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# New Zealand Skeptic

NUMBER ONE

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## PSYCHICS CHALLENGED

NZSCICOP recently challenged psychics to put their abilities to the test under controlled conditions. Colin Amery of Auckland took up the challenge. Mr Amery claims to be skilled in telepathy, clairvoyance, and Tarot reading. He was tested in the Otago University Psychology Department in March this year, claiming that he is "50% successful" in telepathy and "80% successful" in Tarot reading.

Clairvoyance tests could not be conducted as Mr Amery's definition of this could not be distinguished from telepathy. He would only agree to Tarot readings in a face-to-face situation, so controlled tests of this were not possible either. Experimental tests of telepathy were held, and demonstrations of Tarot readings were run under Mr Amery's conditions.

Mr Amery attempted to telepathically receive ten randomly chosen numbers (from the set 0 - 99) and ten randomly chosen pictures (from a set of 50). These were transmitted by Mr Amery's agent from a nearby building. Mr Amery was incorrect on all ten numbers. An independent judge ranked the responses against the targets for both sets with no better than chance results. These controlled tests of Mr Amery's telepathic claims showed no evidence of psychic ability.

Although not under controlled conditions, the Tarot readings showed Mr Amery to be a proficient exponent. However they provided no evidence for any psychic ability, and could be readily explained with standard cold reading techniques.

Mr Amery has subsequently questioned the results (see New Zealand Times, March 23) claiming bias in the selection of pictures and the evaluation of the Tarot results. However NZSCICOP stands by its report, copies of which are available from any member of the steering committee.



*"The practice of astrology took a major step toward achieving credibility today when, as predicted, everyone born under the sign of Scorpio was run over by an egg lorry."*

Message from the Chairperson, NZCSICOP  
An Open Letter to All New Zealand Skeptics

Dear Fellow Skeptics,

Our recently founded "Skeptics Society" is growing fast. We now have almost 50 paid-up members through the country and, by the time this reaches you, we should be a legally incorporated Society. Through individual and media communications NZCSICOP is providing a counterbalance to the ever-increasing number of paranormal claims. The response from the media has to date been most receptive and encouraging, and NZCSICOP seems to be fulfilling a genuinely-felt need for a rational and skeptical approach to magic, myth, and mystery. It has been a pleasant surprise to encounter many hard-nosed skeptics in the media and perhaps they too have grown weary of the psychics and mediums who seem to claim all but demonstrate nothing.

But there is no room for complacency. Consider just one week of TVNZ programming in February, chosen at random:

Monday, 17th: 7.30-8.30 pm, TV-1 "Seekers" featured a visit to a medium in which an episode of spirit possession is realistically displayed as an unquestioned fact (the first installment of a new prime-time N.Z. made series).

Tuesday, 18th: 8.00-8.30 pm, TV-2 "Arthur C. Clarke's World of Strange Powers" gives the usual dollop of pseudoscience in documentary style. Clarke makes a token gesture towards skepticism but cleverly leaves an overall impression of mystery and magic. He has to, otherwise the public may not want to watch, or buy the book.

Wednesday, 19th: 10.10-11.00 pm, TV-2 "Seeing Things" is "a series about a bumbling but clairvoyant reporter who solves crimes" (Listener)

Thursday, 20th: No paranography tonight.

Friday, 21st: 8.30-9.30 pm, TV-2 "Moonlighting". In this episode of a highly popular US-made series, a clairvoyant steals company secrets and sells them to a major competitor.

Saturday, 22nd: Another rest day.

Sunday, 23rd: 10.40-11.30 a.m. TV-1 "That's Incredible". This programme usually makes me feel slightly sick, and I didn't actually see this one. But the paranography quotient is typically fairly high (about 30-40%).

Drama programmes which incorporate paranormal themes are in some ways more disturbing than so-called "documentaries" of the Arthur C. Clarke and Horizon kind. While the latter are usually biased towards belief in the paranormal, they at least question the reality of the phenomena they present; the dramatist seldom does. Paranormal happenings are presented with those of a

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## AIMS OF THE NEW ZEALAND C.S.I.C.O.P.

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- (a) To investigate scientifically and with an open mind, claims and events of an apparently paranormal nature.
- (b) To report the results of these investigations and where possible, to provide rational, scientific explanations.
- (c) To provide reliable information about paranormal claims.
- (d) To encourage a more critical attitude to pseudoscience and to bogus paranormal claims, and to alert people to the dangers of uncritical acceptance.
- (e) To increase public awareness of the difference between legitimate science and pseudoscience.
- (f) To investigate the psychological, social, and ideological factors behind belief in the paranormal.

\* \* \* \* \*

### These aims will be pursued by:

- \* Establishing a network of people interested in critically examining claims of the paranormal.
- \* Publishing a newsletter and distributing information material.
- \* Publishing articles, monographs and books that examine claims of the paranormal.
- \* Maintaining a library.
- \* Preparing bibliographies of relevant published material.
- \* Encouraging and commissioning research by objective and impartial inquirers.
- \* Conducting meetings, seminars and conferences.
- \* Making available informed members to the media and interested groups.
- \* Setting up controlled tests and investigations of paranormal claims.

### The Skeptical attitude means:

- \* Seeking all relevant factual evidence concerning an event, claims or theory.
- \* Keeping an open mind until a satisfactory explanation is found, and not rejecting a priori any paranormal claims without inquiry.
- \* Maintaining a position of uncertainty when there is insufficient or ambiguous evidence; recognising that having no explanation at present is preferable to jumping to conclusions.
- \* Avoiding cynicism as this is not in the spirit of open minded inquiry.
- \* Seeking scientifically a normal explanation of any claimed paranormal event.

NEW ZEALAND COMMITTEE FOR SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION OF

CLAIMS OF THE PARANORMAL (N.Z.C.S.I.C.O.P.)

APPLICATION FOR MEMBERSHIP

Name (Miss/Mrs/Ms/Mr) : \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation : \_\_\_\_\_

Best mailing address : \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Age : \_\_\_\_\_

Degress and/or diplomas: \_\_\_\_\_

Honours : \_\_\_\_\_

Relevant areas of expertise: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Is there any manner in which you would be able to assist the Committee in furthering the aims of NZCSICOP? (e.g. providing expert opinion, public presentation, fund-raising, media contacts, newsletter contributions, etc.)?

Please tell us why you would like to become a member of NZCSICOP.

Please include your membership fee along with this application.

Annual membership: \$10.00 (includes subscription to a quarterly Newsletter)  
Sustaining membership: \$100.00

Signature : \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Return this form to one of the following:

Dr David Marks, Chairman, NZCSICOP, Department of Psychology, University of Otago.  
Dr Denis Dutton, Secretary, NZCSICOP, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury

THE NEW ZEALAND COMMITTEE FOR THE SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION  
OF CLAIMS OF THE PARANORMAL, Inc.

"THE NEW ZEALAND SKEPTICS"

FIRST ANNUAL CONVENTION, 8-10 AUGUST, 1986,  
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

Friday, 8th August

12 - 2 p.m., Press Conference, Committee Members and guests

Saturday, 9th August

9 - 10 a.m. "What Is Pseudoscience?" Denis Dutton  
(University of Canterbury) Secretary, NZCSICOP.  
10 - 11 a.m., "Creationism & the Misuse of Biology" Gordon Hewitt,  
(Victoria University), Committee Member, NZCSICOP  
11 - 11.30 a.m., COFFEE/TEA  
11.30 - 12.30 "The Australia- New Zealand Stop-Over For  
International Psychics" Mark Plummer,  
(Melbourne), Founding Chairman, Australian Skeptics.  
12.30 - 1.30 p.m. LUNCH  
1.30 - 2.30 p.m. "Psychics I Have Known" David Marks,  
(University of Otago), Founding Chairman, NZ Skeptics  
2.30 - 3.00 p.m. "Psychic Powers: A First-Person Account"  
A prominent psychic will be invited to speak.  
3.00 - 3.30 p.m. COFFEE/TEA  
3.30 - 4.30 p.m. "Psychics, Clairvoyants, & Cold Reading" Denis Dutton  
4.30 - 5.30 p.m. Open Forum & Discussion  
5.30 - 7.00 p.m. Drinks, University Staff Club  
7.00 - 11.00 p.m. Convention Dinner & Annual Press Awards,  
University Staff Club. (Tickets, \$25)

Sunday, 10th August

10 a.m. - 12 p.m. Other speakers, to be announced.  
12 - 1 p.m. A.G.M.

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"THE NEW ZEALAND SKEPTICS"

REGISTRATION FORM (Please return to Dr D. Marks, University of Otago,  
P.O. Box 56, Dunedin)

I would like to pre-enrol for NZCSICOP's First Annual Convention

Member \$5 ( )

Non-member \$10 ( )

I would like to attend the Conference Dinner .... \$25 ( )

I would like to reserve accommodation for the nights of:

	<u>University College</u>	<u>Motel</u>
8 - 9 August	( )	( )
9 - 10 August	( )	( )
10 - 11 August	( )	( )
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perfectly normal kind in such a casual manner that the unsuspecting viewer can be further coaxed into accepting that nothing extraordinary has actually occurred. We simply do not know the degree to which occult beliefs are directly or indirectly caused by the mass media's positive and unquestioning treatment of occult material, but such programming can hardly be conducive to increased skepticism.

In daily newspapers horoscopes are published as useful, important information. For example, the Otago Daily Times puts this mindless twaddle at the top of a page entitled "PUBLIC INFORMATION". Here we can also read world and N.Z. weather reports; weather forecasts; times of sunrise, sunset, high and low tides; and Air New Zealand and bus timetables. Shouldn't any responsible newspaper clearly state that the astrology column is purely for entertainment and keep it well separated from serious and genuinely useful public information?

And then there are the dozens of psychics, mediums, spiritual healers, past-lifers, water diviners, and plainly cranky kooks who seem to command as much media attention as they need to gain their dubious livelihoods. Can psychics really read minds using ESP? Can mediums really communicate with the dead? If so, this committee would dearly love to confirm these phenomena in properly controlled scientific investigations. We hope that all practising mediums and psychics will make contact with NZCSICOP so that we can investigate their claims under reasonable and mutually agreeable test conditions. In addition to the personal satisfaction of knowing that one's claims can be supported by proper scientific evidence, claimants would be eligible for some pretty massive financial rewards. Over \$200,000 is available world-wide for mediums who can demonstrate spirit survival in front of CSICOP-appointed observers, and over \$140,000 for any other paranormal claim. More details of this offer will be announced at our conference on 9-10th August, in Dunedin.

But if psychics and mediums don't allow their claims to be properly verified, then they can hardly blame us (or the general public) if we conclude that their powers are not as they claim. The excuse that they are too busy helping people, or that their powers are suppressed inside the laboratory environment, or that the powers don't work when money is involved, simply will not wash. If psychics and mediums won't let their claims be properly tested, then they should quietly withdraw their services from the public scene. The results so far with psychics Colin Amery and Julia Vazey have been entirely negative, but at least they are sincere enough to let their claims be tested. Medium Mary Fry's refusal to be properly tested confirms that the spirits she says she contacts really are 'all in her mind'.

I hope that you will support NZCSICOP's aims and activities, and I look forward to the possibility of meeting you in Dunedin in August at our first annual convention. Please contact me directly if you would like more information on this conference, and please send any proposals for talks and speakers as soon as possible.

David F. Marks, BSc(Hons), PhD, FBPsS, FNZPSP  
Fellow, CSICOP  
Chairperson, NZCSICOP

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### SOME RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Carlson, S. A double-blind test of the astrology hypothesis. Nature, December 5, 1985, 318, 419-425. Two double-blind tests were made of the thesis that astrological 'natal charts' can be used to describe accurately personality traits of test subjects. Despite using highly regarded astrologers, despite incorporating their suggestions into the design, and despite the fact that they approved the design, astrology failed to perform at a level better than chance. The astrological hypothesis was clearly refuted.

Johnson, J., Cain, L., Falke, T., Hayman, J., & Perillo, E. The "Barnum Effect" revisited: Cognitive and motivational factors in the acceptance of personality descriptions. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1985, 49, 1378-1391. Investigations of the Barnum effect, the acceptance of character descriptions as uniquely applicable to the self, provide some conclusions about the factors which influence the effect.

Lewin, R. Evidence for scientific creationism? Science, May 17, 1985, 228, p.837. A computer scan of 1000 scientific and technical journals found no articles offering empirical or experimental evidence for creationism. A survey of 135,000 manuscripts submitted for publication found only 18 addressing the scientific underpinnings of creationism and none accepted for publication.

Marks, D. Investigating the paranormal. Nature, March 13, 1986, 320, 119-124. Reviews current evidence for a wide range of paranormal phenomena, discusses theoretical and methodological issues in their investigation, and psychological factors influencing belief in the paranormal.

Morris, R. What I shall do with the Koestler chair. New Scientist, September 5, 1985, p.59. Morris describes how he views the Koestler chair of parapsychology at Edinburgh University, and what he intends to do as its first occupant.

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### N.Z. Skeptics Press Awards

Readers are invited to submit nominations for the following awards.

#### N.Z. Skeptics Award for Journalistic Excellence

Any report in the printed media concerning the paranormal (published within the last three years) which provides an insightful skeptical analysis of the specific paranormal events reported.

#### N.Z. Skeptics Bent Spoon Award

Any report in the printed media concerning the paranormal (published within the last three years) which provides a gullible and unquestioning analysis of the specific paranormal events reported.

Nominations with supporting material should be sent to Dr Denis Dutton, Secretary, NZSCICOP, School of Fine Art, Canterbury University, Christchurch.