

NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

DECEMBER 1994 — NUMBER 34

The Challenge to Reason

Owen McShane

Tertiary institutes around the country are beginning to offer courses, and even entire degrees, in subjects that are pure pseudoscience.

The Aoraki Polytechnic has applied to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority seeking approval for its proposed Bachelor's Degree in Naturopathy. If approved it will be the first degree programme of its kind in this country.

With generous assistance from all of us, the Northland Polytechnic is offering a course in Astrology. (Only \$25.40 on study-right, but the full \$50.70 non-study-right). Evidently the tutor was a scientist until his teacher "who was recognised as an incarnate lama or tunku by the Tibetans" instructed him in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. After several months' psychotherapy in Morocco he went to India where he was empowered by the Sakyapa Lama. This apparently powered him to Kerikeri, where he now lives in a bus.

In the meantime, the Auckland Institute of Technology Press has been pouring out a stream of pseudoscientific

books dealing with subjects ranging from faces on Mars to conspiracies to repress benevolent inventions, and most recently, *The Poisoning of New Zealand*.

This last book promotes the homeopathic line that increased dilution increases potency. (Sadly it doesn't work with alcohol.) This leads to the remarkable conclusion that while concentrations of pesticides in our food and water may be well below those found toxic in laboratory experiments, ex-

treme dilutions, of say one part per billion, are much more dangerous than concentrations of one part per hundred thousand.

In sum we have tertiary educational institutions subsidised by taxpayers offering courses and publishing books which are based on pseudoscience and superstition.

Does this matter?

It depends on your point of view. The Minister of Education has suggested that if there is a demand for these subjects then maybe the institutions have a duty to offer them — although he sounded as though he did not want to be seen as putting himself in the way of an employment opportunity. And we have to admit that naturopathy signboards (untreated timber only) are spring-

⇒ p3

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We Used to Call it Bedlam

Karekare beach is surrounded by high cliffs which shield my house from television transmissions so that I gain most of my media information from radio and print.

Hence it was some time before I saw *Satanic Memories*, the so-called documentary which won for TV3 the Skeptics' Bent Spoon Award. I found this programme so difficult to watch that it took me two sittings — the combination of fury and embarrassment was just too much to bear.

The programme clearly deserved the Skeptics' major award. It exemplified all those aspects of the pseudoscience of the "New Age" which we find so disturbing, distasteful and eventually downright dangerous.

We saw the expert hypnotherapist plant in his subjects' mind the responses which would confirm their satanic memories. For example, the therapist hints that the young man's feet appear to be giving pain and he dutifully remembers being slung over a waterfall by the ankles. If a hypnotist implies the presence of the devil himself the subject will see him.

The other gross oversight was the failure of the documentary team to look for any evidence in support of the extraordinary claims being made. We followed this family as they re-visited small towns in which they claimed that killing and eating babies, and throwing young people over waterfalls, was as routine as Friday night fish and chips. Surely there must have been records of these deaths and disappearances. Even the general public would surely have noticed something was amiss given that the inhabitants of small country towns don't miss much. But our intrepid television team never bothered to call into the local police station or newspaper office to see if there were any records referring to these remarkable memories of things past.

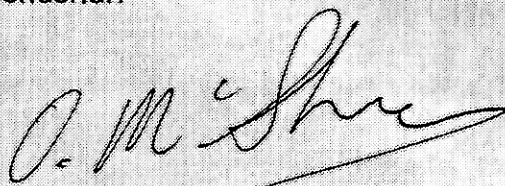
We also had first-hand evidence of the total lack of professional ethics among so many members of this new cabal. I cannot imagine any registered medical practitioner

allowing the televised treatment of a genuine patient — even if the patient had given consent. And surely any registered psychiatrist would have to take the position that such consent could hardly be regarded as "informed". But in this documentary we saw a disturbed patient endure quite severe mental trauma during her "therapy", while her therapist seemed quite pleased by the opportunity for self-promotion.

What was surely the most sickening was the use of two disturbed people as characters in an "entertainment" designed to be broadcast into thousands of New Zealand homes. The mother had a long-standing record of mental illness and treatment. At least one of her sons seemed to be following the same path. Many viewers must have found this parading of their travails as a vehicle for home entertainment both embarrassing and distasteful. Many households would have found it great for a laugh and would have screeched with delight or with terror at the "exorcism" scenes in the hypnotist's office.

When I was at school our teachers used to point out that we were much more civilised in our treatment and understanding of the mentally ill than our nineteenth-century forebears. We were shocked to learn that civilised people used to visit the insane asylums of the time for entertainment. No trip to London was complete without a visit to Bedlam.

I suppose we have made some advances. In those days the ladies and gentlemen of England had to take the coach to enjoy their Saturday afternoon's entertainment at the human zoo. Thanks to modern science and to those who look after our interests in New Zealand On Air, we in New Zealand can now take our entertainment without having to leaving the sofas of our living rooms. Isn't that wonderful?



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Deadline for next issue: **1st Feb**

ing up like daffodils around our suburbs.

Science and Democracy

I happen to believe, along with Karl Popper and his many disciples, that there is a connection between the proper functioning of democracy and the rational or scientific approach to solving problems and learning about the world.

Since the days of the Enlightenment we have tended to the view that rational thought is the best basis for political action. Democratic government knows that there is no Utopian model of the static perfect society, just as science knows that no theory is ever finally proven to be true. The scientific method progresses towards truth without ever reaching it, while the democratic process "muddles through" to a better world by a process of continual experiment, debate and reform.

It is no coincidence that those who attack democracy look to pseudoscience to support their cases. The Socialists looked to the pseudoscience of Marxism, the *laissez-faire* anarchists of the nineteenth century looked to social (pseudo) Darwinism, while the Nazis blended social Darwinism and eugenics (pseudo-genetics) to boost their nationalistic dreams of a master race.

These days the centralists find support in the pseudoscience of the apocalyptic environmentalists, whose message is that democracy is unable to meet the challenge of the forces which "threaten the planet". They make these claims even though the centrally planned states of the Eastern block appear to have committed ecocide. The miracle is that they

could pollute so much while producing so little.

University Unreason

Yet contemporary Western society now seems hell-bent on destroying its faith in reason. The deconstructionists and post-structuralists in our universities now argue that there is no knowable truth, that science is no different to any other body of knowledge or superstition, and that students should not be taught a body of knowledge but should be encouraged to construct their personal models of the world. US universities, cringing under a wave of political correctness and an extreme form of "multi-culturalism", are abandoning programmes which present the history of Western Civilisation as anything other than the history of the rape and plunder of minorities and other victims by a conspiracy of middle-class white males.

Given this widespread attack on science and rationality, it comes as no surprise to find that our tertiary institutions appear to be ready and willing to mount degree courses in naturopathy, including homeopathy and iridology.

The test of a scientific theory is that it can be refuted by an experiment or trial. Homeopathy has been subject to numerous trials and has yet to demonstrate any benefit other than those attributable to the placebo effect. This is not surprising, given that homeopathic medicine is water in which a substance has been diluted to levels where there is virtually no chance that an original molecule of the substance survives.

These are truly "dilutions of grandeur". Frequently this "diluted water" is absorbed into a

sugar crystal for packaging and will have typically evaporated by the time the patient gets round to taking it. The argument that homeopathic medicine can do no harm is almost certainly sound — what harm can be done by a dose of evaporated diluted water?

Against all this evidence the belief in homeopathy survives.

This raises the question of how a tertiary institution can possibly teach such subjects within a genuine environment of learning and research. Universities and polytechnics are supposed to encourage free and informed debate. If students of homeopathy come to an examination armed with all the published refutations of the practice, would they be able to pass the course? Probably not. Homeopathy is a belief system like astrology or witchcraft. You either believe it or you don't, and any refutational evidence is dismissed as somewhat irrelevant. The standard argument is that sceptical observers cause bad vibrations which interfere with the efficacy of the treatment.

Can we really tolerate a course within a tertiary institution which argues that healthy scepticism interferes with proper analysis?

Wheat Amongst the Chaff

The proper place to present the field of natural medicine or its more legitimate cousin, the *whole body* approach to medicine, is within the school of medicine itself. At least it will be subject to debate, and the wheat can be sorted from the chaff. And there is real wheat in there. Modern medicine has gone too far in the pursuit of the science of medicine as opposed

to the art of healing. The placebo effect is powerful and we need to learn how to harness its potential to achieve maximum benefit. But we will make no progress while such investigations are accompanied by nonsense such as iridology or EAV, and where belief cannot be subject to critical experiment and refutation.

Where does the AIT Press fit into this? There are a host of publishers making money out of publishing the latest hocus pocus on the works of Nostradamus or whatever else is providing the latest means of extracting dollars from the gullible. Many readers are trying consciously to make sense of the widely differing views of the world presented by the Uri Gellers on one hand and the Stephen Hawking on the other. If they wander into a library or bookshop and find a book on repressed inventions, or the international conspiracy to poison us all with pesticides, such readers are likely to assume that books published by the Auckland Institute of Technology (which could be expected to share the aspirations of MIT — otherwise why did the ATI change their name to AIT?) will

have been subject to a higher standard of editorial criticism and intellectual rigour than the latest piece of flim flam from the "Centre for Zodiacal Peace Freedom and Inner Radiance".

Well, I am sorry, they would be wrong. It looks as though the AIT has decided if there is a buck in it, they publish. And no doubt their response to this criticism will be to blame the government for not giving them enough money to start with. Is this an excuse to abandon principles?

Surely this is simply bad business practice on the part of the AIT. The AIT teaches courses in business, which presumably advise students that the most important asset of a modern organisation is its intellectual property. I would have thought that a critical part of the intellectual property of any tertiary institution would be its reputation for intellectual rigour and honesty. This reputation must surely be debased by a publishing house which is fast becoming a bad joke among the critical and informed readers of this country. I certainly would not recommend attendance at AIT to anyone I know if these publications represent the poly-

technic's attitude to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

So the Qualifications Authority should stand firm and give accreditation only to those courses in medicine, science and technology which admit to critical analysis and are prepared to expose themselves to the normal standards of the scientific process — which means that if a belief is disproved then it must be abandoned.

Do Believers Really Believe?

One of the problems with naturopathy and similar belief systems is that even people who believe in them don't believe in them. This may sound like nonsense. But if you are one of the many readers who are upset by these arguments and have some belief in naturopathy in any of its manifestations, ask yourself this question:

You have just had a terrible car accident. You are lying in the road and feel your life ebbing away and you suspect that other members of your family are in a similar state. A crowd has gathered around, but no one is equipped to deal with the carnage. Then you hear dimly

SPRITE

You're wasting your time, friend. He won't believe in you.



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)

that wonderful sound, "Step back, make way! Step back, make way!" At last, you think, help is at hand. And then the final chant is "Step back, make way, here I am — and I'm a qualified naturopath".

What do you believe in now?

We have to recognise the inability of modern medicine to meet the unrealistic expectations it created in the fifties and sixties. These have created a market driven by those who believe that their chronic ailments must be able to be cured by some magic medicine and will keep on searching until they find it. During the process the

body often cures itself — and so success is frequently found and the last treatment is declared effective.

This process has opened the door for the irrational to enter our institutions of higher learning and to further close the door on freedom of speech and expression. You may not think this is a bad thing — especially if it provides a few more people with work and earns some money for the education system.

But how would the Minister of Education respond to a proposal to set up the Divine School of Engineering, or the Natural Light School of Veteri-

nary Science, or the Tantric School of Economics? How will you feel when the building inspector uses an EAV meter to decide whether your building is earthquake proof or when an acupuncturist is called in to test your herd for bovine TB or when a Tantric Guru is appointed Governor of the Reserve Bank?

How come we would be prepared to let these people play games with our health, but not with our buildings, our cattle or our economy?

Owen McShane is an Auckland Skeptic and writer.

They're Stealing Our Fish!

Jim Ring

Seeing shouldn't always be believing, as a Nelson skeptic discovered thirty years ago.

One night nearly 30 years ago, three men were driving back to Nelson from French Pass after a fishing trip. Road access to the Pass was quite new and there was very little traffic even by day. The road climbs steeply from French Pass, then follows a high ridge with tremendous views of Marlborough sounds on one side and Tasman Bay on the other. The headlands and islands showed pitch-black on this moonless night and the sea gleamed in starlight.

As the vehicle reached the ridge, three or four dozen brilliant and mysterious lights could be seen in Tasman bay and further out to sea.

"The Japanese are stealing our fish!"

This was a hot topic in 1965. For years Japanese line fishers

had been fishing for high value snapper (quite legally) very close to shore. But a new law excluded foreign vessels from fishing in a region 12 nautical miles (just over 22 km) from the coast.

"That big bright patch must be a mother ship out to sea, these points of lights must be dinghies fishing for snapper, some are right under the cliffs. They are all in the forbidden zone."

We agreed and each estimated the distance to the nearest light. The *maximum* guess was three nautical miles.

All of us were experienced at night navigation. One had had a lifetime in small boats, another was a retired senior air-force flying instructor. These two had sufficient confidence in me (very much the junior) to

sleep in the cabin while I had brought the boat the full length of D'Urville island (over 30 km) after nightfall.

A brilliant idea was developed, we could *measure* the distance to the poachers.

We could make out the headlands below us in the starlight and we had a map. With the car we could measure a baseline distance along the road. By sighting the lights over headlands at either end we could determine the angles. A ruler on the map would give the distance and even a calculation would be unnecessary. A crude measure perhaps, but we did not need a high degree of accuracy. All were convinced the boats were fishing well inside the limit.

Thirty minutes later we stared at each other in disbelief.

The plan had worked well but it showed the nearest light was at least 15 nautical miles from the coast and the furthest was out more than 40 (28 km and 74 km). How could we be so wrong? Relief mingled with the other emotion, at least we had not driven to the nearest phone (a long distance) and made fools of ourselves. The Navy would not have been pleased to be turned out to apprehend poachers and then find only legal fishermen. These boats were not even in Tasman Bay, they were well out to sea.

Only then did we think to use binoculars. Each of the nearer lights was not a point, but a vessel illuminated by many lights. This was our first sight of a squid fishing fleet, then relatively new in New Zealand waters. Each squid-fishing vessel has rows of powerful lights in the rigging. Squid are attracted by these lights and caught by jigging. Thirteen years later a squid fleet off Canterbury was to be one of the UFO sightings in the great Kaikoura UFO mystery — according to Philip J. Klass “the best documented of all UFO cases.”

In our case nobody cried “UFO” (one was a believer but had never seen one). We knew these were lights on boats but otherwise we were horribly wrong. We completely misinterpreted what was visible. We assumed (without considering the possibilities) that the lights were only moderately bright, therefore they had to be close. Because they were close we assumed we were looking down at them (just under the cliffs!). In fact we *seemed* to be looking down at them — until we knew they were well out to sea. Then we realised we were looking

out towards the horizon! They dazzled us, therefore we could not see the horizon (it is usually visible on a clear, starry night).

Even when all of a party agree exactly on what they have seen, they can still be completely wrong. Highly experienced people can make quite ridiculous errors.

The big glow well out, originally assumed to be a mother ship, was probably a cluster of lights over the horizon.

It is difficult to get across just how much illumination is used by a squid boat. The night after the Kaikoura UFO sightings, the RNZAF sent a plane out to investigate. It reported the squid fleet was putting out more light than the city of Christchurch!

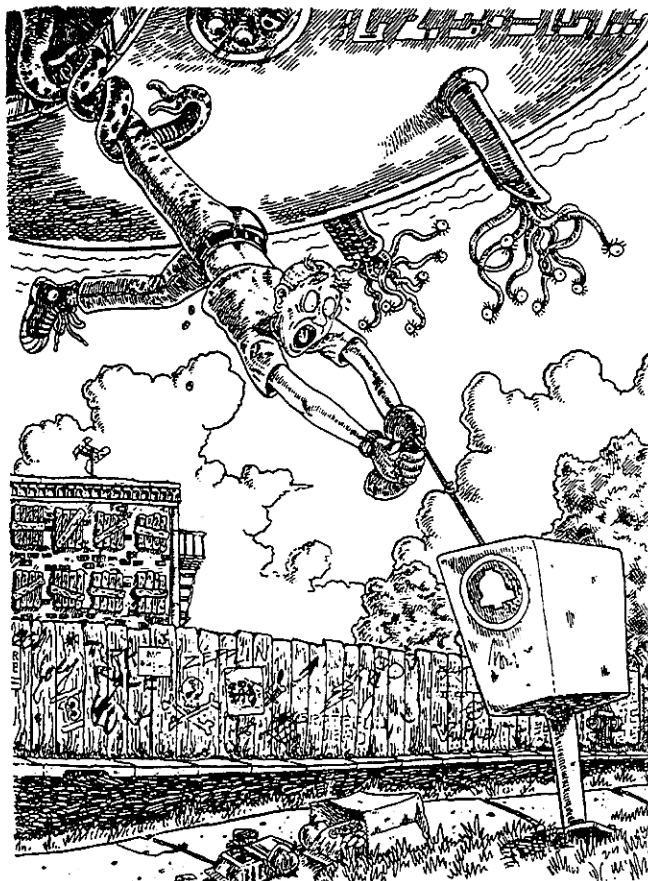
The incident taught me some skeptical lessons.

Some were negative. Judging the distance of objects is very difficult at night. Judging their position in relation to the horizon is even more difficult. It is all too easy to jump to conclusions. Even when all of a party agree exactly on what they have seen, they can still be completely wrong. Highly experienced people can make quite ridiculous errors. What people report as “sightings” are really conclusions.

Some were positive. It pays to use one’s brains. It is possible to make rough but objective estimates of distance. Binoculars enable details to be resolved even at night.

And when the Kaikoura UFO was in the news I had a really good laugh — until I realised how much money was being made out of the incident. It really pays well to see UFOs instead of squid vessels.

Jim Ring is a long-time teacher and Skeptic who lives in Nelson.



Hokum Locum

John Welch

NZ Qualifications Authority

An editorial in the *Christchurch Press* (23 Nov 94) was critical of the universities who are seeking approval from the NZQA and argued that they should continue to set their own high standards.

The Aoraki Polytechnic has applied to the NZQA for recognition of a Bachelor Degree of Applied Science (Naturopathy). Naturopathy can mean anything from treatment with homeopathic remedies to colonic irrigation. I wrote to the NZQA and was told that the Aoraki application "involves review by a panel of peers...having a mix of professional and academic backgrounds."

I await the decision of the panel with considerable interest as the thought of a Bachelor of Applied Science (Naturopathy) holding equal weight with, say, a Bachelor of Applied Science (Biochemistry) is completely ludicrous.

Recovered Memory Syndrome

"ACC payments of \$10,000 to three women who recalled 'memories' of rape and abuse as children are to be re-examined after acquittal of their father." However, unbelievably, ACC's Fred Cochram says "it is possible for people's suffering to be deemed valid for compensation even if abuse was disproved in the courts! (*Dominion* Oct 5 1994)

It is absurd that at a time when ACC is making it more and more difficult for victims of genuine accidents to gain



adequate compensation, they continue to provide money for the fraudulent activities of an army of counsellors who are poorly trained and following their own feminist agendas.

Sporting Excesses

I have previously commented on the insane activities of athletes who take performance-enhancing drugs which in many cases do enhance physique but have no more than a placebo effect on performance. (*Skeptic* 28)

A former Russian gymnast alleged that her trainers forced her to become pregnant and then have an abortion because "the body of a pregnant woman produced more male hormones and could therefore become stronger." (*Press* 24 Nov 94)

There has been much speculation about possible illicit practices by Chinese athletes. I think we can reasonably discount anything other than a placebo effect from a secret elixir containing "turtle blood, ginseng and other spices" used by China's track team. Why "turtle blood" for runners? Surely it would be more logical to give it to their swimmers? In fact it doesn't really matter what the product contains because the

Chinese expect to sell about 20,000 bottles of the quack tonic in Japan.

Eleven of China's long distance runners have had their appendices removed because "they were getting sick and having toxicological problems". Leading sports doctors were reported as being puzzled and amazed. (*Marlborough Express* 13 Oct 94)

I am neither puzzled nor amazed, as China continues to be a rich source of medieval superstition and quackery such as acupuncture. Medical history tells us that it was widely believed that "toxins" were a cause of many ailments and, as a result, people were purged, had all their teeth removed, tonsils extracted and organs such as the appendix were also removed. In some cases patients had their entire large colon removed and enjoyed diarrhoea for the rest of their lives. When history is ignored it tends to get "rediscovered".

Turbulent Priests

A rather extreme Catholic school principal and priest has refused to give his pupils a combined vaccine because it was obtained from cell culture originally obtained from an aborted foetus in the 1960s. I have no argument with any religion provided it does not interfere with the state but the Catholic religion has an unenviable reputation for continually interfering with public health issues.

A more recent example is their attempted sabotage, along with Muslim extremists, of the

recent global conference on population planning. (*Marlborough Express* 27 Oct 94).

Medicines

Correct me if I am wrong, but I think it was GB Shaw who said that the main distinguishing feature of humans from animals was their desire to take medicines.

Health expenditure in Switzerland reached 18 billion pounds last year, of which drugs were 10.7%. About 60% of all drugs are available over the counter (OTC), and the Swiss are at the top of Europe's self-medication league. (*The Lancet* Vol 344 p322).

The New Zealand drug bill shows a healthy annual growth rate and is rapidly approaching the NZ\$1 billion mark. One Government attempt to control these excesses was thwarted by GPs who simply prescribed more drugs on each prescription. If people wish to poison themselves with drugs I think we should follow the Swiss example and make them available OTC. People can then personally pay for their drugs, which will not detract from the health vote. The oral contraceptive is incredibly safe for OTC availability, although there is an excellent case for requiring a prescription for cigarettes.

Prozac is a new antidepressant drug which may be safer than existing drugs but is also much more expensive and has already been grossly over-prescribed in the US. There is already considerable pressure to allow its unrestricted use here in New Zealand.

Christmas Shopping Blues?

A major trial has found that the drug Fluvoxamine prevented compulsive shopping in

all seven patients. Fluvoxamine is frequently used to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder, which causes people to repeatedly wash their hands, pull out their hair or hoard strange objects. It could also help doctors who repeatedly over-prescribe drugs.

Over-investigation

The medical model which applied when I went through medical school suggested that patients had either an accepted organic illness or something less well defined such as "conversion disorder", i.e. stress producing symptoms and signs (for example, RSI or OOS). The evolution of investigative technology means that this model has the potential to be mis-applied.

I will quote in full an item from the *BMJ* (Vol 309 p420). Irritable bowel syndrome is a condition where people complain of abdominal pain and constipation for which no cause is found.

"Six patients with the irritable bowel syndrome between them had 29 operations and 46 investigations, says a report in the *Scottish Medical Journal*. It warns that other studies have shown that around one-third of patients with the disorder have appendicectomies and half the women have major gynaecological operations."

I recently saw a woman with a clear history of hyperventilation syndrome (over-breathing, similar to what happens when blowing up a balloon) which causes neurological disturbances. The patient had had a CAT scan and an electroencephalogram after which a (foreign) neurologist prescribed Tryptanol (an antidepressant), Prednisone (a steroid anti-in-

flammatory) and Dilantin (an anti-epileptic)! Presumably this lethal cocktail was prescribed "just in case".

Sickness Benefit Abuses

As I outlined in a previous column (*Skeptic* 32), all that is needed to get extra money when unemployed is a certificate from a doctor saying that you are "sick". Not surprisingly there has been a steady growth in the benefits industry since most doctors derive their income from signing forms. In six years, the number of people on sickness benefits went from 20,000 to 34,000. When combined with the invalid benefit this costs nearly one billion dollars annually. (*Evening Post* 18 Nov 94)

The cause of this fraudulent activity is the discrepancy between income support and the invalid benefit. A British GP (*BMJ* Vol 309 p673-4) noted that 23 out of 24 of his drug addict patients were receiving invalid benefits despite guidelines that GPs should not issue sick notes to drug users unless they have a co-existing medical or psychiatric condition. In New Zealand I have known of drug addicts getting both sick notes and their drugs from the same doctor!

I am pleased to see that our own Social Welfare Minister has acknowledged that the numbers on such benefits falls once a more consistent policy is taken to assess eligibility.

Breast Implants

A judge in Alabama has approved a US\$4.25 billion compensation deal for more than 90,000 women worldwide with silicon breast implants. Many women have suffered proven ill-health but those who have difficulty finding an excuse to

get their pot of gold can claim for "silicon disease". This only requires at least five of a range of symptoms, including rashes, chronic fatigue, muscle weakness and memory loss. These are of course very vague symptoms and could be attributable to a wide range of other conditions such as CFS and alleged chemical "poisoning".

NHS Goes Bananas?

GPs in the UK National Health Service (NHS) have won a partial refund for their patients who are spending \$1,250 on transcendental meditation courses. TM is an invention of an Indian guru and has no legitimate place in any health system. The Beatles flirted briefly with TM but became disillusioned when the guru persisted in making sexual overtures to their girlfriends.

Smoothing Away the Years

Need a face-lift? Look no further than CACI (computer aided cosmetology instrument). CACI delivers a tiny current to the skin and muscles in order to "re-educate muscles". It is allegedly FDA approved. I have written to NCAHF to check this claim and will report in due course.

Best wishes for the New year to all readers and don't forget Fluvoxamine if you feel a Christmas shopping compulsion. If Christmas awakens repressed memories of ritual satanic abuse at the hands of Santa I recommend a \$10,000 payout from ACC will also help with the shopping.

Squadron Leader Dr John Welch is Base Medical Officer at RNZAF Woodbourne.

Songs from the Skeptical Choir

Yes, Rhesus Monkey

(Tune: "Yes, Jesus Loves Me")

Rhesus monkey, this I know,
that the Bible Belt must go.

Trusting to authority
must give way to "test and see".

Yes, rhesus monkey,
Yes, rhesus monkey,
Yes, rhesus monkey,
The Bible Belt must go.

Rhesus monkeys in the jungle
think Darwin's work was bungled,
for evolution'ry
progress seems delusion'ry.

Yes, rhesus monkey, (x3)
The Bible Belt must go.

Rhesus monkey, don't get madder;
evolution is no ladder.
It's a bush and we are twigs —
you of dates, and we of figs.

Yes, rhesus monkey, (x3)
The Bible Belt must go.

Rhesus monkeys in the lab
wonder who picks up the tab;
ask, Who put man at the top,
Who says we must get the chop?

Yes, rhesus monkey, (x3)
The Bible Belt must go.

Rhesus monkey, give us time,
Homo sap. has far to climb,
Evolutionists are giants
compared with creation "science".

Yes, rhesus monkey, (x3)
The Bible Belt must go.

Ah-monkeys!

by Hugh Young

A bandwagon or Gulf War ailment?

By Jim Schnabel, a science writer, whose recent focus has been psychologically based disorders.

A subversion of medical science by politics is underway at the White House, which announced its support on June 9 for legislation that would compensate those who suffer from the mysterious and controversial "Gulf War syndrome".

Veterans Affairs Secretary Jesse Brown called the proposal "revolutionary" and "unprecedented", and rightly so, since the compensation — which Brown estimates at about \$US50 million a year — comes in the absence of any medical conclusion that "Gulf War syndrome" actually exists.

The proposal may win votes among veterans this November, but to validate a non-existent syndrome by legislative fiat, as the Administration and its Congressional allies may do here, could also lead to a flood of spurious claims, drawing funds from taxpayers and other veterans' programmes and causing needless anxieties among veterans and their families.

News accounts of the mysterious affliction began in 1992 with reports that some 300 Gulf War veterans suffered a range of symptoms including pain in the joints, skin rashes, shortness of breath, chest pain, insomnia, fatigue, mental impairment, nightmares, and hair loss.

Initial suspicions fell on smoke from Gulf Oil fires, Iraqi chemical and biological weapons, and hard-to-diagnose tropical diseases such as leishmaniasis. When the Veterans Administration announced a registry for "Gulf War syndrome" victims, the number of claimants rose from 300 to 24,000.

Studies of British and American veterans and their experiences during the Gulf War have shown, however, that these symptoms, which vary substantially from claimant to claimant, are not clearly related to any common factor, and often have causes obviously unrelated to gulf service.

Because of such studies, the VA has been unable to invoke the existing statutes that empower it to compensate veterans for service-related disabilities. The proposed compensation legislation would instruct the VA to make an exception in this case.

How much all of this will ultimately cost is unclear because there are no blood tests or other "objective" diagnostic procedures that can weed out spurious claims. Of course, 24,000 claimants is only a tenth of what the VA had to contend with after a similar registry was set up for Agent Orange victims, but some Gulf War vets are clearly after big money. Earlier this month a group of them filed a \$US1 billion lawsuit in Houston alleging that 11 chemical companies, which allegedly sold the raw materials for chemical weapons to Iraq, are responsible for their ailments.

The Pentagon and Lederberg's panel have said there is no evidence that American troops were exposed to chemical weapons during Desert Storm, but it is possible that the companies named in the suit, rather than endure expensive litigation and negative publicity, will settle for a smaller but still prodigious sum. The administration's promotion of Gulf

War syndrome cannot help but encourage such lawsuits to continue.

Unfortunately, most authorities outside the medical profession — and many within that profession — seem unaware of how easily the official validation of a syndrome can lead to an epidemic of claims, whether the syndrome exists or not.

This is especially so when (a) diagnosis confers some secondary benefit, such as financial compensation, the avoidance of responsibility or merely ego-boosting attention, and (b) when the symptoms of the "syndrome" are already common in the population.

These symptoms, though perhaps unrelated, may suddenly take on a new and cohesive significance in the minds of their many sufferers and may intensify through the same psychosomatic mechanisms that give us the powerful "placebo effect".

A good example of this kind of social phenomenon is the epidemic that occurred in Kiev in the anxious years after Chernobyl.

A group of schoolchildren developed a collection of symptoms including fatigue, pallor, abdominal pain, headache, and mental impairment. Ukrainian doctors decided to call the syndrome "vegetative dystonia", attributed it to radiation exposure from the Chernobyl disaster, and prescribed a variety of dubious procedures requiring two to six weeks hospitalisation.

Unfortunately, mass hysterias are nothing new in America, home of the Salem witch trials, satanic ritual abuse claims, and even a "UFO abduction" epidemic.

Soon three quarters of Kiev's child population had reported the symptoms. An American pediatrician, Richard Stiehm, visiting Kiev in 1991, realised that the syndrome was occurring too long after Chernobyl to be blamed on acute radiation poisoning and that it was also non-existent among people receiving high-dose radiation treatments in hospitals, who should have suffered the same symptoms if they were indeed radiation-related.

Stiehm, writing in the "American Journal of the Diseases of Children" diagnosed vegetative dystonia as nothing more than "psychological fallout" (mass hysteria).

Unfortunately, mass hysterias are nothing new in America, home of the Salem witch trials, satanic ritual abuse claims, and even a "UFO abduction" epidemic. Avoiding such hysterias requires careful attention to the power of suggestion by authority figures, and the discouragement of spurious self-victimisation. Mass illness can be created more easily by suggestion and incentive than by any chemical or biological agent.

Of course, the intrusion of politics into medical controversies is not always objectionable, since public health is a legitimate political issue. Nor can it be concluded that the victims of "Gulf War syndrome" are merely hysterics and malingerers.

But it does seem that by trying to create a medical syndrome where medical science does not yet agree that one exists, the Administration and its Congressional allies are overstepping the usual boundaries in such matters, and in so doing may bring about the very public health disaster they wish to avoid.

Sept 11

Not so

International psychic mediums George and Suzanne are booked up. Not another person can be squeezed into the three days they are in Christchurch in August, says Suzanne when I ring. I content myself with a spot on their next visit in September.

The plan is simple. I will go to her with an imaginary problem and see what happens. A failure to twig to the deception will mean her powers are not up to the advertised standard. Her sincerity will also be under the microscope: many so-called clairvoyants are frauds who use a few well-tried techniques to exploit the gullible. Others are well meaning and truly believe in their powers.

George and Suzanne may be true believers, but their service is a business. At \$38 a session, they can make up to \$300 a day each. Given that professional counsellors charge up to \$120 a session, \$38 for 30 minutes with Suzanne could be seen as a bargain.

If her and George's claims are correct their insight should be able to shed an invaluable light on the lives revealed to them. How many counsellors, for example, can provide advice given from beyond the grave or instantly identify a

Chelation therapy no extra benefit —

AN OTAGO University study on chelation therapy as a treatment for hardening of the arteries has found that the treatment leads to no significant health improvements.

National Heart Foundation medical director Boyd Swinburn said yesterday that the study, which was funded by the foundation, tested health improvements among a group of 32 patients.

Half the group received chelation therapy — intravenous treatment with the drug ethylene diamine tetraacetic acid, which is conventionally used to treat cases of heavy-metal poisoning such as lead poisoning.

The other half received intravenous treatment without the drug.

Neither group, nor the doctors treating them, knew which patients had been given the drug.

Health improvements were almost identical among both groups, with medical factors such as blood pressure being measured as well as other indicators such as mood and overall quality of life.

Dr Swinburn said the group treated with chelation got significant improvement but "so did the placebo group".

The improvement can be attributed to other factors such as exercise.

Normal treatments for the arteries include giving smoking, losing weight, and medication.

He said these treatments give patients a reasonable improvement in their health.

Dr Swinburn said to rely on anecdotal "so-called health benefits" is a mistake.

He said chelation therapy is widespread in New Zealand newspaper advertisements extolling its virtues.

He said the treatment costs a few thousand dollars.

In some states overseas, such as the United States and Canada, chelation therapy is allowed to practise.

The study was conducted by the cardiovascular assessment university's department.

Dr Swinburn said in this month's edition of the Heart Association journal, which demands standards of research. —

clairvoyant

MARTIN VAN BEYNEN takes himself to a psychic and comes out wiser — but not about himself.

s true problem purely from
ing a piece of jewellery?

is Dutton, a Canterbury art
ophy lecturer and doyen of the
cs Society, has yet to be persuaded
human beings possess the sort of
s claimed by Suzanne and George.

forecasts a session in which
ne will utter some vague banalities
advises confirming her every
ation. "You will find the reading
es wilder and wilder," he says.

ple who claim to be clairvoyants,
he sincere ones, are no more than
eaders, he says. In cold reading
ents work a few intuitive guesses
people based on their appearance,
sex, and other characteristics
ed during an interview.

ervations which apply to most
are then interpreted by the client
cific insights. A sitter may be told
ds to relax more and not take life so
ly and believe the clairvoyant has
into his soul, says Dutton, a

proficient cold reader himself. The better
cold readers will be able to pick up clues
to a person's life from things like accents
and use their general knowledge to make
more educated guesses.

A bit of flattery and common sense
advice will add to the appearance of
perception and wisdom, he says.

The surroundings lend a seedy air to
the occasion. Suzanne and George
have converted a two-bedroom
motel room into a sort of consultation
suite. The two bedrooms are the
interview rooms and easy chairs in the
living area have been arranged to form a
waiting area.

Clients find themselves thrust into the
scene as soon as they open the sliding
doors of the motel unit. George is in the
kitchen and turns to greet me,
immediately looking suspicious. With his
hair drawn back into a ponytail and a gut
that humps over his trouser belt, he looks
like a hotel bouncer.

We say little as I wait among the books
on UFOs and unexplained mysteries
while an American talk show harangues
us on the television.

A woman in a long green velvet dress
opens the door of the nearest bedroom
and leads out a tired-looking woman in a
shapeless dress and sneakers. The \$38
she has just spent appears only to have
added to her resignation.

Suzanne shows the hapless woman out
and we go into the bedroom. The bed
occupies almost all of the room's area and
two chairs have been squeezed into the
space at the foot of the bed. She guides me
into a chair, has me shuffle a deck of tarot
cards and goes to talk to George, closing
the door behind her.

When she comes back I notice her
dainty little shoes that suggest she has
pulled a costume over her normal clothes.
In her early 40s, she has the roundness
but not the good posture of an opera
singer. She has brown eyes and longish
hair of the same colour. She speaks with a
slight English accent. We look carefully at
each other.

On her invitation I begin on
my story. I am unhappily single
wondering whether the future
holds stability and children, I tell
her. (I am actually happily
married with one child and
another on the way.)

Suzanne extracts some of the
tarot cards — I can't help
noticing the card saying "be-
trayal" — and asks for an item of
jewellery. My watch, which I hand over
reluctantly, gives her an immediate start.
"You have been through it," she exclaims.

The next 30 minutes show she has me
figured as a tortured individual whose
tempestuous love life has left me
disillusioned and burdened. I am a
prisoner of unsuitable circumstances.

"You see, you are a man of integrity,
very high ideals where your own beliefs
and values are concerned, and in some
senses the women that you choose don't
have the same thoughts you do so, at the
same time, you pick people who are not
going to be able to live up to those ideals,"
she says.

She feels I have been dreadfully hurt
by a woman I recently split from. "You

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did have an intense, passionate relation-
ship with somebody else and when it
ended it took you a great deal to recover
from that situation. She was not honest
with you either. That was the bit that
bothered you most." All this I confirm.

She sees the woman coming back, us
breaking up again, but "you coming out of
it really happy and buoyant". The
depression I have experienced over the
last two or three years "seems to be
leaving you during this period".

"The one thing you are wanting is to
have a good relationship around you.
Does that make sense to you? It's like you
are blocking it off because you have all
this past stuff there. You can't have this
in your life until you deal with this," she
says.

She suggests ditching the "big heavy
pack" and owning the problem so "you
can start to go forward". But there is good
news. "After that time I am seeing you go

Wonderful. Look, you've been misunder-
stood so many times and walking around
thinking there is something wrong with
you. There isn't anything wrong with
you. Yes, there is going to be marriage.
Yes, there are going to be children."

Warning to the task, Suzanne becomes
quite subversive. "You need to have no
money, no security, no perfect clothes, no
demands, no responsibilities so that man
(the yacht-sailing and restaurant/bar-
owning one she has seen earlier) can come
forward. You can do it tomorrow."

She asks what I do for a living and I tell
her I am an advertising writer. "Yes,
George said he saw printing presses when
he saw you," she says.

Suzanne then starts on my family
which she describes as more than a
hindrance — "I don't mean that in a
horrible way" — than a help. I am in my
current cage because my soul chose it to
make me fight and do something about it.

"We choose the parents we
come down to so that we can
experience what we have experi-
enced (in past lives) as an
expression of trying to break free
from restrictions in every area,"
she adds cryptically.

One of my past lives was spent
mostly in jail shackled in chains.
"In an emotional way you are
still there," she says.

The session is beginning to wind down.
She recommends some books I should
read. Because I have experienced so much
pain during the first part of my life the
second half is bound to be better.

"You've already learnt so many
lessons. You have a lot of wisdom. Never
put yourself down."

To give Suzanne her due she did get a
few things right. She picked I was an
asthmatic and she rightly said someone in
my family was pregnant. But asthma is a
common enough complaint and preg-
nancy is a feature of my age group.

As a psychic Suzanne failed the
ultimate test. As a cold reader she was
unimpressive. As a counsellor she could
be downright dangerous.

**My watch, which I hand over reluctantly,
gives her an immediate start. 'You have
been through it,' she exclaims.**

overseas. I feel actually you will be there
for a long time. It is a warm tropical
climate. Lots of sandy beaches... South
America is that place," she says. The
woman I meet there is eminently suitable
and understanding.

"Because, you see, from a tiny tot you
were always very intense, very passion-
ate with your feelings. You were always
told to control your feelings and never to
express them.

"The woman has long dark hair. She
has that Latin American look. Very
beautiful, very voluptuous. Not skinny by
any means. You're not really into skinny
women are you?"

I agree and she seems pleased. "You
like women with a little bit of meat on
them to hold and cuddle them.

I've been abused — now for my empowerment

by A. K. Grant

THE thing that annoys me is that they were so high-handed about it. No "Thank you for your application", no "if you were to reapply in six months' time" — oh, hang about, I haven't told you what's getting at me. The Lottery Grants Board, that's what I read in this very paper that just the other day they gave the lady who founded the End Ritual Abuse society \$1300 so she could put out a newsletter.

Now when I read that I began to retrieve memories that I had long buried. Because I was ritually abused as a child. I was small and cowardly, and if there is one thing that a playground bully likes more than a large cowardly victim it is a small cowardly victim. So I was regularly and ritually chased around the

playground, as fast as my little legs would carry me, and when they caught me, the rest of the ritual consisted of someone sitting on my head and calling me "Grunt" until I burst into tears or the bell rang for the end of playtime.

As for the satanic aspect of this ritual, let me tell you that having your head regularly sat on is a devilish experience. To be sure, there were no sacrifices of babies or animals, and nothing was eaten apart from my own pride. But it was abuse all right, and as I began to retrieve memories of it, I came to see how it was responsible for everything that has gone wrong in my life: continually changing careers, managing my money badly, losing cases, having television series cancelled, missing aeroplanes and putting on weight. All this could be traced back to the ritual abuse I had suffered.

So I decided to empower myself, by founding the Compensate A. K. Grant for Ritual Abuse Now! Society. But despite the society's title I wasn't just thinking of myself. I had no doubt that there were others whose lives had been affected as mine had been. How to network with them and draw ourselves to the attention of an indifferent society?

Having had a fair bit to do with magazines over the years I decided that a large, high-profile, glossy magazine was the way to go. And because this was such a good idea I decided I would call my magazine "Good Idea". So, armed with my good idea, and some costings which suggested that we could get the thing off the ground for about \$150,000, which would be more than recovered when the first issue of 25,000 copies

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sold out at \$10 a copy, I wrote off to the Lottery Grants Board.

And heard not a squeak from them. Not a dicky bird. Eventually I rang up to find out what had happened to my letter, and some woman with a voice that could freeze brake fluid told me that it was not the board's policy to reply to hoax letters.

Hoax letters! I and thousands like me spend our whole lives in misery because of ritual abuse, and when we utter a cry for help we are treated as hoaxers! Well, that's the last time I buy a Lotto ticket. I've been loyal to them since they started and have never won a cent. From now on my weekly \$5 Lucky Dip money will be spent at the Casino. I wonder whether they would be interested in bankrolling my magazine? It would certainly be good for their image.

Rain makes Wizard toast of town

Christchurch's Wizard is the toast of Tamworth, New South Wales, where steady rain is falling for the first time in six months.

The Wizard performed a rain dance in Tamworth on Tuesday after being summoned to break a year-long drought by the Mayor of Parry Shire Council, Roger Newell.

Mr Newell confirmed last night that rain had been falling steadily since morning, with 4.5mm recorded and storm clouds rolling in.

"It's not drought-breaking rain but it hasn't stopped yet and it's storming at the moment."

Asked if he believed the Wizard was responsible, Mr Newell gave an honest "No".

He said he invited the Wizard for a whistle-stop visit in the spirit of fun to boost a farming centre that has "not had much to laugh

about" during the toast drought.

"I don't really care how (the rain) comes, but if he had something to do with it, well and good."

Tamworth, population 50,000, lies at the foot of the Great Dividing Range, midway between Sydney and Brisbane.

Mr Newell said that after two dry years the area had been "virtually in drought over the last 12 months".

The Wizard was taking the news modestly last night. He claims success for drought-breaking in Waimate, Nelson, and Auckland, and believes his latest success



The Wizard

should have him conferred the "Wizard of Australasia" by Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating.

"I'm not going to do much more of this sort of thing," he said. "Once you get to a certain point, it gets dangerous. People start following you around kissing your cloak and asking for miracle cures."

The New Zealand Skeptics group, of which the Wizard is a member, is delighted.

A Skeptics founder, Denis Dutton, said the Wizard was the only "paranormal man" in the world worth believing.

Cancer quack who conned dying woman

MARTHA was looking forward to selling the farm and retiring with her husband of 46 years... then she noticed a lump.

The 71-year-old was given a devastating diagnosis — advanced cancer, concentrated in her pelvic area.

She had three months to live, maybe a year or two more if she had surgery. Two of her friends had died after operations for cancer, however, and when a naturopath recommended Hamilton doctor Ramesh Parbhu Lala and his Laser Healing Centre, Martha — not her real name — grabbed at the chance.

■ A dying woman paid a conman doctor \$27,000 for a miracle cancer cure. She did not live to see justice done. LEE UMBERS reports

What happened over the following six weeks, in August and September 1992, was the subject of a court case last week which saw a jury find Lala (43) guilty of fraud. He will be sentenced on December 8, for falsely claiming he could cure cancer with his laser treatment.

Martha was not able to see the man who fleeced her of \$27,000 convicted. She died in June. Her evidence was read by Ham-

ilton District Court Judge Victor Jamieson. Martha gave that evidence in a special hearing last July, called because of her ill health. Husband John — not his real name — is protective of his late wife's memory, her identity has been suppressed by the court at his request.

He is annoyed at his naivety for paying Lala for his quack cancer cure. His motive was "desperation".

"I felt if she had passed away without doing something, I would never have forgiven myself." With false hope, he drove from his central North Island farm to Hamilton on August 3. No X-rays, scans or fluid samples were taken, but after feeling her stomach, Lala told Martha "he could definitely cure my cancer" through laser treatment, she said in her statement to the court.

"I was delighted," Martha said. Her joy was tempered by the treatment's cost — \$3000 for each four-hour session, of which several were necessary. Lala said he had cured other cancer patients with his Lala Workman Laser, but they'd gone overseas.

"Treatment" began the next day. Martha lay on a bed with the laser's delivery end, a black box with foil hanging over it, suspended about 30cm over her stomach. She couldn't feel anything during the session but the machine made a low buzz.

After the first treatment, Lala requested payment in advance be-



LALA... convicted

cause the "krypton gas" he used in the laser had to come from America. The following day, Martha paid the doctor \$5000.

After three consecutive days of sessions, Lala told her the cancerous tumour was shrinking and no other medical treatment was needed.

A further three sessions later, she gave him another \$5000. But she was feeling unwell. Lala gave her an iron injection, ointment for piles and made more appointments. Martha paid another \$3000. Hope began to turn to despair. By September 16, her last treatment, Martha "almost ran out of the surgery", John said. (She said) "Get me home. I've had enough of him."

"Lala called out: 'You'll be all right, don't go near (another) doctor.' It was more or less saying, 'that's it lady, you won't be able to pump on me'."

Despite feeling betrayed, Martha felt obliged to pay Lala another \$5000.

By now she was weak at the

knees, bleeding rectally, had difficulty seeing and only eating a desert spoon of stewed fruit for breakfast and a tablespoon of soup for supper.

Days later, Martha was admitted to Palmerston North Hospital after suffering a violent pain. Doctors operated and removed an advanced tumour, the size of a 14-week foetus, from her pelvic area.

Five days after the operation, Martha's son-in-law, a scientist, rang Lala to say she could not keep an appointment. He did not tell the doctor about his mother-in-law's surgery.

The son-in-law said Lala told him he had treated six cancer patients with his laser and cured four. The other two were "much better" but not cured because there were two types of cancer cell and the laser only worked on one — the type Martha had. Lala said surgery would not help Martha, she should finish the laser treatment.

The son-in-law complained to the Medical Council and then to police.

Palmerston North fraud squad Detective Sergeant Ross Grantham was one of a group of police who searched Lala's Hamilton surgery, where he also operated as a GP, in May last year. Mr Grantham described the Lala Workman Laser as "like a 7th Form science project".

Among items at the surgery was a magazine article, *Amateur Scientist* — Building a Gas Laser at Home. In a rubbish bag containing unprotected used syringes and scalpels, were 52 Lotto Combo tickets and racing fields with horses names underlined.

Accompanying the police was Dr Jonathan Henderson, a Waikato University senior physics lecturer, who couldn't get the laser to work.



EXPOSED... gas bottles and wires behind Lala's laser

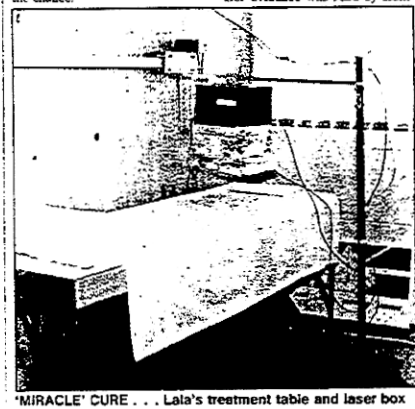
He said its standard of workmanship was "deplorable" and he had no confidence in Lala's explanation of its operation.

Crown prosecutor Ross Douch told the Hamilton court the Lala Workman Laser was "absolutely bloody useless, for anything. The whole thing was an absolute con". John said it was to stop others being ripped off that he and his

wife put themselves through the strain of the court case.

John said he was still "bloody angry with Lala. It was devastating. He did us in."

The Hamilton jury verdict frees the Medical Council to consider Lala's appeal against its decision to strike him off the medical register.



'MIRACLE' CURE... Lala's treatment table and laser box

Psychics Fail Once Again

From a Skeptics' mailing list comes a record of psychic slip-ups for the previous year.

If you thought 1994 has already featured some amazing events, wait until you see what's in store for the final days of the year.

Hillary Clinton will plead guilty to shoplifting lipstick, an earthquake will turn Florida into an island, and Madonna will marry Boy George.

In addition, the US Surgeon General will announce that TV watching makes men impotent, and the Princess of Wales will reveal that an appliance repairman and a postal worker fathered her two sons.

Who says? The world's top psychics.

Those are just a few of the events that were supposed to come true before the end of 1994, according to the forecasts of the self-appointed psychics, whose predictions are published in supermarket tabloids like the *National Enquirer*, *The Star*, *The Sun*, and the *Weekly World News*.

Because none of the extraordinary predictions have come true yet, we're either going to see a lot of amazing news over the next few days or it will become clear, once again, that the nation's psychics aren't as skilled at predicting the future as some people think, according to Gene Emery, a science writer and frequent contributor to the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

If the forecasts don't come true, it won't surprise Emery, who has been collecting predictions in the tabloids since the 1970s.

"When it comes to forecasting unexpected events, psy-

chics historically have had an abysmal track record", he says.

What They Foresaw

According to these top prognosticators, 1994 was destined to be the year:

- ☐ Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere became "the proud parents of triplets" (as predicted by Judy Hevenly in the *National Enquirer*).
- ☐ Charles Manson got a sex change operation and was set free from prison (Peter Meers, *Weekly World News*).
- ☐ Scientists "perfected a small four-cylinder car that can run on tap water" (Leah Lusher, *Enquirer*).
- ☐ Jay Leno quit 'The Tonight Show' (Barbara Donchess, *Enquirer*).
- ☐ Madonna married a Middle Eastern sheikh and became "a totally traditional wife, complete with long robes and veil" (Mystic Meg, *Globe*).
- ☐ Frank Sinatra was appointed US Ambassador to Italy (Micki Dahne, *Enquirer*).
- ☐ Whoopi Goldberg gave up acting to join a convent (John Monti, *Enquirer*).
- ☐ Pope John Paul II decreed that married couples can only have sex on the first Friday of each month (Maria Graciette, *Enquirer*).
- ☐ Office workers fled from the Sears Tower in Chicago after it began to lean like the Tower of Pisa (Maria Graciette, *Enquirer*).

"As always," says Emery, "the tabloid psychics missed all the truly unexpected news of 1994, such as the O.J. Simpson case, the Nancy Kerrigan-Tonya Harding affair, the baseball and hockey strikes, and the takeover of Congress by the Republican Party."

"Instead, we had psychics predicting that the Dow-Jones would rise to 5,000, that a national lottery would cut taxes in half, and that a teenager would build (and accidentally detonate) a nuclear bomb in Pageland, South Carolina."

For 1995, the psychics have already predicted that

- ☐ O.J. Simpson will be acquitted
- ☐ singer Whitney Houston and boxer Mike Tyson will marry
- ☐ a plant that grows in northern Florida will cure AIDS
- ☐ volcanic eruptions in August will create a new land mass joining Cuba with North America.

Will it happen? Emery advises: "Don't hold your breath."

Principles Of Psychic Predictions

One group of scientists and scholars in Buffalo, New York, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), has been publishing the year-end tally of psychic predictions for the past several years in its quarterly journal (now bi-monthly), the *Skeptical Inquirer*. According to CSICOP, psychics don't appear to be im-

proving upon their "hit rate" with the passage of time, and currently CSICOP has yet to find any convincing evidence that psychics possess extraordinary talent for seeing the future, finding missing people, or helping solve crimes.

When psychics are tested under conditions that eliminate luck or fraud, their powers evaporate.

Emery said some people argue that the forecasts in the supermarket tabloids are too outrageous to be taken seriously.

"But extraordinary things do happen," he says. "If I predicted a year ago that Michael Jackson would marry Lisa Marie Presley, that would seem pretty outlandish. Yet I would have been right."

What did the tabloid psychics actually say about Jackson? They predicted that he would marry Oprah Winfrey, become a travelling evangelist, or have a sex-change operation, according to Emery.

The science writer says that scientists who have researched psychics and probed the psychology behind their predictions have discovered that prognosticators use a variety of techniques to make the public think they're giving accurate forecasts.

Jeane Dixon, for example, likes to be vague. One of her predictions for 1994 was that "Mike Tyson may *soon* marry behind prison bars and *could* become the father of a child in the near future" [emphasis added].

"Other times they predict things we'll probably never hear about," says Emery. One of Monti's predictions was that Sally Jessy Raphael and Rush

Limbaugh "will become secret sweethearts".

"If it's a secret, the prediction becomes impossible to prove wrong," he said.

In hopes of finding one psychic who can actually predict the future, Emery accepts writ-

ten forecasts from psychics "as long as they involve unexpected events guaranteed to make headlines. Don't expect me to be impressed if you tell me there will be a scandal in Washington or an earthquake in California."

More Songs from the Skeptical Choir

Amazing James

(Tune: "Amazing Grace")

Amazing James, at last he came
to inspire a wretch like me;
I once was cool, but now I flame
thanks to (Amazing) James Randi!

'Twas James who bent a tablespoon,
mel-ting the heart o-f Kim Hill.
He could change a watch from nine to noon
and teach us all his skill.

He tuned us in, to a healer droll
who knew more than he should know,
and the healer's wife, "the voice of Knowl-
-edge" on his little radio.

He showed us how the psychics work
quackery in the Philippines;
sticking in his fingers, out he'd jerk
chickens' guts and blood in streams.

Amazing James is in no way slack
to advance the sceptical art,
yet admires the Morning Glory's knack
of opening at sparrow fart.

Amazing James, at last he came
to inspire a wretch like me
I once was cool, but now I flame
thanks to (Amazing) James Randi!

by Hugh Young (idea by Eileen Bone)

A Skeptical Miscellany

Owen McShane

Picking Winners?

When the short list for the Booker prize was announced there was much chortling about the fact that Jill Paton Walsh had been unable to find a publisher in Britain for *Knowledge of Angels*. She had to publish it herself.

The *Times Literary Supplement* (9 Sep, 1994) points out that the English publishing houses could not justify their decision by claiming that they had a surplus of great and worthwhile books. Heinemann has just published what the *TLS* described as “a work of the purest bilge.” They refer to *Nostradamus: his key to the centuries, prophecies of Britain and the world 1995 — 2010*, by V.J. Hewitt.

This adventurous work is not Valerie Hewitt’s first appearance as a seer. In her earlier publication, *Nostradamus: The end of the millennium*, she predicted that George Bush would be re-elected in 1992, that the Prince of Wales would be crowned King Charles III on May 2 of the same year, and that California would be destroyed by an earthquake on 8 May 1993.

In spite of this unenviable track record, Valerie Hewitt seems to have no difficulty finding gullible publishers. Poetic justice could have won the day. Maybe they asked her, as Nostradamus’ UK agent, to pick the Booker Prize List as well.

An American Dilemma

In the September 16 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*,

Prof Claude Rawson made a nice point during his review of *The Beginning of the Journey — the marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling*, by Diana Trilling. I’m sure the *TLS* won’t mind us quoting at length:

“[Diana] too persevered with analysis despite a series of discouraging experiences, including a date with her first psychiatrist, from which she had to be sent home by taxi in a drunken panic...Three of her analysts died on her, an occupational hazard in transactions not otherwise willingly terminated by either party. One was a drug addict who missed appointments and fell asleep during sessions... She was next treated by Marianne Fris, wife of Ernst, who told her that Lionel was being mishandled by his analyst...At one point the Trillings shared the same analyst and became ‘sibling rivals, vying for the attention of the same father figure.’”

This (Stalinist) doctor turned out to be unqualified and had to be retrained. The next “analyst’s wife, herself a psychiatrist” maintained a courteous professional distance. When her husband fell under a car she demanded payment of bills already paid, maintaining professional behaviour to the end. Diana had seven analysts in all and still feels that she “was never properly analysed”.

You might think she was slow on the uptake, but the persistence with which busy and intelligent persons in the US lavish their time and money on analysis in the teeth of a continuous sense of the inefficacy

of the whole thing is a cultural phenomenon that awaits explanation.

If you remain unconvinced, watch the wonderfully scary video called *Whispers in the Dark*. It’s hard to know who is the most terrifying — the psychiatrists or their patient/victims. (Not for children.)

Science and the Citizen

On Tuesday 26 September, National Radio’s *Morning Report* carried an interview with a scientist discussing his research programme which I hope is better founded than it sounded — seeing that we are all paying for it.

Apparently some Danes have shown that males who eat organic food are more fertile than those who eat regular (inorganic?) food. Our local scientist plans to repeat the programme here because if they confirm the Danish findings, it will prove that — and wait for it — pesticides cause male infertility.

Where does one start being decently skeptical?

Would it not be simpler and much more direct to dose people with pesticides — without greatly increasing the doses they are presumed to be absorbing from their normal fruit and veges — and then send them out into the world to multiply?

And surely any Skeptic can think of several reasons why organic food-eaters might be more fertile than the average member of the population. Do they wear organic ill-fitting underpants?

But there are even more interesting hypotheses to test. We know that we eat about 10,000 times as many natural pesticides as we do synthetic ones (J.D. Mann, *New Zealand Skeptic* 32). I buy organically grown potatoes because they taste so much better (even though they cost about twice as much), which suggests that they contain a greater and more concentrated range of compounds than the regular watery variety.

Maybe it's these "special secret ingredients" in the organic fruit and vegetables which serve to boost fertility among Danish males, rather than any tendency for nasty chemicals to diminish the fertility off their less "green" brethren.

And what might these extra compounds be? I presume that the way to raise vegetables which are resistant to the normal range of pests and diseases is to grow them so robust and healthy that their natural defences are good enough to provide adequate protection. (Any gardener knows that healthy plants are much less prone to disease than sickly ones.) So maybe the reason these Danish organophiles are more fertile is that they are taking in far more natural pesticides than the rest of their countrymen. (And yes they are men!)

Could be it be that our crafty bodies respond to this toxicologic challenge by producing extra sperm to improve the survival chances of our selfish genes?

Who approves funding this stuff — New Zealand On Earth?

New Zealand Skeptic will watch for the outcome with pitchfork drawn and at the ready.

Numero Uno?

I was driving my car when Kim Hill spent half an hour of public broadcasting time interviewing a woman who claimed to be a Pythagorean Numerologist. The woman claimed that she had not appreciated Pythagoras at school because the teachers focused on arithmetic and all that other dry stuff. But later she learned that Pythagoras was a genuine mystic at heart and was worthy of redemption.

Even Pythagoras could not predict the assumed birthdate of Jesus Christ...

Our numerologist explained to a somewhat sceptical — but not falling-about-the-floor laughing — Kim Hill that Pythagorean Numerology could identify all our personality traits by translating the letters of your born name into numbers and then combining these numbers with the numbers of your birthday.

Evidently we can then all be identified as five/sevens, tens/tens or whatever. As you would expect, a five person could be careful with money, but could be able to overcome this tendency by applying the determination which is also associated with five. These people would make wonderful economists — on the one hand this ... but on the other hand that...

Kim Hill did raise the difficulty that Pythagoras used the Greek alphabet, but our numerologist explained that the system had been adjusted to fit the Roman alphabet.

Now if telepathy worked at all, Kim Hill would have heard my 10,000-watt telepathic messages saying "Ask her about the birthdays." Even Pythagoras could not predict the assumed birthdate of Jesus Christ, so it's difficult to imagine him building a numerology system based on his being born on the 30 September 582 BC or whenever. And I cannot conceive of any algorithm which would translate the calendars of Pythagorean times into the Gregorian calendar dates we use now.

Once again telepathy failed me, and we never heard how our numerologist dealt with this problem. However, we learned something about Pythagoras. Evidently he ran a university in which everyone would have been vegetarians, because vegetables, unlike meat, are such spiritual food. I suppose this explains the behaviour of that other famous vegetarian, Adolf Hitler. One of Kim Hill's questions indicated that our numerologist's extensive research seemed not to have revealed to her Pythagoras's famous aversion to beans.

However, my frustration with all this nonsense was eased later on in the morning's programme when Kim Hill read out a fax from an alert Skeptic who complained bitterly about the use of public radio to disseminate such garbage over the air waves. Well done.

Don't these programmers realise that this sort of stuff makes it doubly hard to argue in favour of preserving public radio. The more National Radio sounds like No Idea On Air the harder it is for any of us to argue its case for survival.

Owen McShane is our esteemed editor.

Demons, Drought and Bullfeathers

Carl Wyant

Pull up a chair and hearken to the tale of the Great Drought of '94.

"Skeptical?" piped up the old timer. "Of course I'm flaming skeptical, ye addlepatented mudfish!"

"Aye, but it wasn't always so. I was a dour and solemn Presbyterian from birth onwards, and bar the whisky, gossip columns, loose floozies and muckraking, a devout one too! But all this changed suddenly in the winter of '94, twenty years ago, when Auckland was struck by drought.

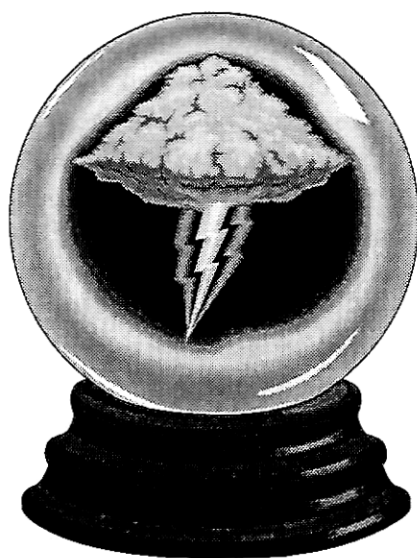
"It was a fearful time. The people were downcast and grimy, and dirt and dust grew on the city like a blight, until you could scarce tell a regional authority from a whorehouse, resulting in all manner of dire ruption and scandal, driving middle-management to the limits of despair and provoking the wrath of the waterblasting community.

"I sought spiritual comfort during the crisis by moving into the Protestant and Trumpet Pub, where I followed the drought's progress by radio and word of mouth, buttressing myself against evil with 17 barrels of ale and religious austerities.

"It might have been a straightforward drought, but a gimp appeared in the scenario when the North Shore City Council imported a wizard from the pagan South Island wop wops to perform rain-making ceremonies. A simple measure, you might think, to divert the suffering masses from their woe.

"But plagues from heaven upon me if as soon as the news

broke the blasted Christians didn't arise in a spluttering fit of hellfire and damnation, claiming that such heretical pranks were proof that the country had gone to the Devil, and forthwith raised such an almighty hullabaloo of scriptural vociferation that by the time the wizard landed, the Council had already taken heed of the Christian catchcall, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", and quelled the pitchfork and torch uprising by cancelling the performance.



"I was flabbergasted, and even the publican, Haggis McDonnagle, was visibly shaken, stating right then and there that he was considering changing the name of the pub to the Secular Humanist, for in all his born days he'd never seen a witch, wizard or soothsayer with any more flair for the mi-

raculous than a card shark, and to ban such blarney was nothing short of idiocy multiplied.

"But the wizard wasn't unemployed for long. The barbarian villages north of the city thought it madness to let an available wizard slip through their fingers and thereupon hired him, leaving the North Shore City Council looking like a prize-winning jackass.

"By now the Christians were nigh delirious with joyous condemnation. It wasn't often they got a chance to go rabid over devil worship and they meant to make the most of it.

"For days the talkback lines ran hot with seething Born Agains, witnessing for the Lord and staking their souls on the blood of the Lamb that the whole country was in the grip of Satan, and unless we clung to the True Vine and threw ourselves down at the feet of the Lord, the Deceiver himself would drag us into the black pits of Hell wherein we would rot in unspeakable anguish until the end of time.

"By now it had been raining for several days. I tell you, if the cat wasn't among the pigeons now it would never get much closer, for lo and behold — both sides claimed responsibility for the miracle!

"The Christians held that the extra energy they had to put in to counteract the forces of darkness brought forth the Mercy of God. And forsooth, the *Presence* was strong! The halls of the pentecostals were abuzz with the Unknown Tongue, and

rumour has it even non-pentecostals were heard to glosso-late, and I'd be prepared to bet money — I take that back, *Haggis* would be prepared to bet money — that the Graph of Visions and Apparitions showed an upward curve through this period.

"The wizard himself took no credit; the peasants did it for him. He departed secretly, as fast as possible, saying little but to remark that if fools were ki-wifruit we could start a new export industry, or something to that effect, for between the jet engines, caterwauling Christians and the Morris dancers it was hard to hear much of anything, and all told the whole dadblanged circus was such an unearthly blaze of flailing sticks and Biblical injunctions that objective observation may not even be applicable in this case.

"Me and Haggis drank a tragic amount of whisky thinking about these things and ten days later resolved, as witnessed by Mrs McDonnagle, to suspend judgement on the Tree of the Unseen until it yielded a visible persimmon; arguing that invisible anti-persimmons didn't constitute enough evidence to lynch tarot card readers.

"As I say, it was many years ago and the details are hazy, but by crikey, I've been on the alert ever since. So hark ye doorknocking gospelizer — if you or any other evangelical hot-air agent ever darkens my front porch again, I'll flatten your cursed head with a spade."

Carl Wyant of Auckland seems likely to be struck down by lightning in the near future.

Pseudoscience in the FOREST

Wendy M. Grossman

Lately — my last few airline flights — I've been listening to the in-flight comedy channels. This was how I discovered Bob Newhart and his monologues. These are things where he takes one side of a conversation and leaves you to imagine the rest. There's one that shows up quite often, where he takes one side of a conversation with Sir Walter Raleigh, who has just discovered tobacco and is sending eight tons of it over to England as an early sample.

Now, as Newhart points out, the uses of tobacco aren't exactly obvious: you stick it up your nose, or roll it up in paper, stick it in your mouth, set fire to it, and breathe in the smoke. One wonders exactly how these uses were discovered. But these days smokers are a persecuted species, we know that. And I have a suggestion: I think smoking should be reclassified as a religion. In some ways this is already beginning to happen in any case.

Take FOREST, for example. According to FOREST, there is no medically proven link between passive smoking and lung cancer. Twenty years ago, the tobacco industry generally was saying the same thing about smoking itself, even, as the 1970s book *Smoke Rings* points out, in the face of medical evidence showing the opposite. This article of belief is both pseudoscientific and incom-

plete: lots of other medical conditions such as heart disease and emphysema are either caused by or worsened by exposure to tobacco smoke, and the children of smokers are well known to have more bronchial and respiratory problems. But point this out, and you run the risk of being labelled a "health fascist", although this term is mostly reserved for government ministers and doctors who set targets for reducing smoking.

Reclassifying themselves as a religion would solve a number of problems for smokers at a stroke. For a start, there could be no more talk of government talk of setting targets for reducing smoking: we don't set targets for reducing the numbers of Jews, Christians, Muslims, or even Hare Krishnas who, like smokers, practice their religion publicly and sometimes disruptively.

Medical practitioners who refuse to treat smokers for illnesses linked to smoking would be guilty of religious persecution. Better still, smokers could have their own medical practitioners, just like Christian Scientists do, who understand and cater to their religious practices.

Best of all from the smokers' point of view, they would be able to make a persuasive argument that the government would have to stop taxing cigarettes and tobacco, since that

Reclassifying themselves as a religion would solve a number of problems for smokers at a stroke.

would be equivalent to taxing religious practices. The money thus saved could be collected by the temples smokers would set up for their religious services (which would no doubt replace singing hymns with ritualistic smoking) and used to fund a variety of smoking community needs.

All this would have useful implications for other types of drug use and addictions. Marijuana smokers, for example, could claim status as a heretical sect, as could crack smokers (these might be the dangerous fanatics that all religions have to have). Alcoholics would have to found their own religion, of course.

All this would mandate changes for the self-help movement, too, some of which already has some religious aspects. Members of any 12-step program, for example, call on the help of a Higher Power (defined however each individual member likes, so it doesn't have to be specifically a god-like figure) to help them stop doing whatever destructive things they've been doing — drinking, gambling, overeating, smoking, or inflicting their chaotic emotional states on their loved ones.

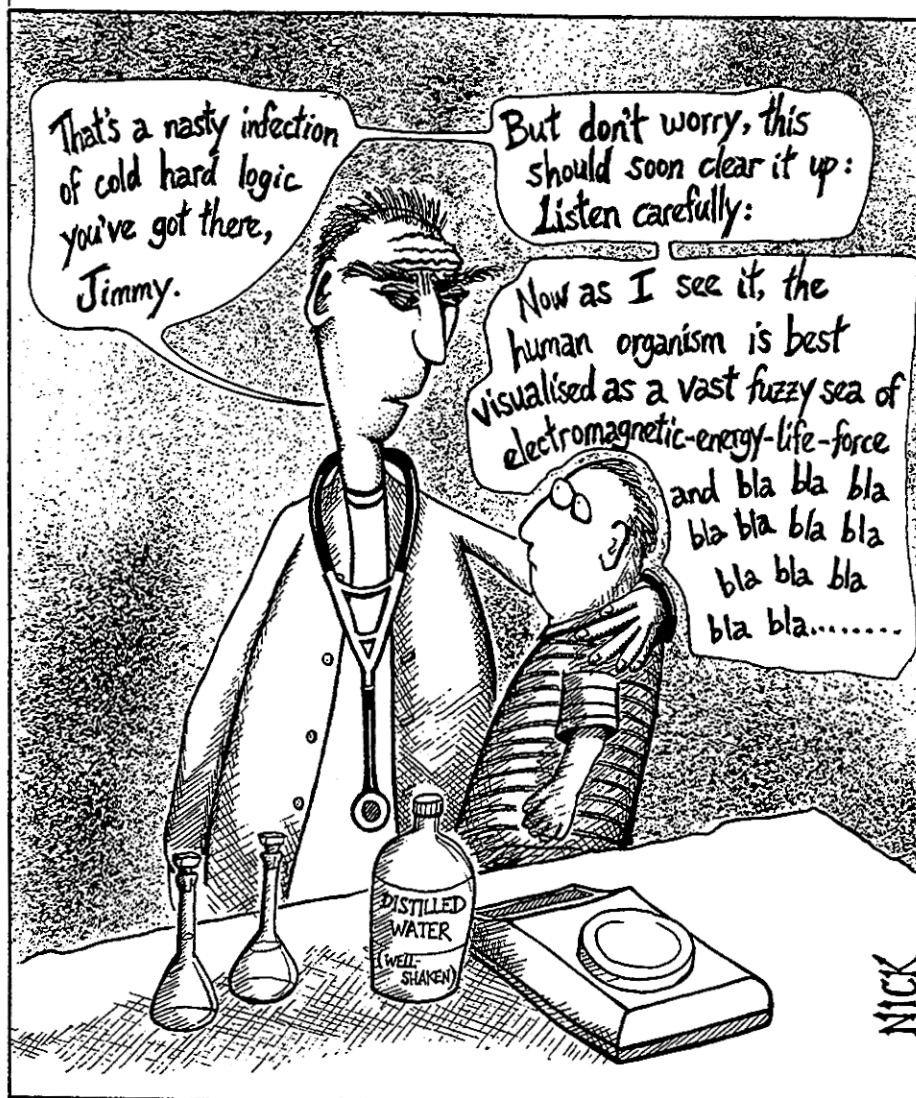
Such self-help groups rarely talk about scientific evidence: telling someone smoking or drinking is bad for them generally doesn't help them stop in any case. They rely instead on shared experiences first of all to show that quitting is possible, and second of all to help members with specific problems by giving them a chance to hear how other members have coped with the same problems.

In this sense, reclassifying smoking as a religious practice merely confirms the setup we

already have, except that smokers and anti-smokers could battle it out among themselves without reference to anything or anyone else. They don't need science for this, and don't use it. The time society at large now spends getting wound up in these battles could be given to finding homes for the conscientiously objecting non-smoking children of smokers, say. Meanwhile, the tobacco industry would be saved a lot of marketing costs, since the temples would obviously want to do their own missionary work to find new members; they could take over the Third-World outreach work already set in place by the tobacco companies.

They would do well to take as their role model in all this the Catholic Church, which deems the health risks of pregnancy and overpopulation irrelevant in its campaign against birth control on moral grounds. You'll have to decide for yourself whether that's better or worse than their present role model, which seems to be those creationists who insist that "evolution is only a theory" and classify their own theories as scientific.

Wendy Grossman is a member of the UK Skeptics, and a writer and folksinger. Her CompuServe ID is 70007,5537.



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