WHAT’S on the TELLY?
Skeptics & the Media
+ Convention Report
Skeptical Groups in Australia

Australian Skeptics Inc – Eran Segev
www.skeptics.com.au
PO Box 20, Beecroft, NSW 2119
Tel: 02 8094 1894; Mob: 0432 713 195; Fax: (02) 8088 4735
president@skeptics.com.au
Sydney Skeptics in the Pub – 6pm first Thursday of each month at the Mezz Bar, Coronation Hotel, Park St in the city (meeting upstairs)
Next dinner - March 23, speaker tbc, Bookings online or contact nsw@skeptics.com.au

Hunter Skeptics Inc – John Turner
Tel: (02) 4959 6286  johnafturner@westnet.com.au
Meetings are held upstairs at The Cricketers Arms Hotel, Cooks Hill (Newcastle) on the first Monday of each even numbered month, commencing 7.00pm, with a guest speaker or open discussion on a given topic. Visitors welcome. Further information from the secretary at: kevin.mcdonald379@bigpond.com

Australian Skeptics (Vic) Inc – Terry Kelly
GPO Box 5166, Melbourne VIC 3001
Tel: 1 800 666 996  vic@skeptics.com.au
Skeptics’ Café – Third Monday of every month, with guest speaker. La Notte, 140 Lygon St. Meal from 6pm, speaker at 8pm sharp.

Borderline Skeptics Inc – Russell Kelly
PO Box 666, Mitta Mitta, Victoria 3701
Tel: (02) 6072 3632  skeptics@wombatgully.com.au
Meetings are held quarterly on second Tuesday at Albury/ Wodonga on pre-announced dates and venues.

Gold Coast Skeptics – Lilian Derrick
PO Box 8348, GCMC Bundall, QLD 9726
Tel: (07) 5593 1882; Fax: (07) 5593 2776
lderrick@bigpond.net.au
Contact Lilian to find out news of more events.

Queensland Skeptics Association Inc – Bob Bruce
PO Box 3480, Norman Park QLD 4170
Tel: (07) 3255 0499  Mob: 0419 778 308  qskeptic@uq.net.au
Hear Bob on 4BC Paranormal Panel - 9-10pm Tuesdays
Meeting with guest speaker on the last Monday of every month (except December) at the Red Brick Hotel, 81 Annerley Road, South Brisbane. Dinner from 6pm, speaker at 7.30pm.

Canberra Skeptics – Kevin Davies
PO Box 555, Civic Square ACT 2608
http://www.camberraskeptics.org.au  Tel: 0408 430 442 mail@canberraskeptics.org.au (general inquiries), arthwollipot@gmail.com (Canberra Skeptics in the Pub).
A free monthly talk, open to the public, usually takes place on the 1st Saturday of each month at the Lecture Theatre, CSIRO Discovery Centre, Clunies Ross Rd (check website for details of the current month’s talk). Skeptics in the Pub gather at 1pm on the third Sunday of each month at King O’Malleys Pub in Civic. For up-to-date details : www.meetup.com/SocialSkepticsCanberra/

Skeptics SA – Laurie Eddie
52B Miller St Unley, SA 5061
Tel: (08) 8272 5881  laurieeddie@adam.com.au
Thinking and Drinking - Skeptics in the Pub, on the third Friday of every month. Contact nigeldk@adam.com.au

WA Skeptics – Dr John Happs
PO Box 466, Subiaco, WA 6904
Tel: (08) 9448 8458  info@undeceivingourselves.org
All meetings start at 7:30 pm at Grace Vaughan House, 227 Stubbs Terrace, Shenton Park
Further details of all our meetings and speakers are on our website at www.undeceivingourselves.org

Australian Skeptics in Tasmania – Leyon Parker
PO Box 582, North Hobart TAS 7002
Tel: 03 6238 2834 BH, 0418 128713  parkerley@yahoo.com.au
Skeptics in the Pub - 2nd Monday each month, 6.30pm, Ball & Chain restaurant, Salamanca Place.

Darwin Skeptics – Brian de Kretser
Tel: (08) 8927 4533  brer23@swiftdsl.com.au
It’s in the balance

Journalists and news programs are bombarded with complaints when readers, viewers etc consider that a specific bit of coverage is biased, ie it expresses a different point of view to that of the complainer. It doesn’t matter how accurate (scientifically, historically, etc) that the original piece is, you will always find someone of a different view, and someone who will call and claim bias and unfairness.

In order to avoid this barrage of negativity, journalists and news programs often include both sides of an argument. This is called “presenting a balanced report”, regardless of the relative merits of the two views.

It is done selectively. The media would (hopefully) not give equal time to astrologers when reporting on the latest discoveries from Mars, or to Big Foot hunters in a story about wildlife conservation, or to an acknowledged paedophile when covering child-raising. But it does happen with other topics, and especially in science and medicine.

As the Economist recently pointed out: “Unfortunately the mainstream media tends to believe that false balance is more important than factual accurate reporting. Too many journalists and news organisations are afraid of being labeled as ‘biased’ if they do not report ‘both sides’ of a story, even if one side is not supported by the evidence.”

The Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance is the union and professional organisation which covers everyone in the media, entertainment, sports and arts industries. Its more than 20,000 members range from opera singers to website producers, recreation ground workers to journalists; “in fact, everyone who works in the industries that inform or entertain Australians”.

The first item in the Media Alliance’s code of ethics is to “Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis. Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply.”

Likewise the ABC. Speaking at a session on the media at the TAM Australia conference in 2010, award-winning journalist Steve Cannane quoted from the network’s rules on reporting: “Balance will be sought but may not always be achieved within a single program or publication. ... It is not essential to give all sides equal time. As far as possible, present principle relevant views on matters of importance.”

For both organisations, which between them cover the vast majority of journalists and news organisations, there is no obligation to give both sides of a story, especially in disregard of their relative merit. You strive for “fairness”, give a “fair” opportunity for reply, and present “principle relevant” views where possible. You do not have to find some alternative view, no matter how dodgy, just to provide a ‘balanced’ report.

So why do journalists feel they do?

One reason is that doing so avoids accusations of bias (even though, to a certain extent, bias is implicit in the use of unsubstantiated and substandard alternative views). Another reason is that, frankly, it fills space. And three, most journalists wouldn’t know a fallacious scientific argument from a well-supported one, so there is no discriminatory BS detector they can draw on. As another TAM Australia commentator said, in a “post-modern management” environment all views are of equal value, even if they are of unequal quality.

As Cannane said in 2010, and as Tory Shepherd says in an article in this issue of The Skeptic, if you have an issue with a particular story, by all means complain. That way, at least the journalist and the news organisation might learn a little bit about the quality as opposed to the quantity of truly scientific views.
Around the traps...
For regular news updates, go to www.skeptics.com.au

UFOs’ crash landing

UK: The Daily Telegraph reports that a declining in the number of ‘flying saucer’ sightings and failure to establish proof of alien existence has led UFO enthusiasts to admit they might not exist after all.

Reporter by Jasper Copping writes that “Enthusiasts admit that a continued failure to provide proof and a decline in the number of sightings suggests that aliens do not exist after all and could mean the end of UFOlogy within the next decade.”

He says that dozens of groups interested in unidentified craft have already closed because of lack of interest and the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena, one of the UK’s leading organisations involved in UFO research, held a summit in November to discuss whether the subject has any future.

Dave Wood, chairman of the Association, told Copping that “It is certainly a possibility that in ten years time, it will be a dead subject. ... The lack of compelling evidence beyond the pure anecdotal suggests that on the balance of probabilities that nothing is out there.

“I think that any UFO researcher would tell you that 98 per cent of sightings that happen are very easily explainable. One of the conclusions to draw from that is that perhaps there isn’t anything there. The days of compelling eyewitness sightings seem to be over.”

Wood added that, far from leading to an increase in UFO sightings and research, the advent of the internet had coincided with a decline.

The Association’s UFO cases have dropped by 96 per cent since 1988, while the number of other groups involved in UFO research has fallen from well over 100 in the 1990s to around 30 now.

“When you go to UFO conferences,” Wood said, “it is mainly people going over the old cases [Roswell, Rendlesham, etc], rather than bringing new ones to the fore. There is a trend where a large proportion of UFO studies are tending towards conspiracy theories, which I don’t think is particularly helpful.”

No Lunarcy

CANADA: A team of researchers from Quebec City’s Université Laval’s School of Psychology say that there is no connection between lunar phases and psychological conditions. The researchers examined the relationship between the moon’s phases and the number of patients who show up at hospital emergency rooms experiencing psychological problems. (Details on the study can be found on the website of the scientific journal General Hospital Psychiatry.)

The researchers evaluated patients who visited emergency rooms at Montreal’s Sacré-Coeur Hospital and Hôtel-Dieu de Lévis between March 2005 and April 2008. They focused specifically on 771 individuals who showed up at the emergency room with chest pains for which no medical cause could be determined. Psychological evaluations revealed that a sizeable number of these patients suffered from panic attacks, anxiety and mood disorders, or suicidal thoughts.

The results of their analyses revealed no link between the incidence of psychological problems and the four lunar phases. There was one exception, however: anxiety disorders were 32 per cent less frequent during the last lunar quarter. “This may be coincidental or due to factors we did not take into account,” suggested Prof Geneviève Belleville.

“But one thing is certain: we observed no full-moon or new-moon effect on psychological problems.”

The study’s conclusions run contrary to what many believe, including, apparently, 80 per cent of nurses and 64 per cent of doctors who are convinced that the lunar cycle affects patients’ mental health.

“We hope our results will encourage health professionals to put that idea to rest,” said Belleville. “Otherwise, this misperception could, on the one hand, colour their judgment during the full moon phase; or, on the other hand, make them less attentive to psychological problems that surface during the remainder of the month.”

New Skeptics president

AUSTRALIA: At a committee meeting held on September 11, Richard Saunders was appointed president of Australian Skeptics Inc, and position he had previously held 10 years ago.

He replaces Eran Segev who had spent the last three years in that role, a period which included the organisation and running of TAM Oz in 2010, and a major revamp of our internal processes and external communications. Segev will stay on the committee.

Saunders has been a member of the ASI committee for 12 years, and is one of the highest profile Skeptics in Australia. He plays a regular role in domestic and international activities, appearing in numerous conventions, blogs and podcasts around the world. In July, he was one of the hosts of a JREF Million Dollar Challenge event at TAM 10 in Las Vegas. He is also a Life Member of the Skeptics, a fellow of the Committee for Scientific Inquiry (US) and founder, producer and host of The Skeptic Zone podcast.
**Scams intercepted**

**AUSTRALIA:** Almost 30,000 scam letters bound for WA homes have been intercepted by the West Australian Dept of Commerce’s Consumer Protection.

The seized mail promoting about 30 different scams can be divided into four categories: prize or lottery notifications; psychic letters; natural health cures; and magic trinkets.

The psychic letters are addressed to the receiver by either an individual psychic/clairvoyant or a group that have been able to deduce that there is good luck coming in the form of large sums of money. The letters state that you are in a period of good luck and must seize the opportunity while you can by sending a small fee. The letters, although printed, look like the sender has personally written to the receiver, giving the impression of some authenticity.

The natural health cure letters advertise a range of health cures, including oyster shell and shitake mushrooms to combat hearing loss, cranberry extracts for bladder control and a lupin and algae bath additive that claims you will lose one kilogram every time you bathe.

With the magic trinkets, one letter explains that for $60 you will receive 12 gemstones with powerful healing properties including protecting the heart, regulating cholesterol and harmonising the immune system, as well as being able to alter emotions and aspects of your personal life. The letters claim that the healing properties of these trinkets have been known about for hundreds of years and some claim that they are accepted by the scientific and modern medical community.

WA ScamNet warns that all of the letters ask for payment through credit card, cash or money order. One common complaint from consumers is that they continue to be charged on their credit card for the products or services on multiple occasions, rather than just the initial purchase. Trying to cancel these ongoing charges proves almost impossible without cancelling the credit card, as the companies responsible are generally not contactable or responsive to consumers’ requests for cancellations and refunds.

All of the seized scam mail will be destroyed.

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**Obamascare**

**USA:** The non-profit news organisation *Mother Jones* reports that President Obama is apparently using a Cold War-era mind-control technique known as Delphi to coerce Americans into accepting his plan for a United Nations-run communist dictatorship in which suburbanites will be forcibly relocated to cities.

That’s according to a four-hour briefing delivered to Republican state senators at the Georgia state Capitol in October, prior to the recent US elections.

*Mother Jones* correspondent Tim Jones reports that, “at a closed-door meeting of the Republican caucus convened by the body’s majority leader, Chip Rogers, a tea party activist told Republican lawmakers that Obama was mounting this most diabolical conspiracy”. The event was taped by a member of the Athens-based watchdog Better Georgia, who was later removed from the room.

The event had been billed as an information session on Agenda 21, a nonbinding UN agreement that commits member nations to promote sustainable development. But according to conservative activists, Agenda 21 is a nefarious plot that includes forcibly relocating non-urban-dwellers and prescribing mandatory contraception as a means of curbing population growth.

The invitation to the Georgia state Senate event noted the presentation would explain: ‘How pleasant sounding names are fostering a Socialist plan to change the way we live, eat, learn, and communicate to ‘save the earth’.”
Two skeptic pioneers

In October, we lost two people who were instrumental in setting up the first skeptical groups in the US and in Australia.

Paul Kurtz

Professor Paul Kurtz, co-founder of the original Skeptical organisation, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), died on October 20, 2012. He was 86. Kurtz was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and over his long career published over 800 articles and reviews and authored and edited over 50 books. He has been called the “father of secular humanism”. In 1969 he founded the publishing house Prometheus Books, which specialises in humanist and skeptical publications. Kurtz visited Australia on two occasions. During the first he attended the Australian Skeptics Convention in Melbourne in 1986, and then visited an outback site to view Halley’s Comet. His second visit was to jointly sponsor the 2000 World Skeptics Convention in Sydney, where he presented a Distinguished Skeptic Award to long-time editor of The Skeptic, Barry Williams. In conversation with Barry, Kurtz paid Australian Skeptics the compliment that, of all the Skeptics functions he had attended, this was the one that most emphasised how much enjoyment could be had from organised skepticism, noting that he had never hitherto heard so much laughter at such a gathering.

While Kurtz’s period at the helm of various skeptical and humanist groups was not without some differences of opinion, in an interview with The Skeptic published earlier this year, Ray Hyman, another pioneer in the establishment of the skeptical movement, praised Kurtz’s organisational skills in setting up the original CSICOP, suggesting those skills were essential to the birth of the movement. For this role he will be fondly and gratefully remembered by skeptics for many years.

James Gerrand

James (Gerry) Gerrand, co-founder of the Australian Skeptics, died on October 12, aged 93.

Gerrand played a fundamental role in the setting-up and on-going activities of Australian Skeptics. The initial meetings to establish the Skeptics were held in 1980 at his home in Hawthorn, Melbourne, with lawyer Mark Plummer, who became the group’s founding president. (Plummer died last year.) Gerrand had previously spent six years working for the United Nations agency ICAO in Montreal. Gerrand and Plummer had known each other as colleagues in the early 1970s when Plummer was the industrial officer for the Professional Officers Association (the union representing scientists, engineers and other professionals in the Commonwealth Public Service) and Gerrand was honorary editor-in-chief of the same group’s monthly journal. In his day job, Gerrand was the superintending airways engineer for the Victorian & Tasmanian Region in the Department of Civil Aviation.

His son, Dr Peter Gerrand, reports that “Having decided to create the Australian Skeptics, inspired by what they had learned of the US organisation [CSICOP], James and Mark approached Phillip Adams, who readily and enthusiastically supported the new organisation, and created national publicity for it, so much so that James and Mark were always ready to include Phillip as the third co-founder of the Australian Skeptics. It was Phillip Adams who had the bright idea of enlisting Dick Smith’s sponsorship of a prize of $10,000 for the first person who could convince a panel of scientific experts that their water divining could work.” This was the first stage of what is now the Australian Skeptics’ $100,000 challenge.

Gerrand was founding secretary of the Skeptics, and produced the Skeptics’ magazine and wrote many of its articles from its first issue in 1981 until March 1983. He was also active as national secretary of the Australian Humanists, and in overlapping periods was the editor for the journals of the Australian Humanists and the Australian Rationalists.

His background in aviation led, among other things, to a series of important investigative articles on the famous Valentich UFO case.

He will be always be recognised as a key figure in the establishment of Australian Skeptics, and whose efforts and scientific approach allowed the group to grow both in size and influence.
Reader’s indigestible

Tim Mendham looks at those ‘other’ publications, where skepticism is a dirty word.

Last issue we looked at two publications – Uncensored, which would be better titled Unbelievable, and UFOlogist, which is exactly as it says, only nicer.

In this issue we again look at THEM – those other publications about “the other” which take a credulous view of the paranormal claims to the extreme.

So what can you say about a magazine called Open Minds, Atlantic Rising and New Dawn, except to say that the first is more Empty Heads; the second should be called Flotsam & Jetsam, and the third … well … bring out the full light of day.

What can you say about a publication that so boldly pronounces its willingness to believe anything, or at least to distinguish itself from those closed-minded publications like The Skeptic?

Well, for a start, you’d have to say this is one smart-looking magazine. That’s “looking”; we haven’t got to the content yet. It is well-designed, colourful, it comes out of Arizona and it is largely devoted to UFOs.

In the issue under review, it “revisits” classic topics, like men in black and the famous 1967 close encounter of the third kind (CE-III) case from Cussac, France. You’ll have to pardon my ignorance of that last one, as it must have skipped by me. The publication does admit, however, that the case, “While quite well known in France, its full history and details are far less known to the English-speaking world.” Well, thanks for that.

Apparently in Cussac in 1967 two children (and a dog) “tending the cows in the field” witnessed four small beings on the ground next to a huge luminous sphere. When the beings realised they were being watched, they flew up in the air and plunged, head-first, into their spherical craft. Hopefully they didn’t bang their heads on the threshold as they went through. The craft then took off, with “a soft but rather acute hissing noise”, and disappeared into … . Actually we’re not sure where it disappeared to, as the kids were preoccupied bringing their by-now agitated cows together. Apparently others heard the noise and smelled sulphur in the air. One neighbour saw the ascending sphere, but didn’t hear the noise.

The whole event took about 30 seconds, but the children nonetheless gave quite detailed descriptions of the creatures. It is primarily their testimony, their apparent sincerity and consistency of their reports that are the foundation of the whole case. Others claimed to have smelled the sulphur in the air. But it is the children’s 30-second experience upon which a succession of investigations has been based.

“Cussac has withstood the test of time,” the article concludes. “But all the inquiries seem to indicate that the incident indeed happened just as it was described.”

The problem with Open Minds is that its editorial content largely rests its case on old claims, a situation which has caused UK UFOlogists to suggest the field of study is rapidly drawing to a close. Thus we have a look at the origins of the Men in Black “phenomenon”; the Clarks Summit “UFO flap” from 1992; sightings by Russian cosmonauts from 1981; a gallery of old UFO photos; and the Gulf Breeze case from the late 80s. As a repository of historical case studies, it might serve a purpose. Unfortunately its content on more recent ‘events’ delves into conspiracy theories and “let’s coat-tail on the back of real science” like Mars exploration, the type of story that so upsets those more serious UFO followers.

And for the movie cognoscenti who took such objection to Ridley Scott’s Alien prequel, Prometheus, the magazine gives it 4 out of 5.

This means you get stories like “Jesse James: Secret Agent” (he might not have been shot, but used a substitute and went into hiding to protect the Knights of the Golden Circle’s stash of $10 million); Rudolph Steiner’s visible speech; the subterranean shelters of Cappadocia as protection against the last remnants of the ice ages; and “strange genetic links” between native Americans and the Ancient Middle East. There are Yeti stories, departing soul theories, prehistoric (?) Norsemen in Minnesota, etc etc.

It’s all New Age hokum, of course. Even the news section is titled “Alternative News”.

It’s almost too all-encompassing to give it a true sense of what it’s all about. Is this a lack of discernment; an anything-goes approach truly indicative of the open mind/empty head concept?

Yes it is.

One annoying style issue is the fact that most articles start near the front, but are then continued many pages toward the back. You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into and what sort of commitment to reading you’re making until it’s too late. But then, simply opening it might have been too late.

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Not a lot of sense to be found in this publication coming out of Melbourne.

Like *Atlantis Rising*, *New Dawn* covers an amazingly broad range of New Age and government cover-up topics, including: time travel and the ‘multiverse’; does the soul exist; auras; biophotons and “the mystery of the pineal gland finally revealed”; clairvoyants observing atoms; free energy (discovered by “rogue scientists”, of course, one of whom installed bulletproof glass in his car to avoid the inevitable assassination attempt); and a short history of chaos theory and the butterfly effect (surprisingly straightforward, and an interesting if brief introduction to the field).

Of course, there are many “they didn’t believe me” stories – rogue scientists included – and ready references to quantum mechanics as the explanation for everything that can’t be explained. But one article stands out as much for its author as for the content: “Top secret projects physicist - Why I believe in ESP and why you should too”. The author is Russel Targ, a name that will raise the eyebrows of many skeptics. Targ and his colleague Harold Puthoff (mentioned in the article) were the scientists who tested Uri Geller and went on to do many ‘distance viewing’, precognition, ‘ganzfield’ telepathy and general psychic power experiments. Over the years – and we’re talking more than 30 years ago – these have been assessed and dismissed.

Much like everything else in this presentation of nonsense as truth. But it must be true - rogue scientists say so.
On November 30 to December 2, the skeptical community converged on Melbourne for the 2012 National Convention. Featuring a bevy of famous (and infamous) speakers from Australian and overseas, including James Randi, this was the third and largest such event to be held in the Victorian capital over the last ten years, and the responses at the end of the extended weekend were extremely positive. “My first skeptic event and I was apprehensive beforehand, but after a glass of wine and a chat with DJ [Grothe] on Thursday evening I fully relaxed and then had the most amazing time. I felt very lucky to be a part of it all.” was a typical reaction.

Just as important was the convention theme – Active Skepticism. And with a steady stream of enthusiastic speakers and equally enthusiastic audience (more than 300 people attended), activity was the name of the game.

The proceedings kicked off with a private dinner on November 29 for a select few to meet with the invited international speakers - Randi, Grothe, Brian Thompson and Rebecca Watson. This was followed by an evening ‘meet and greet’ on the next day, which gave all the attendees to gather, socialise, and listen to music in the classical surrounds of the Immigration Museum (formerly the Old Customs house) in the centre of the city.

The convention proper got underway on the Saturday, December 1, in Melbourne University’s spot theatre – a venue that looked more like something out of the space age than a university lecture theatre.

**DAY ONE**

The day began with video messages from absent friends Phil Plait and Mike Marshall, and then on to the main attractions.

**JAMES RANDI – MY SKEPTICAL WORLD**

First off the blocks was keynote speaker and honoured guest James “The Amazing” Randi, reflecting on “My Skeptical World”.

To many, Randi is the embodiment of Active Skepticism and he has inspired many others to join the sceptical movement and become active themselves. He is often referred to as a debunker, but prefers the term “investigator” – noting that his
investigations usually (if not invariably) end up debunking the subject under investigation.

Luckily, Randi is tireless in his battle against ‘woo’, as its many proponents are unsinkable rubber ducks, with an unshakeable conviction in their own abilities. In the case of faith healer Peter Popoff, even Randi’s exposure of him on Johnny Carson’s The Tonight Show did not permanently scupper the Popoff ministry. But Randi persists, motivated by the conviction that, for the sake of our children, we must safeguard our future against fakes and frauds.

As a conjurer, Randi understands the psychology of audiences and the power of assumption. He believes this is an important message in the skeptical movement: assumptions help us function in the world – without them, we would become catatonic. By the same token, making assumptions can also lead to the most intelligent and highly qualified of us being fooled, as was illustrated by an anecdote of being contacted by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. The scientist (whose name was not revealed to avoid embarrassment) contacted Randi to inform him that he had lost the $1 Million Challenge as they had discovered a man with genuine telekinetic powers. Randi was able to show that the supposed telekinetic feat was in fact Martin Gardiner’s levitating matchbox trick and that was the end of that.

Randi has had a long association with Australia and he acknowledged the important contributions of Dick Smith, Philip Adams, Barry Williams and Richard Saunders to the skeptical movement in this country.

ADAM VAN LANGENBERG – LUNCHTIME SKEPTICISM

Known as “Mr V” to most of his students (although he also quite likes to be called “Sir”), maths teacher Adam van Langenberg is not only an active skeptic himself, he is building an army of young skeptics at McKinnon Secondary College in Melbourne.

It started quite casually in a maths class one day when he did a demonstration on the PowerBalance bracelets sported by some of the students and teachers. These bracelets were spruiked as being effective in improving performance in physical activities, but were in fact simply a hologram embedded in a piece of rubber. The success generated by Adam’s demonstrations (PowerBalance bracelets fell out of favour at the school more rapidly than they had come into vogue) led Adam to suggest that those who were interested meet at lunchtime to form a skeptical society. The topic of the first meeting was ESP testing using Zener ESP cards and was so popular that Adam had to turn half of the would-be participants away until the following week.

Each week the society meets and discusses a skeptical topic of interest: psychics, Armageddon (a topic of great concern to young people), pareidolia, logical fallacies and homoeopathy. And they don’t just come to listen - it’s a hands-on group which conducts experiments, such as whether it is possible to tell if someone is staring at you.

Interestingly, the society comprises a high proportion of girls with more junior students (from years 7, 8 and 9) than seniors. Skepticism and critical thinking teaches the students that humans are not perfect and can be fooled, an essential realisation for a skeptic and perhaps easier for young people to accept, as is illustrated by the quote “Kids have less baggage to throw overboard”.

As impressively active skeptics, these students put many of their elders to shame and Adam’s maxim, Never Underestimate Teenagers, is constantly reinforced.

PANEL – MEDICAL TREATMENT

A panel discussion, chaired by Richard Saunders (president of Australian Skeptics Inc) and featuring Dr Ken Harvey, Dr Mick Vagg, Dr Steve Basser and Loretta Marron, examined the importance of an evidence-based approach to medical treatment and the difficulty of achieving this when people prefer to rely on anecdotes and personal experience, as expressed in the attitude “it worked for me, therefore it works”.

Marron noted that the placebo effect has a role to play in this, as people will attribute their recovery to whatever they happen to be taking at the time. In Harvey’s view, it is important to provide good information to consumers and to combat the influences of both ‘Big Pharma’ and ‘Quack Pharma’. Basser noted that the internet is a boon for skeptics, but is also an avenue for misinformation, particularly with regard to the anti-vaccination movement,
GETTING ACTIVE

Continued...

where a culture of celebrity expertise has taken hold.

Vagg raised the negative influence of quackery on mainstream medical practice, in which disturbing new trends such as ‘integrative medicine’ are taking hold. Users of complementary and alternative medicine are not necessarily enthusiasts - they are just using it as another product, as consumers. He believes that education is better than abuse, as lack of efficacy in non-evidence based treatments is not a deterrent to the average consumer. Much better deterrents are safety concerns and lack of value for money.

Unfortunately, reliance on anecdote is strong. Personal endorsements are quick and convincing, but are usually wrong and are influenced by confirmation bias. For evidence based treatment, properly controlled, double-blind trials are needed. Basser expressed the view that the battle is never going to be won at an individual level and that proper regulation, monitoring and enforcement of standards is the key.

Opening the floor to questions led to an examination of the role of the media. Vagg said that medical professionals do not engage with the media enough. Marron is an exception to this, being a seasoned undercover investigator when it comes to combating misinformation and reporting it in the mainstream media. Basser also noted that the climate science ‘debate’ has contributed to the misconception that science is a democratic process.

Another question from the floor opened a discussion on the visibility of the results of studies on the efficacy of treatments. Harvey acknowledged that lack of visibility is a problem and industry-sponsored publications tend to be more positive about the tested treatments than independent studies. Vagg suggested that after the initial publication of a study, it was important to review the journals for some months afterwards, because valid criticisms will often emerge and the interpretation of the results can change.

In the wrap up of the discussion, Harvey noted that evidence is being prostituted for profit, which is false science. Marron’s advice is to choose your battles. Basser and Vagg both noted the importance of using the skeptical network to spread the message.

DR KRISSEY WILSON – ANOMALISTIC PHENOMENA

In March 2012, psychologist Dr Krissy Wilson launched the Science of Anomalistic Phenomena (SOAP), a research laboratory at Charles Sturt University sponsored by Australian Skeptics, Inc. SOAP is dedicated to exploring the psychology of belief in anomalist experiences. Anomalistic psychology is still an emerging branch of psychology in Australia. It takes a more skeptical approach than parapsychology and explores claims of the paranormal and related phenomena from a psychological and physiological perspective.

In this inaugural year, the aims have been to launch SOAP in the academic community, garner media interest and recruit participants from the community to take part in research.

Research strands are the biological bases of belief and whether belief is innate or learned, personality and individual differences and cognition (information processing). Research questions have included the purpose of belief, the differences and similarities between believers and non-believers, and whether a person’s belief system can be changed. Areas of research for 2013 will be the further examination of gender differences, physiological reactions, personality and cognition – whether believers and non-believers process information differently.

Anyone can take part in Wilson’s research and become a SOAP SUD by going to www.soap.org.au to sign up.

DR LYNNE KELLY – ORAL CULTURES

With long hair, flowing clothes and intricate spider jewellery, Lynne Kelly looks more like a sibyl than one of us nerds. However, don’t be deceived - she has a background in engineering, mathematics, science and teaching, and she is an expert in small scale oral cultures. And there’s nothing she hates more than the misappropriation of indigenous traditions by New Agers and the representation of oral cultures as primitives who lived in a fog of superstition.

In oral cultures, knowledge is power and possession of it is a privilege, as knowledge is the key to survival. It is far too important to pass on by casually swapping stories during hunting and gathering or around a fire at night.

Oral traditions are complex storage systems – all of which are indexed in some way - for knowledge about animal behaviour and classification, plant properties, insects and navigation, resource rights and genealogies, and
marriage laws. The mnemonic methods used by oral cultures include primary orality: chants, songs, dances and mythology, which all serve as ways of encoding information. Other mnemonic methods are enigmatic decorated objects and rock art. Essential survival information must also be accurate, which means it needs to be restricted ‘secret business’ only for the initiated elite. Thus, in oral cultures, there is an important dichotomy between public and restricted knowledge.

Which led Kelly to see if the same clues to mnemonics for information could be found in ancient cultures like the Neolithic Britons – and they could. On a visit to Stonehenge, it occurred to her that its layout looked like a mnemonic to record information on the annual cycle of ceremonies for a culture which was in transition from hunter-gatherer to sedentary. The rest is, as they say, history and Kelly has recently been awarded a PhD for her work.

At one point, she became a tad worried that her theory was becoming a ‘Theory of Everything’ and that she was self-deluded. And that’s where skepticism came in. Skepticism encourages questions and she says that the questions posed by fellow skeptics (particularly Dr Bob) were both helpful in her work and in keeping her perspective.

PAUL GALLAGHER – CASE STUDY

The theme of this year’s convention was Active Skepticism and Paul Gallagher presented a heart-warming 10 minute case study on the success of the social media campaign to prevent American Airlines and then Delta from running magazine and video interviews with everyone’s favourite anti-vaxxer, Meryl Dorey.

LORETTA MARRON – EXPOSING CAM

Loretta Marron is a tireless campaigner against pseudoscience, which is flourishing in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), a $3 billion per year industry. She identifies two types of pseudoscience: it is either an affront to established systems or it could be that there is some evidence for a product or treatment, but the claims made on the basis of that evidence are vastly exaggerated.

For Marron, consumer protection is the biggest issue associated with CAM. The risk for many users of CAM is the delay in proper diagnosis of their condition and the introduction of effective treatment. Individual choices can also compromise the health care of others at considerable cost to the whole community. Alternative treatments can be dangerous, one example being traditional Chinese medicine which often contains toxins or animal DNA.

In 2011, the University of Central Queensland announced that a course for a Bachelor of Science (Chiropractic) would be run in 2012 and alarm bells started ringing. She raised her concerns with like-minded scientists and health professionals and out of this concern, Friends of Science in Medicine (FSM) was founded.

FSM is committed to maintaining tertiary educational institutions free of health-related courses not based on science, and engaging regulatory authorities to reduce the real and potential harm from CAMs not based on science. FSM supports research into promising complementary approaches and training health care students about CAM.

FSM was incorporated in December 2011 and its website and newsletter went live in early March 2012. Within 10 weeks, FSM had 500 supporters and this figure has now grown to nearly 800 around the world. Individual supporters include prominent scientists and clinicians, supporter organisations include the Australian Skeptics, the magazine Choice and the Royal Institution of Australia.

FSM has clocked up an impressive list of activities in less than 12 months. Tertiary institutions and health funds have been the focus. In future, FSM aims to work in the areas of pathology, pharmacy, veterinary science, chiropractic and nursing/midwifery. Marron spoke about the importance of being quick and responsive in its activities.

Despite being a fledging organisation, FSM is already being described as a “powerful lobby group” - it is here for the long term.

FSM was nominated the 2012 Skeptic of the Year at the convention awards presentation (see separate story).

REBECCA WATSON – SOCIAL MEDIA

As a blogger, podcast host and tweeter, Rebecca Watson is an expert on social media. And as a skeptic, she says that using social media requires skepticism and the constant application of critical thinking.

The various forms of social media - Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, forums, blogs, chat and SMS – have revolutionised communication and the exchange of information. There is an ever-increasing amount of information to process and much of it is sourced from our peers, rather than from authority figures or organisations. This is good for breaking news, but the downside is that opinions, lies and misrepresentations can be circulated and perpetuated as verified facts at a frightening rate. Even the quotation “a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting its shoes on” has been wrongly attributed on the net to Mark Twain.
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Watson has found at least three earlier versions of this idea, going back to Jonathan Swift.

Using Twitter as an example, she examined the phenomenon of false information on social media: from fake reports of celebrity deaths to smear campaigns known as ‘Twitterbombs’ and the practice of ‘astroturfing’ (so-called because it is the opposite of a genuine grassroots campaign) in which fake accounts are set up and used to generate tweets to spread false information.

The good news is that there are ways of detecting such tactics. Manufactured re-tweeting can be analysed to detect false campaigns. Although misinformation can be spread by re-tweeting, figures show that users are more likely to question lies, which suggests that there is a healthy self-correcting mechanism at work.

So what tools exist for fact checking on social media? First, be a skeptic and apply critical thinking. Check whether the person spreading the information has a user history and whether they can be contacted to verify the information.

Photos can be checked by cross-referencing them with satellite imagery, reverse image searches such as TinEye or by degrading the photo which can detect Photoshopping. For audio, centre pan removal can be used on recordings to detect whether sounds have been added.

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Skeptics’ Awards 2012 ... and The Winner is

The annual Australian Skeptics’ Awards are always a highlight, whether thoroughly endorsed or highly controversial. This year it was the former, with all the recipients thoroughly deserving and widely supported. The 2012 Skeptic of the Year went to the Friends of Science in Medicine (FSM). This is only the second time the award has gone to an organisation instead of individual. FSM was only formed at the end of 2011, and instantly became a major force in bringing Australia’s universities to task for running courses in unproven and over-hyped medical treatments such as chiropractic, naturopathy, acupuncture, reflexology etc. It quickly garnered support from hundreds of academics and senior medical researchers from Australia and overseas, including past Nobel Prize and Australian of the Year recipients. The fact that Meryl Dorey, president of the Australian Vaccination Network (the notoriously anti-vaccination group) described the FSM as “An organisation [that] slithered out of the primordial medical sludge” is proof enough that in a short period of time, the Friends had really got under the skin of those proponents of un-scientific and unsupported alt med practices.

Loretta Marron, herself a two-time winner in her own right of the Skeptic of the Year, accepted the award on behalf of her fellow executives of the FSM. - Prof John Dwyer AO, Prof Alastair MacLennan AO, Prof Rob Morrison OAM, Prof Marcello Costa and Dr Cameron Martin.

The 2012 Thornett Award for the Promotion of Reason went to high school teacher Adam vanLangenberg from McKinnon Secondary College in Melbourne, for his work in founding the school’s sceptical club.

The 2012 Bent Spoon Award, the least desirable award of the event, went to Fran Sheffield and her organisation Homeopathy Plus for “continued promotion of some of the most ludicrous claims for an already ludicrous product”. Australia’s consumer watchdog body, the ACCC, described some of those claims, regarding homeopathic treatment of whooping cough, as “misleading and deceptive”. There were several additional awards. James Randi was the recipient of a special Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to skepticism over many decades, and not least because of his role in the establishment of Australian Skeptics itself. (This was the second time this award has been issued.)

Ken Grearex, long-standing secretary for the Victorian Skeptics, and Dr Richard Gordon, former president of Australian Skeptics Inc, received Life Membership of Australian Skeptics for their dedicated service over many years.
Keep using social media, she says, it works and it’s “made up of you” so it’s great for crowd sourcing. It’s also a perfect example of how to practise active skepticism in an everyday context.

**DAY TWO**

Sunday began with news of the Bent Spoon and other Awards, followed by a plug for Jason Ball’s new *Young Australian Skeptics Anthology*. This was followed by a video from another absent friend, Brian Dunning, who advised: “Every day start with a complete breakfast and listening to skeptoid.com” Dunning will be with us in the flesh at the 2013 convention in Canberra.

**DJ GROTHE – SKEPTICISM AROUND THE WORLD**

DJ Grothe profiled the rich history and many current activities of JREF. The key is to avoid carping on the world generally. The focus is on scrutinising woo and connecting to real issues. A good example is dowsing. People may think skeptics pick on water-diviners but what about when similar concepts are used to spruik a machine that is supposed to be used by the military to detect concealed explosives? Lives depend on that machine. It’s no joke if it is a dud. Aussies may have wasted their money on Power Band bracelets but in Africa JREF supports our friend Leo Igwe in dealing with life and death issues. Witches are burned. Albinos are killed and ‘harvested’, thanks to superstitions that their bodies have special curative properties. Myths about AIDS cause countless deaths. Indian rationalist Sanal Edamaruku spoke at the National Convention in 2000. Now he is in hiding after exposing a fake Catholic miracle. The faithful were collecting, venerating and probably consuming tears from a crucifix. Unfortunately, these came from a leaking sewer. In a country where 1.1 per cent of the population is Catholic, Sanal’s revelation was so offensive that a warrant was issued for his arrest. These were a few strands of Grothe’s golden thread: “Skepticism is about doing good by being right.”

**LAWRENCE LEUNG – COMEDY AND SKEPTICISM**

Laurence Leung laid claim to a modest miracle of his own – a young Asian man who can grow facial hair. Leung has a one-in-a-million gift for education through humour. His theory: use comedy to engage attention and secure recollection. Proof is found in his tactful but hard-hitting series *Unbelievable*.

As a skeptic, Leung started young. How could Santa deliver the presents to his chimney-less home? One Christmas eve, he set up a covert observation post. After the holidays, the young Laurence could reveal to despairing classmates that his parents had put the presents there. When a colleague insisted that his presents came from Santa, Leung had the answer: “No, my parents also broke into your place and put the presents there!” Never underestimate the power of irony.

In pretending to be a psychic, Leung rehearsed the tried and true techniques – rainbow statements, Jacques statements, Barnum statements. And, as a lark, he decided to throw in some song lyrics, read from a TV on the wall behind the subject, silently playing karaoke tracks. Those lyrics made a bigger impact on the customers than all the textbook stuff. On hearing from the dead, he posed the question, where is the harm if it makes a person feel good? Here Leung gets serious: because that kind of delusion delays the journey that the mourner must take.

**PANEL – SPREADING THE MESSAGE**

A panel on Active Skepticism: Spreading the Message was chaired by Richard Saunders and featured Brian Thompson from JREF, SOAPster Dr Krissy Wilson, rationalist Dr Meredith Doig and Stephen Mayne from Crikey.com. Thompson’s aim is to engage with those who spread misinformation and those who go to see them. Approachability is the key. Skepticism is a public service not a sport. We can’t win. Woo will recur, and we do our best, just as firemen are not deterred by knowing there will always be fire.

Wilson could relate to Leung who had studied psychology and become a performer while she had been a...
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performer and become a psychologist. Doig’s experiences on several boards had taught her this: don’t be in the crowd that stands by and does nothing; be one of the few people who make a stand. Mayne had found ingenious ways of securing publicity. By standing for public company boards, he was able to get emails that mentioned his role in Crikey.com to every shareholder – millions of free emails! Most local council elections in Victoria are conducted by postal ballot. Every voter receives the ballot paper, plus a 200 word blurb from each candidate. Saunders candidly pointed out that every active skeptic should be subscribing to The Skeptic magazine.

DR RACHAEL DUNLOP – SKEPTICISM IN SCIENCE

One of the major criticisms made by skeptics of complementary and alternative medicine is the propensity to cling to dogma, sometimes in the face of boundless conflicting evidence. Unlike CAM and like skeptics, science is proud of its ability to self-correct and change position when new evidence is presented. But what about when this doesn’t happen? And why does it take so long for science to accept changes in dogma and what are the consequences in such cases? Certainly Nobel Prize winners Robin Warren and Barry Marshall, who eventually had their theory of stomach ulcers being caused by bacteria accepted, but only after experimenting on themselves might agree. So how much skepticism in science is too much?

Dunlop addresses this question using her own research into the causes of motor neuron disease as an example. Despite the fact that only about 10 per cent of MND cases have a genetic link, and just having the gene is not enough to cause disease, research has primarily focussed on genes. Working with a consortium of scientists from around the world, she has been examining the role of an environmental toxin found in blue green algae in triggering MND. The work began with the observation that the indigenous people of Guam were dying from MND at a rate 100 times greater than the general population. When ethnobotanists investigated they found the people’s voracious appetite for fruit bats might be the culprit - the bats were feeding on cycad seeds which were full of a blue green algal toxin. Blue green algal blooms in oceans, lakes, rivers and even grow in the roots of cycad trees. More recently research has revealed that the algal toxin (called BMAA) accumulates in seafood, from mussels to crabs to prawns and even shark fin. And even more scary, it concentrates up the food chain to levels as high as those identified in the bats. With algal blooms increasing, humans are increasingly likely to be exposed to the toxin.

DR KEN HARVEY – COMPLAINING

Dr Ken Harvey gave us “Confessions of a Serial (TGA) Complainant”. He identified numerous dodgy products and the TGA’s inability to deal with them. The Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods has become a haven for shonkery and the current system can be gained by unscrupulous sponsors to their commercial advantage. The TGA’s “risk based assessment” is judged solely on the likelihood of the therapeutic good to produce physical adverse effects. That approach ignores the damage done by giving consumers the impression that the government has approved what is truly quackery. Even removal of a good from the Register does not necessarily prevent a ‘practitioner’ from using it; or prevent it being promoted from overseas.

Instead products should be labelled “This product has NOT been evaluated by Australian Health Authorities to see if it works”. He suggested numerous other reforms and urged us to submit more complaints; publicise system problems; make submissions to industry and government inquiries; and agitate on industry and government working groups.
The next panel, titled “Randi with Friends”, discussed “reflections on the importance of being an active skeptic”. Jack Scanlon explained how the Young Australian Skeptics is not an entity but is an online community promoting critical thinking, skepticism and scientific communication. Membership is not confined to ‘young persons’ – a concept that would smack of elitism even if you could give it a sensible definition. In fact, oldies are welcome.

The exceptional progress of skepticism in regional Victoria was exemplified by aviator and Mitta Mitta Challenge master, Russell Kelly. Keep an eye out for details of the next MMC to take place in 2013. Kelly has tips on how pilots can avoid the ‘tiger country’ between Canberra and Mitta Mitta. Or if you drive there, be alert for panthers and crystals hanging from the fruit trees (yes, naturally they are there to increase the yield and quality).

Randi had more information on the dodgy bomb detectors used in Iraq. The ADE 561 Bomb Dowsing Device was taken apart and found to contain no working parts. Its inventor has been charged with fraud.

Randi covered much else, one favourite anecdote being how he was inspired by his high school physics teacher. Toward the end of a class the teacher would draw a machine on the board. “Can it work as a perpetual motion machine? Why not? Come next class with your answer and your reasons.” Instead of piling out of class the instant the bell rang, the boys departed slowly, deep in thought.

That must have impressed former Deputy Headmaster Don Hyatt, who described how the Victorian Skeptics encourage the many local groups that have formed. His key concepts: connect; facilitate; and empower.

Shane Greenup explained the ingenious website tool rbutr. Readers who have loaded the plugin can see whether an article on a site has prompted a response elsewhere. If they open that page, they see if it has in turn received a response – all thanks to submissions from earlier readers of those pages. (www.rebutr.com)

Prior to a wrap-up from the proud organisers, Rebecca Watson presided over the fast and at time filthy twitter quiz. Who won? Probably everyone who was there.

All in all, an excellent time was had by all. At times funny, at times deadly serious, but always entertaining and informative.

Skepticism - something for you to put under the tree for the kids to discover and wonder over.

PHOTO CAPTIONS

(All photos by Mal Vickers.)

Australian Skeptics is a major sponsor of the Science Drama Awards in Victoria. The awards have been operating since 1993 and help to foster creativity and integrate the study of science with reading, writing, music, art and the performing arts. Entrants are invited from all primary and secondary schools in Victoria and must develop a ten-minute performance about a scientific concept or issue.

Before lunch on the first day, we were treated to a wonderful performance by the contestants from Lyndale Primary School, runners up in the Science Drama Awards for 2012.

Eight talented 8-year-olds demonstrated the forces of movement in a musical performance by Pull, Drag and Lift, Push, Shove and Nudge battling against their arch-enemy Friction, as explained by Smartie Pants clad in colourful polka dot trousers.

The young performers were certainly forces to be reckoned with (sorry!) and stole the show on Saturday. The future of science in Victoria looks bright with these kids around.

– Jessica Singer

The Kids Are Alright
Randi and Friends Go Back to School

Elizabeth Raiikkenen describes Randi’s visit to McKinnon Secondary College in Melbourne – a hot time in the old town.

Adam vanLangenberg will forever go down as the man who almost killed James Randi, and I am the witness. Summer hadn’t even started, yet 38˚C heat was the order of the day. I’m sure in a tightly packed theatre of 300 children it felt more than forty.

But Randi, throughout his speech, remained poised and hardly seemed to notice the furnace he was standing in.

I’m sure we have all heard him speak before, but when you are right there, able to reach out and touch him if you really wanted, the man captivates you even more. There is no place better than being right there to appreciate all of his eccentricities. I have watched videos of him before, but even when you’ve been fooled by him on YouTube, he gets you every time. I assume it is his sort of mind control trick. It must be magic.

The McKinnon Sceptical Society children, about a dozen of us, arrived before the year sevens. I watched DJ Grothe, Brian Thompson, Richard Saunders and Maynard amble in; it really hasn’t sunk in yet. To see some of the people that I had looked up to, being connected through the internet but suddenly connected through real life, it was very surreal. They just walked around as I secretly schemed and thought up of all the charming and witty things I could say.

I think the first profession of love was to Maynard. The man never puts that microphone down, and I told him I listened to his work while he came up and interviewed a whole group of us.

So what did we do when Randi was in our grasp and well and truly roasting? We sent in the school children. I have to say, my school has a rowdy bunch of Year 7s; they’ve been known to heckle on occasion. But throughout Randi’s introduction to woo, they listened. For many of them, it would have been their first exposure to the likes of televangelists and psychic surgery. But if they had been introduced in any other contexts, many of these bright kids would have been driven down a way of thinking that was far more dangerous than they would have known at the time.

At the end of his speech and a fine few magic tricks, I stood up and thanked him on behalf of the audience. Really, I was sweating less from the heat and more from the awe of the situation. What he didn’t know about this 15-year-old girl was she was already fully indoctrinated and absolutely brainwashed prior to his visit. With scepticism, that is.

Randi is the most inspiring man I’ve ever had the pleasure to shake hands with, and it gives me hope and a fiery motivation to spear tackle every deliberate fraud and con artist who still mingle with the uninformed and the vulnerable.

With passion and obvious hard work, the JREF – along with the other skeptical groups - is getting their message out there, one school visit at a time.

About the author:
Elizabeth Raiikkenen is a Year 9 student at McKinnon Secondary College, who also played scorer at the convention tweeting competition.
Choice, the consumer protection body, has taken a firm swipe at homeopathic treatments - “the very essence of shonkiness”

Homeopathy has featured high in the list of recent awards. Not only did Fran Sheffield and her Homeopathy Plus website receive the dubious distinction of this year’s Bent Spoon award, but the same ‘medical’ methodology was just as unhappily highlighted in consumer organisation Choice’s Shonky awards.

The Shonkies, in Choice’s words, “name and shame the shonkiest rip-offs and shoddiest products being sold in Australia” - misleading claims, false advertising, lack of transparency, faulty goods and/or poor service. And in among this year’s crop of washing machines, taxi charges, anti-mould products and even chocolate, was Nature’s Way Kids Smart Natural Medicine.

These homeopathic products are supposed to treat various ailments: colds and flu, hay fever and runny nose, pain and fever, and for calming kids down.

Choice, in its award citation, said that “Shonky loves homeopathy. The idea of selling water for upwards of $1000 per litre and claiming it’s medicine represents the very essence of shonkiness. But convincing anxious or desperate parents they can use it to treat their children’s ailments takes it to a whole new level.”

“Being homeopathic, the harm doesn’t come from the stuff itself,” Choice continues. “It’s effectively water with blackcurrant flavour. The harm comes from it doing nothing for your children in the expensive and mistaken belief you’re doing something.”

Dr Ken Harvey, last year’s winner of the Skeptics’ Thornett Award for the Promotion of Reason and Choice’s Consumer of the Year, told the consumer group that “Symptoms like restlessness, anxiety, irritability and agitation that the ‘Calm’ product claims to treat can be the symptoms of potentially serious childhood infectious diseases for which a homeopathic remedy is entirely inappropriate, and such misguided treatment might make a parent postpone seeking more appropriate medical advice to the child’s detriment.

“In my opinion, such promotion is dangerous and an affront to public health and medical science.”

The claims have been referred to the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission (ACCC) for investigation. NSW Fair Trading has written to the ACCC and offered to assist.

Postscript: In addition to the basic Shonky, Nature’s Way Kids Smart products were the winner of the People’s Choice Shonkiest Shonky, with 44 per cent of the vote. With a total of 2670 votes, the product range was a clear winner. One of Choice’s members commented “Playing fast and loose with your money is one thing; playing fast and loose with your health – or, worse, your children’s – is about as low as it goes. If ever there was an example of the abject failure of consumer protection in Australia, this is it.”
We’re only human

Helen Lawrence attends a conference on human foibles – homo not-so-sapiens

A meeting of minds was held at the National Library, Canberra in October 2012 in honour of Phillip Adams, a great supporter of science. It bore the prescient title of The Future of Homo sapiens and was sponsored by Manning Clark House. This gathering of scientists partook of 12 information-packed hours, with four sessions, divided into a series of lectures and a panel discussion with questions from the floor after each four or five talks. Interested spectators were in for a feast: different disciplines were brought together, with the generale view that more is needed from governments if we humans are to have any degree of comfort or perhaps even survive what was originally called the ‘greenhouse gas effect’.

All this may sound highbrow and academic. It was not. The situation is real. If our children don’t have to face it, our grandchildren certainly will and they may blame us for doing little about it. So why was this not just an academic exercise in prestige? Because Homo sapiens more than any other species has squandered Earth’s life-giving properties and unless we atone from our rapacious ways we will be required to pay, perhaps with our lives or the lives of those we care about – and even by the mildest estimates there is a likelihood of climate change.

Although my attainments are meagre in contrast with the stellar cast of speakers, I was invited to attend by the conference organiser, Andrew Glikson, otherwise I probably would never have heard of this important event!

Judith Crispin, director of Manning Clark House, gave the introductory speech and pointed out that Viking pig farmers in Greenland got into trouble for causing erosion. We have certainly exacerbated the situation with our ‘pigish’ behaviour! Crispin also gave one of the lectures, highlighting the inventive, articulate and artistic genius of human kind over the generations. She contrasted this with the present pop culture, the modern lack of interest in classical music and art spanning the centuries, in fact in many cases the decline into trivial pursuit.

She deplored the lack of ‘political will’ of governments and warned that decisions will need unheard of ‘boldness’. She pointed out that our leaders have so far “failed to capture and sustain public support for non-polluting energy,” and added. “The reason for this lacklustre attitude is just basic selfishness.”

This attitude was captured brilliantly by Bishop George Browning, who frankly admitted that monotheism had led some Christians astray. He taxed preachers with hypocrisy when they stressed humans and their piety to the exclusion of the plurality of creatures in this world. He said, tellingly, “Thinking that we are essentially independent beings is our biggest mistake. To recognise that we human beings are part of the created order and not apart from it, is essential for our future.”

Robert Manne, professor of politics at La Trobe University, paid tribute to what President Obama had said in 2008, that “the world would struggle to combat climate change”. Were these empty words, a symptom of the modern ‘good life’ philosophy? Manne has written against complacency “and the deplorable way both politics and religion have given way in the short term again and again, deluding themselves and others into thinking they can avoid the inevitable”.

Tony McMichael, professor of population health at ANU, warned of new infectious diseases from overcrowding and inter-species pathogens. So-called zoonotic microbes mutate fast and can impact mass humanity with devastating results as we have already seen in countries compromised by drought and population densities. McMichael says we have to learn quickly. “Homo sapiens is neither well-equipped biologically, nor acting wisely enough, to avert a possible long-term catastrophic setback in the long-running struggle between microbes and humans. For the microbes, that would be a footnote in their diary.”

“Are we masters of the Earth or merely stewards?” asked Clive Hamilton, vice chancellor’s chair of public ethics at Charles Sturt University. Narcissistic humans have been under the impression that they (we) can manage Earth and run it like a corporation. Hamilton likens this bereft philosophy to the Prometheans ( a Greek god who endowed humans with managerial skills and
technology) and the Soterians, so called after the Greek god of safety and deliverance. We human beings have released greenhouse gases until the atmosphere has had a gutful! Are we intelligent enough to heed the Soterian message?

The words of Colin Groves, professor of anthropology and primatology at ANU, remind us that Homo sapiens are part of the primate line; that we cannot stand apart from evolution. Groves concentrated on the long history of our ancestors becoming humanlike beings through the remarkable process of evolution. The change to us has taken six million years. Evolution since the first symbiotic prototypes that became mitochondrial DNA, and thence us, will not stop there. Those of us who study and cherish information on evolution stand in awe of the surprises it brings and those like Groves never give up the chance to find out more. He is constantly visiting countries where clues to solving our inheritance can be found, but public acceptance of the facts is slow. Anthropology, and particularly palaeo-anthropology, only became a university faculty in its own right a hundred years ago and is now vital to our understanding of ourselves.

Andrew Glikson was the organiser and motivator behind the conference. Glikson is both a geologist and a palaeo-climatologist. His theme was fire and human evolution, highlighting how fire, much of it man-made, has ravaged Earth. Control of fire by humans may have begun more than a million years ago. It was protection against attack but was also a stimulant to communication and imagination. One of the things that made us human was the taming of fire, sitting around the camp fire, telling stories. Out of control fires are now of significant risk to us.

James Hansen, director, NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, is worried about the lack of action taken to reduce the effects of climate change. In a video presentation, he pointed out that the heat wave in Europe in 2003 killed 50,000 people. Events like this will become more common unless more is done to limit carbon emissions, he warned.

Michael Raupach, a program leader in CSIRO’s Centre for Environmental Mechanics tackled projections. How bad can it get? Is it too late already to make adjustments? He explained that “Since the start of the industrial era around 1800, emissions of greenhouse gases through human activities have grown exponentially. He asked “Is it possible for human economic and social systems to decarbonise at the rate of five per cent a year?” He also pointed out that “myths, narrative, stories, mental maps and aspirations” will need to change.

A contribution from Bob Douglas AO, emeritus professor of ANU, a revered medical expert, ended the event. He had this to say: “Human numbers have outstripped the capacity of the environment to maintain us in the style, which we, in the affluent world, now regard as our birthright.” We have plundered not only pristine forests and seas but food growth is finite and critically, particularly in Australia, so is water. Douglas has a message that all should heed. It is “You can do it!”

This he illustrated with an image of cars hurtling along a highway at breakneck speed. A tiny fraction of drivers saw a rugged sign: “Eco-centric survival”. Only careful drivers were within the possible speed to turn off onto the rough track. The rest careered onwards until striking an unyielding concrete wall.

During one of the brief breaks I met a mother with two teenage daughters, both of whom were at university. I asked them whether they found the contents of the conference depressing. Both answered with emphasis: “Not at all!” They regarded the current situation as a challenge and were sure that they and their peers would solve it. This was not said boastfully, neither was it overconfidence – just healthy youthful optimism and great to hear. It is they and their descendants who will pay the price of our tardiness.

The scientists who spoke at this conference are trying to close the stable door after the horse has bolted and to tell the world that the horse has bolted.

Homo sapiens is an ingenious creature, but can it catch the horse?
Who do you reckon are the worst offenders in the media?
[Audience reaction: Television]

I come from newspapers – there are never any problems in newspapers!

This is really weird, preaching to the converted, because quite often I have to explain to people that the world is full of bullshit, and you are the ones who probably already know that, so I don’t have to explain how much bunkum there is out there.

But I would like to talk about how I think it is getting worse, and that is the internet.

This is my livelihood, we all depend on it so much now, but it has changed the way the snake oil merchants work.

Creationism, for example, has a lot of funding and backing, and it took a while for it to get to where it is now, with a whole body of work behind it to catch the unwary. But with the all the new bunkum that’s on the internet it’s very easy to grab those ‘convincing’ arguments. There’s a vast ‘echo chamber’ and people can find the ‘evidence’ for whatever crazy belief they have. Working online you see these people flooding in, and you know where they’ve come from, and it’s often quite sophisticated websites – the science behind the power band or stories behind homeopathy curing cancer.

And that in turn has led to what people refer to as the “democratisation of knowledge”. Everyone’s an expert online. A homeopath, for example, gets as much credence as a doctor.

I’ll quote from Larry Sanger, a co-founder of Wikipedia, who wrote an article where he proudly states that “Professionals are no longer needed for the bare purpose of the mass distribution of information and the shaping of opinion.”

It’s the idea of the noble amateur. Everyone’s an expert. They will tell you that, for example, they’ve looked at climate change data for themselves, and they come up with very different ideas for what it ‘actually’ means.

With The Punch, we’ll run opinion articles and lot of the interest in these is the conversation that follows it. There’s inevitably a lot of politics and other issues raised. We regularly get this with the vaccination issue – it’s a classic example. It’s interesting how people will flood to a topic, swamp it with their comments and back each other up. The scary part is how another person – someone who might be wavering - reads the story and might be convinced.

Obviously you’ve got people who are convinced vaccination is a good thing, but you’ve got this tiny minority who think it’s giving kids autism. Then you’ve got another minority of waverers, and it’s really frightening how they can be turned by the pseudoscience that groups like the Australian Vaccination Network can put out.

Theoretically, the media should be something that holds back the tsunami of rubbish that’s out there. We should be the ones who are arbiters of truth; we should be able to spot the bullshit. We should be filtering it out. We should be a respected institution that people can rely on to get proper information.

And that’s just not happening.
all think that balance is a good thing, and that we should represent different points of view. This is something that is heavily exploited by people who think, therefore, the anti-vaccination people should get as much space as those in favour of vaccination. I think that's something the media have to challenge. I think if something's just not true we shouldn't be printing it. But Meryl Dorey, if you publish a piece on vaccination, will demand a right of reply. She writes to my editor and says that she's been misquoted or taken out of context if I criticise something that she's said. And I don't know if Meryl Dorey has done this, but some people will threaten to take you to the Press Council if you criticise their unproven health therapies.

So there is a range of ways that the woo-woo merchants and the 'moonbats' are trying to manipulate the media, and unfortunately sometimes it works.

There's a really interesting example recently of Jim Stynes, an Australian Rules football legend. Everyone loved him. Unfortunately he died of cancer. While he was suffering from it he was trying every treatment under the sun – he was drinking coffee enemas, he was drinking his own urine, he was doing special juices, he was getting Reiki healing. This was his story and everyone wanted to know the journey he was going on. That gets reported uncritically. Being a skeptic, I wanted to debunk this. If everyone sees a story about their hero drinking his own wee, they're all going to want to drink their own wee if they're suffering from cancer. But you can't criticise a footy legend, especially one who's dying. It was quite insensitive of me. But that's another way that bunkum gets a run in the media. It's part of a story that's true, but there isn't the space or the inclination at that time to debunk what's going on.

CAUSE AND EFFECT
There are a lot of reasons for this. One of these – and many people don't believe this – is that journalists are actually humans. They're just normal people, and brought up like others believing in tarot and the healing properties of crystals. When you stand around and discuss the stories of the day, as part of that conversation it's guaranteed you will have people who believe in completely unproven medical treatments or they never thought to question what the chiropractor told them or they just find it unthinkable that something they've grown up with all of their lives could actually be untrue.

That's one of the ways in which a lot of rubbish gets into the media.

There are also a lot of young, inexperienced journalists and they can get bullied in to running a view quite easily. I keep coming back to Meryl Dorey [head of the AVN]. She, and people like her, can ring up a journalist, harass them and spread scare stories. If people don't know better and it sounds like she's come from a respectable institution, before you know it there's a story on the news list about the latest child killed by vaccination.

Another thing that Dorey does quite successfully is that she knows that the media clings to the idea of balance. We all think that balance is a good thing, and that we should represent different points of view. This is something that is heavily exploited by people who think that, therefore, the anti-vaccination people should get as much space as those in favour of vaccination. I think that's something the media have to challenge. I think if something's just not true we shouldn't be printing it. But Meryl Dorey, if you publish a piece on vaccination, will demand a right of reply. She writes to my editor and says that she's been misquoted or taken out of context if I criticise something that she's said. And I don't know if Meryl Dorey has done this, but some people will threaten to take you to the Press Council if you criticise their unproven health therapies.

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SEE SOME ACTION
We need to fight back. As skeptics - anyone working in science or health - we need more input from interested communities. I'm very privileged as I get to talk with them every day, but there are ways that skeptics can get their message across. I'm sure you know some of them.

We see a lot of skeptics responding to crazy claims in the media. Social media are amazing in terms of getting the skeptical message out there. I see a lot of them debunking the moonbats on The Punch every now and then. But there a few other things that I think can be done.

One is being more proactive. A journalist would generally do four stories a day, and often more than that, so we’re not talking about having a lot of time to do the most thorough job. But say we’re working on something, like someone’s pronounced something to be a miracle, and that’s the story of the day. In every newsroom in the country there will be someone rushing around desperately trying to write copy on it. And if, at that point, an email drops into their inbox with some really good precise quotes about why it’s probably not a miracle, that makes life so much easier. The journalist might be ringing ten people trying to get that good quote, and if one appears then … well, it’s like a miracle!

One of the biggest problems we have is that, if we’re doing a story on some kind of medical bunkum, you go to health bureaucrats, or some kind of officials, or the head of the AMA or whomever, but because of their
Meet the Press

Continued...

positions they’re scared of upsetting anyone.

I was discussing an example earlier of a woman who said she could cure cancer by eating KFC, with a bit of stomach massage as well, as long as you believe. I struggled to get people to tear her to shreds. I called everyone. In the News, I’m not supposed to let my own opinions influence what I’m writing. But you would talk to a top doctor and he says, “Look, I understand that some people may have different beliefs and that some complementary therapy ...” and they would go on and on and on, and they would just not come out and slam this woman for being the fraud that she was. Having people like the Skeptics who are free to really go on the attack is something that journalists would really value.

Anytime you see anything that looks like rubbish, just tell us. We’re actually really easy to contact. Just write to a journalist, tell them whenever you’ve seen someone exploiting vulnerable people, or telling lies, or using a dodgy qualification, anything like that. These are really good stories for us. We rely on the public to give us tips-offs to find these things out. That’s where most of these stories come from – your mate down at the pub telling you what they’ve seen or someone from the public tipping you off.

I think it’s about time for the skeptical community to step it up a bit, and get a bit more proactive in exposing this sort of bunkum every time you see it.

The regulators are not keeping up with all the various ways in which people are taking others’ money in return for fraudulent cancer cures. We all know how much snake oil there is, and that’s a really good story. I think you can start to shift that balance of what’s out there, get rid of all these fluffy feelings on the magical healing powers of pawpaws or whatever the latest thing is.

How much are you restricted by the legal environment? How often do you come across the statement like “We’d love to say how this person is telling lies but we really can’t”?

It depends on the journalist and where they’re at. I’m gradually getting much more confident with the legal system and how far you can go. We have great lawyers at News, but they tend to be over cautious. I think the more journalists who educate themselves about the law and make their own judgements and take their own risks, the better off they’ll be.

I don’t think that I’m restricted as long as I’m telling the truth and not making stuff up. But I think a lot of people do feel constrained, particularly if they’re a junior journalist and they’ve got someone ringing them up and telling them “If you print that story I am going to drag you arse backwards through the justice system”. I think that would have a big impact.

In terms of how the media corporation handles it, that’s another question. They have to make a risk assessment of the chances of it being successful. It’s expensive going to court, and they have to make a risk assessment of the chances of it being successful. It’s expensive going to court, even if you know you’re right.

The other threat is the Press Council; people like to hold that over your head. Again if you’re a junior journo and someone threatens you with the Press Council or MediaWatch, then you crap yourself. That’s what we all fear - having Jonathan Holmes talk about us. That keeps us in line more than the Press Council.

BRIAN DUNNING & THE MEDIA

Skeptical investigator and producer and host of the Skeptoid podcast.

It seems a bit puzzling that your show seems to be something that’s commercially saleable. The same for George Hrab’s program and The Skeptics Guide to the Universe. Yet they’re not on mainstream radio. Why can’t these things get on, even in a small syndicated fashion, in the US?

That’s a good question. The example I use, which may be known to Americans but not to Australians, is a daytime TV show here called The View. You’ve got five women sitting on a couch and they argue about current events and such. If you ask anyone to name a subject they’ve heard on The View, no-one can think of one. What happens on The View is it’s mainly all arguments and fireworks between two of the personalities – one very conservative and Whoopi Goldberg representing the liberal perspective – and it makes great entertainment because it’s conflict.

That is so different from what I’m doing on Skeptoid. Skeptics’ Guide to the Universe has had some conflict, especially when they had a previous host, Perry, who’s unfortunately no longer with us. He used to get into some great arguments and make great entertainment.

So I think it’s just a matter of finding the right personalities and presenting this fascinating information in a more commercial format.

Do you think it’s because commercial entities haven’t woken up to the fact that there is an audience for this, even in a limited way, and they have to work harder to find it, rather than if they’re given something that’s a bit junky they can just throw it on.

I don’t agree that there is an audience out there that isn’t being addressed. All audiences respond to sensational programming, and the problem is that it’s really easy to make up crap and have sensational programming and there’s no real financial upside to putting in the extra work to make non-crap equally sensational.

Don’t get me wrong, it can be done. I’m convinced it can be done and I’m happy to step up and do it. Someone just needs to write a cheque.

- Interviewed by Maynard at TAM 2012, Las Vegas
The Press Council has to consider complaints submitted to it. A whole ago a white supremacist took me to the Press Council because I called him a racist. His argument was that he was just stating the fact that whites are superior, so he was not actually a racist. The Press Council got involved, I got a notification, and they ended up throwing it out of court because it's obviously ridiculous. But, even so, everyone then knows it's gone to the Press Council. He can go onto his website and say “This is now a matter for the authorities. I've gone to the Press Council and I've taken Tory Shepherd there because she called me a racist and I'm going to take her down.”

So, yes, there is an effect from the fear of those sorts of things happening. But you've just got to grow the confidence and the balls to not worry too much about it.

**How much effect is there from the loss of specialisation in journalism?**

*The Advertiser* is pretty good. They quite like to hire people with previous degrees. I did anthropology before I came to journalism. We've got psychiatrists, we've got accountants, we've got a range of people with some particular expertise. Our science reporter used to be with the CSIRO before she came to us, and she does a fantastic job. The problem is that they're not always going to be reporting in their specialist field. You have to be a mini-expert on everything. I can say that in some papers they're not trained in specific areas. They don't know about whether a particular bit of research has been peer reviewed, has it been published, do they know about the theory of falsification. They don't particularly know how science works and I think that shows through.

In an ideal world, everyone would be a specialist. You'd have a doctor as the health reporter, and a scientist as a science reporter, someone who used to work at the EPA on the environment. But it just doesn't happen and I don't think it ever will happen because resources are dwindling and stories have to be done so quickly online that you have to grab the nearest journo. They have to be able to cover a bushfire or a drowning – they have to be able to cover such a broad range. And that's where people like you are very important. If you ring the journalist who's written something without understanding what they're talking about, they'll get scared and they will remember that.

We hate letters to the editor, we hate having our errors pointed out. It's really embarrassing.

**With the ‘information revolution’ becoming the ‘misinformation revolution’, do you see this as getting worse? It sounds like, with losing the print media and all the experience that exists there and relying on outsourcing, you've got to react spontaneously. If you want to be exclusive or get out first you've got to write something even before you've checked the facts.**

In a normal day in the newsroom, you're working very quickly. You've got to get something up online as soon as anything happens, and then have to get working on another version for the next day's paper, and you have to do analysis. It's getting faster and faster all the time. We haven't come to terms yet with what's happening. Maybe once we start making lots of money from online and maybe getting some more resources back into journalism, maybe we can halt that decline. But I don't think we can stop all of these people who go online and find the evidence for their beliefs. We're back to the echo chamber idea, everyone furiously agreeing with each other and lacking any reference to the outside.

**What's the chance of getting a skeptic having his or her own regular column in the media, say every week?**

I would say to anyone, why not suggest it. We have to fill this huge paper every day, so find out who the opinion editor is and give it a crack. ■

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**About the speaker:**

**Tory Shepherd** is chief reporter for News.com.au and a columnist for the national News Ltd opinion site, The Punch. The first article she ever had published was in The Skeptic back in 2003.

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**MICHAEL SHERMER & THE MEDIA**

**Founding publisher of the US Skeptic magazine, executive director of the (US) Skeptics Society and columnist for Scientific American.**

How do you push the message to the media, because you often have only 20 seconds to get your view across?

We try to get the message across that we're teaching people how to think, not what to think; that we live in an age of science; that science should be the definitive test about whether something is true or not.

Have you been on the receiving end of a fiery interviewer?

A lot ... all the time.

How do you feel at the end of it, if you haven't got your argument across or they've cut you off?

Well, I have thick skin. I've done it so much it's not a problem.

Does it help to yell in that sort of situation??

No. It doesn't help.

Penn Jillette seems to think the opposite, that it's OK to lose your cool occasionally.

You can be assertive, in a strategic way, but not lose your temper. I think what he's talking about is strategically raising your voice and saying something with more emphasis as a way to make your point.

- Interviewed by Maynard at TAM 2012, Las Vegas
The concept of the amateur media mogul is appealing to those who feel disenfranchised by the big newspapers, TV and radio networks. Bypassing those near-monopolies and producing your own editorial content seems to be a worthwhile alternative, as long as you can identify an audience, manage the technology, develop the content that will hold your audience’s interest, and find the often considerable effort of producing regular programs. It’s that easy!

In the last century, audio content companies used to supply radio stations with packaged programs – music, talk, etc – that the stations could play as they see fit. In a way, these could be seen as the precursors of podcasts. Unlike these packages, however, podcasts are available to anyone with an internet connection, and represent a more direct way of passing information to a specialised audience of interested parties.

Podcasts are normally audio files that can be downloaded to computers and more often portable media devices (thus “iPod” + “broadcasting” = “podcast”). The video alternative, not surprisingly, is called a “vodcast”.

The technology has been around since the start of the century, when early MP3 player manufacturer, i2Go, began supplying content for its portable MP3 players. The company introduced a digital audio news and entertainment service called MyAudio2Go.com that enabled users to download episodic news, sports, entertainment, weather, and music in audio format for listening on a PC, the eGo portable audio player, or other MP3 players.

Programs were originally downloaded directly from the supplier, although third party distributors, such as iTunes, are now the main source of the files.

The term podcast was first used by a Guardian journalist in 2004, and since then the medium has more than blossomed – estimates of how many there are vary, especially with foreign language versions, but numbers between 100,000 and 150,000 have been given. The vast majority are in English.

Individual skeptics and skeptical groups have taken advantage of the technology, and Tim Farley (www.whatsintheharm.net) estimates that there are 95 such podcasts currently around the world, with 11 sourced from Australia. Between them all, about two hours of content is published every day, ranging from a few minutes to an hour-and-a-half per episode. Most are available for free, although some also suggest a miniscule regular donation would come in handy. The first skepticism podcast is said to be Derek & Swoopy, a US-based program which started in April 2005. It changed to Skepticality, which is now the official podcast of Michael Shermer’s Skeptical Society.

But how successful are they? Farley lists a further 31 that have passed onto that great podcast in the sky, though some of those, it must be admitted, have not so much passed on as morphed into something else (such as The Skeptic Tank into The Skeptic Zone).

Richard Saunders, Australian Skeptics Inc’s president and producer of those two podcasts, says that The Skeptic Zone (www.skepticzone.tv) has been online since September 2008. It averages about an hour of content weekly. Before that, he did a vodcast called the TANK. “That was 30 minutes about every two weeks which was really hard to film and produce.” And before that was The Skeptic Tank, which dated back to 2001 when members of the Skeptics appeared on a segment on net.FM, an internet radio station.

He admits that it’s not always easy finding an hour of content every week that’s going to appeal to an audience and make them want to return week on week.
“I do what I can in conducting interviews or doing field reports myself, but I rely heavily on my reporters to come to the aid of the show. Over the past few years, Maynard’s reports and interviews [“Maynard’s Spooky Action”] have added immeasurably to the show.” The Skeptic Zone also includes informal chats between various members of the Skeptics [“The Think Tank”] and specialised editorial ‘columns’ such as “Dr Rachie Reports” from Rachael Dunlop, “Grain of Salt” from Eran Segev, and “Reality Bites” from Jo Benhamu.

So why did Saunders launch the revised program?

“The Skeptic Zone always has been about segments,” Saunders says. “That is still the case to this day. I tried to have reports like “Dr Rachie Reports” that people would get to know and look forward to hearing again. That is also why each major segment has its own theme music. “People, reporters and segments come and go, but the show has not changed since we launched it.”

And why did he launch it?

“The time seemed right in 2008 and podcasts were popping up everywhere covering all sorts of issues. I also found that most people would rather listen to an audio show than try and watch it. It’s much easier for people to put on headphones and go jogging, commuting or driving.”

He admits that “It’s a tough market and to get a reasonable audience is really hard. Many shows just disappear after a few months when the people behind them realise what a commitment it is to always get that show out. Also, being an Australian show means my audience will never be as big as the US-based shows [such as the Skeptics Guide to the Universe – SGU, www.theskepticsguide.org]. However more people download The Skeptic Zone in the USA than Australia.”

The audience for skeptical sites can range from a few dedicated listeners to those in their thousands. The 80-minute SGU, which launched in 2005, has approximately 100,000 downloads.

But the mainstream media are still, shall we say, sceptical of the skeptical audience.

“After all these years,” Saunders says, “they still look at us as another fringe group or a strange gaggle of old white men who ‘don’t believe in anything’. I think that will change, but it’s a very long road. I like to surprise the media by saying things like ‘As far as I know the universe is teeming with life.’ This can really confuse them as I don’t then fit the pigeon hole.”

One program that did include a sceptical component on a regular basis was The One, a one-hour ‘talent’ program run on the 7 network that basically pitted several psychics against one another, participating in trials which challenged their purported abilities in activities such as clairvoyance, telepathy and mediumship to determine who is Australia’s top psychic.

Saunders was one of two judges on the program – the other was ‘psychic’ Stacey Demarco.

The show ran for two seasons (so far) and has been criticised by both skeptics and ‘psychics’ for editing content for effect.

Nonetheless, Saunders says “The One was a chance for me to put a face on the skeptical movement for a new generation. I knew I would never change the minds of the true believers, but I really wanted to have people see that we are just human and can have fun but also make insightful comments. I’m pleased when, even now, people come up to me in the street to say hello. What is really odd is to have ‘psychics’ at Mind Body Spirit festivals come up to me and call me by name as if they are old friends. Almost universally they will tell me that they think I am a good skeptic, not a cynic, and that they are skeptics too. I know... don’t they all.”

The Skeptic Zone has now produced more than 200 programs. So what does Saunders think makes a good and hopefully successful podcast?

“As far as the Skeptic Zone goes, I try to maintain a high standard of production. Not always easy and I cannot always get it right. I have heard many podcasts over the years that are really just people talking about anything and laughing at their own jokes. That’s fine if that’s what they want to do and they have people who want to hear it. But I try to produce a more polished show.

“I guess if I was to sum it all up in one word, that word would be ‘persistence’.”

About the author:
Tim Mendham is executive officer and editor with Australian Skeptics Inc.
What’s your preferred medium? TV, radio, newspapers, or Madame Fantoma, the gypsy spiritualist down the road? As a skeptic, you’d probably have more chance of a deep and meaningful with the gypsy lady than you would with most Australian mainstream media.

Yes, skeptics are consulted on a regular basis for short comments or ‘grabs’ on anything that happens to be in the news, and that would normally be UFOs or psychic detectives or the occasional ghost story. All the fun stuff.

Getting a serious discussion of any length on a serious topic is less common. In fact, it’s downright uncommon.

Comedian Lawrence Leung’s short series Unbelievable was shown on ABC-TV in 2011. It took a semi-lighthearted look at ghosts, psychics UFOs etc. Leung is a skeptic, but each program in the series would set off with Leung going along with the believers, gradually shining a skeptical light on their evidence and beliefs. Interviews with skeptics were included, including Victorian Skeptic magazine consultant Steve Roberts, who discussed UFOs.

Australian Skeptics are often approached by would-be program producers, pitching a particular concept to cover skeptical topics, often presenting skeptical and non-skeptical views in the one program. Despite their enthusiasm and good intentions, these programs rarely (never?) get off the ground.

Considering that success rate, one can become jaundiced about such proposals. But nonetheless we always welcome them as there might be a jewel among them where the skeptical approach can be properly presented.

Someone who tries to cover a range of skeptical topics - both the fun stuff and some more serious issues – is Maynard, a self-confessed dag who confesses to an abiding over-interest with 1960s TV program figures like Adam West (Batman) and William Shatner (Star Trek).

Maynard is well-versed in the issues of getting skeptical programs on mainstream media.

He started in community radio in Newcastle when he was 16, with his own program Radio Stupid. He then moved to Sydney, where he again worked on community radio on the
Maynard’s ABC digital radio and an accompanying podcast. It was a light-hearted look at skepticism and the paranormal, featuring Maynard, Richard Saunders, Dunlop and Jamie Leonarder (”a great conspiracy theorist archivist”) discussing news, a public shaming (their mistakes), a guest and a theme. “These ranged from Nazi UFOs to the burning social issue of are tights pants? The last episode went to town on the Kennedy assassination.”

But the show wasn’t picked up for any more episodes by the ABC. They called it ”self indulgent and over-produced”, he says.

“I think it was a show that could have gone somewhere. I liked the fact that Richard and Rachie and Jamie could all get along OK, despite coming from different directions.

“I wanted a show that skeptics could listen to and I liked the fact that anomalists and skeptics are both looking for something. The difference is the level of evidence that they require.”

“It was my ideal show. Working on that program was the most fun I’d had working at the ABC for 12 years.”

But alas, not to be repeated, or at least not for the time being.

Instead, Maynard is now working as a “cross media reporter” with the ABC back at skepticism and the paranormal, podcast. It was a light-hearted look at skepticism and the paranormal, featuring Maynard, Richard Saunders, Dunlop and Jamie Leonarder (”a great conspiracy theorist archivist”) discussing news, a public shaming (their mistakes), a guest and a theme. “These ranged from Nazi UFOs to the burning social issue of are tights pants? The last episode went to town on the Kennedy assassination.”

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Instead, Maynard is now working as a “cross media reporter” with the ABC back in his home territory of Newcastle. There he maintains the ABC Newcastle website, develops content for the site, and does multitasking roles on a range of stories for on-air and online use.

He also, of course, has been a regular and prolific correspondent and interviewer for the Skeptic Zone, sometimes notoriously so, leaving some interviewees, particularly those without the quick wit needed to keep up, nonplussed and confused – Maynard’s shirts are as loud as his questions are often confronting.

With that background, he thinks there are the opportunities for skeptical coverage in the media.

“Local radio might like to get through four different issues an hour - potentially 12 issues for a three hour program. They’re under pressure. In regional radio you’ve got few resources, no time to go back and revisit things.”

Which means they would probably welcome the input.

And the future?

“1d like to do a Dirty Disbelievers version of the 7.30 program. Or do a wacky late night TV program – there’s no money in it, so only cable could do it.

“The worst thing you can do is call me a journalist, because I’m not. They’re someone who checks their facts twice, they’re serious people, who are all about getting hard-nosed news. And that’s about as far away from my style as possible.”

HOW GOOD ARE SKEPTICS ON TV?

For every program featuring a skeptic – and there are very few – there are dozens that promote the paranormal as being authentic. And when skeptics are included in programs, they are often there as a token effort, a sop to “scientific balance”.

Take for instance the appalling program Chasing UFOs. “Chasing” is an apt description of the show, as the protagonists spend most of each episode rushing breathlessly around various landscapes, raising paranoid delusions of being watched or tracked, and showing off a fine range of night vision glasses. Produced by the once-prestigious National Geographic organisation, the program has been pilloried by both UFO proponents and skeptics.

The so-called skeptic in this ‘real life’ investigative documentary series is Ben McGee, “a space-minded geoscientist” who is engaged in the development of ‘xenoarchaeology’, “a speculative form of archaeology exploring possible alien life and culture”.

This is a skeptic?

Sorry, he must be, because the show’s website tells us so: “Ben is a true skeptic by nature, and as Chasing UFOs’ resident scientist, he brings a wealth of diverse academic and scientific know-how to the team. A respected field researcher with experience in nuclear rocketry, planetary geology, hydrology and glaciology, Ben’s job is to gather evidence at proposed sites of unexplained occurrences and scientifically determine its origin.”

His prognosis is, normally, “Gee, I dunno ... it could be.”

And it doesn’t get much better when you have a show totally about skeptical investigators.

Fast or Faked: Paranormal Files features a group of paranormal investigators who also race breathlessly around various mysterious sites trying to recreate famous videos or artefacts, as if recreating something is definitive proof that the original is a fake.

Skepchik Rebecca Watson, in a review of the program, says that “All in all, I can’t say this is the worst paranormal show on television. The hosts act like morons, but I think it’s pretty clear that most of them are just going through the motions to be on television and get free trips to Mexico.”

Both programs suffer from the need to dramatise what is often undramatic. Glamorous people in glamorous locations is not skeptical investigation, with or without night vision glasses.

- Tim Mendham
ABC-TV’s Media Watch program has described the Australian Vaccination Network (AVN) as “deceptively-named” and an “obsessively anti-vaccination pressure group that’s immunised itself against the effect of scientific evidence”.

In a segment of the program titled “False balance leads to confusion”, which went to air on October 1, host Jonathan Holmes also referred to an AVN claim about medical literature linking vaccination with autism as “pure, unadulterated baloney”. He also said that supposed evidence for a link was “bulldust”.

Not surprisingly, AVN acting president Meryl Dorey was not impressed. In a blog, she called the report “a hatchet job” and “reporting of the lowest standard”.

The segment covered an August 16 report on Wollongong-based WIN-TV News about an outbreak of measles. The WIN program included a comment from a reputable medical source, but the reporter, Michaela Gray, then allowed Dorey to make her claim that “All vaccinations in the medical literature have been linked with the possibility of causing autism, not just the measles/mumps/rubella vaccine.”

Media Watch referred to the news program’s approach as an example of “false balance”, where a reporter or producer simply looks for two sides to a story, regardless of the relative merits of the two positions.

“To put it bluntly, there’s evidence, and there’s bulldust. It’s a journalist’s job to distinguish between them, not to sit on the fence and bleat ‘balance’. Especially when people’s health is at risk.”

Holmes asked “So why on earth ... did [WIN-TV] include the AVN’s misleading claims in a news story about a measles outbreak? WIN-TV couldn’t find time to answer that question.” He then quoted Shirley Brown, group business director for WIN-TV, who wrote to a viewer who had complained about the coverage: “The story presented was accurate, fair and balanced and presented the views of the medical practitioners and of the choice groups.”

“Medical practitioners – choice groups,” Holmes said, balancing one hand against the other. “One opinion as valid as the other. It’s a classic example of what many – especially despairing scientists – call ‘false balance’ in the media.”

In commenting on WIN-TV’s “fair balance” excuse, Holmes, in fact, gave even stronger criticism of the AVN’s claims: “[The WIN-TV program] only quoted one [‘free choice’] group, which claims that it’s in favour of the public having a choice. But Meryl Dorey’s deceptively-named Australian Vaccination Network is in fact an obsessively anti-vaccination pressure group that’s immunised itself against the effect of scientific evidence. Dorey’s claim about the medical literature linking vaccination and autism is pure, unadulterated baloney.”

Note: The Media Watch report and transcript can be found at www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s3601416.htm.
LANDING on the TRUTH 2013

CANBERRA

AUSTRALIAN SKEPTICS NATIONAL CONVENTION

November 22-24, 2013
Ball lightning is one of the strangest phenomena on our planet. It’s usually seen during thunderstorms as a ball of light about the size of a grapefruit, with the intensity of roughly a 40W light bulb. It moves at about walking speed, roughly a metre above the ground, and lasts about ten seconds. It’s been seen by hundreds of people for hundreds of years in almost every country of the world – but has remained something of a mystery. Put simply, we don’t know what it is, what provides its energy, or why it moves independently of any breeze.

But my colleagues and I have published a new paper* that should shed some light on this mysterious phenomenon and bring us one step closer to understanding, definitively, what ball lightning is.

A BRIGHT HISTORY

My association with ball lightning began in the 1960s when I was working for Westinghouse Research Laboratories in Pittsburgh in the USA, working on the theory of cooling air formed from electric arcs in circuit breakers.

Next to my office was that of physicist Martin Uman who now, having written three text books on lightning, is regarded as the world’s leading lightning scientist.

One day, over coffee, Martin mentioned that ball lightning was one of the very few phenomena we don’t understand at all, despite having been seen by hundreds, maybe thousands, of people.

I replied that I thought ball lightning was just hot air produced from a lightning strike, the ball being so large that it cooled only slowly, giving it a lifetime of seconds (rather than the fraction of a second a lightning strike lasts for).

Several months later, Martin came back from one of his trips to Washington with a contract from the US Air Force for me to research ball lightning. I presume the US Air Force was interested to be able to make ball lightning and use it in the Vietnam War to scare the Viet Cong!

But there was a problem with my ‘hot air’ theory: hot air rises and ball lightning does not generally rise. In 1969, after the contract period had expired, my colleagues and I concluded we still had no idea what ball lightning was.

Yet we wrote a paper, published in the Journal of Geophysical Research, entitled “Toward a Theory of Ball Lightning”, in which we explained ball lightning could not just be hot air because hot air rises.

LIGHTING UP THE HOUSE
While many sightings of ball lightning have been made outdoors, it is also seen inside houses. In fact, a recent French survey of 350 sightings in France found far more observations of ball lightning inside houses than outside (181 to 94). Perhaps even scarier, ball lightning has been seen inside of aeroplanes.

Luckily, it seems the ball lightning that appears inside of houses and aeroplanes is harmless and no injuries have been reported. I’ve heard one report of ball lightning in a plane passing right through or around an air hostess as it travelled down the central aisle of the plane.

John Lowke knows that ball lightning exists.
The problem now is to figure out what on Earth it is, and then make our own.
(By contrast, outdoor ball lightning has been seen to initiate very damaging lightning strikes.)

So how do these balls of lightning get inside houses and aeroplanes? And why does ball lightning almost always move? People claim to have seen ball lightning entering a house through a closed glass window, yet subsequent examination of the window reveals no damage or even discolouration of the glass.

There have been hundreds of papers written in scientific journals speculating on these issues, variously assigning the energy source of ball lightning to nuclear energy, anti-matter, black holes, masers, microwaves … you name it.

A recent theory (besides our own) about ball lightning – published in Nature in 2000 by John Abrahamson at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand – is that ball lightning is a ball of burning dendrites (branched projections) of silicon fluff formed after a lightning strike vaporises material from the ground.

But it seems impossible that such a mechanism could cause ball lightning inside a house or aeroplane.

NEW AND IMPROVED
The new theory about ball lightning that my colleagues and I have published is unlike any before it.

We propose ball lightning is powered by ions (charged particles) formed in the atmosphere, particularly from lightning, where columns of ions kilometres in length are produced from a lightning strike and ‘stepped leaders’ (paths of ionised air).

In this way, ball lightning does not ‘pass through’ closed glass windows, but is formed on the inside surface of the window by ions piling up at the outside surface.

The piled up ions on the outside surface of the glass – which is an electrical insulator – increase the electric field on the inside, and can initiate ionisation – that is, the creation of charged particles.

Charges of the opposite sign to those outside on the window will be attracted to the inside leaving a charged sphere of plasma free to move away from the window. This discharge is ball lightning.

Using the conventional equations for electron and ion motion in an electric field we were able to predict such a ball-like structure from a stream of ions impacting on glass.

In this way, we’ve explained (we believe) the principal mysteries of ball lightning. The energy source is ions left in the atmosphere after a lightning strike. The roughly ten-second lifetime of ball lightning can be explained as the time taken for ions to be dispersed to the ground.

The ball moves due to electrical forces from other ions that have collected on insulators, such as those that exist on the walls of rooms or aircraft. For instance, ions from the ball lightning discharge can collect on a plastic or wooden surface if the ball comes into contact with it, repelling the ball and giving the appearance of ‘bouncing’.

CREATING BALL LIGHTNING
Of course, the definitive proof of any theory is experiment. What we need is an experiment to actually reproduce ball lightning in a controlled way.

Several of the observations in aircraft have been when there was no evident thunderstorm. We postulate that the ions in this case were produced by the aircraft’s radio antenna.

If this is true, such experiments for the production of ball lightning should be possible, independent of the power sources of natural lightning, which typically generates up to 100 million volts.

If these experiments come to fruition, it is highly likely that, in the next few years, the long-standing mystery of ball lightning will be definitively solved.


Note: This article is republished from The Conversation, 5 November 2012 - http://theconversation.edu.au/ball-lightning-exists-but-what-on-earth-is-it-10419

Finding photographic evidence of ball lightning is next to impossible. Much of what is put forward is merely photos of plasma balls, which do not have the characteristics of ‘ball lightning’ at all. What we are largely left with are Victorian engravings of befuddled businessmen, frightened farmers and shocked suburbanites.

“ I presume the US Air Force was interested to use ball lightning against the Viet Cong.”
Off with the Fairies

Adam van Langenberg reports on a visit to a fair full of psychics (plus a few others) where he comes across the bad, the ugly and the really ugly.

On a recent weekend I was unexpectedly driving up the Nepean Highway in Cheltenham, Victoria, due to a surprise invitation to lunch from some friends. At a very specific moment of my journey I happened by chance alone to turn my head to the right and noticed a sign proudly claiming “Psychic Expo”.

Clearly, this was no coincidence.

In fact, one of the vendors inside told me that to my face.

At $5 entry I figured, why not? It should be a good way to kill a couple of hours on a Sunday afternoon and possibly learn a little bit more about what these chaps were up to.

I decided to call myself Tyler and pretend that I had a three-year-old daughter called Zoe and a deceased father. I thought back to my high school drama days and imagined the spotlight following me around wherever I went.

The event was held in the Kingston City Hall and was not particularly busy. There were around 15 vendors inside and possibly 30 visitors. More came in over the two hours I spent there, but I don’t think they would have had more than a hundred or so altogether.

I have ranked them from what I think were the least to most harmful. A couple were fairly innocent, just a bit silly. Others angered me to the point of contacting the city council and asking them why they allowed such people to sell their wares in an official city building.

THE BAD

A very nice lady was selling some children’s books full of positive messages such as “I love family” and “I love breathing”. She told me how thinking “I love my body” could really help, and I asked her if she meant that I could stop going to the gym. She said no, just that being positive about my body meant I would be more likely to take care of it. She was definitely the least kooky of the bunch.

Only slightly more kooky was the lady selling the Himalayan salt lamps. Apparently they emit negative ions which counteract the harmful positive ions produced by electronic devices in your home. I asked how big a lamp I would need to balance my 48-inch TV and I was told to go by feeling, not size. She suggested at least one in each room, especially children’s bedrooms.

I commented on the irony of the fact that the lamps contained positive ion emitting light bulbs but she said they don’t, they just heat the salt which is what makes them work.

More bizarre were the heart shaped salt rocks labelled “angel poo”. Apparently angels defecate in the shape of a heart. Who knew? Ultimately I didn’t find these terribly bad. The science behind her claims is non-existent but at least she wasn’t making any real health claims.

And the lamps were quite pretty so I can’t fault her aesthetics.

THE UGLY

Most of the tables were for the fortune tellers. All of them had tarot cards but a couple also claimed to be able to communicate with the spirits.

“What are spirits?” I asked.

“They’re just dead people, basically. Yeah, they’re dead people.”

Gotcha.

One said she might be able to contact my father (alive and well in Healesville) but couldn’t make any guarantees. They’re still people so who knows what they’re up to!

Prices varied from $20 to $30 for 15 minutes, and up to $45 for a half hour. I decided to give the cheapest tarot reader a go and this is where I learned my first lesson: you get what you pay for.

I spent the reading looking for cold-reading techniques and trying my
best to not give away any information through my body language. I needn't have bothered as she didn't look up from the cards once.

She had me shuffle and deal out 11 cards onto her green velvet draped table, which were then arranged in some kind of pattern. I got told that I am very organised (I'm not) and that there will be a lot of retrenchments at my business (I'm a teacher) and I would rise to a leadership position within the next six months (no chance in hell). My three-year-old daughter (I have no children) was very wise for her age and that my wife and I don't see each other as much as we'd like to (we're both teachers and see each other too much, according to my wife).

I did notice a couple of cold-reading techniques coming out. I'm fairly convinced that she wasn't aware she was using them, or least wasn't doing anything deceitful. She clearly seemed to believe in what she was doing.

Psychic: “You are very organised.”
Me: “No I'm not.”
Psychic: “Well, you could learn.”
See what she did there? She turned her miss into a hit. Of course, I could learn to be more organised; pretty much anybody could!

“You're a ballerina!” “No I'm not!”
“Well you could take lessons!”
I asked her to tell me about my family and she dealt out some cards, one of which was the two of pentacles.

Psychic: “Do you have two children?”
Me: “No, I have one daughter.”
Psychic: “Well it must mean your wife and daughter.”

Another miss turned into a hit!
The third time I noticed this technique was when she turned a miss into a hit by telling me that I was wrong and she was right.

Psychic: “Is your daughter an Earth sign?”
Me: “No, she's a Sagittarius.”
Psychic: “Well she has a lot of Earth sign characteristics.”
One of my students pointed out that she was essentially saying that I couldn't trust astrology, anybody could be anything.

$20 later I looked around for something else to do.

THE REALLY UGLY
More disturbing than most was the representative from a cult known as Eckankar, who taught me a magic word that could be used to communicate with God and reveal my past lives. The word is “HU” (pronounced hew). This will open your body (or your soul, they're essentially the same thing) and then you chant “MANA” (pronounced marna).

He spent a lot of time trying to give me free books and pamphlets and encouraging me to attend their fortnightly chanting sessions. Of course, he was very friendly and open, but then again, cult recruiters generally tend to be.

Not so encouraging was the man from Scientology. I spent around twenty minutes with him, learning about them and what they do. He showed me a booklet containing an emotional scale known as a “tone scale”. 1.5 is anger, 2.5 is boredom, 3.5 is cheerful and so on. Apparently everybody has a base level which they will revert to. A person whose base level is 1.5 will generally be angry all the time. They may feel more positive emotions from time to time but will eventually default back to anger.

I took an E-meter stress test to see how I was doing and apparently I am a 3.45, quite cheerful! This pleased me no end. The fact that I could make the little needle on the machine jump around by moving the handles was irrelevant, I suppose.

What hurt my feelings was that he made absolutely no attempt to recruit me. He didn't tell me where they met, he didn't try to sell me a book or DVD, he didn't even tell me how much better my life would be if I joined them. Am I not special enough? Could he sense my lack of riches? Was my slack-jawed yokel impression not good enough to mask my cunning intellect? I felt like writing a letter to Tom Cruise to complain.

It was actually a lot of fun pretending to be completely ignorant because these people were falling over themselves to get their message out there. No question was too stupid for them to answer. I did feel very welcomed there and I see that as a real danger. It would be a very tempting place for somebody who was feeling lost or alone.

Even worse than the cults (in my opinion, anyway) were the alternative medicine pedlars. One lady told me that she could reverse type-2 diabetes through diet and twice-yearly detoxes. She couldn't use the word “cure” due to legal reasons but had cleverly discovered that saying “reverse” meant the same thing and didn't incur the wrath of the diabetes foundation.

The stall that really upset me was run by a lady who sold magical rocks. No wait, they weren't “magical”. Actually nothing at the entire expo was magical. They were all 100 per cent scientific.

These scientific rocks grew in the earth and contain minerals. We contain minerals. Therefore these rocks can help us by giving out powerful emotions. She had bowls full of beautiful little stones, all shiny and polished and in varied hues and colours. Each one has a different effect, such as tektite which is as follows:

- It's a meteorite and is believed to enhance connection to other worlds
- It delves deep into the heart of a situation, so you see the cause and effect

Below: Tektites - great for protecting from fire and fever ... but too powerful for kids and pets.
Off with the Fairies

Continued...

- It creates bio-magnetic energy around the body
- It signifies spiritual change & development
- You can bury it near your front door to guard against fire, storm, hostility and to attract abundance
- They are too powerful to use on children & animals, and
- They reduce fevers, aid circulation and prevent the transmission of diseases, skin disorders and illnesses that drain strength.

Worried about the spread of HIV in Africa and the fact that the Catholic church tells them that condoms are evil? No problem! Just give them a small piece of tektite. Sick of replacing your smoke detector batteries? Just bury one by your front door and you’ll be fine.

That’s not even the bad part. She mentioned using one for her son who suffers from migraines. One placed under his pillow at night fixes them right up. I asked her what else her rocks could cure and she dropped the big C right on me.

Cancer.

Cancer is nothing more than repressed emotion, apparently. And what is the cure for repressed emotion? Amethyst. Carried with you, worn as jewellery or placed under your pillow at night time won’t just prevent cancer but completely cure it. I agree that repressing your emotions isn’t healthy but it sure doesn’t cause cancer.

As funny as I found some of the exhibitors ($80 for a badly drawn picture of a guardian angel) I can’t find a single thing to laugh about here. Even one person taking her advice over a doctor’s would be one too many. How would you feel if somebody close to you abandoned their medical treatment for a magic rock?

I do understand that desire - cancer treatment is no picnic and I don’t think we can blame people for wanting an easier, less scary option. What we can do is blame the people pushing these decisions. They are taking advantage of people’s fear and weakness and turning it into a profit.

I’m not going to call this person a con artist because I think they believe in what they are doing. That still does not excuse the fact that an untrained individual is giving out very serious, very flawed and very dangerous medical advice.

Given that this event was held in the Kingston City Hall I have written to the council expressing my anger and concern. Finding people making unsupported medical claims and two cults operating out of an official city building is not the type of thing I expect. I have no doubt they will respond with something along the lines of “It is not up to us to monitor every stall holder and people have the right to express their opinions etc etc.”

I hope I’m wrong.
DR BOB’S QUIZ

1. In the UK Midlands, the Oxford, Cambridge and Regional examination board’s syllabus once required knowledge of the “ocrawatt” and “ocrajoule”. How many watts were in an ocrawatt?

2. What is, or rather was before the Russians flattened it, the principal source of revenue of Chechnya?

3. When an earthquake shook the Microsoft building in Seattle, the alarms sounded properly but nobody left their desks. What eventually persuaded the staff to leave the building?

4. There are legends of “four perfect hands” each of 13 cards of the same suit being dealt in a single game of bridge. Apart from its extreme improbability, what other reasoning indicates that this has never happened?

Answers on page 62

ACROSS
1. I see something in an Oedipal air. (10)
6. How much land does 51 cover? (4)
10. Romania’s fine for a crash site. (7)
11. A splendid display, a sound of a town going under. (7)
12. Cads have bad retorts. (7)
14. Your editor has a degree in Cuban music. (5)
15. Used to refer, and to arouse. (6)
16. A spiritualist, whose condition is neither rare nor well done. (6)
20. Shout angrily to allow an insect. (3,3)
21. Back at one, then a Greek letter for exercise. (3,3)
23. Foreigners are doubly positive when faced with 16 across’s board. (5)
26. Alien life form soon confused by a Latin. (7)
27. Male demon incorporating uranium transport. (7)
28. Arrange a micron for wireless pioneer. (7)
29. Is Elliot or the monster home? (4)
30. Break a clay cast – a thousand more would be a disaster. (1,9)

DOWN
1. Always on the go for a poorly made purple tea suggestion. (9,6)
2. The right rest cure won’t bring you back to life. (9)
3. Very like a citadel in ruins. (9)
4. Hooter in low light. (3)
5. I am disgusted with mischievous behaviour. (6)
6. How a steaming mailman can find you attractive. (6,9)
7. Catching sleep when a man falls into the drink? (5)
8. Must sort pornography. (4)
13. Aztec town centre on the outer? (4)
17. Isn’t it strange for the European community to give money to Little Richard? (9)
18. Spots before the eyes? (9)
19. What sort of life does uranium have? (4)
22. Manage to scrape through 30,900,000,000,000km. (6)
24. Incorporated as southern Americans. (5)
25. Cathartic centre added me for an excuse. (4)
28. Joined the weather bureau. (3)
Gather now as we throw another log on the fire, pour some milk in our tea, and close the shutters against the mist as we tell stories of Borley Rectory, the most haunted house in England, and probably in the world.

A rectory is the residence provided by a church to its rector, vicar, or minister. This particular rectory was built on the same site as a Cistercian priory perhaps several hundred years older in what is now Borley, Essex, United Kingdom. There are two stories of ancient love affairs gone wrong from Borley Rectory. In one account, a monk from a nearby 14th century monastery had a relationship with a novice from the local nunnery at Bures. When the illegal affair was discovered, the monk was hanged and the nun was bricked up alive inside the basement of the priory, which later became Borley Rectory. Later, in the 17th century, a French nun named Marie Lairre left her order in Le Havre and came to England, staying for some time at the same nunnery in Bures. Soon she met and married Henry Waldengrave, owner of a manor home that stood on the site of Borley Rectory.

In an evening of rage, Waldengrave strangled his wife, and buried her in the basement.

Eventually, in 1862, Borley Rectory was constructed for the Reverend Henry Dawson Ellis Bull. Almost from the beginning, the Bull family was plagued by frightening apparitions. A ghostly nun was frequently reported in the twilight near the home, walking through the gardens. Once Bull’s daughters tried to talk to the nun, only to see her fade away and disappear as they got closer. The family was shocked to learn that the nun’s path through the garden was already well known to the local villagers, and was called the Nun’s Walk. Sometimes the nun was seen watching people from an upstairs window. Even more terrifying was the appearance of a phantom coach driven by two headless coachmen, which was sometimes seen and often heard at night in front of the rectory. The sounds of mysterious footsteps and strange creaks and crashes were commonly heard inside the house.

“Harry Price … by no means a scientist or unbiased researcher but a proven hoaxster.”

Were the events at Borley Rectory a real haunting, or the product of a hoaxster? Brian Dunning investigates.
Reverend Bull’s son, Harry Bull, succeeded his father and stayed in the home until his death in 1927. It was said that Harry Bull enjoyed the ghostly disturbances as entertainment, and built a summer house overlooking the Nun’s Walk where he could enjoy cigars and watch the spectacle.

The new rector, Guy Smith, moved in with his family in 1928. While cleaning, Mrs Smith found a strange package wrapped in brown paper, and inside was the skull of a young woman. The same strange incidents plagued the Smith family, and after Mrs Smith saw the phantom coach, they called in The Daily Mirror newspaper for help. The Mirror sent paranormal researcher Harry Price to investigate. Price had stones and a vase thrown at him from unseen hands. After the Smiths’ daughter was inexplicably locked in a room with no key, they had had enough, and moved out after only one year.

The next victims were Reverend Lionel Foyster and his wife Marianne, and it was during their stay that Borley Rectory’s most famous haunting occurred: the appearance of automatic writing on the walls of the house. The writings contained pleas for help from Marie Lairre, often addressed specifically to Marianne. The writings said things like “Marianne, please help get” and “Marianne, light mass prayers” and “Pleas for help and prayers”. The writings sometimes even appeared in real time while people watched! The Foysters tried to erase and even paint over the writing, but it persisted.

Marianne was often victimised by violence. She was thrown from her bed on many occasions, was attacked and slapped by unseen assailants, and was struck by flying rocks. Windows shattered spontaneously. Reverend Foyster tried many times to exorcise the house, without result, and kept logs of the incidents which he mailed to Harry Price. Price said that the Foysters reported as many as 2000 events.

The Foysters finally gave up and moved out, and Harry Price himself rented the Rectory. Price advertised for 48 volunteer researchers to come and stay in the house with him and help record the supernatural episodes. Along with his best friends and fellow researchers Sidney and Helen Glanville, Price conducted seances using a planchette, a writing implement held by the seance participants similar to a Ouija Board. Two spirits most often manifested themselves during these seances. Marie Lairre, the most vocal of the spirits, told her woeful story and explained that she was condemned to wander until her bones could receive a proper Christian burial. The second spirit, named Sunex Amures, warned that he would burn down the rectory that very night, and that the bones of a murder victim would be revealed in the wreckage.

The rectory did burn down, but it was eleven months after the ghostly threat. The home’s new owner, Captain W. H. Gregson, was unpacking and accidentally overturned an oil lamp, starting a fire that destroyed the building. During the inferno, onlookers spotted a nun in one of the windows.

Afterwards the rubble was demolished, and the bricks were re-used for the war effort, leaving a bare hole in the ground.

Harry Price took advantage of the unfortunate opportunity and excavated the basement. The bones of a young woman were found, certified by a pathologist, and reburied in the nearby cemetery at Liston in 1943. After nearly a century of haunting, Marie Lairre was finally at rest, the Nun’s Walk found peace, and the legend of the most haunted house in England came to an end.

And now, decades later, we turn a skeptical eye upon Borley Rectory and see how much of it we can verify, and how much of it is complete bunk.

One of the keys to understanding the events at Borley Rectory is to understand who Harry Price was. By no means was he a scientist or an unbiased researcher. He was an expert magician, a member of the British organisation The Magic Circle, and a
proven hoaxer. He was a close friend of Charles Dawson, the man behind the infamous Piltdown Man hoax. He and photographer William Hope staged an elaborate photograph depicting a ghost looking over the shoulder of Price as he sat for a portrait. He went on the road with a fake statue of Hercules. He exhibited a fake silver ingot from the reign of Roman emperor Honorius. He showed gold coins from the kings of Sussex and a bone carved with hieroglyphics, all proven to be fakes.

By every account, Harry Price was a practised hoaxster and very much of the P. T. Barnum mould. And he did not investigate Borley rectory for his own health. He achieved a great deal of notoriety from it, including the publication of three books, *The Most Haunted House in England*, *Poltergeist Over England*, and *The End of Borley Rectory*.

It’s important to note that prior to the 1929 article in *The Daily Mirror*, when Harry Price was first called in, no written account exists of any unusual incidents at Borley Rectory. A closer look at the facts reveals a long string of inconsistencies and contradictions between Price’s published accounts and the reports of the families themselves. Let’s go through a few of these.

The legend of the nun bricked up in the cellar, that so frightened the Bull family, came from a novel that they owned by H. Rider Haggard, *Montezuma’s Daughter*. Reverend Bull used to read this chilling tale to his children.

Reverend and Mrs Smith said that they left the house due to its horrible condition and prehistoric plumbing, not due to any hauntings. The skull that Mrs Smith found was attributed to a victim of the 1654 plague, many victims of which were crudely buried in the ground that later became part of the garden of the Rectory. It was not uncommon for skulls and
other bones to be found on the property, and they were routinely reburied in the churchyard.

Marianne Foyster stated that she believed many of the strange incidents were being staged by her husband working in league with Harry Price. Price countered that he believed Marianne herself was, consciously or unconsciously, causing some of the incidents, stating that events only seem to occur when she was present.

There is much confusion over the automatic writing. Most significantly, accounts of the Glanvilles’ seances show that they used rolls of wallpaper on which to capture the writings of their planchette. Why they used wallpaper rolls is not clear, but it could be as simple as wallpaper being the largest rolls of paper that were handy. The story of automatic writing appearing on the walls of Borley Rectory while people watched appears to be nothing more than a misinterpretation of the reports of the planchette seances, in which writing was captured on wallpaper while seance attendees watched and participated. As for the contents of the writings, most are almost completely illegible, and the popular interpretations are dubious at best. In particular, the writing interpreted as the name Marie Lairre appears to many skeptics to say no such thing.

When Borley Rectory burned down, the insurance company determined the fire to be arson, and Captain Gregson’s claim to be fraudulent. What connection this has to Harry Price is not certain, but Gregson was instrumental in organising Price’s excavation, and was present when the bones were found in the cellar. You decide.

Price’s discovery of the bones has also been the subject of debate. Critics have questioned the likelihood of Price turning up bones in a single search in only a few hours, when other searches, both before and after Price’s excavation, came up empty handed despite far more extensive digging. They also question the fortuitous presence of a pathologist and a barrister to certify the remains. And to make it even more confusing, the two gardeners who did the actual digging, Johnnie Palmer and a Mr Jackson, identified the only bone recovered as a pig’s jawbone. What was actually recovered, and how did Price happen to have a pathologist and a barrister on hand? It’s unlikely that we’ll ever know either answer for sure, but there’s enough uncertainty to put Price’s own claim on thin ice.

Harry Price died only a few years later, and some of his former associates from the English Society for Psychical Research published their own findings and analysis. A similar report was made by the London Society for Psychical Research. Both reports concluded that there were no verifiable events that could not have had natural explanations, that Harry Price’s duplicity made it hopeless to determine the validity of his findings, and that the most popularised events were caused by Price himself. They even debunked specific episodes, such as a light often seen in one of the rectory’s upper windows which happened to coincide with the reflected headlight of a regularly-scheduled train nearby.

The conclusion I draw from all of this is that to enjoy a good ghost story, you’d better not look at it too closely. If the events at the world’s most haunted house can be total fabrications, then what about all those other lesser hauntings around the world? Maybe it’s time for one of them to step up and take over the crown. All it takes is some creativity and a book with a great title.

Note: This article is a transcript of an episode of Skeptoid (episode #53, July 5, 2007). It is used with permission and is copyrighted to the author.

About the author:
Brian Dunning is a computer scientist, and host and producer of the award-winning podcast, Skeptoid: Critical Analysis of Pop Phenomena (www.skeptoid.com).
Pyramids, Pyramyths & Pyramidiots

In this classic article from The Skeptic 1988, Barry Williams gets to the top of an age-old non-mystery, and establishes the role of EUTS in pseudoscience.

What is a pyramid? Is it a polyhedron whose base is a polygon and whose sides are triangles having a common vortex? Well, yes it is, but it is far more than that. The pyramid, which in its megalithic manifestation played a very important role in the histories of two early civilisations, has excited more speculation and fantasy than has any other solid geometrical shape. Cubes and dodecahedrons have never had the press of the pyramid.

Before we investigate some of the more fantastic myths that have attached themselves to pyramids, we should review some of the facts which, to the inquiring mind, are far more fascinating than the fantasies.

THE PYRAMIDS OF EGYPT
The heading of this section is the title of the book widely regarded as the definitive work on the topic. Written by IES Edwards, keeper of Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum from 1955-72, this book presents the facts in a most readable form and is the reference for the archaeological information in this article.

The history of Dynastic Egyptian civilisation covers more than 3000 years, of which the Pyramid Age accounts for fewer than 500, although this form of construction continued, in a much debased form, for a further 500. There are more than 80 known pyramids in Egypt, some of which are so ruined as to appear only as heaps of rubble.

It is not surprising that many people have exercised their imaginations to speculate on the purpose of these massive stone structures and on the methods used in their construction. Although there is much that is unknown about the Egyptian pyramids, there can be little doubt that they were built according to the funerary rites of the Egyptian religion and that the construction methods used were quite possible within the limits of the technology of the time.

The Egyptian religion was firmly based on the existence of an afterlife, which depended for its continuance on the protection of the mortal remains of the former citizen. In pre-dynastic times, important people were buried under a mound of sand, the shape of which seems to have gained some religious significance. During the First and Second Dynasties, this mound was made more elaborate and became a rectangular, decorated mud brick structure, called a mastaba. Naturally enough, the mastaba of the Pharaoh was the most imposing, although many fine examples have been found of those of nobles and officials.

In the Third Dynasty, circa 2680 BC, the Pharaoh of the time, Zoser, was fortunate in having as his Chancellor, one Imhotep, who is credited with the building of the first pyramid (and, incidentally, the world’s first large stone building). Imhotep was deified by later Egyptians, possibly the first recorded instance of someone “coming up through the ranks”.

Theories have been put forward about the use of the pyramid as a religious building, the place of the Pharaoh’s resting place, and as a kind of temple. This last theory is supported by the discovery of the Sixth Dynasty pyramid of Pharaoh Sahure near the Sphinx, which contains a temple and a vast necropolis with the remains of many of the old nobility.

The pyramid was also an important symbol of the Egyptian religion, and the word “pyramid” itself comes from the Greek word for “pyramid,” which means “to square.”

The Egyptian pyramids are a marvel of human ingenuity, and they continue to inspire awe and wonder to this day. They are a testament to the skill and craftsmanship of the ancient Egyptians, and they are a reminder of the enduring power of the human spirit.
It is tempting to speculate that Imhotep thought to himself one day “If I put another mastaba on top of the first one and then another on top of that, until I reach six, then my Pharaoh will be much more important than his old Dad”, but excavations of Zoser’s Step Pyramid reveal that many changes in design occurred during its construction. First, an unusual square mastaba was built in the unusual material of stone.

Then it was added to, in various stages, until it became rectangular, then built upwards to become a four step pyramid, then extended on two sides and upwards to become a six step pyramid, which was its final form.

All of this indicates that there was no sudden infusion of new ideas from “somewhere else” but suddenly changed “primitive” Egyptians into brilliant engineers and stonemasons, a theory beloved of the more irrational speculators on matters Egyptian. It is clear that Imhotep was an unusually intelligent man, but it is equally clear that his ideas did not spring from mysterious sources. His learning curve is inscribed in stone.

From the first step pyramid, we can trace the development of this form of architecture through the first true pyramid, to the apogee of pyramid building, the Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza. This is the one about which all of the fantasies have been constructed and it certainly is a remarkable piece of engineering.

The first notable fact about the Great Pyramid is that the time which elapsed between the invention of pyramid architecture by Imhotep and the construction of this, the largest and best of them all, was only a little over a century.

The Great Pyramid is unique in many ways. When it was built, it was the heaviest building (at around 6 million tonnes) ever built. It still is. It consists of approximately 2.3 million blocks of stone, with an average weight of 2.5 tonnes. Its base is 227 metres square, accurate to within 20cm on each side. Its original height was 150m, although the top 15m have disappeared. It is accurately aligned to the four cardinal points, with its least accurate side, the east, diverging by only 5° 30’’ from true north-south, which, for a civilisation that had no compass, was not bad. Its base covers 13.1 acres, its sides make an angle to the ground of 51° 52’ and it was built using technology no more sophisticated than the lever, the roller, the inclined plane, stone and copper tools, intelligent minds and hard work.

We should clear up a few popular misconceptions at this stage, misconceptions largely propagated by the works of wilfully ignorant authors such as Erich von Daniken, who surely must hold the distinction of being more wrong about more things than any other person on Earth.

The Egyptians were not primitive people at all. They were every bit as intelligent and sophisticated as we are today, and, although their technology was simple, it was adequate for the task and they were expert in its application.

The Egyptians did not use slaves to build the pyramids but citizens who were paid in food for their work (there is even evidence that the Egyptians invented the strike for better wages). We know that the expert work on the pyramids was carried out by a full time team of craftsmen, and we can assume that much of the heavy labour was carried out by unskilled ‘casual labour’, probably the local farmers who had nothing to do while their land was inundated by the annual Nile flood.

The Egyptians moved large blocks of stone on wooden sleds, pulled by teams of men with ropes. Von Daniken would have us believe that the Egyptians had no rope and that wood was in short supply because “trees did not grow in abundance along the Nile”. Both statements are lies. Many ropes have been found in Egyptian tombs, and the Egyptians used a lot of wood, much of which they acquired on trade with neighbouring countries, and many examples of which have been found.

The Egyptians did not carry out human sacrifice in dynastic times (although there is some evidence that pre-dynastic Egyptians did) and there is no evidence that live humans were sealed in pyramids with their dead Pharaoh. This latter is almost certainly a Hollywood invention.

Mummification was carried out for the purpose of preserving the remains of Egyptians for the afterlife and not, as von Daniken would have it, for resurrection by returning astronauts. The techniques of mummification are available to us in some considerable detail, from existing texts. The internal organs were removed and stored...
separately from the body, and the body was treated with various salts and resins and wrapped in linen.

All of this may have been counter-productive, as some older mummies of earlier Egyptians, merely buried without treatment, have survived better than those of Pharaohs. The evidence suggests that desiccation caused by interment in dry sand is a far better preservative than any of the treatments given to pharaonic corpses.

What really gives the lie to von Daniken, however, is the fact that the brain was removed in pieces, through the nose, and not preserved. The Egyptians believed that the heart was the seat of the soul, and that the brain was not of particular importance. In the case of von Daniken, this may well be true.

**MOTIVATION**

We will look further at some of the fantasies that have been built around the Great Pyramid later, but first let us consider “why build a pyramid in the first place?”.

The answer to that is that we do not know. There are many logical hypotheses (and many more illogical ones) but there is no doubt that the purpose was of a religious nature. It may be that the pyramid was seen as a “stairway to the heavens” for the dead Pharaoh to ascend to his rightful place alongside the sun god.

There is no direct evidence that the pyramids were the actual burial site of the kings, as no pharaonic remains have ever been found inside or under a pyramid. The pyramids may have been built as a memorial and not as a tomb, although, in the absence of direct evidence, the latter purpose seems to be more likely.

One hypothesis, proposed by German/British physicist Kurt Mendelssohn, postulates that the existence of the pyramids was secondary to the fact of their construction.

Mendelssohn proposes that the rulers of the recently unified Egyptian kingdom needed some work of national importance to weld together the various regional groups into a cohesive and centralised state. Mendelssohn’s theory, propounded in his book *The Riddle of the Pyramids*, argues this case very well and, whether true or not, it is certainly logical and it does explain some of the mysteries that surround these giant structures. This hypothesis falls within the parameters of reasonable speculation, as do many others associated with a period of history which, while better documented than many other ancient eras, is far from comprehensively understood.

What surviving texts do tell us about the ancient Egyptians is at considerable variance with the popular mythology that surrounds them. They were practical and intelligent people, not given to excessive mysticism which is an error generated by the fact that the majority of surviving literature is concerned with death, which in turn is explained by the fact that their tombs survived the millennia in far better shape than did their mundane dwellings.

Although there is clear evidence that the Egyptians had sufficient knowledge of astronomy to enable them to devise an accurate calendar, and thus to be able to predict their most important annual event, the flooding of the Nile, there is no suggestion that they developed astrology, a fact that should endear them to all skeptics.

In general, the Egyptians come down to us as remarkably likeable people, with little of the cruelty and brutality that characterises so many ancient civilisations, and not a few modern ones.

We do not know why the pyramid became such an important structure to the Egyptians, but there may be a clue in the sheer pragmatism of the shape. Once the decision is made to build on a monumental scale, the pyramid makes the most sense to people who had not devised arches or free standing columns. Once you build a pyramid, assuming

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**Pyramids, Pyramyths & Pyramidiots**

Continued...
you do it properly, it tends to stay put. Staying up is far simpler than falling down for a well-built pyramid. (This is not the case for all shapes, as some well-built Skeptics who attend annual convention dinners will attest.) We should also address the claim commonly made by those who know nothing of Egyptian history and culture and who seek to achieve wealth and fame by writing books which are firmly rooted in that ignorance.

This claim is that “it would be impossible for us to build the Great Pyramid today”.

This claim is both arrant nonsense and likely to be true - nonsense because the reasons cited for the claim lie in techniques the Egyptians were alleged to have and that are no longer available to modern people, and true for an entirely different reason in that it would be hard to conceive of a politician or company director convincing the electorate or the board of the desirability of expending so much wealth on an intrinsically useless structure. (Cynics should not use the Parliament House in Canberra as a rebuttal of this argument.) This question is addressed in Ronald Story’s book Guardians of the Universe. A Japanese construction company estimated in 1980 that the cost of erecting a replica of the Great Pyramid, using modern techniques, would be US$563 million. If the labour intensive methods employed by the Egyptians were used, then the cost would approach US$18 billion. It would be a brave government indeed that would suggest pyramid building as a cure for unemployment.

As for the “lost” techniques, there is plenty of physical evidence of how the Egyptians chiselled the stones, carried them to the site, used ramps to get them to the necessary elevation and moved them around when there. What techniques have been lost?

Yet another mystery which bedevils the proponents of paranormal

explanations is how the concept of pyramid building sprang up in two widely separated cultures as those of Egypt and Central America. The suggestion is that Egyptians colonised Central America and taught the Indians how to do it.

This suggestion is difficult to sustain when we consider a few facts.

The Central American pyramids were designed for an entirely different purpose to those of Egypt - ceremonial rather than funerary. All Central American pyramids are at a far lower angle than the Egyptian and were designed to be climbed after

staying up for a well-built pyramid. (This is hardly likely to be the case with the Maya. Human sacrifice seems to have been the major activity carried out on the pyramids, although this probably was not the case with the Maya. Methods of construction differed greatly from those used by the Egyptians and, generally, the Central American pyramids were not used for monuments or burial, although one has been found to contain a body of some important person.

The crucial fact that makes any cross-cultural exchange seem to be unlikely is that the earliest pyramids of Mexico are the so called Temples of the Sun and the Moon at Teotihuacan, about the builders of which little is known, but who have been identified by some mystics as the Lost Tribes of Israel (who else!). These pyramids are comparable in size to those of Egypt, and are dated at just before the beginning of the Christian era. It would seem to be highly implausible that Egyptians, at the final stages of their long history, would venture halfway around the globe and then teach the natives a technology that they themselves had abandoned nearly two millennia earlier. It is far more likely that the practical significance of the pyramid shape for large construction appealed to two different cultures - neither of which had developed the arch - quite independently.

We can dispose of the absurd pseudoscientific claims of ancient astronauts, time travellers and remnants of pre-existing high tech civilisations as espoused by the likes of von Daniken by a simple examination of the facts which have been discovered by genuine archaeologists and other scientists. Such claims can be put down to wilful ignorance on the part of their proponents. Of more interest are some of the weird cults that read mystical significance into the measurements of the pyramids, particularly those of the Great Pyramid of Khufu.

PYRAMYTHS AND PYRAMIDIOTS

It would appear that the driving force behind the desire to mix measurement with Biblical prophecy, that drove many 19th century British authors to ascribe unwarranted significance to the Great Pyramid, was a distaste for the metric system of measurement, introduced after the French Revolution. No self-respecting and God-fearing Briton was going to take this example of atheistic Frog perfidy lying down.

There is no evidence that the Egyptians developed astrology, a fact that should endear them to Skeptics."
Pyramids, Pyramyths & Pyramidiots

Continued...

Among the first to address this problem was a retired publisher, John Taylor, who believed that the pyramid had been built by Noah, to God's specifications, and who decided that 25 inches was the size of the Biblical cubit.

Taylor was the first to realise that the dimensions of the Great Pyramid suggested that the Egyptians had knowledge of the ratio $\pi$ (the ratio of the circumference of the pyramid to its height gives a fairly accurate ratio of $1/2\pi$). As it was known that the Egyptians had not developed mathematics on a theoretical level to that extent, this convinced Taylor that the Great Pyramid was divinely inspired and presented a genuine problem to more scientifically inclined scholars.

One possible explanation that has been advanced is that, if the Egyptians used a rolling drum to measure long distances, then $\pi$ would have become part of the computation quite fortuitously and Egyptians would have discovered the ratio without being conscious of the fact. Whatever the truth of the matter, Taylor, who was an adherent of the proposition that the British were descended from the Lost Tribesmen, was convinced that the Pyramid had been built by these proto-Britons. Obviously the Egyptians could not have done it, as they were worse than the French.

Taylor's ideas were taken up by no less a personage than the Astronomer Royal for Scotland, Charles Piazzi Smyth. (The real mystery in this story is how someone with such a foreign sounding middle name got to be Astronomer Royal.) Smyth had been a pupil of Sir John Herschel and, like Herschel and Taylor, he objected to the use of the metric measurement system, which may help to account for some of the extraordinary theories he later propounded.

Finding that one of the casing stones of the Great Pyramid was approximately 25 inches, equal to Taylor's cubit, Smyth decided that the inch (one twenty-fifth of a cubit and approximately one 10 millionth part of the Earth's polar radius) must have been the divine unit of length. When it was discovered that the original casing stone was a bit over 25 inches (25.025 in fact), Smyth proposed that the “Pyramid inch” of 1.001 was the actual divine unit. (The British unit presumably got worn down a bit in the pocket of one of the Lost Tribesmen.)

Of course it did serve to prove that the British measurement system was divinely inspired, which was one in the eye for those nasty French. Smyth used the pyramid inch and various other measurements made at the Great Pyramid to calculate the density of the Earth, its population and, for all we know, the winner of the third at Ascot.

It is obvious that, given the number of measurements one could make in a huge structure like the Great Pyramid, and with suitably preconceived ideas, one can come up with any answers one likes. This Smyth did. His book, *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid*, contains over 600 pages of these calculations and predictions. The big problem was that all of this was theory - no actual dimension of one pyramid inch had been found. This was put right when Smyth, on a visit to Egypt, found a mason's boss on a slab of stone and declared it to be the Divine Standard. The 'science' of Pyramidology was now firmly established. It survived the revelation that one of Smyth's followers had been caught trying to file down the boss to make it more accurate and the discovery that surviving Great Pyramid casing stones were all of different sizes.

With the bit firmly between his teeth, Smyth and his many followers, who included the founders of the Jehovah's Witnesses, using his Pyramid Inch, decided that various internal structures of the Great Pyramid were a record of the past history of the world (naturally beginning in 4004 BC). But that was not all. Further measurements showed that the future history of the world was also contained in the stones. The end of the world was variously predicted as happening in 1874, 1914, 1920 and 1925. [No mention of 2012, then? – Ed]

As with all failed predictions, when it does not happen you revise the data to get a new date (see Nostradamus). What Smyth and his followers were doing was bending the data to achieve their preconceived outcomes, a practice still followed by many practitioners of the paranormal.

Smyth could multiply any dimension by a suitably large number and come up with a significant measurement, such as the distance to the sun derived from the height of the pyramid (481ft x 1000 million = 91.8 million miles). Not very accurate, and certainly not as accurate as God or a space travelling ET would know them, but they certainly fooled the customers.

Unfortunately for Smyth, like an
It appears that they can do anything and are not governed by any rules at all. Proponents of pyramid power have claimed that pyramids can, inter alia, mummify flesh, preserve food in a natural state and resharpen razor blades. It would appear, to the casual observer, that these three acts call for three different applications of energy.

To mummify flesh presupposes an ability to remove water molecules; to sharpen razor blades requires the ability to add molecules; and to preserve food means preserving the status quo. As the material from which the pyramid is constructed does not appear to affect any of these processes (they are available in cardboard, wood, polystyrene, copper, polycarbonate, steel and many other materials) and as they appear to have no control systems, how is the required process determined? Can the EUTS themselves decide that the object in the pyramid is a razor blade or a dead cat? If that is so, and that appears to be the only logical conclusion that follows from the claims, then we appear to be dealing with some form of sentient energy. This is an extraordinary concept and would require far more persuasive evidence for its existence than is offered by its proponents. Imagine the problems Einstein would have faced with relativity if gravity could think for itself!

Earlier personage of Egyptian fame, he was nursing a viper in his bosom. Largely because of his position, his theories were treated with a degree of respect that they obviously did not deserve. One of his most ardent supporters was a chemical engineer who, along with his son, decided that to further refine Smyth’s theories more accurate measurements were needed to be made on site. These two set to work to design more accurate instruments to make the measurements as exact as possible. As this took a long time, the engineer finally decided that he was too old to travel to Egypt and his son was sent out alone. He conducted several very accurate triangulations of the site and succeeded in proving conclusively that Smyth was talking through his hat (chapeaulalia?).

The young man, William Matthew Flinders Petrie, stayed on in Egypt to become the greatest Egyptologist of his time and to be regarded by many as the father of scientific archaeology. He was, incidentally, the grandson of the explorer of Australia’s coastline, Matthew Flinders.

The fact that Smyth was wrong has done nothing to dissuade a lot of people from believing his predictions and his theories continue to be recycled to this day.

Pyramid Power: Much Ado About Nothing

All of the foregoing can be explained by the inability of some people to accept that ancient civilisations were capable of carrying out major works of construction or that these monolithic structures are intrinsically useless.

The next stage in the saga of pyramidology leaves the world of tangible pyramids and enters the realm of pyramid as shape. More particularly, we will look at the effect of pyramids on that shibboleth of the New Age, “energies unknown to science”, or EUTS as we will refer to them for typographical reasons.

It was probably inevitable that someone, sometime, would hit upon the idea that the pyramid itself had something to do with the process of mumification.

This idea flies in the face of all the evidence of how mumification was carried out, including the records left by the Egyptians themselves, but it is in accord with the thinking of those who persist in seeing a problem where none exists.

Martin Gardner, in his entertaining book The Magic Numbers of Dr Matrix, traced the first reference to this idea to the early years of the twentieth century.

At that time, a “French occultist”, as Gardner described him, discovered that a dead cat became mumified after being placed in a model pyramid. As there appeared to be no great call for mumified cats in the ensuing half century, no more research seems to have been carried out.

Then, in the late 1950s, a Czech named Drbal claimed that a razor blade placed under a cardboard pyramid retained its edge for longer than would normally be expected.

Next, we find that various film actors (who may well be the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel) claim to be able to meditate better while sitting under a pyramid. Others have claimed that foodstuffs kept in a pyramid retain all of their freshness, that wishes come true when written on paper and placed in a pyramid, and that pyramids kill bacteria. This is all remarkable stuff, if true, but how true is it? Let us first consider EUTS, whether they obey rules, and how a pyramid might channel them.

Whenever a pseudo-scientist or a paranormalist is challenged to explain some phenomenon that science decrees to be highly improbable, he responds with EUTS.

While not wishing to suggest that there are no such things as EUTS, we are not very encouraged to believe in them by the claims made for them.
The Zero-Sum Fallacy

In game theory, “zero-sum” describes a game where one player’s gain is another player’s loss; and the total amount of the available money or playing chips is fixed.

A logical fallacy often occurs when this particular game theory is applied to economic or political discussions among non-economists, leading to false beliefs that the amount of wealth or jobs in the economy is fixed. That is, that people can only become richer by making others poorer, or that increasing labour productivity and immigration causes unemployment. In economics, this is known as the “lump of labour fallacy” or more generally as the “zero sum fallacy”.

Many economic situations are not zero-sum, since valuable goods and services can be created, destroyed or badly allocated in a number of ways, and any of these will create a net gain or loss of utility to numerous stakeholders. Specifically, all trade is by definition positive sum, because rich countries are rich, and belief that poor countries are poor would simply not take place.

On an international scale, the zero sum fallacy manifests itself in the false belief that poor countries are poor because rich countries are rich, and that poverty can only be alleviated by redistributing wealth from rich countries to poor countries.

In informal logic, the zero sum fallacy often takes the form of a false premise. In rhetoric it is usually a hidden premise, which makes the conclusion of one’s argument a non sequitur. That means that the zero sum fallacy is usually either a subtype of a false premise fallacy, a non-sequitur fallacy, or both.

- by Tim Harding

Pyramids, Pyramyths & Pyramididiots

Continued...

Next we ask, “What is inherent in the pyramid shape that allows it to channel this energy when other geometrical solids do not?” We do not hear about cube power or sphere power (although this article may generate such thoughts in some minds - it has happened before).

The answer is that there is nothing about a pyramid that should give us reason to suppose that this shape holds a privileged position in the world of solids. Far more likely that the proponents of this fallacy are seduced by the supposed mysteries of the Egyptian pyramids and that as a result have invested the shape itself with mystical powers.

There is no reason to believe that pyramids exert some sort of influence on energy, be it known or unknown to science. This, of course, would not matter if there were examples of tests that ‘proved’ the opposite. However, while there are many references in the pro literature to such tests, it is difficult to find reference to any properly conducted tests that give factual results rather than subjective opinions. Those tests that have been conducted using a double blind methodology give no comfort to the proponents of pyramid power.

In a test of French wine, as reported in the Winter 1987-88 edition of The Skeptical Inquirer, wine kept in pyramids was judged to be no different in quality from wine not so stored.

Proponents of pyramid power must fall back on the only rule that EUTS are known to obey. This is the law that states “No paranormal event will occur in any location that contains a skeptic”. This law is better known by its common title of “The Psychics’ Cop-Out”, which explains a lot of things other than the failure of pyramids to perform.

To conclude this section on pyramid power, we should refer to the influence of American author and respected skeptic, Martin Gardner, on the level of belief in this unlikely form of energy. In a satirical article in the June 1974 edition of Scientific American, Gardner made a number of outrageous claims for the powers of pyramids, which were being promoted by his character Dr Matrix. Gardner was astonished at the amount of mail generated by this article, from people who were seeking more details of how pyramids could help them.

Some of Gardner’s tongue-in-cheek claims still form part of the lore of pyramid power, so do not be surprised if cube or sphere power become New Age phenomena in the future.

Although there is nothing particularly mysterious about pyramids, they certainly have exerted an influence upon the imagination of many people for millennia.

Merely reading about how people from early civilisations set about the tasks of construction and how modern people have wrested the secrets from the stones appeals to our romantic instincts. It makes us realise the remarkable mental and physical accomplishments of which the human species is capable and has been capable of since the beginning of recorded history.

It also makes us realise just how limited must be the imagination of those who cannot take pride in the accomplishments of our species and who must invent super beings to take credit for what humans have done.

As skeptics, we should not resent such people as Erich von Daniken, Charles Piazz Smyth and the many others. We should pity them for the narrowness of their vision and the meanness of their spirit.

Note: Re-published from The Skeptic 8:3, September 1988, pp14-20.

About the author:

Barry Williams is a former president and executive officer of Australian Skeptics, received a lifetime achievement award in 2011, and has a long-standing interest in Egyptology (and not just because he was there at the time).
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The cycle of life

Water, water everywhere ... and frogs. And so it goes, the almost inevitable realisation that all knowledge is connected and connectable.

FROGS & STUFF

Fort spent much of his adult life in the New York City public library, examining newspapers, magazines and scientific journals. He was looking for accounts of anything weird or mysterious which didn’t fit with current scientific theories. Among his favourite weird and bizarre stories were those about frogs and other strange objects raining from the sky. He postulated that there is an area above the Earth where living things originate and periodically are dumped on Earth by intelligent beings who communicate with secret societies down below, perhaps using teleportation. He called this area Genesistrine, and while this region might cover the entire Earth, it is also described as a Super-Sargasso Sea.

Source: Skeptical Dictionary

CURRENTS

The Sargasso Sea is a region in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1100km wide and 3200km long. It is bounded on the west by the Gulf Stream; on the north by the North Atlantic Current; on the east by the Canary Current; and on the south by the North Atlantic Equatorial Current. This system of ocean currents forms the North Atlantic Gyre, and they deposit the marine plants and refuse they carry into this sea. The ocean water in the Sargasso Sea is distinctive for its deep blue colour and exceptional clarity, with underwater visibility of up to 61 metres.

COLLECTORS

One famous collector of tales of cryptids (unknown or unlikely lifeforms) was Charles Fort (1874-1932). He claimed to be an ‘intermediatist’, one who believes nothing is real and nothing is unreal, that “all phenomena are approximations one way or the other between realness and unrealness”. Actually, he was an anti-dogmatist who collected weird and bizarre stories, usually uncritically. He collected accounts of UFOs, ghosts, spontaneous human combustion, the stigmata, psychic abilities, etc. His records have formed the stuff of much discussion ever since, including in various Fortean societies and the publication The Fortean Times.

Source: Skeptical Dictionary
The Sargasso Sea is home to seaweed of the genus *Sargassum*, which floats en masse on the surface there. The sargassum is not a threat to shipping, and historic incidents of sailing ships being trapped there are due to the often calm winds of the horse latitudes. This hasn’t stopped Hollywood, of course, from claiming otherwise. The 1923 silent film *The Isle of Lost Ships* is an atmospheric adventure directed by Maurice Tourneur, taking place in the Sargasso Sea. The 1968 movie *The Lost Continent* was set in the Sargasso where Spanish galleons, trapped for centuries in seaweed, are found in modern times, along with a society of descendants of Conquistadores and sea monsters.

**WRECKS**

The Sargasso Sea is a region in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1100km wide and 3200km long. It is bounded on the west by the Gulf Stream; on the north by the North Atlantic Current; on the east by the Canary Current; and on the south by the North Atlantic Equatorial Current. This system of ocean currents forms the North Atlantic Gyre, and they deposit the marine plants and refuse they carry into this sea. The ocean water in the Sargasso Sea is distinctive for its deep blue colour and exceptional clarity, with underwater visibility of up to 61 metres.

**TRAVELLERS**

Portuguese sailors were among the first to discover this region in the 15th century, naming it after the Sargassum seaweed growing there (*sargaço/sargasso* in Portuguese). Christopher Columbus and his men also noted the Sargasso Sea, and brought reports of the masses of seaweed on the surface. However, the sea may have been known to earlier mariners, as a poem by the late 4th century AD author, Rufus Festus Avienus - *Ora Maritima*, a poetical account of the geography of the time - describes a portion of the Atlantic as being covered with seaweed, citing a now-lost account by the 5th-century BC Carthaginian explorer Himilco the Navigator.

**MONSTERS**

Himilco lived during the height of Carthaginian power, the 5th century BC. He is the first known explorer from the Mediterranean Sea to reach the north western shores of Europe. His lost account of his adventures is quoted by Roman writers, but otherwise we know next to nothing of Himilco himself. According to the Roman sources, Himilco described his journeys as quite harrowing, repeatedly reporting sea monsters and seaweed. It has been suggested that this was done in order to deter Greek rivals from competing on their new trade routes. Avienus relates “there monsters of the deep, and beasts swim amid the slow and sluggishly crawling ships.”

**TRAVELLERS**

A monster from the deep, attacking a “sluggish” ship.

**The Sargasso Sea, suspiciously close to the Bermuda Triangle.**

**CURRENTS**

The Sargasso Sea is suspiciously close to the Bermuda Triangle.
Magical medicine

The Long Lost Friend: A 19th century American grimoire
Originally by Johann George Hohman
Annotated by Douglas Harm
Llewellyn Publications, US$11.96

It is a chaotic world out there, and we may often be fooling ourselves that we are in control of what happens to us within it. The forces of randomness are constantly at work in ways none of us can completely understand, but we like to feel we are calling the shots. Even when we are not really in charge, we like to think we are, and we like philosophies and books that tell us how to overcome the chaos.

Not all of these ways of thinking can be correct; think of all the religious believers in all ages certain that their particular beliefs are controlling things. But even if one religious belief is the right one and enabling such control, the control offered by the others must then be illusory.

That isn’t to say that illusory control isn’t important. Take, for instance the book The Long Lost Friend, which is “perhaps the most influential and well known of all the grimoires, or books of magic, to originate in the New World”. This is according to Daniel Harms, a researcher who concentrates on magic and folklore, and who has annotated the most authoritative edition of the book. This edition is heavily annotated and bears the editor’s explanatory and introductory essays, but there can be no doubt that some will be using it for the purpose for which it was originally printed in 1820, and then translated into English first in 1846 with the subtitle A Collection of Mysterious and Invaluable Arts and Remedies, for Man as Well as Animals: Of Their Virtue and Efficacy in Healing Diseases, etc.

The book remains a resource for spells in Hoodoo and paganism. It has entered the digital age; not only are its spells available online, but Harms says “The proprietor of a popular online spiritual supply shop has listed Hohman’s book as one of her two top sellers.”

This curious work, however, is not a throwback to a pre-Christian pagan tradition. Harms says that some authorities maintain that the Pennsylvania Dutch, who had a tradition of this sort of grimoire, included a core of pagans, but The Long Lost Friend cannot be evidence of this. Some of the charms included within it are ancient; there are a couple that are based on the famous Sartor Square, which was found in the ruins of Pompeii. Reprints of the book sometimes claimed some sort of connection to the healing powers of American Indians, but its spells and cures do not come from that source. Like most grimoires, this one harnessed the best available supernatural beliefs, Christian and specifically Catholic. Typical is a “A good remedy to stop Bleeding,” which consists of saying three times, “This is the day on which the injury happened. Blood, thou must stop until the Virgin Mary bring forth another son.”

The author of the original, John George Hohman, thought he was doing religious business. In his introduction he asks, “Do I not deserve the rewards of God for it? ... Besides that I am a poor man in needy circumstances, and it is a help to me if I can make a little money with the sale of my books.”

Hohman seems completely in earnest, not at all a deliberate fraudster. He was a German Catholic who came to America from Hamburg in 1802, and made his living publishing hymns, books of catechism, and apocryphal gospels. The target audience for The Long Lost Friend was isolated American settlers who had to be their own doctors, veterinarians, and ministers. They found the book useful; if you didn’t have a copy, you can be sure a neighbour did.

Hohman justified his book and its practices upon a religious foundation. He includes testimonies from ministers who found its cures useful. He insists that if it were not God’s will, then God would have stopped the circulation of his book long ago. “I say,” he declares, “any and every man who knowingly neglects using this book in saving the eye, or the leg, or any other limb of his fellow-man, is guilty of the loss of such limb, and thus commits a sin, by which he may forfeit to himself all hope of salvation.” Indeed, the efficacy of these charms, he assures us, is a valuable weapon against atheism.

Looking at the long list of remedies, a reader can learn what sorts of worries bothered those who consulted this book of charms. For colic, you were to say, “I warn ye, ye colic fiends! There is one sitting in judgment, who speaketh: just or unjust. Therefore beware, ye colic fiends!”
sort of things witches would be good at doing, called “A Charm for Bad People”, which goes like this: “It is said, that if you suspect a person for badness, and he sits down in a chair, and you take a shoemaker’s wax-end, that has not been used, and stick one end of it on the underside of the chair, and you sit on the other end of it, he will immediately make water, and in a short time die.”

One charm would help with legal matters; anyone who has to go to court, “let him take some of the largest kind of sage and write the names of the 12 apostles on the leaves, and put them in his shoes before entering the courthouse, and he shall certainly gain the suit.”

There may be some useful household lore here. If you are stung by a bee, it cannot hurt to apply an onion to the sting, and maybe there are chemicals in the onion to affect the pain; this particular treatment is still current, and was recommended by Ann Landers. There are suggestions for dying cloth red, blue, or green. The more interesting claims, however, are the ones that call upon supernatural forces, which show the worries that were current in Hohman’s time.

This remarkable book was so popular that it engendered its own folklore; Harms says, “According to some traditions, possession of the book, or even touching a copy, would lead to crows, including one transformed witch, roosting on the roof of the owner’s house.”

I cannot say that crows have happened to my roof since I have had my review copy, but I can testify to one of its other charms. Hohman writes, “Whoever carries this book with him, is safe from all his enemies, visible or invisible; and whoever has this book with him, cannot die without the holy corpse of Jesus Christ, nor drowned in any water, nor burn up in any fire, nor can any unjust sentence be passed upon him.”

Holy corpse or not, this has all come to pass for me just as Hohman foretold.

- Reviewed by Rob Hardy
A Skeptical Manifesto
The case for dragging Africa and Africans out of dogmatic superstition

For too long, African societies have been identified as superstitious, consisting of people who cannot question, reason or think critically. Dogma and blind faith in divinity and tradition are the mainstay of popular thought, culture and mentality. African science is often equated with witchcraft and the occult, African philosophy with magical thinking, myth making and mysticism, African religion with stone-age spiritual abracadabra, and African medicine with folk therapies often involving concoctions inspired by magical thinking.

Science, critical thinking and technological intelligence are portrayed as western - not universal-values, alien to Africa and to the African mindset. An African who thinks critically or seeks evidence and demands proofs for extraordinary claims is taken to be taking a white or western approach. An African questioning local dogmas and traditions is portrayed as having abandoned or betrayed the essence of African identity. Skepticism and rationalism are regarded as western, unAfrican, philosophies.

Although there is a risk of over generalising, there are clear indicators that the black continent is still socially, politically and culturally trapped and held back in the past.

Many irrational beliefs exist and hold sway across the region. These are, in the main, beliefs informed by fear and ignorance, misrepresentations of nature and how nature works. These misconceptions are often instrumental in causing many absurd incidents, harmful traditional practices and atrocious acts.

For instance, not too long ago, the police in Nigeria arrested a ‘robber’ goat which they said was a thief who suddenly turned to a goat. A Nigerian woman was reported to have given birth to a horse. In Zambia, a local school closed temporarily due to fears of witchcraft. In Uganda, there are claims of demonic attacks in schools across the country.

Persecution and murder of alleged witches continue in many parts of the continent. Many Africans still believe that their suffering and misfortune are caused by witchcraft and magic. In Malawi, belief in witchcraft planes is widespread. Ritual killing and sacrifice of albinos and other persons with disabilities take place in many communities. Across Africa people still believe in the potency and efficacy of juju and charms. Faith based abuses are perpetrated with impunity. Jihadist, witch hunters and other religious militants are killing, maiming and destroying lives and property.

Other-worldly visions and dogmatic attitudes to anything divine continue to corrupt and hamper attempts by Africans to improve their lives. Even with the continent’s ubiquitous religiosity, many African states are to be found at the bottom of the Human Development Index and on the top of the poverty, mortality and morbidity indices.

Recently Africa was polled as the most devout region in the world. Devoutness and underdevelopment, poverty, misery and piety co-exist and co-relate. Incidentally the dominant faiths in the region are alien faiths. That means African Christians are more devout than Europeans whose missionaries brought Christianity to Africa. African Muslims are more devout than Muslims in the Middle East whose jihadists and clerics introduced Islam to the region.

Meanwhile, whatever good these foreign religions may have brought or done in Africa cannot be compared with the damage and darkness they have caused and are still causing in the region. Intellectually, these two religions are holding Africans hostage. Most Africans cannot think freely or express their doubts openly because these religions have placed a huge price on freethinking and critical inquiry. Christianity and Islam peddle too many irrational claims which reinforce traditional irrational beliefs and encumber efforts to combat superstitions in the region. They include the belief in heaven and hell, virgin birth, Jesus as the saviour of the world, ascension and resurrection, divine revelation, holy spirit, angels, the devil, prayers and faith healing, divine emissaries, the prophethood of Mohammed and other Abrahamic religious icons, holy books, holy land, holy water etc. Africans must reject religious indoctrination and dogmatisation in public institutions. Africans need to adopt this cultural motto: Dare to think. Dare to doubt. Dare to question everything in spite of what religions teach or preach.

Africans must begin to think freely in order to ‘emancipate themselves from mental slavery’ and generate ideas that can ignite the flame of enlightenment. The two dominant religions have fantastic rewards for those who cannot think, the
intellectually numb and dumb, those who exercise blind faith and unquestioning obedience, even those who kill or are killed furthering their dogmas. They need to be told that the skeptical goods - the liberating promises of skeptical rationality - are by far more befitting and more beneficent to Africans than imaginary rewards either in the here and now or in the hereafter. Today the African continent has become the new battle ground for the forces of a dark age. And we have to dislodge and defeat them if Africa is to emerge, grow, develop and flourish. To some people, the African predicament appears hopeless. The continent seems to be condemned, doomed and damned. Africa appears to be in a fix, showing no signs of imminent radical change, transformation and progress. African enlightenment sounds like a pipe dream. But I do not think this is the case. The fact is that there are Africans who reason and think critically. There are Africans who are skeptics and rationalists. But active African skeptics are too few and far apart to form the critical mass the continent needs to experience a skeptical spring. The momentum is building slowly and steadily, and one can say that an African skeptical awakening is in sight. The darkest part of the night often precedes the dawn. So there is no need to despair for humanity in Africa. There is every reason to be optimistic and hopeful. After all, Europe went through a very dark period in its history, in fact a darker and more horrible phase than that which Africa is currently undergoing. Still the European continent survived to experience enlightenment and modern civilisation. Who ever thought that the Arab Spring would happen in our lifetime?

So, African enlightenment can happen sooner than we expected. But it will not happen as a miracle. African enlightenment will not fall like manna from heaven. It requires - and will require - hard work, efforts, sacrifice, courage and struggle by Africans and other friends who are committed to the values of enlightenment.

In Europe, skeptics spoke out against dogma and tyranny and caused the dawn of a new awakening. African skeptics likewise need to speak out against the forces of dogma, irrationalism and superstition ravaging the continent. Skeptics need to organize and mobilise - online and offline - to further the cause of reason, science and critical thinking. Skeptics can no longer afford to keep quiet or remain indifferent in the face of a looming dark age.

Many charlatans operate out there in their communities. They ‘mine’ popular fears and anxieties, exploiting desperate, ignorant gullible folks. We need to expose them and free our people from their bondage.

African skeptics cannot remain passive and inactive and expect skeptical rationality to thrive and flourish or expect the forces of dogma and superstition to simply disappear. The situation requires active engagement by convinced and committed skeptics. That was how the much talked about skeptical tradition in the western world was established and is sustained. That is how we are going to build and leave a skeptical legacy for Africa.

This is a call to duty to all African skeptics in Africa and in the diaspora. History has thrust on us this critical responsibility which we must fulfill. Let us therefore marshal our will to doubt and other intellectual resources and cause this new dawn - this skeptical awakening to happen early in this 21st century. African skeptics arise.

Leo Igwe
Fellow of the James Randi Educational Foundation

Peer pressure

In which is discussed peer review and the inter-governmental panel on climate change

The claim has been made that scientists who reject the notion of catastrophic anthropogenic global warming (CAGW) don’t produce much in the way of peer-reviewed published literature. In the last edition of The Skeptic, [32:3, p53] Martin Bridgstock said: “I hesitate to say that climate change deniers are like creation scientists but the most convincing demonstration to the contrary would be if they produced some real peer-reviewed science.” (1)

The same claim has been made in the media and by Al Gore: “There was a massive study of every scientific article in a peer-reviewed journal written on global warming in the last ten years. They took a big sample of 10 per cent, 928 articles. And you know the number of those that
disagreed with the scientific consensus that we’re causing global warming and that it is a serious problem out of the 928: Zero.” (2)

It’s understandable that those who do not have expertise in climate science and/or are not familiar with the climate literature might believe such statements and trust the authority and findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In order to shed light on this publication issue, CAGW skeptics (please let’s stop using the silly term “climate change denier”) have now established a site where over 1100 peer-reviewed published papers, arguing against the notion of CAGW, have been referenced and sorted into categories for easy access: http://tinyurl.com/b4oh2c7

So why hasn’t this literature been paraded by the media and why has the IPCC ignored or marginalised such a large body of literature which does not support their alarmist CAGW message?

Scientists, the media and politicians trusted that the IPCC would be the ‘gold standard’ of climate science, dispassionately assessing all relevant peer-reviewed published literature in its meta-analysis. It was widely believed that the IPCC had impartially concluded that human activity is placing the planet on a pathway to catastrophic global warming.

Dr Jason Johnston, Professor of environmental law in a paper titled “Global warming advocacy: a cross-examination”, looked to see if the IPCC reports actually represented “an unbiased and objective assessment.” Johnston reported: “Such verification means comparing what the IPCC has to say about climate science with what one finds in the peer-reviewed climate science literature.”

He concluded that “On virtually every major issue in climate change science, IPCC reports systematically conceal or minimise what appear to be fundamental scientific uncertainties.”

Johnston went on to say that when they examined research by “scientists at the very best universities” who are of “unimpeachable credibility” they found “facts and findings that are rarely if ever mentioned” by the IPCC. (3)

The non-scientist chairman of the IPCC, Dr Rajendra Pachauri, has always dismissed scientists or journalists who have been critical of the IPCC process. One defensive line he has frequently used is: “The IPCC studies only peer-review science. Let someone publish the data in a decent credible publication. I am sure the IPCC would then accept it, otherwise we can just throw it into the dustbin.” - Pachauri, November 2007. (4)

He also said: “People can have confidence in the IPCC’s conclusions … Given that it is all on the basis of peer-reviewed literature” and “This is based on peer-reviewed literature. That’s the manner in which the IPCC functions. We don’t pick up a newspaper article and, based on that, come up with our findings.” - Pachauri, June 2008.

Similar statements have been echoed by others who believed Pachauri: “Without a strong, peer-reviewed science base (provided by the IPCC) … the case for action on climate change would not be as unequivocal as it is today.” - Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary General, August 2008.


“The IPCC bases its work on papers that have been published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature.” - The Economist, December 2009.

Of course, skeptical readers will keep in mind “De Omnibus Dubitandum” – question everything, and “Nullius in Verba” – take no one’s word for it.

A team of 43 auditors from 12 countries scrutinised the IPCC’s 2007 report which comprises 44 chapters and around 3000 pages. There are 18,531 cited references and each chapter was audited three times with references being sorted into articles that were published in peer-reviewed academic journals and non-peer-reviewed articles.

It became clear that, of the 18,531 references cited in the IPCC report, 5587 (nearly one third) were not peer-reviewed. They included press releases, newspaper and magazine articles, discussion papers, student theses, working papers, and literature published by environmental groups.

Dr Richard Tol worked for the IPCC and was dismayed about the input from environmental groups. He said: “The IPCC attracted more people with political rather than academical motives. In AR4, green activists held key positions in the IPCC and they succeeded in excluding or neutralising opposite voices.”

IPCC scientist Dr Roger Pielke observed: “All of my comments were ignored without even a rebuttal. At that point, I concluded that the IPCC Reports were actually intended to be advocacy documents designed to produce particular policy actions, but not as a true and honest assessment of the understanding of the climate system.” (6)

Some of the IPCC chapters were particularly scant with regard to peer-reviewed literature. For instance, Chapter 5 from Working Group
3’s report has only 61 of its 260 references being peer-reviewed, ie about three-quarters of the material cited in that particular chapter was not peer-reviewed. (7)

So we find the IPCC chairman being economical with the truth and a leaked email from the IPCC’s vice-chair (2002-2008) Dr George Filippo, shows that he knew “grey literature” was being used. Filippo said: “I feel rather uncomfortable about using not only unpublished but also unreviewed material as the backbone of our conclusions (or any conclusions) ... I feel that at this point there are very little rules [sic] and almost anything goes.”

There is evidence of gate-keeping activities with regard to papers challenging the notion of CAGW. One of the leaked ‘climategate’ emails from IPCC scientist Dr Phil Jones to his colleague Dr Michael Mann on July 8, 2004, shows Jones confiding that he and IPCC co-author Dr Kevin Trenberth were determined to keep skeptical papers out of the IPCC Report. Jones said: “I can’t see either of these papers being in the next IPCC report. Kevin (Trenberth) and I will keep them out somehow - even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!”

In other emails Grant Foster was looking for suitable comments about a paper which was critical of the IPCC’s alarmist message. Jones gave Foster a list of people, telling him that: “These reviewers would know what to say about the paper without any prompting.” (8)

Dr Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen wrote, in a submission to the UK Parliament: “I inherited the editorship of Energy & Environment from a former senior scientist at the Department of the Environment (Dr. David Everest) because we shared doubts about the claims made by environmentalists and were worried about the readiness with which politicians accepted these claims, including ‘global warming’ which followed so seamlessly from the acid rain scare, my previous research area. As editor of a journal which remained open to scientists who challenged the orthodoxy, I became the target of a number of CRU manoeuvres. The hacked emails revealed attempts to manipulate peer review to E&E’s disadvantage, and showed that libel threats were considered against its editorial team. Dr Jones even tried to put pressure on my university department. The emailers expressed anger over my publication of several papers that questioned the ‘hockey stick’ graph and the reliability of CRU temperature data.” (9)

Harvard-Smithsonian astrophysicists, Dr Sallie Baliunas and Dr Willie Soon, reviewed over 200 peer-reviewed climate papers which indicated that the 20th century was neither the warmest nor the century with the most extreme weather. They published their findings in the journal Climate Research. (10)

IPCC scientist Dr Michael Mann, in an email sent in March, 2003, said: “Perhaps we should encourage our colleagues in the climate research community to no longer submit to, or cite papers in, this journal. We would also need to consider what we tell or request of our more reasonable colleagues who sit on the editorial board.”

It isn’t difficult to find examples where the IPCC has either marginalised or ignored conflicting peer-reviewed, published literature which challenges the exaggerated IPCC ‘findings’ about ocean warming/acidification; residence time of atmospheric carbon dioxide; recent years being the hottest on record; continuing atmospheric warming; the global warming impact of rising carbon dioxide levels; the effects of climate change on the Amazon rainforest; sea level rise; flooding in the Netherlands and Bangladesh; ice loss in the Arctic; ice loss in the Antarctic; ice loss in Greenland; ice in the Andes, Alps and Africa; snow cover; ice melt and fresh water reduction; extreme weather events; agricultural yields in African countries; species extinction; disease and mortality rates and drought and wildfires.

Criticism of the IPCC does not bring into question the integrity and commitment of those scientists who contributed in good faith to the IPCC’s technical reports. In fact, many IPCC scientists (I have statements from about 50) who have contributed to the IPCC process as authors and reviewers are now publicly criticising what they see as a “flawed IPCC process”.

For instance, Dr Judith Curry, Professor of Earth Sciences at Georgia Tech. said: “I’m not going to just spout off and endorse the IPCC because I don’t have confidence in the process.”

Dr Eigil Friis-Christensen, Danish National Space Centre: “The IPCC refused to consider the sun’s effect on the Earth’s climate as a topic worthy of investigation. The IPCC conceived its task only as investigating potential human causes of climate change.”

Dr Vincent Gray, expert reviewer on every IPCC report: “The (IPCC) climate change statement is an orchestrated litany of lies.”

Dr Chris Landsea, author and IPCC expert reviewer resigned from the IPCC: “I am withdrawing because I have come to view the part of the IPCC to which my expertise is relevant as having become politicised. In addition, when I have raised my concerns to the IPCC leadership, their response was simply to
In the June 2012 issue of *The Skeptic* [32:2, p48], an article by Gary Bakker purports to try out “a fraud on Freud”. The alluring title is accompanied by the usual portrait of a scowling Freud, with the caption “Sigmund Freud – not happy”. Thus drawn into what might have been an interesting exercise (for myself, as a psychoanalyst), I eventually found myself wondering how this article came to be published.

In essence, this is because Bakker sets up a proposition that psychoanalysis is “guff” (arguably based on acknowledged bias and resentment), which he then attempts to prove by trying to get a sham paper published - but then fails. Still, he claims partial success. Such a feat of logical contortion merits a response; more so because skeptics look for balanced evidence, while Bakker seems to not provide much balance. Had he done so, he’d have included more than is presented in his article. Clearly...
Bakker can put an opinion that psychoanalysis is guff, but to then try to justify this view on the limited points he raises is dubious to me.

In considering a reasonable response, I started with a consideration of the term “skepticism”. Although its ordinary definition is one of a doubting disposition, it has also been discussed philosophically. For example, “I take it that a skepticism, especially in a philosophical context, should be argued rationally as distinct from a dogmatic rejection … at least the fulfillment of this condition would seem to rule out a categorical rejection of all truth or all reality.” (Rieman 1977)

Bakker does start with some observable reality, that “a profound schism has dogged the disciplines of clinical psychology and psychiatry for over a century” (p48).

True enough, but one quickly finds that Bakker’s article is less about the schism, and more about biased opinion, which fails the condition set up by Rieman above. Just as true, in a sense, is the following: “the treatment you will receive … can vary enormously … because your therapist will have been trained in, and EXCLUSIVELY offer, just one or two therapy models (p49).” [emphasis mine].

Well yes, a patient might be offered something but there’s also a real ethical imperative that goes unmentioned. This is one of providing treatment a patient needs, rather than an approach one is trained in. That necessarily implies a need to know one’s limitations, what else exists, and to refer a patient elsewhere if need be. One might argue, given the general thrust of the article, that an implication is made here, by this omission, that psychoanalysts don’t do this.

Be that as it may, let’s follow Bakker’s article in which it was argued and ostensibly demonstrated that psychoanalysis is “guff”.

Factual errors aside, I noted in passing that the article used heavily skewed language possibly to bring home a ‘message’. Terms such as “progressive”, “scientific”, “experimental verification”, “more sophisticated”, “evidence-based”, and “very exacting” were used to support the cognitively-based strategies that Bakker so clearly favours. In contrast, psychoanalysis and its practice were connected with phrases/notions such as “over a century ago”, “never tested”, “unfalsifiable”, “unscientific”, “arbitrary” and, of course, “guff”.

Returning to facts, Bakker refers to the psychoanalytic school “represented especially by Freudian psychoanalysis”. As an example of inherent biases in the article, and in the apparent context of describing an “antiquated” therapy, it ignores the fact that while Freud did indeed leave an enormous and at times contentious legacy, his ideas went on to be developed and expanded by early theorists including Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Fairbairn and later by Sandler, Kernberg, Grotstein, Ogden and so on. It wasn’t, and isn’t, a static thing as even contemporary neo-Freudians agree. Freud (1922/23) himself quickly rejected the idea of “catharsis or abreaction” (p48) as ineffective, as any reading of Freud will show. Indeed, this was the impetus that led him to look more closely at the relationship with the therapist, and its complications and subtleties. This later informed his conceptions for the use of dream interpretation, free association and insight oriented techniques.

To digress briefly, it is understandable that people unfamiliar with psychoanalysis (which has nevertheless had a pervasive influence on thought and culture) will find such concepts as “dream analysis” odd or even quaint, more in the realm of tarot cards than clinical use. A brief example serves to illustrate the need to distinguish between fact and fiction (or to not reject all truth, as Rieman has it). Many years ago, I came across an article that did indeed look at the early Freudian idea of “the anal character” and its relationship to toilet training. It found there was none!

On the other hand, dream analysis has been extensively researched and grounded in increasingly sophisticated studies using sleep laboratories and the use of subjects examined while they sleep hooked up to EEG machines. This is exemplified, for example, in a review of the area and particularly to how research favours the use of dream material in contemporary practice to expedite treatment (Glucksman & Warner 1987).

People may well find something difficult to understand, but this can still allow for the possibility of acceptance if enough reasonable evidence is put (or, if not, it allows for suspending judgement). That’s what skeptics do, after all. But Bakker does not put balanced evidence. Indeed, his project is acknowledged as being based on assumptions that “they’re making this up as they go along” from “a bunch of verbally talented devotees … to play with concepts among themselves” (p49). No real evidence, in 2009 or later, is given to support his thinking this; it’s just his thought as he read an article.

Incredibly, he goes on to say, based on the arguably denigratory assertion that betrays
A happier Freud?

contempt “This is literature”, as if this is self-evidently bad. Yet he constructed his ‘experiment’ using psychoanalytic terms “without a proper understanding of what these terms meant” (p49). He really made it up.

The thrust of Bakker’s argument is akin to my saying (if I could get such a view published) that the recent discovery of the Higgs-boson particle and its implications for understanding dark matter and energy is a contrivance of international scientists since Einstein. I could say that they collectively want to advance their various careers and credentials, merely because I don’t agree or understand, that it derives from an elegant theory that has taken a long time to find ways of demonstrating its veracity. Of course, I could look up references, read peer-reviewed articles, even talk to scientists about large particle accelerators; I might still not understand it but I doubt I’d reject it.

Similarly, one might actually read wider references about contemporary psychoanalysis and research, peer-reviewed journals of which The Psychoanalytic Quarterly is one, and one might even get into conversation with practising psychoanalysts to ascertain what facts there are.

In regard to the latter, of course research facts do exist. These have grown to not only counter the oft-repeated claims put by Bakker regarding outcomes etc, but also to reasonably respond to the demands of health-care providers that treatment is justified by these means. For example, I put this to the Australian government, and Medicare, in a detailed submission which also discussed the evidence base, (http://www.napp.org.au/downloads/submissions/m319-1.pdf - AnaF G et al, 2003).

The evidence base for psychoanalysis is extensive. Even then, in my 2003 submission, the evidence concerned substantive issues such as cost, efficacy, comparative studies, studies concerning frequency of visits, biological studies and more general studies on the use of this approach.

Since then, and in stark contrast to Bakker’s claim that “psychoanalysts are still supporting their claims with selected self-report … single case illustrations” (p51), the Göttingen study of psychoanalytic therapy (Leichsenring et al) attempted to address the need for rigorous outcome studies using methodologically high quality protocols, in accordance with the current standards of psychotherapy research.

These authors explicitly take issue too, with the same notions put by Bakker when he states “Because the criterion for truth in analytic models is not experimental verification … there has been no way to arbitrate.” (p49)

Leichsenring et al (2005) make this telling point: “The exclusive position of RCTs (randomised controlled trials) as methods for demonstrating that a treatment works has recently been queried. The main argument is that it is questionable whether the results of RCTs are representative for clinical practice … Thus, the supposed strength of RCTs, especially randomisation, can turn out to be their central weakness, because RCTs create artificial conditions that are not representative of clinical practice (Seligman, 1995). This is also true for the use of therapy manuals.” (p842)

Does Bakker really want only RCT as a measure of the effectiveness of therapy, and nothing else, as implied on p51? That would be fine for measuring the side-effects of aspirin, but not, in my view, complex human interaction.

Before that, but no less significantly, in 2000 Sandell's paper on efficacy reported that “the main findings of a large-scale study of subsidised psychoanalysis and long-term psychotherapy. More than 400 people in various phases, before, during and after … were followed up for a period of three years … analyses revealed progressive improvement the longer patients were in treatment - impressively strong among patients in psychoanalysis.” I cannot reconcile this with Bakker’s view that “outcome studies are very disappointing” (p50).

More recently, Wallerstein (2009) detailed a review of the whole issue of research into psychoanalysis. (Yes, even psychoanalysts write about the issue themselves!) This covers such problems as the nature of such research, the issue of the single case study, conceptual vs empirical research, qualitative vs quantitative approaches and implications for ongoing research methods.

Returning now to Bakker’s article: it is an astonishing fact that the reviewers to whom Bakker submitted his ‘article’ explicitly stated that “the paper feels fragmented & incomplete”, and uses “simplistic views of theory” in ways which are “rote, dated and incomplete”. In other words, they seem to agree with Bakker that “I have never used Freudian psychoanalysis in my life” (p50). Somehow Bakker sees the very fact they commented and asked for case material to justify a “fragmented paper” as evidence of their being duped. I think personally they were just agreeing it was to be rejected.

More serious errors present themselves.
Bakker apparently asserts that his reviewers ought to have objected to one view in his “experimental article”: that analysts blame patients if they don’t get better, and that it has nothing to do with their function as analysts (p51). Curiously, he doesn’t mention that this would fly in the face of the vast literature on the evolution of the concept of ‘counter-transference’, since the term was coined in 1909. This concept, with all its complexity, refers to the role of the psychoanalyst in the treatment of patients. Bakker states that no reviewer objected – perhaps they didn’t feel a need to object, given it is clearly wrong, and having rejected his article.

We need to look closely at Bakker’s concluding paragraph, the ‘killer punch’ as it were. It pays here to reprint it thus, with emphases that are mine: “the core issue ... is an epistemological one: Does generalisable knowledge about human psychopathology and its treatment arise from the subjective observations ... of a group of intelligent practitioners, OR from the systematic application of the scientific method in the development of a verifiable body of theory and the testing of applied outcomes?” (p51). Clearly he favours the latter.

Case studies and qualitative research do have their place, here as in other more diverse areas. For example, Baum maintains that case studies are also empirical enquiries utilising multiple data sources. A “case” may be a community, institution or individual, with the research being descriptive or explanatory (Baum 2008 - in Anaf J, 2011). Bakker acknowledges his resentment of the psychoanalytic literature (p49), which arguably allows him to ignore notions such as those put by Baum. In his resentment, he skewers his case, even as he (quietly) rails against “conveniently contrived case studies”.

Keeping Rieman’s contention in mind (not to reject all truth and reality), it’s easy to see that the Gottingen Study, Sandell, Wallerstein and many others clearly refute Bakker’s arguments.

To recap: Bakker sought to have a paper published but it was rejected. The sham paper relied on terms that were not understood, which the reviewers point out. He used that to make/imply claims about psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic research that are incorrect. Bakker’s last point, that the answer to the core epistemological question lies only in choosing between subjective observation and scientific method is demonstrably wrong; both can lead to verifiable outcomes.

All in all, it’s hard for me to see what Bakker’s article achieved here, other than to arguably perpetuate the schism he described at the start. What’s the point of that?

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REFERENCES
Anaf G et al: Long Term Intensive Psychiatric Treatment: The Impact of Medicare Item 319 and Associated Restrictions on Patients, Psychiatrists and the Community; A submission prepared for the Medicare Benefits Consultative Committee by the National Association of Practising Psychiatrists; p 21 – 22, May 2003
What you think ...

Share the difference

What a revelation to read the feelings of Alison White living life as a sceptic [The Skeptic, 32:3, p4]. I thought I was the only one who felt isolated and alienated by others who hold the dominant, conservative view. I too am still wondering if life could be more enjoyable if I give a bit and join the masses, but my fascinating destination so far will not let me go back into the dark. I identified strongly with Alison’s assertions that “it must be closed doors, and no one else cares. Thank you for your honesty Alison.

Denise Kerley
Caloundra QLD

Reflected Gory

In your editorial “On Reflection” [The Skeptic, 32:3, p4], you state that “criticism is a necessary reviling of an organisation”. You then go on to state that if such criticism is destructive “for other than altruistic motives”, then we should rethink our view on such reflection/criticism.

I’m not sure if such destruction can ever be undertaken for altruistic motives. There seems to be a lot of self-flagellation at times among the skeptic community, but there also seems to be a lot of opportunistic and petty and often anonymous vindictiveness that so-called social (anti-social?) media promotes, or at least allows. The “elevatorgate” debate around Rebecca Watson’s issues with sexism and possible assault is the ultimate case in point. Too many people took this as an opportunity to vent possibly long held animosities and even neuroses, some tipping over into violent threats.

Can we ever see ourselves as altruistic in our destruction and our reflection when some among us fall so easily into reprehensible and vile practices. Of course, such people are in the minority, but so too are those on the other side who promote violence and hatred. Not all antivaxxers are uncaring, just as much as not all skeptics are rabid ranters. But some obviously are, and perhaps some of that reflection might be applied to the sort of people we are as much as it is to the sorts of things we do.

Brett Veld
Hornsby NSW

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD SOLUTION

DR BOB’S QUIZ SOLUTIONS

1. The board had changed its name from “Midlands Examination Group”, and somebody did a bulk replace of “MEG” with “OCR”.

2. Stealing oil from the Russians’ oil pipeline that passes (or, rather, used to pass) through the area.

3. (Until it’s virtual, it’s not real.) When a message came on to their computer screens “Please evacuate the building! Have a wonderful day!”

4. Because there are far fewer claims of only two perfect hands occurring, which is vastly more likely.

For more of this sort of thing, go to drbobsquiz@wordpress.com, where these and many others have witty or even sarcastic answers.
Local Skeptical Groups

VICTORIA

Gippsland Skeptics – (formerly Sale Skeptics In The Pub)
Meets every second Friday in Sale and Morwell in alternate months.
saleskepticsinthe.pub@hotmail.com or 0424 376 153
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Gippsland-Skeptics/172376579482915

Great Ocean Road Skeptics – (Geelong)
Meets on the last Wednesday of each month from 6pm, City Quarter, Cunningham Pier East Geelong
Contact: Carolyn Coulson carolco@barwonhealth.org.au

Melbourne Eastern Hills Skeptics in the Pub
Meets second Monday of each month at The Knox Club, Wantirna South.
Contact: Lucas Randall 0423141453
mehsitp@codenix.org
http://mehsitp.codenix.org

Melbourne Skeptics in the Pub
Meets on the fourth Monday of every month from 6 pm at the Mt View Hotel in Richmond.

Mordi Skeptics in The Pub
Meets at 7.30pm on the first Tuesday of each month at the Mordi Sporting Club. ($2 to cover website costs)
http://www.meetup.com/Mordi-Skeptics-in-the-Pub/

Peninsula Skeptics – (aka The Celestial Teapot)
Contacts: Graeme Hanigan 0438 359 600 or Tina Hunt 0416 156
945 or glannagalt@fastmail.fm
http://www.meetup.com/Teapot-Mornington-Peninsula/

TASMANIA

Launceston Skeptics
Skeptics in the Pub
Contact: Jin-oh Choi, 0408 271 800
info@launcestonskeptics.com

NOTE: LISTINGS WELCOME
We invite listings for any Skeptical groups based on local rather than regional areas. Email us at editor@skeptics.com.au with details of your organisation’s name, contact details and any regular functions, eg Skeptics in the Pub, with time, day of the month, location etc. Because this is a quarterly journal and most local groups meet monthly, it is unlikely we will be able to include references to specific speakers or events.
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