Welcome to the second part of the Healthmanship correspondence course. I would like to say a few words about our college, the Greater Southern Hemispherical Electronic Correspondence College of Life and Professional Skills for the Alternatives to Medicine Industry. It has a proud history of providing training for a huge range of institutions. We do not provide the spiel that Healthmen will use in their professional practice, but do we provide the skills needed to the practice a business success.

One feature common to all alt2med professions is the need to simulate a diagnosis when there is no training in sciences to underpin the action. The first and easiest step is to accept, unquestioningly, the self diagnosis provided by the client. Our competitors err by applying scientific methods when they see clients with a new problem. The ridiculous questioning of the clients beliefs about their bodies’ structure and functioning alienates the customers, who know what they feel is due to the interpretation they read in any self diagnosis magazine. This is why it is so important to build and keep a relationship with the media so we can continue to undermine client trust in scientific method to our mutual profitability.

Occasionally Healthmen will see a patient who does not express a self diagnosis due to social shyness, or they meet someone who does not (or can not) read the advertising and does not watch the advertorials. These ‘word of mouth’ referrals may just have symptoms. In these circumstances Healthmen need to interpret the symptoms in such a way that the assertion cannot be simply refuted by the clients. The best method is to apply ‘cold reading’ methodology. This allows the Healthman to appear to be a keen observer, or better still for the credulous, clairvoyant.

The chiropractor or osteopath, aided by years of extensive marketing, can begin by saying “I sense you are worried that you have something wrong with your spine”, notice that the content is focused immediately on the client and that there is the appearance of empathy. Obviously how this line is acted will significantly affect its acceptability to the client. I suggest that prospective Healthmen copy the look of the old TV doctors — Kildare is probably the best example of an acted earnest caring expression.

For those of you with a limited advertising budget, in preparing the ground you may need to act more medical, but the opening line must be delivered with the same earnest caring expression. If the client provides some interpretation from another professional, do not attack the other professional directly — that is to be left for later when a return visit is set up. This person has failed to achieve what they
wanted from the other professional, their symptoms may be persisting or whatever. However, there will be a key dissatisfaction which you will need to exploit but we will leave that for another day.

As the client delivers their explanation for being there nod with each point, wince when episodes of pain are described and maintain eye contact. If people mention something they find socially embarrassing they will look away, and when they do, you can drop your eyes, but until then continuing eye contact establishes a belief in your honesty, empathy, sympathy and being an all-round good chap who can be trusted. By establishing this early, you are setting the ground for many return visits. Even if your ‘treatment’ fails to alleviate their symptoms, you can continue to exploit them because they will know you are doing your best.

It is remarkable how effective this is; one of our former teachers, who marketed himself as a biochemist providing cancer treatment, was able to keep people on the hook even when they were dying in excruciating pain, but he was very successful in denigrating other professionals who might have taken these customers away. This very skilful man had an income which exceeded the top medical specialists of the country, but he applied a very important principle of healthmanship called roomsmanship. This is the matching of dress and office décor with the expected clientele.

If you are to practise as our biochemist friend did you must match your appearance and office with your empathy. If you are attracting people with poor science education many will be in the Congleton Social class 4 and 5 of our society. Your office should be a house, poorly maintained but clean — giving the appearance of you, or your spouse, having to maintain the place yourself. Medical records should have the appearance of being professional — manila folders with coloured tags are always a good option. When your are starting out, fill a large number of folders with dummy records and ensure they can be seen from the waiting room so that clients think you are more popular. If you use a book for appointments write dummy names in the book and block off large sections so that people can never get an appointment immediately, unless you or your staff make it very obvious to them that you are doing them a favour, and putting yourself to considerable inconvenience. The conversation should run like this…

Beep….beep
Hello, Dr X’s surgery, How can I help you?
I’ve just hurt my back; can I get in today or tomorrow.
I am sorry but doctor is booked out for next few days, have you seen doctor X before?
No, but he was recommended to my by one of my work colleagues.
Doctor X does not do workers compensation.
This is not compo, I did it at home.
I will just have a word with Doctor please hold on …
Switch to radio station with local connection
Doctor is teaching on-line for the Greater Southern Natural Therapies Correspondence School this afternoon, but he can fit you in at 5:30pm when the students have logged off.
That’s great.
The cost will be $80 per half hour and we accept all credit cards except American Express. Please bring at least $160.00 if you do not have a credit card in case Dr has to treat you for an hour.
Let us analyse this.
Always use the term Doctor. In Australia few medical practitioners are doctors, and many doctors are not medical practitioners. If you do not have a piece of paper attesting to you being a doctor in your profession please contact us and we will provide you with a certificate on graduation from this course stating that you are a doctor and that you have completed this course.
Never offer the first appointment available.

Of course the doctor does not do compensation cases, he does not get paid by the insurance industry for useless treatments but do not state this — imply that he chooses not to do workers compensation. This does not preclude payment from the Department of Veterans affairs who, it seems, will pay for any ‘therapy’ that makes the poor old diggers or their widow feel better irrespective of efficacy.

The person answering the phone of course will not leave the desk (unless there are witnesses in the waiting room), she (kid on work experience, or a subsidised trainee), will merely switch the phone to hold.

Of course our professional may not actually be teaching one of our courses, but they can claim to be (we will never deny that you are, or have been one of our many teachers or mentors) — this implies our professional has expertise in his chosen field, sufficient for a tertiary teaching organisation to have him on their books.

Make the appointment the last of the day, so if the potential client gets cold feet about the cost you do not displace a paying customer.

When the customer arrives, the receptionist should be trained to fuss over them — offer them cushions, special seating, allow to lie on the floor or whatever. If the appointment is 5:30pm have the patient ushered in at 5:45 and the conversation should proceed as follows; I am sorry I have kept you waiting, one of the students had a bit of a problem that I had to fix up for them.

(Turns to computer screen which is logged to our pseudointeractive web page www.gtsouthernhemi.org.au/professional/teaching/login) and types a few characters to exit. This page is provided as a service to all our graduates.)

Now I sense that you are in pain, what is the problem…

In the next session when we will deal with the methods of cold reading and complementing them with special investigations.
I have been a fan of James “The Amazing” Randi, ever since Don Lane’s dummy spit on the Don Lane Show a number of years ago. Don wasn’t a happy camper when Randi questioned the credibility of Doris Stokes, who was talking to dead relatives when John Edward was still in short pants. These days James Randi is better known for his debunking of Uri Geller and his ‘prove to me you have paranormal powers and I will pay you one million dollars’ challenge. He still has his money! He has set up the James Randi Education Foundation, ‘an educational resource on the paranormal, the pseudoscientific and the supernatural’. As one of its functions JREF runs the TAM conventions which are unashamedly designed to raise money to support the foundation’s work.

Taking a leaf out of the book of Skeptobear’s companions who had attended TAM 3, I made sure I took a photogenic, cuddly companion with me. Darwin K Bear has been around in his short existence — made in China and acquired by yours truly at a souvenir shop in the Brisbane Mall. The next indignity — being stuffed in a daypack for a plane trip across the Pacific — was somewhat lessened by his being able to share in the business class upgrade enjoyed by his fellow traveller.

On the night prior to the conference, a number of attendees took advantage of some slightly discounted tickets to attend the Penn and Teller show at the Rio. Penn and Teller are sceptical magicians (Penn is the tall one who does the talking, Teller is the short silent one who reminds me of Harpo Marx). The finale is a total show stopper. They fire guns at each other and catch the bullets in their teeth. Perhaps I should clarify — that is what appears to happen — they are quite up front in admitting that it is a trick!

First Day

The conference kicked off in the afternoon of Thursday with a couple of optional sessions. Since by profession I am a ‘liar to children’ (that is, a teacher) I signed up for Critical Thinking in the Classroom. Darwin was a bit disappointed. He wanted to go to Margaret Downey’s Grassroots Media Training session.

The first presenter was Diane Swanson, educator, and author of Nibbling on Einstein’s Brain. The points she made in her wrap up contain some great advice for anyone in the business of education.

- Even young children can think critically;
- Present things to them in a positive manner;
- Remember what Carl Sagan said and balance scepticism with wonder;
• Keep it relevant;
• And don’t forget the power of humour!

Bob Carroll, *the Skeptics Dictionary* compiler, was next. He argued that logic is a part of critical thinking and that nobody’s world view should be exempt from examination. It is job of the teacher to get students to think so that when they express opinions they know they need have reasons behind them.

The final presenter was Ray Hall and his topic was *Fooling students into not Fooling Themselves*. He, too, quoted Carl Sagan (who was close to being the most quoted dead person at the conference):

> how much superstition is accepted relates to how little science is understood.

He ran an exercise with the group which illustrated very simply the problem inherent in the human tendency to seek confirmatory evidence by demonstrating the value of falsification. This is a scientific principle which is counter intuitive and therefore has to be explicitly taught. Ray showed a film clip from *The Wizard of Oz* — the scene where Dorothy (Judy Garland), still in Kansas, meets Professor Marvell. It contains as brilliant a piece of hot and cold reading as you could ever wish to see! Ray argued that it is the role of the teacher to help students develop their own baloney detection kit.

The official reception to mark the start of TAM5 was held that night was at the ballroom at the top of the Riviera. It had a fabulous view over the Las Vegas strip, some reasonable finger food and a cash bar. Darwin was thrilled to get his photo taken with one of his heroes.

**Second Day**

On the Friday morning TAM 5 proper opened with an announcement by James Randi about an impending change to the $1,000,000 challenge coming into effect, with deliberate irony, on April 1, 2007. Instead of waiting for the challengers to come to the challenge, JREF is going pro-active. Challenges will be issued to merchants of woo with a media profile. Each respondent will be given six months to answer the challenge and a media profile will be actively sought. Also being investigated is the possibility of instituting class actions — civil and criminal — against some of these people.

Michael Shermer, President of the Skeptics Society began his presentation with a reference to something outlined by Richard Dawkins (probably the most quoted live person not present at the conference) in *The Root of All Evil* (this documentary might be shown on Australian TV this year) — the process of non-thinking, called faith — before he went on to talk about the subject of his new book, still a work in progress, on evolutionary economics. Shermer is drawing from different disciplines — history, economics, evolutionary biology, sociology. He comes to the conclusion, like Dawkins, that with things economic (like money) that it is not wise to make assumptions based on faith alone. His recommendation is trust with verification — a good slogan for any skeptic.

Eugenie Scott NCSE (National Council for Science Education) spoke about the types of news stories that always get a run in the media: it’s going to kill you! (disease or calamity); it’s going to cure you!; the mad scientist; religion; abortion!

There is a common misconception which is reflected in the media — unsolved is not the same as unsolvable. Scientists reject the ‘theory’ of Intelligent Design because it is bad science. The Creation Science lobby is excellent at anecdote mongering. It fails to recognise that anecdote is not evidence and should never be more than the starting point of a real investigation. Unfortunately the media treats both the CS and ID lobbies much more kindly than it should, sometimes through sheer ignorance.

However another driver is the need to tell a story and to be ‘balanced’. This can be problematic when the story is opinion dressed up as fact. The need for conflict can skew the balance. Settled issues aren’t newsworthy — there is no conflict, so there is a need to manufacture it. Evolution is treated as an opinion issue and it isn’t. Refutation must happen. Evolution is sound science, evidence and religion are compatible and it is not ‘fair’ to miseducate out students. Eugenie finished her presentation on the point was that we need to remain positive.

Darwin was disappointed that he didn’t get his photo taken with Eugenie, who had to leave the conference to go to another event,
but his disappointment was mitigated somewhat when he met Michael Shermer. Michael also had a little bear called Darwin attached to his backpack and was very pleased to meet my companion.

Nick Gershenfeld from the MIT centre for Bits and Atoms used an analogy from history to mount a compelling argument that, like Martin Luther, science needs to make it own reformation to make it accessible to ordinary people. As an expression of this principle in action MIT has set up the FAB LAB program, a technology outreach program designed to help people around the world. Digital fabrication is being used to produce some amazing things.

Jamy Ian Swiss, a fellow magician and mentalist, hosted a session with James Randi entitled Randi in the Media. Randi had been approached by the producers of a popular TV show in Korea. They asked him to be a consultant and advise them on what to look out for in their investigations of people who claim they had psychic powers. Randi heaped praise on one man in particular (I think his name was Lan) who was able to use what Randi told him to capture some amazing footage exposing these people as frauds. Unfortunately, on the technology side, the poor presentation of the visual material meant that much of this session was quite frustrating for all who were there.

Former Congresswoman Lori Lipman Brown is currently a lobbyist for the Secular Coalition for America. She spoke about her experiences with the media, and the media response generally to a non-theistic lobby group. In America, you need to be a pretty courageous individual to push this kind of bandwagon, but as Lori said to me later, her experiences in the world of politics gave her lots of practice in developing the tools needed to deal with all kinds of media types, including those pushing the agendas of the religious right. It was obvious from one clip she showed where she was interviewed by a TV shock jock whose name I can’t remember that she has done this successfully.

Penn and Teller did a Q and A session which disappointed some attendees. This also happened the next day with Adam Savage and the seriously cute Tory Belleci from The Mythbusters and South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. I enjoyed all these sessions, and felt that the contrast they provided with the more content driven sessions was a good thing but I didn’t end up finding much to write down at any of them.

Richard Wiseman (whom I, along with many other people, mistook for Bad Astronomer Phil Plait at least until he spoke — the British accent is a bit of a giveaway), had the presentation from hell. The perversity of the inanimate was at its most active. He was unable to present most of the clips he had on his laptop, and we ended up only seeing a couple of things, including one piece which I had seen at the Skeptics World Convention in Sydney in 2000. This was his investigation into the so-called psychic dog. The claim was that the dog knew when its owner was arriving home, and Wiseman’s video evidence proved that there was nothing to support this claim. I was left wanting to know what all the other things on the laptop we didn’t get to see were about!

The night time entertainment on both Thursday and Friday nights — Banacheck on the Thursday after the reception, and the Friday night sessions with Hal Bidlack as Alexander Hamilton followed by the team of comedian Julia Sweeney (Letting Go of God) and singer-songwriter Jill Sobule were worth the money I paid for them. Darwin was really keen to bat on at the skepticchick’s pyjama party, and wasn’t very happy with me when I decided a reasonably early night was in order and took him back to my room. He complained that the heater in my room made so much noise that he wasn’t getting any sleep anyway so he might as well party on with the girls and that I was a spoilsport. I ignored his whinges. I hadn’t come all that way and spent that much money to be brain dead from a lack of sleep and an overabundance of alcohol for Day 3 of TAM.

Continued next issue
In the last issue (26:4) we published an article, ‘The Mind and Mental Illness; A Tale of two myths’, by Professor Robert Spillane of the Macquarie University Graduate School of Management. This item has drawn an unprecedented amount of comment from our readers, much of which we have published here.

Medical reality

David Brookman
Salamander Bay NSW

The argument that there is no mental illness by Prof Spillane suffers from the common errors of those who believe that disease classification is a manifestation of reality; he reifies, just as those who believe that IQ testing represents reality and justifies destructive action against those who do not measure up. His first argument, that the English interpretation or the Roman interpretation or the Greek original did not entail a concept of mind hence all derivations such as ‘psychosomatic’ are fallacious, is quaintly misleading — perhaps a current reference to an agreed meaning of the word would be of more value (it does not actually appear in the DSM-IV handbook) and belongs to the judgemental era of Freudian psychotherapy.

Classification of diseases varies over time with increasing application of knowledge. That people with a limited range of scientific knowledge applied a certain word to the constellation of symptoms, signs and behaviours does not mean that word is currently applied in the same way. Nor does the meaning of the word reflect what is happening in any particular individual but can only be an interpretation of the signs and symptoms and behaviours by an individual who is trained (with inevitably varying skill) in the interpretation of those behaviours. (Note that where there are no medically trained people to make a diagnosis there is a statistical artefact of disease absence.) Disease classification systems such as the DSM-IV and ICD-10CM attempt to achieve standardisation, but because of varying fashions, beliefs and skills this is an impossible goal. The reason for such standardisation is so we can actually prove therapies work with some degree of scientific accuracy — if we are not treating the same constellation of signs, symptoms, behaviours and pathology, then this accuracy becomes impossible.

There is one thing we have to repeatedly drum in to medical students; ‘when in doubt look at the patient’ and do not rely upon self diagnosis, test results, philosophical beliefs and other such information that may be spurious and misleading. The first test we apply is consistency of symptoms with established anatomy, physiology and normality. For behavioural problems the only normality we have is what we see in the surrounding population — hence mental illness will always be culturally biased, as the only yardstick is the clinicians’ interpretation of the local population behaviours as normal. Thus Richard Dawkins argues belief in something, for which there is no evidence, is a delusion, but theism is not regarded as a mental illness because it is a belief held by a large proportion of the population.

I urge Prof Spillane to ignore the spurious arguments of philosophy and misleading interpretation of words and look at the reality of people who suffer delusions, hallucinations, suicidal ideation, mania, drug dependency, and ask how are these people suffering and distressed. They have been diagnosed with a mental illness; that we can now demonstrate organic lesions in their brain with sophisticated technology, does not mean their disease is not a mental illness because this classification is part of a system that allows application of statistically evaluated treatments and investigations — not because someone developed a concept of ‘mind’.

Were Prof Spillane able to observe someone with psychotic depression, or flexibilitas cerea, or mania I am sure he would withdraw the assertion that mental illness is not associated with objective signs. People may or may not be able to ‘catch’ mental illness — we do not as yet have sufficient evidence to refute or accept such a hypothesis.

It is also clear that Prof Spillane is not up to date with the most recent research on the schizophrenias, and I would urge him and his readers to examine this before making bold assertions about this group of mental disorders. But then what can you expect from someone who makes the statement that ‘The causes of mental illness are unclear’ and later that bereavement, relationship breakdown, child abuse are associated.

For those who doubt the inheritability of mental disorders, I recommend a browse through...
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/PubMed/OMIM, which will provide the best summary of current evidence in this area. The use of statistical association for inheritability of any disorder is ultimately dependent on comparison of monozygotic, and dizygotic twin populations. The ultimate is the demonstration of the DNA defect and its biochemical consequences. Damning inheritability by using the correlation inversely is a common trick used by those with a vested interest — the best current example is gliomas and use of mobile phones.

The one valid argument raised is the overuse of stimulants in children, with irritating behaviour classified as ADHD, ODD and ADD. The work of Prof Chris del Mar in Queensland clearly demonstrated the lack of scientific objectivity in applying these diagnoses and implementing treatment. It is very clear that many people are profiting considerably financially from this fashion, parents are able to absolve themselves from blame. But there is a group which can be demonstrated objectively to benefit from stimulants — to deny the existence of the disorder because of the remaining 70% is a reflection of gross ignorance (the method best used with poorly defined classification systems is an ‘N of 1 trial’, where active and inactive medication is randomly and blindly switched and the diagnostic criteria applied).

Prof Spillane’s conclusion that the myth of mind spawned the myth of mental illness is based on ignorance, and the old philosophical tricks of shifting word meaning, and generalising an absolutist assertion from a limited specific. It is very similar to arguments applied by the Scientologist against mental illness.

The long lead time from childhood trauma to adult pathological behaviours has made linking these difficult. There is some early work that has shown adults with borderline personality disorders have a high proportion of childhood sexual abuse, and that a structural defect is demonstrable with PET scanning. It will take at least 20 years to prove or disprove the associations as causation. The association of sociopathic behaviour with the absence of bonding in childhood due to illness with separation from family social education figures (parents, grandparents etc) was described 30 years ago and has led to a change in policy where children are not separated from parents when admitted to hospital. Has this been beneficial? We do not know, as the criteria for classifying someone as sociopathic has changed and we cannot definitely say there is a reduction in sociopathic personality disorder as consequence of policy change (look at the work of John Bowlby et al.).

Mental illnesses are a group of disorders for which we are only recently shedding our anti-science belief systems in complex theories based on ‘expert’ opinion (Freud, Jung, etc). Their manifestations are culturally varied, the tolerance of the aberrant behaviour by the society also varies. They are not a theoretical concept derived from a theory of mind, but a group of disorders defined by observing people who seek help because they are distressed, or because their behaviour is a personal or public risk. I have refrained from criticising the philosophical arguments because they are irrelevant — but that Descartes is one of the geniuses, or western culture did not provide a logical refutation of theism in his writings, could have been due to the significant personal risk (religious and legal persecution) he would have suffered. The treatment of Copernicus and Voltaire are but two examples which come to mind as examples of thinkers who did have the courage to be persecuted. I note also that David Hume declined to publicise his atheism in his lifetime.

The final nauseating leap is from a concept of mind through mental illness to public manifestation of morality in which the author decrees the excuse of ‘immoral’ behaviours in the courts through argument of mental illness as a cause. This also has nothing to do with mental illness, that there is an explanation for antisocial behaviour should be irrelevant to sentencing decisions. That Martin Bryant suffered from Asperger’s syndrome did not absolve the court from protection of the greater society from repetition by him, or emulation. The court role is not the exercise of revenge, despite the assertion of ignorant radio propagandists, but providing remedies. The court role is not to exercise religious belief in good or evil — indeed, if they did, many cults would be suppressed for the evil they inflict through child abuse.

Strange bedfellows

Peter Bowditch
Northmead NSW

At first sight and to someone who is unfamiliar with those who oppose psychiatry in all its forms, Robert Spillane seems to be using a classical syllogism to make a point that might be surprising:
Mental illness requires a mind;
There is no such thing as a mind;
Therefore there can be no such thing as mental illness.

He took a similar approach in his speech at the Sydney Skeptics dinner as he did in his article in the Skeptic, but the written article spent much more time on the arguments against the existence of the mind, therefore apparently making a much stronger case for the non-existence of mental illness. The problem for me, however, is that I do know some of the background and I am aware of the opposition to psychiatry coming from one source in particular. That source is Scientology. What Professor Spillane was offering as an argument was not a syllogism where the truth of the premises led inevitably to the truth of the conclusion. What he was offering was an argument of the form:
Mental illness requires a mind;
Mental illness doesn’t exist; therefore there is no mind.

This is a logical fallacy called Modus Tollens, specifically a subset of fallacies which come under the heading ‘Denying the Antecedent’. If you start with an axiom that there is no such thing as mental illness, then the non-existence of the mind becomes a convenient piece of evidence supporting your position. In another context this form of fallacy can be seen in arguments by creationists: They say ‘Evolution implies continuous and gradual change from one species to another, therefore evolution is wrong’ when what they really mean is ‘Evolution is wrong, therefore’.

I am going to limit my comments to what was said at the dinner, because that was essentially a condensation of the article in the Skeptic.

For the dinner, the speaker was advertised as coming to talk about philosophy and the mind. I spent some enjoyable times studying this sort of stuff at university, so I looked forward to an entertaining evening.

The presentation started out with a mention of how Rene Descartes had proposed the still-unsolved duality problem by simply declaring that there is no such thing as a mind. Again, an interesting, although apparently naive, philosophical position. (He went into this in much more detail in the written article. I will leave it up to the professional philosophers to assess the level of naivety in the expanded form.) The next statement led into the level of naivety in the expanded article. I will leave it up to the creationists: They say ‘Evolution implies continuous and gradual change from one species to another, therefore evolution is wrong’ when what they really mean is ‘Evolution is wrong, therefore’. 

I have also have some vicarious knowledge of the mental health system, so the red flags started popping up for me shortly afterwards.

Some of these warning signs were stories such as the one about the millions of children being prescribed Ritalin, but the turning point for me was when Professor Spillane mentioned that anti-psychiatrist Thomas Szasz was one of his dearest friends. Szasz worked with the Scientologists to create the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a blatant anti-psychiatry Scientology front organisation. He then went on with more CCHR nonsense such as the claim that ADHD was invented in 1987 simply to create a need for Ritalin. (Methylphenidate was patented in 1954, so inquiring minds want to know why it was invented 33 years before what it was supposed to treat. That is assuming that “inquiring minds” exist, of course). We were eventually told that schizophrenia is just people hearing themselves think like everybody else does and that anorexia nervosa is just girls having conscious hunger strikes to get their own way and annoy their parents. By the end of the night we were hearing scary stories about government plans to drug all schoolchildren. At no stage was CCHR or Scientology mentioned.

Part of the teachings of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard is that psychiatry is bad. His original feelings on this might have been influenced by the fact that he was mad and he felt threatened by a medical speciality which existed to treat that madness. Put another way, he felt that if there were no psychiatry there would be no madness for it to treat and this would make him sane by definition. (This is not meant to make sense. Remember that Hubbard was insane.) The real reason that Scientology opposes psychiatry, however, is that Scientology’s target market is people who are depressed, unhappy, susceptible to suggestion, and don’t feel that they fit in to society. Anybody offering to treat these conditions with some behavioural therapy and a course of Prozac is an obvious threat to a cult which wants to brainwash people into paying several hundred thousand dollars to cross a mythical bridge to personal awareness.

CCHR would not be such a problem if the Scientology links were made obvious, because this might make other people think twice about dealing with them. Certainly, Scientology is mentioned in their literature (I have a book called “Documenting Psychiatry: Harming in the name of healthcare” which mentions that the cult paid for the printing of the book, as if that were the only involvement) but the true horror is well hidden. On the other hand, it might not worry some people who deal with them. Alternative medicine supporters gleefully accept the CCHR’s attacks on drugs such as Ritalin and Prozac because this supports their shared ideology that there is no such thing as mental illness. (In one bizarre confluence of insanity, The National Vaccine Information Center, one of the most virulent anti-vaccination organisations in the world, issued a newsletter promoting a CCHR seminar.)

I know people who have suffered from depression and other mental illnesses. There are some people I don’t know any more because they committed suicide. I have friends whose son was crippled when his schizophrenia led him to leap from a window. I have seen the skeleton-like frames of young girls with feeding tubes up their noses and twenty-four-hour supervision in a locked hospital ward who, according to the anti-psychiatrists, are just killing themselves to make a point to their parents. I have watched as someone had charcoal forced into their stomach to soak up poison, and I know several families who have had to keep all knives and razor blades locked away to prevent their children cutting themselves. That anyone would deny that these are problems and campaign against effective treatments for these illnesses is almost beyond belief.
Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view), the dinner was not the sort of place where I could hurl furniture and insults, and the question (and answer) at the end which opened the crack to allow me to introduce an exposure of the Scientology connection was declared the last question before everyone went home. I am sure that most of the audience would not have been aware of the background to what they had been told, and I am equally sure that nobody openly declaring that they wanted to promote Scientology or its principles would have ever been invited to speak there. A real psychiatrist in the audience later told me that she could not remember the last time she heard so many specious claims in such a short time.

So here are the questions I would have liked to ask:

If, as you claim, mental illness cannot be the result of incorrectly operating chemistry in the brain or misaligned neuronal connections, how is it more probable that mental illness is caused by memories of noises heard in the womb and by a collection of soul-like adhesions derived from the time when Xenu blew up all those billions of entities with hydrogen bombs 75 million years ago?

If you don’t think this fairy tale is likely how can you reconcile promoting the teachings of Scientology, unless you agree with Thomas Szasz that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”?

**Overstating the case**

Michael Evans
Beechworth Vic

I enjoyed Professor Robert Spillane’s provocative article, “The Mind and Mental Illness: A Tale of Two Myths” in the Skeptic.

Earlier this year, I was walking along the sidewalk by New York’s Central Park when I came upon an agitated man who was shouting at passers by “I am a real person. You are not real. You are a robot.” Professor Spillane’s article had much the same impact on me as did that man. As both the Buddha and David Hume found, when we attend closely to our consciousness, we find nothing but fleeting mental states.

We don’t have stable constantly aware selves. But I think the Professor and the man on the sidewalk both overstate their case and engage in paradoxical behaviour. After all, why shout at robots and why write for mindless entities?

Professor Spillane seems to want the “logically minded folk” he addresses to pay attention — with something to something. He wants...
us to do some “minding” or some “heeding” to the nature of “the Ghost in the Machine” — to use Gilbert Ryle’s terms from his The Concept of Mind (1949), terms also used by Professor Spillane. Initially, Professor Spillane’s purpose was unclear to me. Was he taking a hyper skeptical position on the mind — show me a mind then I will believe they exist? Did he really believe mental illness could be dispensed with as some kind of category mistake — that it just referred to bad or unacceptable behaviour? He accepted that “demented folk” and children could not respond to life as independent moral entities but did not extend this notion to the mad.

A quick Google search revealed that Professor Spillane was the recipient of the 2006 Thomas S Szasz Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Cause of Civil Liberties. His use of Szasz in the article and his closing comments about the medicalisation of moral behaviour and the undermining of notions of personal responsibility became clearer to me. Perhaps the award should have been mentioned to inform his readers he was listed to speak at a conference on the mind last year. He may have intended this article as a provocation to that audience, not as a statement of dogma.

I then saw the article as an argument for individual liberty and responsibility, both causes to which Thomas Szasz has been dedicated. Professor Spillane was arguing that we do not have stable ongoing minds but we are responsible for our actions and intentions — an argument that has an odd resemblance to Buddhist teachings.

Szasz has done great service in challenging official psychiatry about its abuses and faults. It has a shady past and a questionable future. But to say that is not to deny the reality of mental illness. Those of us who have encountered a person in the midst of a psychotic episode have seen mental illness first hand, however you define it.

To say mental illness is nothing but a metaphor is a bit like the intelligent design people saying evolution is nothing but a theory. After all, may not our reality be nothing but a mathematical metaphor, do we not speak almost entirely in dead and living metaphors, and is not money a powerful metaphor that determines how we feed, house, and clothe ourselves?

Szasz has at times taken his line to extremes. According to Wikipedia, he remains associated with the Church of Scientology’s Citizen’s Commission on Human Rights, a body he helped found with the Scientologists in 1969 to oppose established psychiatry.

The mind, mental illness and the border between the mad and the bad are all fuzzy and contested concepts. I think as skeptics that we should avoid using logic chopping argument to create false certainty where the empirical picture is not clear. As Professor Spillane says in his article, “Valid logical arguments do not entail empirical truth.” Skeptics respect facts and reason but there are times when we have to respect mystery as well.

I may be taking Professor Spillane out of context. Google tells me he was listed to speak at a conference on the mind last year. He may have intended this article as a provocation to that audience, not as a statement of dogma.

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**Lack of definition**

**Keith Birney**  
Nganawal ACT

Reading the Skeptic on Christmas Day, I thought I had got a special Christmas present when I started to read Robert Spillane’s piece on Mind and Mental Illness. Unfortunately, it gradually deteriorated into a confusion of “mental illness”, “moral agents”, the medicalisation of misbehaviours and an apparent lament on “the undermining of the notions of personal responsibility”. The problem with “Mind” is that, like many things passed on over time, everyone knows what it is and no one is prepared to attempt to define it. Whatever “Mind”, “Psukhe” or “Soul” may have meant to various individuals in the distant past is largely irrelevant — or, at least, I would have thought so.

More relevant, for very many people who are sufferers and many more who are affected indirectly, are attempts to understand the human neural system and its phenomena. Prof Spillane would, I feel, have done a useful service by providing some definitions, however tentative, as a starting point rather than further confusing the already confused. I happen to agree that the mind of common usage is an outdated, and hence useless, concept, philosophically as well as physiologically and medically, so there are two alternatives: the first is to define the concept much more precisely, which leaves us with the problem of re-educating the world, and the second is to junk the whole thing, which would mean inventing another word to describe certain phenomena.

Whichever route we take, we have to find a shorthand for “the sum of the products of a neural system at a given time”; being lazy and not good at inventing new words, I choose the first alternative and use this as a tentative definition of “Mind”. Thus “Mind” becomes the “neural process” and “mental illness” can be regarded as “malfunction in that process”. Unfortunately, at this point in time we know practically nothing of the neural processes of the human, nor any other, animal because they are very complex. We do know something about the neuro-electrical functions, a little about some of the chemical signalling mechanisms and not much about the rest, including the all important interactions and feedback loops. As an example, we do not know if the cerebral-spinal fluid is a homogeneous mixture and if it is not — which seems likely — what this chemical mix is and if or how it changes. The reason that we know so little is that invasive experiments on living humans are generally frowned on and no one, as
far as I am aware at this time, has managed to work out another methodology.

We do not even have a clue as to what a “normal” process is for any given individual, let alone populations. Given all this, and lots more, I would not have thought it surprising that the attempts at clinical diagnosis and treatment of “mental illness” (see definition above) are at what may be described — except by some of their practitioners — at a primitive stage. This means that it is almost solely involved with symptoms, or perceived symptoms.

This, in turn, may lead, for good reasons as well as venal, to, among other things, the “medicalisation of misbehaviours” of which Prof Spillane complains; this may be its own problem but this does not preclude the possibility of certain behaviours being the result of “the malfunction of the neurological processes” of an individual. The fact that diagnosis may be primitive, that treatment may be less than ideally informed and that certain unethical individuals may see a way of extracting cash out of the vulnerable — not limited to those involved in “mental health” — do not, of themselves, mean that there is nothing going on and that, as Prof Spillane appears to imply, mental illness (see definition above) does not exist.

Thus, the problem ceases to be one of the definition of mind but one of present lack of knowledge and therefore of adequate clinical diagnostic and treatment tools. I realise that I have cheated here by redefining “mind”, which seems to have been set up as a “straw man”, but this was always an option for Prof Spillane. By refusing that option he ends up in a quagmire of assertions, voltages or whatever.

Better (or not)

Geoff Sherrington
Donvale VIC

As Robert Owen noted in 1828, “All the world is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer”. There are legally binding documents which use the expression “Act of God”. There are people who do not believe there is a God, or that God acts in the way the documents indicate. A lightning strike setting a home on fire is not an act of God. It is a combination of known physical laws. There are computers that people feel have a mind, because they can self-learn and improve themselves. There are people who do not believe that computers have minds. A computer running amok does not have a mental illness. It has a failure in electrical connections, voltages or whatever.

There are people who use the expression “mental illness”. There are people who believe that there is no entity identifiable as the mind. A person who carries on in irregular manner does not have a problem with a mind. That person has a problem with partly-understood factors such as an excess/deficiency of a brain chemical, or modification of an electrical or biological pathway or maybe is just an opportunistic git.

People have long been unable to define “better”. Is 34 degrees better than 35 degrees? Is a Brunette better than a blonde? Is tall better than short? Is a person with Down’s syndrome happier and better than a person without? There are many examples where person A cannot state that he/she is better than person B, because the person is unable to achieve both states for comparison. One cannot flip in and out of Down’s syndrome or from tall to short at will.

Is a person said to have mental illness better than one without that diagnosis? We cannot know whether a said mental illness is a better or worse state and therefore whether treatment would be a benefit or an impediment — as felt by the recipient.

Poor Jack, farewell! I could have better spared a better man. (Henry IV, part 1). If you sum the population sectors who are drinkers, smokers, bipolar, attention deficit, autistic, acupuncturist, homeopath, homosexual, religious believers, oddly behaved, perverted, violent, obsessive/compulsive and so on, you could well have an earthly majority. The minority remainder might well regard the above as mentally ill. What a strange outcome.

Why do we struggle with the nomenclature and etymology of this outcome?

Answer One: Because we who assume superiority are driven to make others conform to our ideals.

Answer Two: Because it’s a great sport. Some of my most enjoyable moments have been spent teasing psychiatrists. So, let’s keep the fun part of mind games, which requires acceptance of a mind, however ill-defined and weird.

When I was 17 I applied to join the RAAF Academy. The strange psychiatrist who consumed a half day of the week of tests wanted to sort us by sexual tendencies because this was a boy’s own job. He took us one by one into a room, where he shouted part sentences at us. We had to finish them without creative thinking time allowed. The part sentence came out “He dreams about????” Of course, the answer was “Once a year”
Letters

Waiting for the evidence

Robert A. Backhouse
Brisbane QLD

Mass medication is the supply by Government Agency of a nostrum or procedure that is expected to improve the health of the public. The service provided can be optional as in immunization or be compulsory as in the chlorination of urban water supplies. In keeping with an anti-science philosophy, many citizens have strong objections to being forced to accept any universal medication, they reject immunisation schemes and avoid public water supply by collecting rain water for drinking.

Statistical studies of medical intervention on large samples of humans typically show a large mid group that experience an improvement, but at one tail of the normal curve are cases that show no change, and at the other tail are individuals who suffer serious adverse reactions. It is this latter group that is used as a reason by the anti mass medication lobby for why they exclude themselves from the procedure or, if exclusion is difficult, arguing that society should not embrace the procedure. That the risk is low is ignored; just the fact there is some risk is sufficient for complete rejection. Their position is supported with other arguments that lack proof, or else they resort to a philosophical position about an individual's right in a democracy to reject medical treatment.

Medical therapies are often tested on rats before humans are exposed to them. If most of the test rats die, it's unlikely that that therapy would go on to a human test. Presuming the rat test shows little danger, then a test on humans proceeds but often after a prolonged time, deleterious affects may show up that did not occur with rats. If the adverse events are limited to relatively small numbers of the population, these dangerous consequences for the minority will be discounted in favour of the benefits for the majority. This type of risk benefit is judged by medical specialists and bureaucrats, who are considered expert in the area and have the public good in mind, when granting approval. Acceptance of this procedure depends on public trust in those health authorities that make the decision, which is presumed to be free of commercial bias. Most of the public cannot make an informed choice as the evidence is too technical and mathematical.

The failure of local area referendums to support fluoridation shows that a significant number of the populace can be convinced not to trust the authorities. Now in some places in Australia fluoridation has been operating over a prolonged period so there will be irrefutable evidence one way or the other of its efficiency and hazards, in the same way our society is conducting the experiment on the potential dangers of mobile phone use — in fifty years, we will know if it is hazardous or not.

Sad to say many people first decide their position on an issue, then cast around for arguments in support of that position, never realising that their thinking process is flawed. I believe the correct skeptical process is to collect the evidence, establish reliable experts in the field and then wait patiently for time to properly resolve the issue. The debate on climate change is a perfect example of the process we should be following.

Evidence

John Gibbs
Gold Coast QLD

As a schoolboy in England in the 1960s, I was taught in Geography that the last Ice Age ended about 12,000 years ago and that the world has been getting warmer, in its usual zig-zag pattern, ever since. Indeed I went on a field trip to the Lake District to study the effects of the retreating glaciers on the surrounding topography as the huge polar ice caps that covered so much of the world then, melted.

I have therefore viewed with total bafflement the claims that man is responsible for global warming, via the greenhouse effect. I have searched in vain for any actual evidence of this phenomenon, but this has not prevented the growth of belief in it, which is taking on all the features of a cult.

We now have the unedifying spectacle of our federal government caving into pressure from a gullible (and, dare one say, politically motivated?) media throng on the matter. I have awaited eagerly the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to see if this elusive evidence has been unearthed. Puzzlingly, the Commit-
There is no evidence provided by the IPCC in its fourth assessment report that the uncertainty (surrounding climate change) can be formally resolved from first principles, statistical hypothesis, testing or modelling exercises. Consequently there will remain an unavoidable element of uncertainty as to the extent that humans are contributing to future climate change, and indeed whether such change is a good or bad thing.

Amazingly — although a cynic would say predictably — the media has ignored this conclusion and reported the Committee’s summarised findings as further confirmation of the greenhouse hypothesis. Now, as skeptics we must keep an open mind on these matters — I have always said that my attitude to religion will change immediately, the day that someone hops into Lourdes on one leg and walks out on two — but in the meantime, to quote the independent summary again — There Is No Evidence...!

On the level

Mark Lawson
Hornsby Heights NSW

Okay, so it’s back to school for me. In the discussion of sea level increases in my article on the difficulties of foretelling the future (26:4), I managed to confuse centimetres with millimetres. On present trends of perhaps 1 mm increase per year in sea levels we can look for an increase of 0.1 metres in a century, or perhaps 0.15 metres if we allow for some sort of acceleration. Not 1-1.5 metres as I have it in the article. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change originally forecast sea level increases of up to 1 metre over a century (actually 0.1 to 1 metre) but seems to have reduced this in the latest report. However, even with those reduced forecasts the IPCC seems to be expecting a sharp acceleration in current trends.

The National Tidal Centre, a part of the Bureau of Meteorology, has been measuring sea level changes around Australia over the past 10 years or so and estimate that local increases range from 8 mm a year around the Northern Territory, down to 2 mm a year around Sydney, but as the latest NTC report points out 10 years is too short a time to come to any reliable conclusion, particularly about any acceleration in sea level increases. (Albeit it is expected that the more data gathered, the more average increases will fall.)

The results for the last year to June were much smaller but a year by itself does not mean much. After looking at the available evidence I would start buying beach-front property — that is, if I had any money and was not too busy attending primary school.

Teaching English

Leonard Colquhoun
Invermay TAS

Kylie Sturgess — would that there were more teachers, especially teachers of English — like her [Critical Thinking in the Classroom, Summer 2006, pp 12-13]. Plenty of teachers of English claim to be teaching ‘critical thinking’ or, as the jargon puts it, ‘critical literacy’, but what they are really doing is propagandising for a particular sociopolitical -ism, generally termed post-modernism, which is as anti-scientific and anti-empirical thinking as the most rabid creationism.

Interesting, though, that there seem to have been no media reports of the results of post-modernist testing of the cultural relativity of G=32ft/sec² by jumping out of a tenth-storey window. Professional associations such as the AATE and the VATE¹ push this line quite relentlessly, uncritically reducing the teaching of literature to “Spot the PC no-no de jour” in, say, Macbeth, Moby Dick, Morte D’Arthur and Murder in the Cathedral.

This is not to deny that there is no value in, say, Marxist or feminist interpretations of works in the canon. It is:

(i) to assert that they are only interpretations and have to be justified on a range of criteria;

(ii) to ask why texts ought not be subjected to, say, Christian, Islamic, social Darwinian or Nazi interpretations, and

(iii) to acknowledge that teaching the actual literary texts is the core business of teachers of English (if it is not, how are po-mo-pushing classrooms any different from old style RC schools, Islamist madrassas, Nazi Strength-Through-Joy camps, or Komsomol gatherings in the old CCCP?)

Sturgess-standard critical thinking needs to be applied to the notion that effective teacher preparation can be achieved without efficient and practical training in the craft and skills of teaching, as much media reporting claims is the case in far too many faculties of education. More specifically, a critical investigation of the assertion that reading can be taught and learned without the link between the alphabetic code and the sounds we hear and make being presented, and how “We teach children to think, not ram facts down their throats” is an example of False Dichotomy, or is it False Dilemma? (see Jef and Theo Clark’s The False Bits from Humbug [Summer 2004, pp 22-27]).

As a teacher of English up to HSC² level in three state systems, I found that time-allotted rarely conformed to time-sufficient for full treatment of these aspects of literary texts — plots, characters, background, setting and context, language and themes.

Stuffing in a mish-mash of PoMo for Dummies wasn’t a high priority; getting my students to know, understand, appreciate and, above all, enjoy their novels, dramas and poetry was. In that I seemed to have a different set of priorities to AATE and VATE, as I reckoned my stu-
dents would work out their politics for themselves in their own good time, without my force-feeding them like French geese getting fat for foie gras.

1. AATE and VATE: Australian/Victorian Association for the Teaching of English.

2. Or whatever the various state EdCentrals are calling their Year 12 qualifications at the time of printing.

**Letters**

**The God Delusion**

*David Goss*  
Torrens ACT

Like Rob Hardy I read Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* with interest. Hardy’s review published in your last issue sets out a fair description of the book as far as it goes. Yet it is a less critical and unskeptical review than one would expect to find in *the Skeptic*, so let me make two additional observations on *The God Delusion*.

First, the definition of God that Dawkins accepts and attacks is one he shares with the Christian fundamentalists namely of “a little old man up in the sky visiting rewards and punishment on those below”. It is an anthropomorphic, simplistic view of God. Such a definition has been under critical examination and revision within most Christian Churches for over a century. Fundamentalists may cling to it, as they do to creationism and other beliefs. But if you ask any thinking Christian about their idea of God it would fall outside Dawkins’ definition. Thus in Dawkins’ terms it would be rejecting God and he would describe them as atheists. This is not new.

The Christians over 1900 years ago were described as atheists because they rejected the prevailing view of the Gods. The agnostics, of whom Dawkins is so critical, are agnostic precisely because they do not accept Dawkins’ premise of God. They are not agnostic because they are not sure but think it is possible that there is a “little old man up in the sky armed with thunderbolts”. They are agnostic about a more modern non-anthropomorphic idea of “God”.

The idea of what or who God actually is has gone through many changes over the past few millennia. Anyone interested in following the detail should read *The History of God* by Karin Armstrong. Her last few chapters also describe the modern approaches that have been adopted seeking to define, understand or describe God in ways which the modern mind can understand and accept. I would strongly commend her book to anyone who wants to see the many ways God has been and can be understood.

There are a great many who share Dawkins’ definition of God; they are the ones Rob Hardy notes will not be reading Dawkins’ book. But let no one think that the simplistic idea of God which Dawkins and many fundamentalists share is the only concept of God which is around.

The second point is morality. Dawkins says that morality does not come from religion and attacks the approach that if we were convinced that there was no God there would be no reason to be moral. But he goes on to say that morality is inherent in us all. While this may be partly true the actual situation is that our morality comes from our culture, of which for most religion is and has been a part. The concept of what is moral has changed over the centuries and religion has had a part in changing it. For example Hardy notes that the Bible accepts slavery. But in the 18th Century many Christians re-examined and reinterpreted their Bibles and said that slavery was wrong. It was Christians in the UK and in the USA whose campaigns led to slavery being abolished.

It is probably true that if you asked third generation Australian Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus what their views were on various moral issues, you would get somewhat similar responses. But that is because they share the same culture. But ask a group of tribal Africans, Afghans, Serbs, Indians, Thais, Sicilian Mafia Dons and Brazilians the same questions and you would get vastly different results.

So our morality comes from our cultures, these differ greatly and they change over time. They can also be manipulated. I fear that those who rely on Kant’s moral imperative within to keep us on the right track are going to be disappointed. Nor is religion necessarily the answer; the Auschwitz guards celebrated Christmas. Like liberty the only real defence is constant vigilance to react and stop immoral actions being accepted as normal. There is work for us all to do on this in Australia today!!

**The worth of water in Sydney**

*Ian Ernst*  
Mosman NSW

It ranges from more than $5000 per kilolitre to less than $1.85 per kilolitre! For example Franklins® Spring water was “on special” at Woolworths in January for $1.522 per Kilolitre ($5.48 for a 6 x 600ml pack, ie, 3.6 L) and Nobel Water Pureau® sold at $1.340 per kilolitre ($2.68 for 2 Litres, ie, $1.34/L). Woolworth’s website quotes “Water-FIJI-1 litre” at $4,500 per Kilolitre ($4.50 per 1L) at postcode 2000, but for postcode 2088 it is $5000 per Kilolitre ($2.50 for 500ml). Conversely, until 2009, drinking water from your tap will cost between $1.20 and $1.85 per kilolitre depending on how much you use (that is as little as $0.07 cents for 100 x 600ml).

Is bottled water worth up to five thousand times the cost of tap water? If you know people who buy bottled spring/bore water, tell them about the price differential. Then
suggest they consider the environmental costs not included in the bottled-water price. For example, the risk to creeks, swamps and their dependent ecosystems imposed by commercial bottling of spring/bore water, and the pollution and resource consumption linked to the manufacture and disposal of plastic bottles.

Unconvinced? Suggest that they do a blind taste test and see if they can distinguish between bottled water and tap water. The bottled water should be the one that leaves a sour taste in their mouths through a hole in the hip pocket!

**Capital punishment I**

**Leon Retief**  
*Belville South Africa*

Jay Browning, as well as those who responded to his article on the death penalty, wrote from the perspective of people living in a society where personal safety is more or less taken for granted.

South Africa has a population of approximately 40 million people. During the preceding twelve months, 54 926 rapes were reported to the police (and undoubtedly many were not), 226 942 serious assaults were reported (and again, probably many were not) and 18 528 people were murdered. The police force is understaffed, poorly paid and trained, demoralized and often corrupt.

This situation can be likened to an undeclared war waged by criminals on society. Criminals know that they will not be executed and that lenient courts will allow them their freedom within a few years, no matter how heinous their crime may have been. It is commonplace to read of crimes (often murder) committed by freed convicts, convicts on parole or by those awaiting trial but allowed to run free.

Few people will deny that any government which reasonably consider itself to be under attack has the right to positively encourage killing (by uniformed soldiers) in defence of the state. Should capital punishment be reintroduced in South Africa, it will be a legitimate defence by the state of the fabric of society against those who seek to destroy it. Life imprisonment is ineffective and far too expensive for the taxpayers to support. In this country, capital punishment is not a matter of academic debate, it is becoming a matter of life and death — the life and death of its citizens, not of its criminals.

**Capital punishment II**

**Mark Avery**  
*Forest Lodge NSW*

A hundred or so years ago the mentally ill were considered to be possessed by demons, and were horribly killed. Not so long ago we threw them into dungeon-like ‘hospitals’ to rot. Had we kept up that practice the horror would still be continuing, and we’d know little about mental illness and how to treat it. But we kept trying. We kept progressing. Although we have a long-way to go, things have improved, and the mentally ill are our researchers’ most valuable resource.

Yet people want to kill our sadistic criminals. In Vol 26, No 4, Vivienne Miller says of them: “The problem is the way their brains are hard-wired. Nothing will change that.” On what does she base that? Vivienne and Gary: if we are to ever have a society in which change can be brought about, and in which released criminals will not choose to kill again, and if we are ever to have a society in which we can predict and prevent such violence in the first place, it will be achieved by treating our current sadists as a valuable resource, not as squashable cockroaches.

**Evolution debate**

**Michael Moont**  
*Point Piper NSW*

I read with interest Why Creationists Love Debating Atheists in your summer edition. It would be nice not to have to bother with such debates but considering the influence of creationists on school curricula, we probably do need to keep having them. In that case, I do not agree altogether with the Recommendations which seemed the main purpose of the article.

While I agree with most of the concepts I do not agree that “debates that make evolution the battleground should be avoided.” On the contrary, I think we should debate on this issue alone and persistently divorce it from many of the other issues raised. This is not at odds with the other recommendations but complements them, and is more in line with the editor’s note. My point is that as soon as you discuss evolution, creationists start discussing creation and tie the two issues together. We may not yet have enough evidence to discuss creation so that it will be acceptable to non-scientists but we surely do have the evidence for evolution.

Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was not about the origin of life or the universe, but only discussed the adaptation of species to their environment. In discussing evolution then, we should confine our arguments to that and not get into spats about where the first life came from. We should furthermore present evolution as an accepted science and not as an unproven theory, which is how many people view it. And it can be shown to be happening in front of us, such as the evolution of antibiotic resistance by bacteria exposed to an altered environment.

As an overall tactic, we should combat creationism by fighting the battles we can win, topic by topic, to gradually weaken their stance, rather than expecting to demolish them in one hit. Evolution is a battle
we should be able to win. Galileo also fought on a single issue and the Church must have been immeasurably weakened when it finally had to accept what had become the bleeding obvious. It is true that if you seem to be winning a debate, the opposition will try to attack you from a different direction by trying to change the subject, but this is where you need talented debaters to keep the topic on line and drive home an advantage.

Catalyst not so hot

Peter Williams
Mt Hutton NSW

I myself have blasted off three somewhat abusive emails to ABC regarding that load of preposterous rubbish known as Psychic Investigators with I might add, no noticeable effect. However, I would comment that the (fully justifiable) vitriolic attacks on the show emanating from various Skeptic forums have allowed a (to me) non sequitur to run rampant throughout the Skeptic outpourings, namely the scientific credibility rating of Catalyst.

Of course, even Bananas in Pyjamas would be better than PI — however in my view Catalyst has severe problems of its own. Sepulchral voice-overs, ghostly sirens, rattling tin cans, and superficial analysis of complex subjects are also well utilised by this show. I stopped watching Catalyst after the ‘Jack the Ripper’ reinvestigation, using DNA methods, was presented as a genuine resolution of this no-doubt puzzling but no longer relevant lurid series of murders.

The fact is that there is no genuine TV show anywhere that I can find that adequately presents science to an intelligent and reasonably informed audience. Some valiant and worthwhile attempts are made on ABC radio, but the lack of visual impact (not to mention audience) substantially blunts their effectiveness. Even the occasional good documentary is continually spoiled by irritating and totally unnecessary sound effects.

The present ongoing (otherwise good) Compass series re the history of Christianity in Britain suffers from this particular defect. Regrettably, Catalyst, whilst better than nothing has a long way to go to gain maximum credibility.

Lines of least resistance

Len Bergin
Lower Templestowe Vic

Kevin Rogers (Letters, Summer 2006) writes that “Theism is the belief that God is immanent in the world, yet transcends it”. There is no evidence, however, of the existence of a God. I contend that it is more likely that the way everything works is through the movement of objects along the line of least resistance, that we are in a continuum which had no beginning, which proceeded by the movement of objects along the line of least resistance with changes being wrought through friction and the collision of objects — bringing about a sort of evolution of objects and the eventuation of the Big Bang. Obviously, objects would have been more sparse the further back they were in the progression. The sparseness of the particles of atoms might be an indication of the sparseness of the objects at some stage.

Natural selection can be seen as working per the movement of objects along the line of least resistance, where creatures with poor camouflage are more likely to be taken by predators than those of their species with good camouflage, leaving the latter to breed and produce progeny with the good camouflage. This would have been brought about through the movement of objects (the predators hunting) along the line of least resistance.

Human behaviour is the consequence of the action in brain cells in the circumstances of the moment. The action would have been influenced by past experiences of the individual and, in effect, the behaviour would have been inevitable through the action in the cells moving along the line of least resistance. I would think that a case could be made for any event to have been caused by the movement of objects along the line of least resistance.

The theists’ belief is relatively primitive — from thousands of years ago. The Big Bang theory and other scientific knowledge which has surfaced, surely indicates that their belief in a creator god is erroneous.

Where’s the spark?

John Grushka
Bolwarra NSW

As a long-time member of our respected fraternity I am deeply disappointed that no answer has been forthcoming in your columns to the most crucial question surrounding our belief system. It’s fine to go along with our stance on the paranormal, evolution and the game of cricket, but where is the answer to a supposed “spark of energy”, shall we call it, that transformed a complex protein molecule into a living organism in the primordial soup? Perhaps one of our more learned contributors would care to enlighten us? Dare I drag the term Creation into such a discussion?
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