Skeptic
a person who looks for the simplest explanation first, but is willing to consider other possibilities in the light of unambiguous evidence

The 'Georgia Magnet' in NZ

Armchair activism and amber

Skeptical soundbites

Conversations with a creationist

Matakite walkovers

new zealand Skeptic

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editorial

Fluoride decision a win for common sense

SO after a break of almost 13 months, fluoride is now back in Hamilton's water supply. It was 5 June last year that the council, after three months of public consultations, submissions and hearings, decided to cease fluoridation, despite clear support for the practice from the Hamilton populace and the medical profession. In doing so they bowed to pressure from a well-organised and well-funded lobbying campaign, and ignored scientific evidence, which they said they lacked the expertise to assess (for background on the funding of the anti-fluoride lobby, see Ken Perrott's excellent analysis at **openparachute.wordpress.com/2014/01/12/who-is-funding-anti-fluoridation-high-court-action**). Then followed a citizens-initiated referendum in October when 70 percent of respondents voted for fluoridation to resume, and a High Court judgement on 7 March in the case of New Health NZ Inc v South Taranaki District Council, which ruled in favour of that council's decision to fluoridate (see *NZ Skeptic 111*, p 17). Hamilton City Council's decision to resume fluoridation came on 27 March, and this was put into action on 3 July.

The story is not over yet. New Health NZ has appealed the South Taranaki decision, and another anti-fluoride group, Safe Water Alternative NZ (SWANZ), lodged a statement of claim with the High Court on 28 April for a judicial review to test the HCC decision; the High Court hearing is scheduled for 9 September. SWANZ appears to be of recent origin and presumably was set up for the express purpose of taking this action, so as to protect its supporters from incurring legal costs. HCC doesn't have this option, and will face yet another hefty legal bill as the affair drags on through another round.

But the anti-fluoridationists may be on the back foot. Many in Hamilton were angry at the way a minority pressure group was able to have a civic service with wide popular support curtailed, and the lobbyists' ongoing efforts to overturn the democratic outcome of the referendum, with resulting legal costs which ultimately ratepayers will have to meet, are winning them no friends. Supporters of fluoridation are now much better organised, and submissions for this year's Kapiti District Council draft annual plan ran 366 to 261 in favour of fluoridation, compared with 1375 to 170 against in Hamilton last year. We must still await the outcomes of the next rounds in the courts, but for now we can be cautiously optimistic that decisions on fluoridation will continue to be based on sound science.

David.

Magnetic South: The Georgia Magnet's tour of New Zealand

Tony Wolf

"... she successfully resisted the forces pitted against her, giving an astounding manifestation of some power other than that making up the ordinary phenomena of nature." So wrote the Feilding Star *on 25 October 1899, reporting on an early incarnation of the supernatural showpeople that still tour the world today. But other newspapers took a sceptical line that media today could learn from.*

THE originators of the 'Georgia Magnet' or resistance act are generally conceded to have been the promoters of Lulu Hurst (1869-1950), a slight girl in her early teens who enjoyed astronomical success touring vaudeville theatres throughout the US during the 1880s. Her act consisted of a range of 'tests' at which members of the audience (generally large, strong men) were challenged to overcome her. These tests included feats such as Miss Hurst resisting the attempts of one, two or even three men to push her backwards, lift her into the air, force a billiard cue through her hands to the stage floor and similar stunts.

Miss Hurst and her promoters attributed her seemingly supernatural strength to a mysterious energy, akin to electricity or magnetism, which they referred to as the 'Great Unknown'.

Upon Lulu Hurst's retirement from show business at the still-tender age of 16, there emerged a proliferation of performers who appropriated the Magnet name and act. At least two of them toured New Zealand around the turn of the 20th century, by which time many of their standard 'tests' had not only been duplicated, but quite frequently exposed by academic sceptics in various newspaper and magazine articles.

Notably, these included EW Barton-Wright's very comprehensive exposé entitled *How*

"The greatest wonder of the world: Miss Abbot of America performing feats of strength", woodblock print triptych by Shokokusei, 1896.

to Pose as a Strong Man which had been published in *Pearson's Magazine* (London) a year previously. Barton-Wright was a former engineer who became the first man to introduce the Japanese martial art of jujitsu to Europe. He also devised his own eclectic self-defence system, which he called Bartitsu; a combination of Japanese jujitsu with boxing, wrestling and Swiss stick fighting.

Observing the fundamental similarity between the subtle leverage principles at work in the Magnet act and his own study of body mechanics as they related to hand-to-hand combat, Barton-Wright had clearly explained many of the Magnet's secrets in a 'how-to' format:

> It must not be supposed that it is necessary to possess any unusual strength to pose as a strong man; indeed, in many strong men's feats, strength plays a less important part than knack and trickery.
>
> … [The Georgia Magnet] declared that it was solely owing to the fact that she possessed remarkable magnetic and electric powers that she was able to perform these feats. This, of course, was not the case, for anyone of average strength, who follows these instructions, will be able to perform them.

Barton-Wright addressed the psychological aspect of the Magnet's act, referring to techniques of distracting the audience's attention from the actual methods employed through 'patter' and misdirection. His concise essay, well-illustrated with step-by-step photographs, was unusually accessible to the lay reader. Magician and arch-skeptic Harry Houdini also summarised the physical mechanics and psychological principles of the resistance act in his book *Miracle Mongers and their Methods* (1920).

MISS ANNIE MAY ABBOTT, THE "GEORGIA MAGNET."

Matilda Tatro, who toured New Zealand (as Annie May Abbott) in 1899.

On 28 August 1899, the *Auckland Star* reported that a new Georgia Magnet had arrived in New Zealand. This mystifier was a young French-American woman named Matilda 'Tillie' Tatro. Miss Tatro's stage name of Annie May Abbott was a successful attempt to cash in on the fame of her manager Richard Abbey's former protégée and star, another Magnet who had by then retired from show business.

Mr Abbey's patter had come to redefine the 'Great Unknown' as the 'Odic force'. This hypothetical, animistic energy had first been proposed by the scientist Baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach in 1845. By 1899, the notion of Odic force had also been embraced by many spiritualists and by researchers of apparently psychic phenomena such as telekinesis.

By 14 November the Magnet was well into her New Zealand tour and was receiving excellent, if mildly sceptical, press notices:

> It is claimed for Miss Annie May Abbott 'the Georgia Magnet', that she is the possessor of some odic or occult power. The sceptical, however, will remain of the opinion, that she is simply a mistress of leverage and equipose. But whatever the power may be, there is no gainsaying the fact that the entertainment she provides is a very clever one. It is at once both entertaining and instructive, though the amusement, it must be added, is provided largely by the Committee.
>
> Young men, fresh from the gymnasium, exerted all their muscular energy, and staid and respectable city fathers pushed and shoved till their bald pates reddened; but all with one result – the 'Magnet' remained rooted to the ground. The gentleman who acted as master of ceremonies last evening was quite mysterious about the power possessed by Miss Abbott, but he went the length of grandiloquently stating that it was in the region of the nebulous mists that hang out beyond the domain of already explored and classified science.

The Magnet failed to attract on her last performance in Wellington, as it was reported that one of the Committeemen had actually succeeded in lifting her off the stage and that "the entertainment was concluded at an unusually early hour". However, this did not prevent a local politician, Mr TK McDonald, from scoring some points for topicality in a

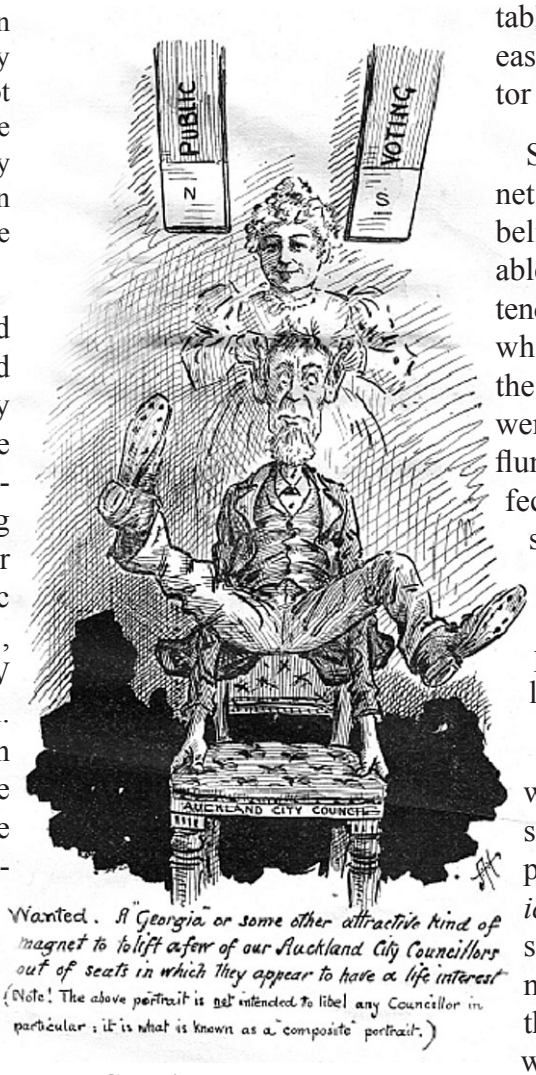
speech given on the evening of 20 November:

> "The members of this triple alliance, however, are very much mistaken if they think they are going to get rid of the Right Hon. RJ Seddon (Applause). He is like the Georgia Magnet – they can not shift him. (A voice: They shifted her at last.) They did not know the power that enabled 'the Magnet' to remain fast, but they knew what kept Mr Seddon in power. It was 'the power of the people'. (Applause)"

The Magnet continued her tour, playing to packed houses in Auckland in early September. The editor of the *New Zealand Graphic* appreciated the show but evinced strong scepticism regarding the Master of Ceremonies' spiel about 'Odic force' and 'magnetic influence', going so far as to re-print EW Barton-Wright's exposé in full. The paper also published an editorial cartoon expressing the wish that the Magnet might use her powers to 'lift' certain recalcitrant City Council members out of their seats.

Response from the Magnet's representatives was swift and came in the form of a politely blistering letter to the editor of the *Auckland Star*.

The Magnet's defender in this instance was Danvers Hamber, who was at that time the assistant editor of the *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review*. In a high dudgeon, he proceeded to point out the various ways in which Miss Abbott's performance differed from Barton-Wright's descriptions. Barton-Wright had addressed the fakery of 'Georgia Magnet'-style feats in general rather than Annie May Abbott's act in particular, and his article also included several feats that were not part of the standard Georgia Magnet repertoire. Moreover, as Barton-Wright had explained, there are several ways to perform the



The Georgia Magnet vs the Auckland City Council.

various Georgia Magnet 'experiments' without resorting to 'odic force', all of them requiring the practised application of leverage and balance combined with the ideomotor effect – the influence of imagination, suggestion and/or expectation on unconscious bodily movement.

The ideomotor effect was first formally described and defined by William Benjamin Carpenter during the mid-19th century. A physician and physiologist with a strong critical interest in claims of psychic phenomena, Carpenter observed and then proved that the apparently mysterious workings of spiritualistic phenomena including ouija boards, table turning and dowsing could easily be explained via ideomotor action.

Specific to the Georgia Magnet 'experiments', subjects who believed that they would not be able to overcome the 'odic force' tended to find that they could not, while those who believed that the force was stronger than they were tended to find themselves flung about the stage. These effects were exacerbated by the strict protocols of the 'tests', which subtly disadvantaged the volunteers in terms of position, momentum and leverage.

Danvers Hamber's fears were somewhat justified when several other regional newspapers followed the *Graphic*'s lead, printing increasingly sceptical editorials as the Magnet's tour continued through the provinces. Their consensus was that, while the show was very entertaining, the 'odic force' patter was now well past its prime.

The editor of the *Timaru Post* asserted that:

> .. the 'Georgia Magnet' possesses no power, psychic or otherwise, that is not possessed by every member of her sex. As an example. The 'Georgia Magnet' holds the downward end of a stick in her clenched right hand, and one or two men are expected to force it through. Why, almost a child could resist their efforts. We know it is claimed that she

does not grasp the stick, but we have seen her do it …

Twice has the 'Magnet' been lifted from the local platform, despite her exertions and anatomical distortions, and twice has it been clearly demonstrated that there has been no magnetism or 'new force' holding her down …

As previously stated, we have no objection to such exhibitions as shows, merely; but we are bound to protect truth and science from incursions of that description. It is unlikely the Magnet will attract much more in New Zealand, as all the papers are busy exposing her tricks.

It's unlikely that EW Barton-Wright was even aware that his *Pearson's Magazine* article had played so great a role in this New Zealand newspaper controversy, but there's no reason to doubt that it would have pleased him.

By November of 1900 the Magnet had departed the Land of the Long White Cloud and was enjoying success in an Australian tour. She seems to have faded from Kiwi consciousness until 18 April 1903, when local papers reported she had apparently fallen on hard times and expired of consumption at her home in Georgia. The *Evening Post* published a letter by the New Zealand magician and exposer of spiritualist hoaxes Professor Robert Kurdarz, the stage name of Thomas Driver.

Kudarz wrote that:

"As far back as 1892 [Magnet acts] were exhibited in Christchurch by Professor Charles N Steen [who, by the way, was for a long time associated with the original Annie May Abbott, in America], and he also was the first to introduce the 'Georgia Magnet' in Australia, in the person of Miss Rose Howard, in Melbourne, in 1893, when I was giving exhibitions of magic along with Steen in St. George's Hall. ....

"The two 'forces' that were never mentioned in connection with 'Magnetic Lady' exhibitions were the very two that would give the 'show away' – *viz*, 'gravitation,' and the 'centre of gravity,' and the tricks which the latter 'force' plays you would hardly believe. Moreover, the 'Georgia Magnet', like all other young ladies, always had her own way, notwithstanding all the precautions taken by her sterner committee."

As it turned out, the reports of the Magnet's demise proved to be false; she was in fact alive and well, and performing to packed houses throughout the American Midwest.

Postscript

In much more recent years, the Georgia Magnet or 'resistance act' has been emerging from an almost century-long period of hibernation. The most famous modern exponent of the esoteric art of the 'immovable body' is a young Laotian mentalist and magicienne named Sisuepahn, who has defied the attempts of Arnold Schwarzenegger, amongst many other athletes and celebrities, to lift her from the ground.

Originally from Wellington and now resident in Chicago, Tony Wolf is an action choreographer, martial arts instructor and author of several books on obscure historical topics.

activism

Armchair activism and amber

Mark Hanna *reports on how to use the Advertising Standards Authority to fight back against the promotion of questionable therapies.*

IN November 2012, I saw a television infomercial for a product by a 'Dr Ho' that struck me as a little odd. I later went to the Dr Ho website to discover that the man behind the brand is not a medical doctor at all, but instead a chiropractor and acupuncturist. I contacted the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), asking if he was allowed to use the term 'doctor' in a way that falsely implies he is a medical doctor, as was done in the ad, and the ASA interpreted my question as a complaint.

Eventually I was told that the ad would be changed to make it clear that 'Dr Ho' is not a medical doctor, and so my complaint was considered to be *settled*. After seeing how easy it could be to make a difference, this was the start of an enduring habit of

laying complaints against what seemed to be misleading medical advertisements.

In February 2013, a few months after I'd started actively complaining, I decided to focus my skeptical activism on a single product, and rather arbitrarily picked amber teething necklaces as my target. I had thought that, as misleading therapeutic claims in general are very easy to find and seem to be never-ending, perhaps if I focused on a single specific subset of them I might be able to make a significant dent. To date, I've made 21 complaints about amber teething necklaces. Of those 21, the ASA's decisions for 19 have been released, and each one of those was successful.

When I say successful, what I mean is that each of the complaints were either *settled* or *upheld*. A complaint is *settled* when the advertiser voluntarily changes their ad to the extent that the ASA agrees it no longer violates their codes. A complaint is *upheld* when the complaints board agrees that the ad violates their codes, but the advertiser doesn't change it voluntarily.

Of the 19 successful complaints, 14 of them have been *settled* and 5 were *upheld*. Only one of these advertisers even tried to defend their claims by providing evidence, but what they provided turned out to be irrelevant to their claims, so the complaint against them was *upheld*.

Unfortunately, due to the fact that the ASA is not a statutory regulator, advertisers aren't legally required to comply with the ASA's requests to remove their advertisements when a complaint is *upheld* against them. At the time of writing, none of the five advertisers of amber teething necklaces against whom complaints have been *upheld* have removed the misleading claims from their advertisements.

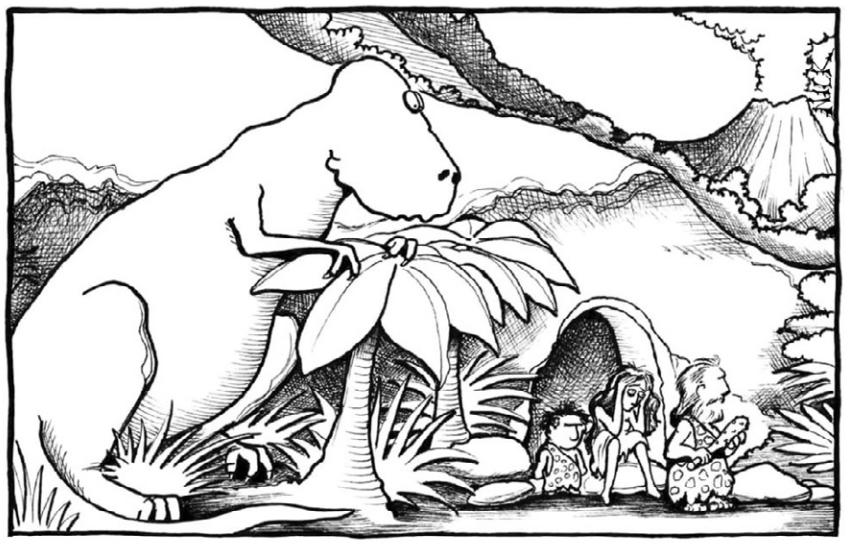
I have made sure the ASA is aware of this, so that they can work with the relevant statutory regulators to protect consumers from misleading information. By the time this article has been published the Fair Trading Amendment Act 2013, which prohibits unsubstantiated claims in trade, will have come into effect. This will make it much easier for these companies to be potentially prosecuted for their misleading advertisements.

Although the ASA has not yet managed to get all of these advertisers to remove their misleading claims, the number of complaints I have submitted about the same type of product seems to have made them realise that this is a widespread problem. Last year the ASA, Medsafe, and TAPS (the Therapeutic Advertising Pre-vetting System) adjudicators worked together to create a guideline specifically for advertisements of amber teething necklaces.

This new guideline is TAPS Guideline 41, entitled the *Guide for Advertisers when promoting products such as amber teething necklaces*. The guideline discusses the types of claims that are considered acceptable and unacceptable for advertisements about amber teething necklaces, and I am very happy to see that the list of unacceptable claims (which is not exhaustive) seems to contain all the types of misleading and unsubstantiated claims I have encountered. Some examples of unaccepted claims are:

- When amber is warmed on the skin, the skin's warmth causes the amber to release trace amounts of healing oils
- When warmed against the skin, [amber] releases its therapeutic properties safely and naturally
- How does Baltic Amber work? No one knows exactly how or why Baltic amber works

NEARING ZERO by Nick Kim



Everyone tried their best to ignore the dinosaur.

- Because Baltic amber teething necklaces have not been scientifically proven we cannot make any claims as to their effectiveness
- Baltic amber teething necklaces have been *a traditional remedy for* teething babies in the Balticregions [sic] for centuries
- Have immune-boosting properties
- Have therapeutic qualities

Many of the unacceptable claims seem to have been taken word for word (right down to spelling and grammatical errors) from advertisements I have complained about. For example, this claim was found in an advertisement by Baby Amber Teething, against which complaint 13/077 was *upheld*:

> There is no mystic in Baltic amber, just huge amount of succinic acid which has anaesthetic and anti-allergic characteristics

The guideline also makes the excellent point that, if claims regarding the action of these necklaces are correct, then it should be regulated as either a medicine or a medical device:

> **Medicines**
>
> Claims that the beads have a therapeutic effect by releasing chemicals which are absorbed through the skin, would classify the beads as a medicine.
>
> **Medical Devices**
>
> Claims that the beads have a therapeutic effect through the wearing only would classify the beads as Medical Devices.

This is something that has occurred to me as well. Advertisers often claim that amber teething necklaces warm against the skin and release succinic acid, which is then absorbed through the skin into the bloodstream from where it can have therapeutic benefits. However, if these claims were true then amber teething necklaces would be unapproved drug delivery devices that administer an unknown dose of an unapproved drug. They have been tested neither for safety nor for efficacy.

If claims regarding the action of these necklaces are correct, then it should be regulated as either a medicine or a medical device

The guideline also remarks on the evidence that would need to be presented before any therapeutic claims about the products could be deemed acceptable:

> In either case, the therapeutic claims and the method of their effect would need to be substantiated in Clinical Trials that demonstrated efficacy. Such trials would be double blinded against a placebo and show a statistically significant and measurable effect. With these traditional Folk products, this is fairly often not realistic, and the effect may in itself be a placebo effect, or be due to historical anecdotal reports.

I'm also happy to note that the guideline has a section on safety warnings, that recommends warnings similar to those recommended by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs:

> Amber necklaces should be removed from a baby when the baby is unattended even if this is likely to be for a very short period of time. Babies should not be left wearing necklaces while sleeping whether that is during the day or overnight.

This guideline make it very easy for advertisers, the ASA, and myself to tell if any claims made in advertisements are out of line. Since it was published, the ASA has used it effectively as a guide for when an advertiser's changes are sufficient for a complaint to be *settled*. In response to the initial changes made by Bambeado in response to my complaint 13/555, the complaints board wrote back to tell them that their changes weren't good enough.

The guideline has also allowed me to make less formal complaints regarding non-compliant advertisements. Instead of always having to go through the process of a formal complaint, in some cases the ASA has elected to immediately send a notice to the advertiser informing them of the guideline and their responsibility to conform to it. For example, after my Bambeado complaint I found 14 of their stockists were still advertising the products in a misleading manner on their websites. Instead of having to complain about them all individually, when I contacted the ASA about this they elected instead to send each stockist a letter about the guideline and their responsibility to comply with it.

I'm especially happy that the standard set by this guideline seems to be significantly stronger than the standard that the ASA has previously used in settling some of my complaints. For example, complaints 13/177 (Punga Tails) and 13/553 (Mama Pukeko) were both *settled*, yet those websites still contain claims about amber

jewellery that seem to clearly violate this new guideline. The Punga Tails website still contains claims such as this:

> Baltic amber has been used as a traditional remedy for teething babies for centuries. Wearing Baltic amber can have a very soothing effect and is beneficial for many adult discomforts.

The Mama Pukeko site still contains this claim on its homepage:

> For centuries the people of Lithuania and other Baltic countries have worn Amber to help cure all types of pains and ailments. In these countries it is believed to help anything from sore throats to aching muscles and joints. If you believe natural alternatives are helpful then you may find wearing amber jewellery means you can avoid frequent use of other medications.

I intend to continue to bring these misleading claims to the ASA's attention, and would encourage anyone else to do the same. Hopefully in the near future misleading claims about amber teething necklaces in New Zealand advertisement might be eradicated.

To me, it feels like this guideline is a sign that my efforts have finally come to fruition. It feels important to note that, in all of the work I've done to remove misleading claims about amber teething necklaces, I've never had to spend a cent, and I've never had to leave my chair. I have not required any special knowledge or resources in order to do this work, only an internet connection. I think the most encouraging part of this story is that one person can make a difference.

And that person could be you.

Mark Hanna is a consumer advocate from Auckland who recently co-founded the Society for Science Based Healthcare. You can read about his activism at honestuniverse.com or follow him on Twitter at @HonestUniverse

Soundbites for the active skeptic

*At the 2013 NZ Skeptic Conference **Vicki Hyde** presented a series of soundbites and talking points skeptics can use in discussions with others. Here are some of them, presented as a smorgasbord of ideas to be dipped into.*

To paraphrase Edmund Burke:

> For a dangerous idiocy to succeed requires only that good people say nothing.

Here's what you can say, please always in a polite caring fashion.

About Skeptics and Skepticism

It's not that skeptics don't believe in anything, but that we try to maintain a balance between wide-eyed credulity and close-minded cynicism.

•

We see thinking critically as a creative, constructive, positive process – where you get to challenge what you think you know, identify assumptions and biases, evaluate what is presented, look for disproof that allows you to discard poorer explanations in favour of better ones, solve problems and suggest solutions.

•

I'm sure your strange experience was real – I've had some too – but that doesn't necessarily mean we always get the explanation right, assuming we get one at all.

•

Whether it's believing the promises of dodgy finance companies or thinking we've seen a ghost, we are all vulnerable to making mistakes, to being fooled – but that doesn't necessarily mean we're actually foolish.

•

The New Zealand Skeptics are the Consumers' Institute for the Mind.

•

Skeptics look for the most likely explanations, but we're happy to consider alternatives or accept the weird when the world is just plain weird at times.

•

Any skeptic would give their eye teeth for absolute proof of life after death or mind-to-mind communication or a perpetual

energy machine. But the evidence has to be sufficiently compelling to be worth overturning everything we think we currently know about the world and how it works. That's a very big ask.

•

It would be great if there really was a moa out there or a Bigfoot; if the UFO landed in my backyard or better yet in front of the Beehive; if you really could cure cancer by waving a crystal at it. That sort of wonderful possibility is what keeps skeptics investigating claims – maybe one day that extraordinary thing will come up. But the proof will have to be equally extraordinary.

•

Think about all the things that happen to you in the course of a day. Do the maths and you should get a one-in-a-million experience – like a long-lost friend phoning you just when you were thinking about them – happen every couple of years on average. Seems amazing when it does, but it's not really that surprising.

•

Explain This!

There are people who genuinely believe they have paranormal powers, but although they may sincerely believe in what they are doing, a firm belief does not necessarily make it so.

•

With the information you've given me I can't explain your UFO sighting, but I think it's a pretty big jump to go from 'there's something in the sky I can't identify' to deciding that it must be an extraterrestrial spacecraft flown by aliens.

•

Having proof that there is alien intelligent life would be the biggest story ever – it would change everything, don't you think? So we should be really, really sure that that's what we've got here, right?

•

During the alien abduction fad in the 80s, the claimed abductee numbers meant that one American was being hauled up into a spacecraft every minute of every hour of every night for the previous 30 years or so. And yet not one decent photo, video or piece of souvenired alien artefact has ever been produced. Doesn't that seem odd to you?

•

But what about my auntie whose cancer was cured by prayer?

That's lovely for her. But there are thousands of people who die every day despite the fervent prayers of friends and family. Were all of them not worthy?

What you've got to be careful about are those cases where people want to stop the medication and rely solely on prayer – that's when it gets dangerous and unethical. We've seen people – adults and kids – die when that happens.

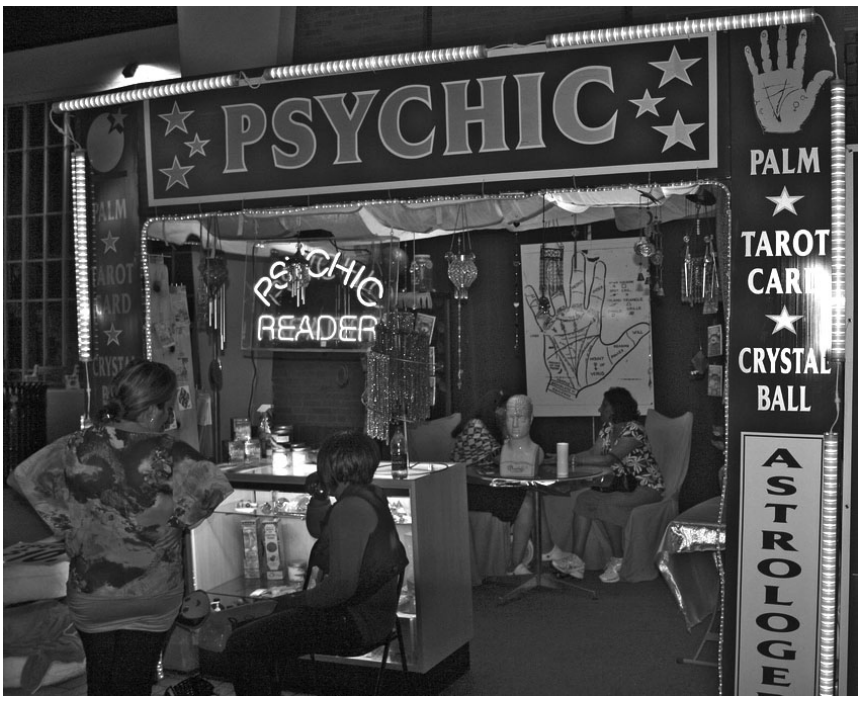
•

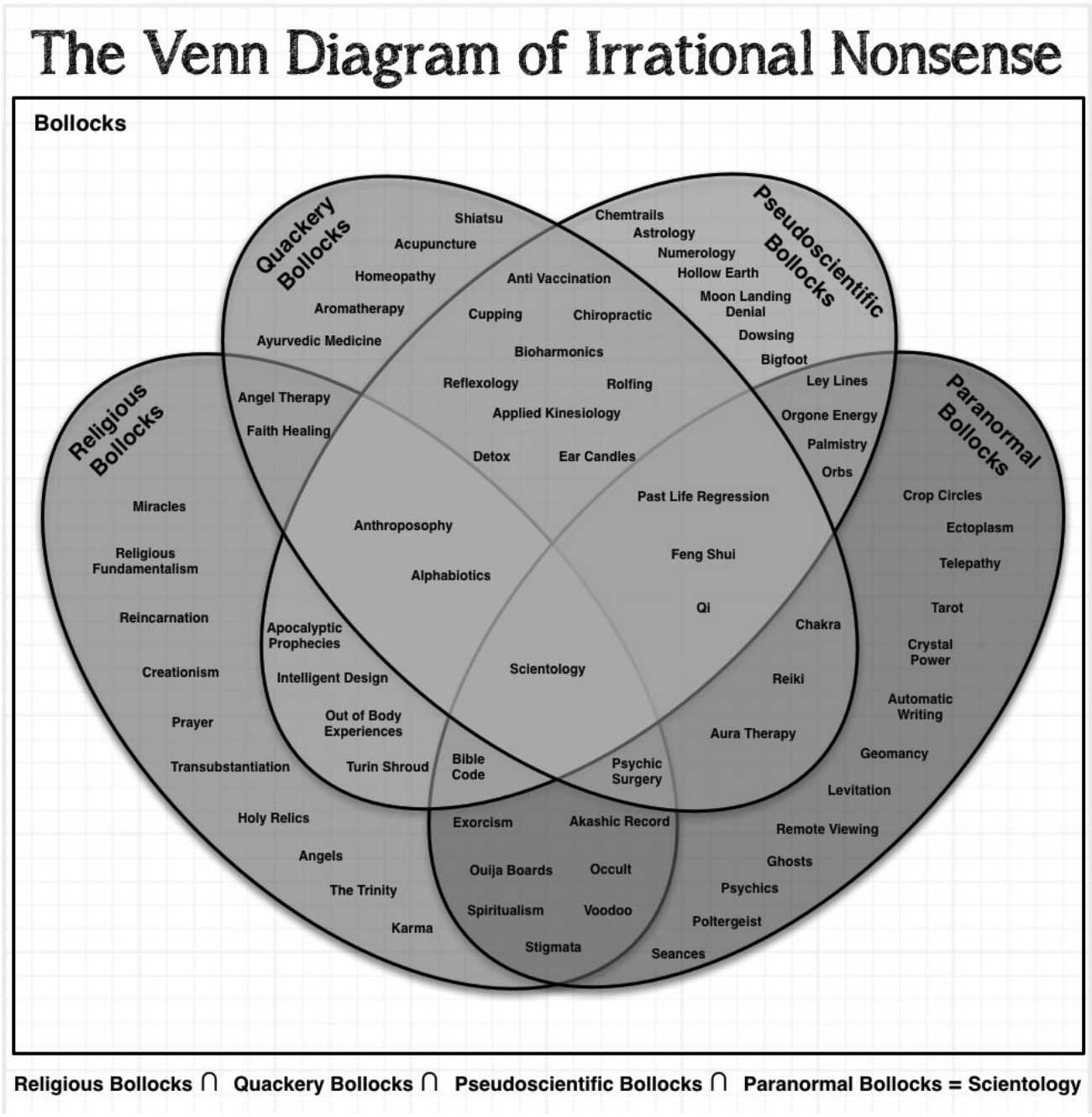
But at least alternative cures don't cause any harm

Take a look at the **WhatsTheHarm.Net** website. They've got a selection of examples from all around the world where people have been harmed by claims of the alternative health industry, the paranormal, and pseudo-science.

At last count, the website was citing 368,379 people killed, 306,096 injured and over $2,815,931,000 in economic damages in just the examples they cite. There are many many more.

We have cases here in New Zealand, like the poor lady last year whose scalp lesion was treated by an iridologist who bathed it in colloidal silver and picked out dead skin and bone to the point where the actual soft





The Reason Stock. © Crispian Jago, www.crispian-jago.blogspot.com

tissue of the brain was exposed. The victim refused conventional treatment for almost two years, and eventually died of the cancer.

•

But what about the *Sensing Murder* people who have revealed new info?

Well, the worldwide franchise for this exploitainment show hasn't provided any new information that wasn't already known to someone living. The police give out information to publicise the cases; anguished families are known to contact the psychics directly and tell them everything they know. There's even aired footage of the film crew prompting Kelvin Cruickshank to get things right when the psychic identifies a kid's drawing as a dog and you can clearly hear someone off-camera whisper, "It's a cat". That doesn't look like special powers to me!

•

But what about moa [ghosts, UFOs etc]? Prove they don't exist!

The problem is that you can't ever prove a negative, as there is always the possibility you might not have all of the evidence.

Do moa still live in New Zealand? To prove that they don't, you would have to undertake a ground search of every last inch of the country. That would be pretty hard … but that's not all.

To Page 14

Compiled by David Riddell

Hunt on for lost dinosaur fossil

AUTHOR and journalist Ian Wishart claims Taranaki could be the last resting place of a giant lizard-like "dinosaur" and is issuing a challenge for it to be rediscovered (*Taranaki Daily News*, 10 May).

Well-known to skeptics as editor of *Investigate* magazine, Wishart tells the tale of the mystery fossil in his latest book, *Our Stories: The New Zealand That Time Forgot*.

The *Taranaki Herald* reported in November and December 1896 that the remains of a 12-metre-long creature with a head "like a dragon" had been discovered in the bank of a tributary of the Waitara River at Purangi. According to Wishart, a WH Skinner inspected the fossil a week later and took photographs of the skull, describing it as being almost as big as a man's body.

Puke Ariki Museum heritage manager Andrew Moffat was sceptical, however. If there really had been such a major find it should have been followed up, yet no one did, and he was unable to find any trace of the photo. But he would be delighted to be proved wrong, he said: "Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction."

Wishart wrote that although the discovery made news headlines around New Zealand at the time, government officials decided the dinosaur was too big, too remote and too expensive to move. "[T]hey left the skeleton where it lay and it was quickly forgotten,"

Given that Wishart is a creationist one has to wonder if there's an agenda behind this interest in dinosaurs, or maybe he just likes a good yarn. And given New Zealand's known fossil record, if this specimen does exist it's more likely to be a marine reptile than a dinosaur. But even that would still be really cool if it were ever found again.

Dawkins attacks fairy tales?

Richard Dawkins has been accused of launching a scathing attack on children's fairy tales (*Dominion Post*, 6 June).

"I think it's rather pernicious to inculcate into a child a view of the world which includes supernaturalism," he was reported as saying in the *Times* of London. "Even fairy tales, the ones we all love, about witches and wizards or princes turning into frogs. There's a very interesting reason why a prince could not turn into a frog. It's statistically too improbable."

However Victoria University psychology school head Marc Wilson said there was no evidence showing that fairy tales caused children any damage. Fairy tales had a greater benefit, he said, as they taught children about morality issues. "We use metaphors to understand the world around us."

Dawkins has since attacked the way his comments at the Cheltenham Science Festival were reported (*The Raw Story*, 5 June). He said he was worried about encouraging children to believe in the supernatural. "If you did inculcate into a child's mind supernaturalism … that would be pernicious. The question is whether fairy stories actually do that and I'm now thinking they probably don't. It could even be the reverse.

"It seems that all you have to do is say that x is the case, and immediately people will jump on it and say you want fairy tales banned. Like sheep, all the other journalists jumped on the *Daily Mail* bandwagon..."

Spooky surprise in Dunedin skies

Dunedin student Terence Huang was surprised to see a couple of UFOs hovering over Otago Harbour when he had a closer look at two of the photos he took on recent outing (*Otago Daily Times*, 25 June).

He paid little attention to the sky while he snapped about 20 photos, supporting the camera on a chair, and noticed nothing unusual at the time.

The images appear to show a pair of lens-shaped yellowish objects topped by greenish blobs. In a close-up view on the ODT website the left-hand 'UFO' can be seen to have a fainter ghostly double right beside it.

NZ Skeptics media spokesperson Vicki Hyde said some people didn't tend to bother with UFOs these days, because it was too easy to fake things, and very

common for digital artefacts to be misconstrued. In this case she said it was most likely the latter.

"Certainly it doesn't look very solid at all, which I think supports the reflection theory.''

Homeopaths fight back over negative finding

New Zealand homeopaths are up in arms over an Australian paper stating homeopathic remedies were no more effective than placebos when used to treat 68 health conditions (*NZ Herald*, 19 April).

The draft paper, released by Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council, assessed 57 clinical studies that tested homeopathic remedies on ailments including asthma, arthritis, sleep disturbances, cold and flu, eczema, burns and even heroin addiction.

"The available evidence is not compelling and fails to demonstrate that homeopathy is an effective treatment for any of the reported clinical conditions in humans," the report said.

Christchurch rehabilitation specialist Dr Richard Acland said the findings would be supported by most doctors here. "My reading is that [homeopathic remedies] are no better than placebos – but placebos can be very powerful. It is not unsurprising that the results have come up with that finding, but there are a lot of therapies within the health arena that are possibly no better than placebos."

NZ Homeopathic Society spokeswoman Den Illing said the paper appeared to have ignored studies that found good results. "There are screeds and screeds of clinical trials that homeopathic remedies work but this study appears to have not included any of them."

The study's authors said there were no studies that proved the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies with reliable enough methodologies to be included in the paper.

He's not dead, he's resting

The disciples of one of India's wealthiest gurus are refusing to hand over his body to his family for cremation, insisting he is still alive (*NZ Herald*, 29 May).

His Holiness Shri Ashutosh Maharaj, the founder of the Divya Jyoti Jagrati Sansthan religious order, with a property estate worth an estimated NZ$200 million, died in January, according to his wife and son. His followers, however, who are based in the Punjab city of Jalandhar, insist he simply went into a deep Samadhi, or meditation, and they have put his body in a commercial freezer at their ashram to preserve it for when he wakes.

The guru's sect, reportedly established in 1983 to promote "self-awakening to global peace" owns dozens of properties in India, the US, South America, Australia, the Middle East and Europe.

Punjabi police initially confirmed his death, but the Punjab High Court later dismissed the police report. Local governmental officials said it was a spiritual matter and that the guru's followers could not be forced to believe he is dead.

His son Dilip Jha, 40, claims his late father's followers are refusing to release his body as a means of retaining control of his financial empire.

Vaccination alternatives for Wellington teachers

Teachers at some Wellington schools are being offered herbal medicine and vitamins as alternatives to a flu vaccination (*Dominion Post*, 3 April).

Administration manager Cheryl Wilson at Lower Hutt's Waterloo School investigated ways to support teachers who opposed flu vaccinations, and after her proposal was adopted by the school she was one of 10 staff to choose a two-month course of echinacea. Ten other staff picked multi-vitamins, while 16 received vaccinations, and nine staff did not want any of the options. The options were not offered to children.

Hutt Intermediate has been offering vitamins in conjunction with either echinacea or a flu vaccination for about a decade.

Otago University professor Michael Baker said scientific evidence that echinacea and vitamins kept flu at bay was lacking. "If alternatives are being promoted, there needs to be evidence.

"There are still 400 people in New Zealand dying each year from influenza ... so we're not dealing with a trivial illness."

From Page 11

You'd have to make sure that this scrutiny was undertaken simultaneously right across the country, otherwise you'd be open to the Pythonesque argument that moa really are out there, they just nipped over to the other side of the hill when you weren't looking.

So turn the argument around – it is possible to prove a positive, and it's certainly a lot easier in this case. All you need to do is turn up with a genuine moa.

•

Why would people believe such weird things, pay for something that doesn't work…?

Sometimes it's something as simple as having been brought up in the faith, of whatever variety it may be. If you know of no other viewpoint or have no alternative source of information, you may well believe the Earth to be 6000 years old or that global cabals control everything.

Sometimes they are desperate for any kind of help or assistance, whether it's from psychics claiming to be able to locate missing family members or parents searching for cancer cures for their children.

Sometimes they have paid over so much money to the likes of Nigerian scammers or herbalists they don't dare believe that it might all be for naught.

Sometimes they are just too polite to disagree. (Have you ever sent a bad restaurant meal back to the kitchen?)

•

Sowing Seeds of Doubt and Uncertainty

Ah yes, I watched *Sensing Murder* last night, but I feel really uncomfortable with the manipulation where the psychics use the same old tricks and techniques to make themselves look good. Those poor exploited families ...

•

If clairvoyants really can see the future, it's a shame they didn't warn anyone about the Boxing Day tsunami, or 9/11. Poor old Princess Di was going to remarry and have two more kids – that was predicted just a week before she got into that car. Boy did they get that one wrong.

•

Yeah, I've heard claims that cellphone towers can maybe cause childhood cancer at the one-in-a-million kind of level, but I'm far more worried about those parents in their big SUVs doing U-turns outside the school every day.

•

Ken Ring keeps getting his earthquake predictions wrong. I wonder how many times he has to get it wrong before people stop listening to him?

•

I wonder why the psychics always talk to spirits with common names like John or Bill or Mary. They never seem to talk to a Peng, or a Mohammed or a Sanvi. The after-life must be European-only.

•

I used to think star-signs were harmless fun, but then I got to thinking that there's not much difference between disliking Scorpios and disliking Samoans – it's all just nasty stereotyping really. That's not so funny.

•

The New Zealand Council of Homeopaths have admitted there are no active ingredients in homeopathic products. No wonder it's called "the air guitar of medicine".

•

I think it's terrible that 94 percent of New Zealanders buying homoepathic products are being misled into thinking they are getting something real; it's a real rip-off to pay $10 a teaspoon for water with no active ingredients.

•

The alternative health industry is big business; "alternative, complementary or natural medicine" is just a marketing slogan for unproven products and services.

•

If the photos are blurry, perhaps you should reserve judgement about the Bigfoot body up for sale on EBay.

•

If the clinical trial has a sample size of 14, all carefully selected by the man looking to connect autism and vaccinations so he can sue Big Pharma, then it's not Big Pharma you should be wary of.

•

In the 16th century, people were plagued by night visits from demons who took them flying on broomsticks and fornicated with them; in the 1980s people were plagued by night visits from aliens who took them flying on

spaceships and sexually interfered with them. Those experiences were genuine, but different times meant different explanations. Science now shows these experiences are down to basic human brain physiology, not demons or aliens. It's a fascinating discovery, and one which is very reassuring for the five percent or so of people who've had these experiences and thought they were going mad.

•

We do know there are people in the psychic industry who use non-psychic tactics to make it look like they have special powers. Check out the YouTube clip of Peter Popoff and his radio-supported messages from God, helping the hit rate at his faith-healing shows. Or Penn and Teller's footage of Rosemary Altea milking her audience for information for her psychic performances. That's pretty blatant.

•

If this were true, how would the world be different?

(Richard Lead, Australian Skeptics)

If clairvoyants could really tell the future, there should have been no deaths from the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami – people could have been warned.

•

If mediums could really talk to the dead, there should be no unsolved murders or arguments over inheritance.

•

If coffee enemas and Rife machines really worked, cancer should be a thing of the past.

•

If telepathy really worked, it would confer such handy advantages to telepaths in dating and mating that we should all have inherited these powers by now.

•

Talking to the Media

So why do you think 'balance' is needed when this story is about science, not about opinion or belief? Would you talk to a creation 'scientist' about why God made such bad rocks under Christchurch to 'balance' the ideas of a geologist?

•

If this psychic really was talking to the dead … if this machine really does cure cancer ... if [insert major claim here] forget putting it in the *Press*, go straight for the *New York Times*. You'd get the front page and be up for a Pulitzer. Course, it would have to be true..."

•

Doing a piece on why psychics want to believe they have special powers would make far more interesting — and far more illuminating — television than any amount of exploitainment shows like Sensing Murder.

•

Vicki Hyde is media spokesperson for the NZ Skeptics.

'Anti-catastrophic principle' is Pascal's Wager

IN the Autumn 2014 NZ Skeptic, Martin Manning stated:

> "But some are using the fact that climate scientists admit to uncertainties as reason for not making changes, or at least for delaying responses until we can be sure."

And

> "However, Cass Sunstein has suggested that for issues such as climate change it would be better to adopt an anti-catastrophic principle."

Prof Manning's article encourages us to believe (the majority of) climate scientists' explanations, predictions and recommended behaviour change despite uncertainties (and inconsistencies) in their data and understanding, because rejecting their beliefs and behaviour changes may lead to very bad outcomes. This is essentially Pascal's Wager applied to the greenhouse gas theory instead of a god theory. The reasoning is fallacious in both cases.

Prof Manning claimed that consideration of all known factors that might have "contributed to" global warming showed the "predominant cause" since 1950 was "increases in greenhouse gases". It is surprising that any scientist would claim to have proven (or disproven) causal relationships with correlational data. While it may be justified, as in the case of tobacco and lung cancer, to assume a causal relationship when many different scientific approaches have produced correlational findings of similar strength and direction with other variables controlled for in various ways across those

different research approaches, that does not seem to be the case for the greenhouse gas theory either in the range of research designs or the consistency of the correlations.

Lastly, it's surprising how few people remember to distinguish the phenomenon of global warming (which appears to be sufficiently proven) from beliefs about its causes. *(abridged)*

Hans Laven
Tauranga

Thank-you

Thank-you for your reasoned response to Gold's statement on climate change. It is clear which of the two of you is the better skeptic. Many people share your "alarm bells" at the amalgam of passion, left-wing politics, speculation, and science that now characterises the global warming movement. Long may you promote debate in the interests of finding objectivity. Silencing any one view would be anathema to good skeptics. Let the creationists and homeopaths publish in our magazine. And those who dare to suggest that we are not all doomed to roast in the hellfire of global warming.

Rob England
Porirua

Climate consensus a broad church

I see (*NZ Skeptic 111*, p10) our Society is determined that its formal position on climate change will align with the scientific consensus – whatever that may be from time to time.

This is a very odd principle for a group brought together by scepticism. Shouldn't reason and data always trump a head-count of believers?

The current consensus (represented by the IPCC's fifth assessment) is a very broad church covering all equilibrium climate sensitivities from 1 - 4.5°C. The NZ Climate Science Coalition doesn't have a "position statement", but I don't know of any members who wouldn't be quite comfortable with the lower end of this range. The Green Party prefer the top end. For the first time, the IPCC has been unable to agree upon a "most likely" ECS figure.

It is scarcely helpful for Gold to point out that there are apparently 24 (out of 13,950) outlier papers that are obviously outside the debate. Does Gold suggest some of the eight articles/letters appearing in *NZ Skeptic* were also outside the IPCC range? If not, then what is the case for shutting down the debate?

Finally, there is an error in the Position Statement: there is no evidence that global mean temperatures "are rising". Even **www.skepticalscience.com/trend.php** demonstrates that all the recognised series are showing declines over the past eight years.

Barry Brill
Paihia

Global models inaccurate

So NZ Skeptics supports the pseudoscientific consensus on Climate Change? My first reaction was to resign on the spot. What has happened to scepticism? But then I noticed you still seem prepared to publish letters on the subject so maybe it is possible to point out what is being missed.

Nobody mentions Climate Science. This is a subject that has been studied for thousands of years and has become the discipline of Meteorology. It is concerned with measuring properties of the climate and has all come together in the weather forecasting service.

Since the computer came along the data are processed by numerical models. They can be applied to small and larger regions and also to the whole globe. Accuracy goes down as you go up so global models are the least accurate. All are limited by the number of levels and frequency of the data, by the reliability of the physics, the power of the computer and the accuracy of the starting point which brings on the dreaded CHAOS.

The climate change models are currently in trouble because the temperature has not risen for 17 years. The sea level is not rising as anyone can confirm by checking the map at **www.psmsl.org/data/obtaining/map.html**

Then the Arctic ice has got to the end of being shoved around by ocean oscillations and is now expanding. We all know what happened to the Antarctic when a gang of climate changers hired a boat to prove it was warming. *(abridged)*

Vincent Gray
Wellington

Position Statement causes concern

I was exceptionally disturbed and concerned on reading the latest *NZ Skeptic*.

Gold is certainly entitled to freely express his personal position on climate change as detailed in his article, as is any other member. However, he and the committee have absolutely no authority to issue a "NZ Skeptics Society Position Statement: Climate Change". The membership has never been polled on this matter, neither at a conference nor via the *NZ Skeptic*. To issue such a statement, especially on such a controversial matter, is an insult to all members, no matter what their opinion may be. This society consists of all its members; not just Gold and the committee. Gold should rescind this 'Position Statement' immediately with an apology to all members. Failing that he must resign.

This statement astonishingly ends with: "The society will adjust its position with the scientific consensus".

Surely a consensus is exactly what we Skeptics should be challenging; not blindly accepting, especially based on the ridiculous statistics that Gold presented! His "references" are mostly blogs…he needs to realise that not everyone lives in the blogosphere and many of us treat it with indifference, disdain or even contempt.

In my lifetime many scientific consensus have been proved wrong (eg ulcers are caused by stress and continents do not move). In the past presumably Gold would have had us Skeptics accept unquestioningly the prevailing consensus that the Earth was the centre of the Universe.

I also object to Gold's final quote. This kind of language has no place in our publication, especially as it goes to many school libraries. *(abridged)*

Alastair Brickell
Whitianga

My creationist

***Matthew Willey** has a series of discussions about big questions.*

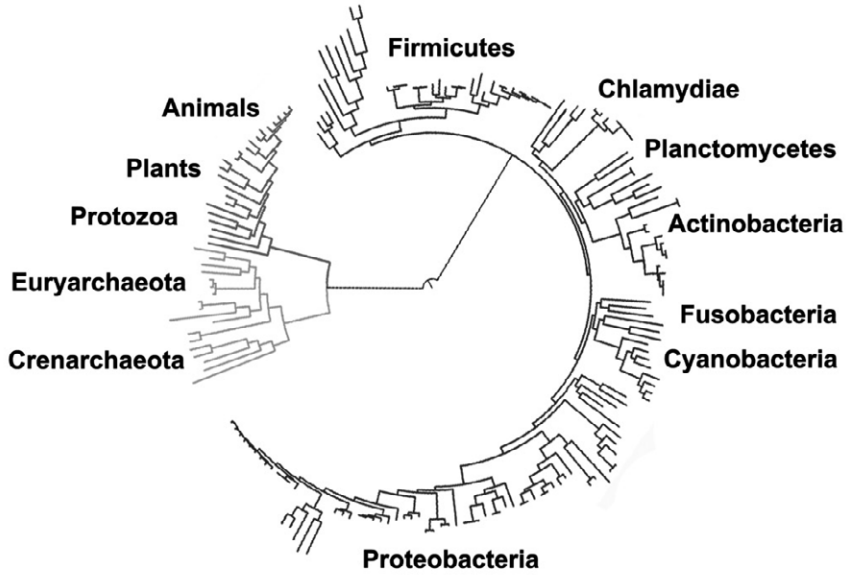
MY creationist is a pillar of the community. She is a well-regarded professional in the town where I used to live. She is a deeply respected and devout follower of her faith. She has studied her specialised calling at a high level and has participated in publishing work in a peer-reviewed journal. And she believes that the earth was created by god 6000 years ago. At least, that's what she says.

She has had an education and now has a professional qualification that is predicated upon empirical evidence, of careful triangulation of fact, of measured and weighed reference to reality. She knows about the scientific method and uses it in her work. My guess is that in trying to apply that approach to support her own faith, something brought her to talk to me, an atheist who loves evolution.

Her interest was originally piqued by my perusing a printout of the tree of life. She leaned in to what I was doing and studied the diagram from the Interactive Tree of Life project. After a moment she pointed at the centre of the diagram and asked "What is right there?"

The answer is, we don't really know what the first organism was, what Darwin called the "urorganism". I tell her that, and she walks away in triumph.

But then, much later she brings the issue up herself. On a bike ride, and quite without warning, she confessed that she could not understand how evolution could conjure up information from nothing. She saw this as a flaw in the theory that could not



be answered. Panting heavily as I tried to keep up with her, I suggested that this could be better answered when we were off the bikes, and had time to think about the question. We agreed to meet and to discuss what we knew of evolution and creation. I remain very glad we did.

Sitting over coffees in our home town she explained that a fundamental flaw in the theory of evolution was that information could not be conjured from nothing, and that this alone causes the artifice of Darwinian evolution to topple. The information contained in the sperm and the egg must be vast and complex, and there is no scientific explanation that tells us where this comes from. Surely holding onto this untruth is as much an act of faith as belief in the biblical explanation for the diversity of life?

It is clear to me that she has been holding onto this argument for some time, that it is one of the arguments used in her church. She is sure it constitutes a slam dunk. But one of the reasons I like her, the reason she is still my friend, is that she listens to the answer.

Carefully I walk through the digital nature of the genetic code, checking with her that we agree on the principles I am explaining. The code is a digital code, not analog. Check. The code comprises four amino acids. Check. The pairing of these acids provides the means by which information is stored and transmitted, check.

The problem is where does all of this lavish, abundant information come from, if not from god? Chance alone is not sufficient explanation, and I suspect that she has heard this debunking of evolution in meetings at her church. To answer, I used the analogy from Dawkins (1986) of the sentence from Shakespeare: "Methinks it is like a Weasel".

It's a lovely thought experiment, and worth describing again even if you are familiar with it. Given time (which as with all things evolutionary is a key word) a monkey at a typewriter will be able to type the phrase from Hamlet "methinks it is like a weasel". The event will happen, but even with a very well motivated and immortal monkey it will likely take longer than the lifetime of the universe to occur. My creationist's argument rests on this fact. The DNA sequence is so exquisitely formed its complexity could not have arisen by chance, and in this she is perfectly correct.

Returning to "methinks it is like a weasel" we need to add a simple ingredient to make this happen: selection. If instead of simply being allowed to type at random the phrase from start, we were to select when the monkey hits the right key at the right time. We then lock those letters in place in the sentence every time the monkey scores a hit. It keeps going in its simian authorship, and the letters of the sentence begin to fill up.

The monkey gets to the key phrase not in the lifetime of the universe, but during lunchtime. Dawkins's analogy for the way that evolution combines randomness with selection is powerful and can be found in various forms on the internet. One nice example is at **bit.ly/1hYmMoo**

She tests this example with a few reasonable questions, and I talk through how this occurs in nature. She says that this still doesn't make sense because we are the driving force, we know what the target phrase is. But how can an eye, for example, assemble the genetic information needed for its construction? There must be a concept of an eye towards which evolution is striving?

I'm glad of Dawkins in many ways, and again I stood on his shoulders to explain the evolution of the eye. I still have the sketches I made of the patch of photosensitive cells on the skin

of a prehistoric and hypothetical animal. There are drawings of a recession that allows that cells to begin to differentiate the direction of light, the deepening of the depression to begin the formation of a pinhole camera. I then have sketched a lens over the hole, and then added an iris, and voila! An eye has evolved through small improvements selected for not by a monkey but by survival. The drawings are poor reconstructions of the clear illustrations in *The Blind Watchmaker* and at this delicate moment I choose to plagiarise them. I think that citing their source might not be helpful, though we do go on to discuss Dawkins in later conversations.

Over the course of three conversations we cover how microscopic evolution leads to macroscopic evolution, and I can see a struggle taking place. Often a slam dunk criticism turns out to be nothing of the sort. She often repeats dogma from the church that she has brought in from discussions in the side rooms of the sprawling complex that she attends. For example she is aware of a dating anomaly in the rocks of Mt St Helens.

The anomaly comes about because of poor science from a young earth creationist who sent away contaminated samples for testing of mixed rocks from the dome of Mt St Helens. Instead of showing the date of the eruption (1986) , the dating of the samples showed an age of millions of years. This, it is claimed, now demolishes the idea that radiocarbon dating has any authority over other sources, for example the Bible.

I don't know (yet) the answer to this one, and she claims a victory with a small yelp. My response is weak and I know it. How old are fossils? she asks. Again, I am not sure. How long does something have to stay in the ground to mineralise? I don't know.

It feels as though I have lost the battle, but looking back I am not so sure. She is very smart, and knows about fallacious reasoning.

We separate and don't talk again about creationism.

About a year later we meet and she tells me, out of the blue, that the Bible never contradicts itself. This must count for something. The written work is unique in that it never has an internal inconsistency. I nearly explode, knowing this is untrue, and perhaps pleased to have an answer after being trumped the last time. I am aware of the Bibviz project that maps the contradictions in the Bible, and let her know that to my knowledge the Bible contains thousands of contradictions and logical inconsistencies, all of which can be explored using simple tools at a website, whose address I give her. She walks away and we say no more on that occasion.

Poignantly we meet up and have our last conversation on the issue of faith versus science, and I ask her if she has had a look at the website I suggested for her. At last I see a crack in the armour, and she tells me that the way she has been brought up to think is deeply entrenched. Questioning her faith is also questioning her upbringing, questioning her church and her family. She has too much at stake to easily change from one stance to another. And that is the last conversation we have on the issue.

Reflecting on this, and our still intact but more distant friendship, I see the struggle that plays out for her. If you have spent your life defined as a member of a particular faith how difficult it is to change. Our conversations were a desperate attempt on her part to assimilate science into her world view, and she failed. I don't know for certain where she stands now. She may have walked away from science altogether, but I suspect that the opposite may be true. I think that she remains in the church, continues to profess a faith in what she has always been taught. She continues to live as a member of a community that has nurtured and accepted her throughout her life, but she knows that what they preach to the children in their community is wrong. I suspect she cannot see a way out. I hope she is okay.

Matthew Willey works in schools as an adviser for children with disabilities. He lives in Palmerston North with his family, who tolerate his enthusiasm for skepticism with a kindly forbearance. He is English, but losing the accent.

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Welcome to iTOL! itol.embl.de

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‘Matakite walkovers’ – a new assessment tool for councils?

The proposed Hastings District Plan (November, 2013) includes references to ‘matakite walkover’, the use of Maori clairvoyant powers as a means of determining an area’s cultural or spiritual significance. ***Vicki Hyde****, on behalf of the NZ Skeptics, made the following submission on the proposed plan.*

CHAPTER 16.1, Section 16.1.1 needs to be amended to remove the two references to matakite walkovers, for the following reasons.

The New Zealand Skeptics believes that it is vital that regard for wahi tapu, regulation of development on any kind of land, and protection of natural resources must be best practice and evidence-based to ensure that appropriate, sustainable plans, methods and actions can be identified and supported. The adoption of Section 16.1.1 as currently written does not support that because of the inclusion of matakite walkovers as a recognised assessment practice to be undertaken.

Matakite has two distinctly different usages in Te Reo:

(1) referring to traditional Maori divinatory practices, involving clairvoyant or psychic powers

General marketing for matakite consultation-based services makes it clear that the main usage in this regard relates to a belief in the ability to use psychic links to the spirit world to gain information about the past, and visions of the future. Thus matakite-based commercial services are primarily associated with terms such as clairvoyant, psychic, palm reading, tarot, intuition, spirit, seers, foretellers, soothsayers, shaman, and other offerings associated with the paranormal industry. These are not practices which should be referenced in such a document as a District Plan, in the same way that a best-practice approach would require that you should not advocate for the discredited paranormal practice of water dowsing as part of any water management scheme.

(2) a more modern usage as a synonym for visionary thinking or looking towards the future when undertaking planning processes.

This latter usage has been adopted by numerous organisations as part of their commitment to bicultural development. Eg Otago Polytechnic’s strategic plan: “Our Vision Ou matou Matakite”; Waikato District Health Board: “Vision (Te Matakite)”.

Please note that the NZ Skeptics strongly support the use of the term matakite in this fashion, particularly with regard to involving local iwi groups in developing a strategic vision and looking to the future of their area to improve outcomes for tangata whenua and others as well as the social and physical environment.

It is clear from the term “matakite walkover” in Section 16.1.4 Methods that the Council is proposing inclusion of the clairvoyant practice as one of the recognised methods that *will be implemented* (Section 16.1.4 wording, our emphasis) to achieve the Plan’s Objectives and Policies; it is included alongside references to widely supported evidential practices such as consultation of historical records, archaeological

information evidence, resource consent and Historic Places Trust records, customary use and recognised iwi consultation and kaitiaki processes.

We do not support the advocacy of clairvoyant practices as a legitimate assessment method for such planning, and believe the specific references to it should be removed from Section 16.1.4, hence our opposition to the Kiwirail proposal to adopt this Section as it currently stands.

At the very least, if the Council genuinely intends to mandate use of clairvoyance as part of approved practice, it would be vital for the definition of matakite, as used within the Plan, to be included in the Section Glossary (16.1.8) so that people can be aware of the intended meaning in this context and make their own assessment of the Plan's credibility as a result. We note that much more commonly used terms are currently defined in that section (eg iwi, pa) yet this one, with its relative scarcity of common usage and two distinctly different usages at that, is not. Thus 16.1.8 should include, if this practice is to be mandated, the following definition: matakite walkover: divining land using traditional Maori clairvoyant or psychic powers.

Vicki Hyde (Ngati Maniapoto – Tamainupo, Ngati Te Kanawa) is media spokesperson for the NZ Skeptics.

NZ SKEPTICS CONFERENCE 2014

REGISTRATION is open for the 2014 NZ Skeptics Conference, to be held at the University of Auckland, Friday December 5th to Sunday December 7th.

This year we feature our international guests – the hosts from The Skeptics Guide to the Universe podcast. They will be joined by US skeptical musician George Hrab – plus a great line-up of local speakers on a range of skeptical and science-related topics.

There will be a variety of talks and panels plus a live recording of the SGU podcast and fantastic opportunities to hang out with like-minded folk.

Early-bird ticket pricing is: $195 (waged), or $155 (unwaged, including students and retirees). Open to all but there's a $10 discount for NZ Skeptics members.

Saturday night will feature a buffet dinner and entertainment – separate cost of $80.

Tickets and full details are available online at: **conference.skeptics.org.nz/register** or visit the Facebook page: **www.facebook.com/nzskepticsconf2014**

And, if you're in or near Wellington on December 1st there's an opportunity to have dinner with the SGU hosts and George Hrab – put your bid in on the blind auction on the conference registration site.

Preoccupations of an earlier time still with us

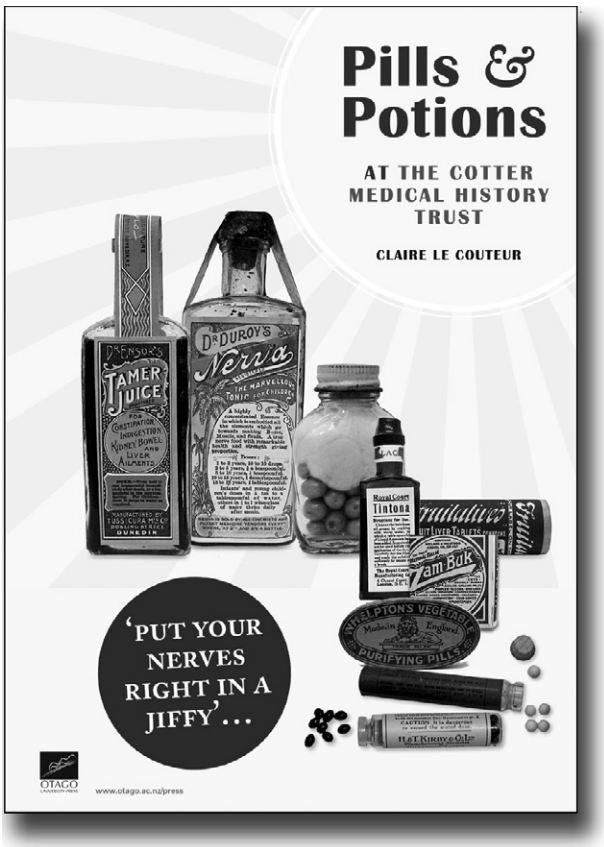
Pills & Potions at the Cotter Medical History Trust, by Claire le Couteur. Otago University Press, 2014. RRP $25. Reviewed by Vicki Hyde.

I DIDN'T know whether to laugh, cry or wince as I paged through this inviting wee volume. We're not that far away from the days of liver pills, iron tonics and syrup of figs – I'm sure I've seen very similar products gracing the shelves of my local pharmacy, and certainly the enthusiastically dubious claims made for such products 100 years ago could have come straight off current packaging in the health food shops today.

Claire, a former long-serving secretary for the NZ Skeptics, has worked her way through popular remedies from the 19th and early 20th centuries housed by the Cotter Medical History Trust in Christchurch.

I quite like the sound of 'Wahoo', a tonic for indigestion and piles and confess to being amused by its somewhat honest labelling which lists some of the "healing balsams and vegetable demulcents and expectorants" it contains, finishing with "and some other drugs we won't tell you about". I know of suppliers out of China who could validly put that on their product labels these days...

Claire has not only given us a salutary lesson in *plus ça change*, but has also shone a light on the preoccupations of an earlier time.



Perhaps not surprisingly, we see assistance offered for what's often termed "the usual suspects" – those ailments which come and go and for which there are no easy treatments, making sufferers vulnerable to the blandishments of the latest snake-oil salesman. Thus conditions like arthritis, rheumatism, insomnia and fatigue pop up frequently, teamed up with catch-terms like "invigorates", "stimulates", "tones" and "cleanses".

Many of the tricks and techniques used in the advertising claims have a certain degree of familiarity, even if couched in the language of an earlier time:

- a secret "preserved in the family for several ages";
- supported by "years of arduous scientific researches and experiments";
- "precludes all possibility of the Hair Falling Off";
- endorsements from Hollywood stars, the Canadian Mounties and a "well-known sheep farmer from Buenos Aires".

Back in 1904, the government of the time became concerned by the outrageous claims and attempted to require a clear ingredients list for each products. The measure failed largely due to "vociferous protest" by the vested interest of manufacturers and newspaper owners. Sound familiar?

Give this book to any family hypochondriac, along with a packet of jellybeans – the latter will help them medicate themselves through the pages, and provide just as much relief as most of these pills and potions would have had.

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An on-line subscription/renewal form (internet banking and credit card options) is available on the New Zealand Skeptics website (**www.skeptics.org.nz)** – click on 'Join us'.

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from the vaults

Oh, What a Lovely World!

Denis Dutton

LATE in his life, in answer to a question, Freud compared the human condition approximately to the contents of a baby's nappy. When I first heard this story, it seemed to mark a bitter old man. That was when I was in high school in the late 1950s. Higher education was spreading in the world's democracies. Ignorance and superstition, the plague of the human species since the caves, were on the way out. Reason, knowledge and tolerance would rule the future of the world. Or so it seemed. Does it look like that today, even to high school students? A few news items:

• A British insurance salesman is convicted of double murder on the testimony from one of his victims, who was contacted during deliberations by three jurors using a Ouija board. Because British law normally does not allow even appeal courts to question jury deliberations, the conviction may stand.

• Australian medical schools are being filled by significant intakes of Darwin-doubting fundamentalists, possibly 20%-25% of students. These wholesome young people will in the course of time advance, attaining places on the policy boards of hospitals, using their authority to determine health policies.

• In South Africa a woman was forced by a mob to douse her mother in petrol and set her alight, before she and the rest of her family were killed. Her crime: being a witch. There is a steep increase in killing of witches in South Africa...

The meliorism of the 1950s has evaporated. Why? Some talk of abandonment of moral standards, others the rise of the nuclear threat – or the decline of the nuclear family, while others will blame it on the fall of religion – or of communism. My candidate is the degradation of education in its broadest sense – the failure of the modern democracies to give sufficient knowledge and critical, analytical abilities to young people at all levels. The dumbing down of public education, with its mantras in praise of self-esteem rather than hard-won knowledge is bad enough. But even school is being replaced by television, with all its shallowness and sentimentality, as the major enculturating force. Ignorance, prejudice, and superstitions thrive in ways that would have amazed me thirty years ago.

The next time someone tells you how much better the world is becoming with instant global communications, innovative educational methodologies, and your therapy needs covered by ACC – think skeptically!

– From *NZ Skeptic 32*, June 1994

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NZ Skeptics Annual General Meeting

Saturday September 6, from 11am, The Fringe Bar
26-32 Allen St, Te Aro, Wellington

This year we're staging a stand-alone AGM because the conference has shifted to December to enable the Skeptics Guide to the Universe folk and George Hrab to appear (see inside).

There will be an AGM Google Hangout for those who cannot attend physically. See upcoming Skeptics Alerts for further details on how to participate in this, or contact Gold at:
chair@skeptics.org.nz

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