

# NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

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## Active Skepticism

Vicki Hyde

*Skeptics can take an active stance in their daily lives, according to this abridged version of the Chair-entity's after-dinner speech from the conference.*

It's been four years since I stood before a skeptical audience in Nelson and confessed to being a dry skeptic who was a little wet behind the ears. It's been an interesting four years, not least due to the fact that the following year's Skeptics conference saw me elevated to the Chair-entityship.

Since then I've learnt a lot — in many cases more than I care to know — about the human capacity for self-deception, gullibility and, in some cases, sheer greed. I've been asked to make pronouncements on everything from moa sightings to the Maori science curriculum, and have cheerfully done so while attempting to ensure that the Skeptics did not come across as a dogmatic, authoritarian bunch of killjoys. When people ask me who the Skeptics are, I reply "We're the guys that say the Emperor's not wearing any clothes and how come no-one else has noticed."

We do know that the sorts of things that Denis and I and others have done has meant that the Skeptics as an organisation have had an effect. That's recognised by the number of calls from journalists I get which begin with "We don't want to get the Bent Spoon so we thought we'd better check with you guys..." It is gratifying to note that such calls have increased over the past four years.

I've also been interested to see how the development of international electronic contacts has helped various skeptical causes. The sci.skeptic newsgroup on Usenet is woefully deficient in the apparently mandatory pornographic pictures and pyrotechnical instructions, but it does provide a useful information source for the many and varied idiocies that Man is heir to. It is useful to be able to drop a note on the Net asking for information on the latest visiting loony and to have that information to hand when you're rung up and asked to comment on everything from flying saucer conspiracies to creationism.

It also means we can be forewarned of forthcoming fads simply by keeping an  $\Rightarrow p3$

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## Skeptical Early Warning System.

One of the arguments presented in favour of this year's Bent Spoon award was that the NZ Skeptics increasingly provide an early warning system against strange notions from abroad. For example, Skeptical activities helped New Zealand develop some early immunity to the worst excesses of the "repressed memory" virus. While many members supported the *Hitting Home* award on similar grounds, some members may have wondered whether *Hitting Home* was no more than a local aberration and that we were seeing international demons where none existed.

It seems not.

In Massachusetts, USA, a feminist coalition has promoted the view that there has been a widespread epidemic of violence against women in the community and have succeeded in instituting legislative changes in response. But it turns out that the range of violent and abusive behaviour by males which has contributed to the epidemic includes the following:

- ❖ claiming the truth
- ❖ emotional withholding
- ❖ telling jokes
- ❖ changing the subject of a conversation.

Given these definitions, it should come as no surprise that abuse against women has reached extraordinary new levels.

The further lesson from Massachusetts is that such extended definitions have significance well beyond boosting statistics and writing reports. They have been applied to the administration of justice through vehicles such as the Restraining Order legislation, Section 209A which allows a Massachusetts woman "in fear of abuse" to be granted an emergency restraining order against a husband or partner which can:

- ❖ order the man immediately out of the home
- ❖ order no contact between the man and the woman and any children
- ❖ grant temporary custody of children to the victim

- ❖ order the man to pay child support

Inevitably Section 209A, which was intended to protect women in genuinely violent and dangerous relationships, has been seized on as a powerful weapon in divorce and custody battles within the civil courts, where they have become weapons of domestic war rather than instruments of justice.

During the *Hitting Home* debate, several Skeptics wondered what could be the point of extending definitions of violence to include verbal sparring and the like, given that the justice system has no mechanism to intervene in such matters. The Massachusetts experience suggests that we were missing the point. These definitions have found their home in the adversarial legal environment where any weapon is legitimate if it assists the prosecution of the case.

Many of us have taken comfort from the fact that we live outside the culture of routine violence displayed so powerfully in *Once Were Warriors*. But only a brave, or foolish, man or woman could believe that divorce or custody disputes will never intrude into their family lives. During the public debate the Minister of Justice gave an assurance that *Hitting Home* (which focused on violence by men against women) was to be followed by similar studies focusing on violence by women against men and on violence within other relationships. The Ministry's staff, when pressed on the matter, revealed that while this was what they had told the Minister, no funds were available for the job.

So, in the absence of local evidence, we must turn to US statistics and studies to test the common-sense assumption that most domestic violence is committed by men against women.

In 1975 and again in 1985, Murray A. Strauss and Richard J. Gelles led one of the largest and most respected studies in family violence. They concluded that not only are men just as likely to be the victims of domestic violence as women, but that between 1975 and 1985, the overall rate of domestic violence by men against women decreased, while



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Please indicate publication and date of any clippings.

Contributions should be directed to:

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women's violence against men increased. Responding to accusations of gender bias in reporting, Strauss re-computed the assault rates based solely on the responses of the women in the 1985 study and confirmed that, even according to women, men are more likely than women to be assaulted by their partner.

There is no question that men on average are bigger and stronger than women, and hence they can do more damage in a fist-fight. However according to Professors R.L. McNeely and Cormae Richey Mann, "the average man's size and strength are neutralised by guns and knives, boiling water, bricks, fireplace poker and baseball bats." Their opinion is endorsed by a 1984 study of 6,200 cases which found that 86% of female-on-male violence involved weapons, as compared to 25% of cases of male-on-female violence. (McLeod, *Justice Quarterly* (2) 1984 pp. 171-193.)

Several other US and Canadian studies reach similar conclusions while the following Justice Department statistics (1994) suggest that men receive no special favours from the "patriarchal" justice system of the US:

	Men	Women
Proportion of murder victims in domestic violence	55%	45%
Acquitted for murder of a spouse	1.4%	12.9%
Receive probation for murdering a spouse	1.6%	16%
Average sentence for murdering spouse (years)	17 years	6 years

These statistics and data have been collected off the Internet and are subject to bias or even corruption by those who put together the material. However, for what it's worth, during the time I lived in the United States I was exposed to only one example of genuine domestic violence. A recently married couple living in the apartment beneath me became embroiled in a typical domestic screaming match. The young wife telephoned her mother seeking assistance. Mother drove round to the rescue, wielding a pistol with which she attempted to shoot the son-in-law. Instead she shot her own daughter.

American women turn to guns and knives. The English and Europeans appear to favour poison. How do New Zealand women redress the sexual balance of power? Or have they been conditioned to literally "take it on the chin"? At present we do not know and *Hitting Home* tells us less than half the story.

For me the strongest lesson of the exercise has been that the scope of such exercises is even more important than the internal integrity of the study itself. Telling half the story may well be less informative — and indeed be more damaging to public policy — than telling no story at all.



Owen McShane, Editor

eye on what's happening overseas and waiting just a bit. We've seen alien abductions, satanic ritual abuse and repressed memory arrive here following their development in the US scene. I am glad to say that it looks like interest in those areas has peaked as the voracious US appetite for sensationalism and voyeurism moves on.

Keep an eye out for millennial sightings — the Holy Virgin appearing in a taro or reports of guardian angels (complete with wings, rather than red berets) helping out the afflicted. That seems to be the latest enthusiasm Stateside.

## Practical Skepticism

For those of you who'd like to try something a little more practical in terms of applied skepticism, I have some suggestions for you as to the options that lie open for the skeptic who wishes to be a little more proactive in his or her life.

I believe that there are many ways in which we can make a difference.

Perhaps first and foremost is demanding from our media that they treat us as intelligent, rational beings who are capable of sitting through an hour-long television investigation into a complex subject, who are interested in reading material that is challenging and thought-provoking. It's a delight each year to be able to select the awards for journalistic excellence — I just wish we had more candidates.

By all means complain to the television people and to the papers if they run stupid stories or totally uncritical puff pieces. If you can, explain why you were annoyed, suggest things that could have been included, useful source people for opinions

or interviews. Make the complaint a constructive one.

But also, please, don't forget to write and praise them when something good comes along. It's a sneaky strategy but one that can be far more effective — praise is a rare thing these days and tends to be remembered far longer than just another rant.

We shouldn't be content with just taking on the media, as critical thinking is important in all aspects of our lives.

### Informed Boycotting

I stopped using the chemist in our local mall when they started stocking homeopathic first aid kits. I had managed to ignore the expanding shelves of homeopathics, aromatherapy oils, megavitamins and the like, but the promotion of a first aid kit based on homeopathic principles was too much. It makes a mockery of the much-touted phrase "the health professional you see most often".

It also makes me wonder about the professional ethics of these so-called health professionals that they are able to stock material like this and do in-store promotions pushing pseudo-medicine. I presume that it's more a matter of ignorance in most cases, but which

is more disturbing — a chemist who apparently doesn't know the difference between tested, regulated medicinal materials and diluted, evaporated water tablets; or the chemist who does know what they're touting and doesn't care?

**...please, don't forget to write and praise them when something good comes along. It's a sneaky strategy but one that can be far more effective — praise is a rare thing these days and tends to be remembered far longer than just another rant**

(As an aside, I believe that sloppiness or ignorance in caring for the health of the public affects other areas of the pharmacy involved. On the last three occasions when I went to buy something medicinal there, I noticed that the use-by dates were well and truly over, in one case by three years.)

I make an effort not to buy from Amcal chemists after having read the mix of fact and fantasy in a glossy "Healthcare" advertorial magazine. In amongst some relatively sensible pieces on middle ear infections and coping with thrush, they had an article and advert

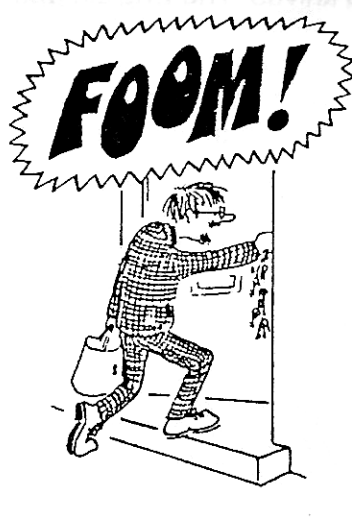
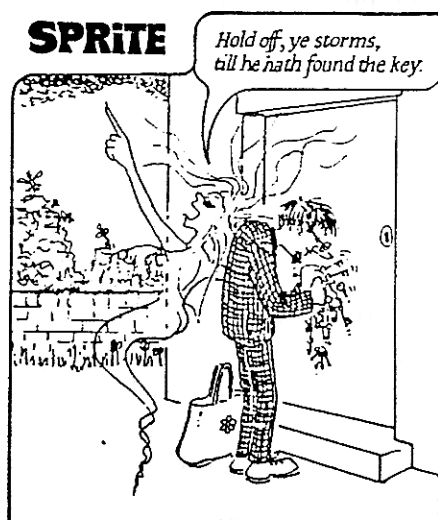
on aromatherapy, touted as having been a part of our medical history from 2,000 years ago, when Hippocrates spoke of the benefits of an aromatic bath.

Now I like an aromatic bath or a massage as much as anyone, but I find it difficult to be-

lieve that a trained pharmacist can tout burning essential oil of lemon for the promotion of clarity, inspiration and to provide excellent antiviral properties. I expect to find these sort of products and claims in a New Age shop of one form

or another, between the mung beans and the royal jelly, not from someone who presumably has some modicum of medical acumen.

I'm pleased to say that I now walk down the road to another chemist which doesn't foist these money-spinners onto an ignorant public. I talked to this pharmacist about why I support his shop — he doesn't have homeopathics or other dubious items. He does have garlic tablets, vitamin pills and the like but I can live with that because, being realistic, there is market demand for them and there is some use in them. (He also has



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)



them tucked down on a bottom shelf for those who want them, rather than spilling over everything else in sight.)

I was waiting for a prescription the other day, idly picked up one of the bottles of vitamins and was startled to find in rather large letters on the side "These vitamins are recommended for use where dietary intake is inadequate for some reason — eg pregnancy, heavy sports training."

In effect, the label was telling the consumer that if you're eating properly and your body's not stressed, don't bother with these. It's an odd thing to have on a product you're trying to sell. Even odder was the fact that this was on a product from Roche, one of the supposedly big nasty chemical companies who are out to poison the planet.

I checked out the labels on vitamins from the friendly, healthy organic companies who are there to make your world a better place to live in. Of the four different manufacturers in stock, only one of these had an equivalent label, though it was less direct, printed in much smaller type and came after all the information on how many tablets you should be swallowing daily.

What does this tell us about the ethics in operation here? It's certainly counter to all the chemophobic propaganda that masquerades as advertising, articles in the popular press and in the minds of the general public.

Sure we need to keep an eye on what those chemical companies are up to — it's taken a lot of concerted action over the past 30 years to produce at least some measure of control and consumer safety issues. But we can't afford to let those other commercial organisations get

away with things just because they're touting a natural, organic, alternative image.

The same goes for other areas where organisations want to take the moral high ground on certain issues. One such area is that of environmental issues. I consider myself a practising environmentalist — though often I prefer to use the term ecologist these days, as the former has gained many connotations which make me uncomfortable.

Some years back, Heather Mackay sent me an environmental magazine that had just started up. The articles were advertorial on one sort or another, spelling out the wonders of guaranteed dolphin-free tuna next to ads from a large seafood provider and so on.

One article in particular which caught my eye was the one which said that all our allergies and modern ills are being caused by the decreasing amount of oxygen in the atmosphere. It went on to recommend that we all consume what it called "oxygen water" to boost our flagging immune systems; oxygen water being defined as "simply water with an extra oxygen atom attached". It doesn't take much chemistry to realise that  $H_2O$  plus  $O$  equals  $H_2O_2$ , or hydrogen peroxide. Some of you may recall the delightful speech we had from Alan Hart a few years ago on the dubious benefits to be gained from this potentially potent hair bleach and rocket fuel. So I took a look at the organisation putting out this publication and found that they were an environmental group who focused on marine issues. Interestingly, neither the people at the local DOC conservancy, nor friends at our local Environment and Peace Centre knew much about

the group, beyond the fact that they produced a nice range of T-shirts.

It's one environment group which won't get my money or support, and I'm equally distrustful of the advertisers and products in their publication. Much in all as I don't want to eat tuna which has had a high sidekill of dolphins, I'd rather it came from a company which has put some thought into the sort of marketing it undertakes.

I'm also dubious about another group which had been campaigning heavily against horticultural use of pesticides. A group of orchardists had apparently been spraying their crops and their neighbours in a new subdivision nearby immediately were said to have come down with nausea, coughs, headaches, asthma attacks — everything short of leprosy it seemed.

The environmental group produced a photo as proof that the spraying was at fault. It showed a plane releasing a cloud of noxious looking vapour which was obviously going to pass over the nearby houses.

A chemical safety consultant friend of mine identified the plane and checked things out. He found out that the contractor had released a light smoke bomb to check wind direction and spray drift — no spraying had been undertaken at all during the period claimed. He told the group involved that they'd got things wrong and was told yes they knew that, no it didn't matter — the protest aims were more important than the truth. He promptly resigned his membership.

I didn't bother renewing my Consumer subscription after they got the Bent Spoon award

a couple of years ago. It was not so much that they got the award (everyone in publishing has the odd "off" issue), it was the injured, rather self-righteous tones with which the appalling article was defended that made me feel the organisation no longer had sufficient credibility in my eyes to keep me a member.

I still read the magazine in the library from time to time, but I'm a lot more skeptical about their pieces than I once was. After all, I *do* know something about the alternative health scene and could judge for myself how poorly researched the piece was — I don't know anything about medical insurance or stereo systems, so how do I know what they're writing on those issues is right?

I remain highly skeptical about acupuncture and its uses, but didn't have too many problems with it until a mother in my local baby group announced that her acupuncturist had said the best way to treat a baby with a fever was to bleed it.

"That's positively medieval" I gasped, only to be reassured "oh no, it's much older than that, the Chinese have been doing it for thousands of years".

I knew this woman wasn't going to be interested in a tirade, but I pointed out just how little blood a small baby has to lose before it gets into dire trouble. She could see what I was getting at and even nodded when I added that she might like to consider changing her acupuncturist.

If you can stop and make people think about an issue, explain even briefly why you have problems coming to terms with something which uses pseudoscience or shonky science, then you've done a Good

## Call for Proposals

NZCSICOP Inc. is interested in receiving formal proposals for the maintenance and upgrading of the World Wide Web site which was recently established at <http://www.spis.co.nz/spis/skeptics.htm>

Any proposal should include:

1. Researching and incorporating additional links to sites of skeptical interest around the world
2. Adding online keyword-based access to additional reference material, including Truth Kits and articles from current and previous issues of the *NZ Skeptic* (available on disk)
3. Publicising the site to appropriate parties both online (e.g. other Skeptics organisations, site index lists) and in other media
4. Updating the page when required to publicise local and national meetings and other events
5. Adding nomination and results pages for the Bent Spoon Awards, and other opportunities for visitor feedback and contributions
6. Monthly cost of keeping the site online (not necessarily at its current location), plus the data transfer costs (per MB) which would be incurred as a result of national and international visitors to the site.

Send proposals to:

The Secretary  
NZCSICOP  
150 Dyers Pass Road  
Christchurch 2

Thing. And it isn't really that hard to make people think.

If you explain homeopathic solutions in terms of a teaspoonful of gin to a Pacific Ocean of tonic, people can immediately grasp what you're getting at when you're challenging the idea of potent dilutions.

When people stop and think about it, they know that it doesn't seem all that likely that a civilisation immeasurably more advanced than ours would want to travel hundreds of thousands of miles across space to stick things up the noses of neurotic Americans. The idea becomes even more ridiculous when you point out that the figures being bandied about for alien abductions mean that one American has been abducted

every minute every night for the past 30 years. People *know* that there are simpler solutions.

One of the loveliest images I have come across in trying to explain the skeptical ideal of seeking the most likely explanation for strange phenomena is the one used on our new Skeptics leaflets and on our Web page:

*When you hear the sound of hoofbeats in the night, think first of horses, not zebras.*

The image appeals to me, as does the fact that it doesn't rule out the possibility that it might just be a herd of zebras cantering past your window, depending on your circumstances...

That's the sign of the thinking skeptic.

Vicki Hyde is an active skeptic and a sceptical activist.

# Hokum Locum

## Joint Manipulation

An article in *NCAHF* reminded me of past activities with respect to joint manipulation. Following a one week course I embarked on a short-lived career in spinal manipulation which is very easy to learn and causes a greatly inflated belief in one's ability to "cure" spinal ailments.

The first problem was that patients kept coming back repeatedly to have their back or neck "put back." I soon realised that if, as the quacks claim, the spine can easily be "put back" then it can just as easily "go out" again. All I had done was create a perception with the patients that every time their back or neck hurt it required a specific manipulation. If only I was more unscrupulous...what a wonderful money-making idea!

What finally cured me of such activities was the day I manipulated a patient's neck with the usual psychologically satisfying crack from the spine. She sat up, went pale and slumped back onto the couch. Distraught, and thinking that I had killed her I rushed through to get the assistance of my receptionist who took one look and said to me "You twit. She's only fainted."

As a reformed manipulator, I was therefore interested in the following which I will quote in full:

"The popping sound associated with 'putting bones back-into-place' (though it may be accomplished by manipulating a normal joint) is one of the cleverest and most effective forms of suggestive therapy

ever devised. This has a tremendous psychological influence over the mind. While the popping sound itself is quite meaningless, this influence might possibly be used to advantage in curing psychosomatic conditions — provided the patient is informed that the bone is 'back-in-place' and will stay there. By the same token, however, such treatment can cause a great deal of harm; that is by perpetuating a psychosomatic condition or even creating a new psychological illness."

Manipulative therapy is well documented as leading to spinal cord damage and paralysis. Quacks will claim that this only occurs in a few cases per 100,000 patients treated but the easy answer to this is that all of these conditions get better without the risk of paralysis from manipulation, therefore any risk of spinal cord damage is unacceptable.

*NCAHF* Vol 18, No 3

## Alleged Allergies

Although I don't see many children in the course of my work, I am amazed at how often mothers allege that their children can't have milk because of various allergies. In one study, researchers found that people who perceive that they are allergic to milk simply misinterpret ordinary abdominal feelings. From a group of 30 subjects, 21 were identified who were genuinely intolerant of lactose. They were divided into two groups and given either normal milk or lactose-free milk. There was no difference in the amount of abdominal distress reported by the two groups.

## Full of Wind?

A report on a new breathing therapy for asthma initially looked quite interesting until I came across the following statement: "by learning to saturate their bodies with carbon dioxide, patients can lessen muscle tension and slow breathing to a normal rate." After reading this I was still interested until I came to the end: "the technique is also used to treat angina, high and low blood pressure, piles, varicose veins and even cancer." This is an absurd range of indications for any one treatment and such claims are absolutely diagnostic of quack therapies.

Carbon dioxide is one of the most potent stimuli of the respiratory centre which triggers breathing. Any attempt to saturate the body with carbon dioxide will stimulate the breathing reflex so the whole therapy concept is a contradiction in terms.

## Silicon Implants

Are there any American female actors who have not had their breasts surgically enhanced? I was reading a magazine which was profiling *Baywatch* star Pamela Anderson. Pamela cannot stay in cold water for very long because her implants start to solidify and ruin her mammary profile.

In *Skeptic* 34 I outlined how women could claim for silicon disease if they had vague symptoms such as chronic fatigue, muscle weakness and memory loss. A study reported in the *British Medical Journal* (Vol 311, p138) found no connection



between silicon breast implants and connective tissue disorders.

### **Gulf War Syndrome**

A study of 10,020 Gulf War veterans found that the range of complaints they had was no different to the general population. I imagine that this conclusive study will not settle the matter as long as there is the prospect for compensation. There was very little actual fighting in the Gulf War and more Americans were killed in accidents than in actual combat.

Like most sensible people in the military, I am opposed to ritual combat as a means of solving disputes. In future wars, I can see soldiers going into battle followed by support companies of psychologists and counsellors, available to give emotional first-aid following the shock of finding that the enemy are firing live rounds.

The American study confirmed a British study of 45,000 soldiers which concluded "no evidence has emerged that any organic disorder has occurred more commonly in Gulf veterans than in any similar population over a similar four year period." Hopefully this will be the last we hear of "Gulf War syndrome."

*GP Weekly 16/8/95, BMJ Vol 310, p1073*

### **Size Does Matter!**

Before being released from prison, convicted sex offenders in the UK are being subjected to penile plethysmography (PPG). PPG detects minute changes to the penile blood supply while the prisoners are shown sexually explicit material. Sexual arousal is defined as a "deviant response". The psychologist in charge of this program claims that the scientific literature says that the test is "valuable". An-

other psychiatrist condemned it as a "gross abuse of human rights". As a rational skeptic (after Skrabanek) I suspect that PPG is an unproven and extremely unlikely test which is likely to have a very high false positive response. Sexual arousal in males can occur at all sorts of embarrassing moments and it is likely that most males would show a degree of arousal when exposed to sexually explicit material.

*Christchurch Press 1/6/95*

### **Berry Silly**

The Auckland Sunday paper (27/8/95) carried a small article which claimed that World War Two airmen improved their night vision by eating blueberry jam. This contains "anthocyanosides" which are alleged to improve night vision and treat visual fatigue. It is no surprise that a drug company is now marketing pills containing this substance. This is another good situation for Skrabanek's rules. Is this claim at all plausible and is there any more likely explanation for claimed improvements in night vision? Clearly, the placebo effect is at work here and no further testing is warranted.

### **Quackery and Chemists**

If you go into the average chemist's shop you will often see displays of homeopathic remedies along with vitamins and other dubious preparations. Most chemists derive the majority of their income from OTC sales and if they didn't sell these things, someone else would. I draw the line, though, when chemists start promoting quack ideas and remedies.

A member handed me a newspaper clipping which quoted a chemist as saying "zinc detoxifies chemicals like

alcohol, improves behavioural problems such as depression, anorexia, bulimia, fatigue and loss of libido."

Prior to rushing off to get some zinc, readers will be pleased to know that there is a simple test for zinc deficiency. A sip of zinc septahydrate solution is held in the mouth and "from the taste the zinc level is determined." I tried it and got a taste reminiscent of bullshit.

I forwarded this clipping to the Pharmaceutical Society of NZ and got the following reply: "whilst not every pharmacist would share these views, it is not considered that they bring the profession into disrepute. There have been many studies carried out on zinc which would appear to support the general thrust of these claims."

### **Sick Building Syndrome (SBS)**

Investigators have finally done the obvious and looked at buildings for which there are no complaints of SBS. Measured levels of contaminants were low and the authors found that complaints about the working environment were related to "perceptions about air movement, dryness, odours and noise."

As I have said before, SBS, like CFS and OOS, is based on a notional but false belief that psychogenic symptoms have some exterior cause. The availability of compensation completes the picture although, in the case of SBS, compensation is not available for any occupational disease associated with air-conditioning and this is probably why there has not been a flood of claims.

Occupational health workers continue to perpetuate false ideas in their own literature be-

cause they lack a perspective on history and human behaviour. The *Lancet* (Vol 345, p1361) reviews such a publication which claims that SBS is due to environmental factors. It is time that this false concept of SBS was laid to rest.

*Occupational Health* May 1995, p174

### Other Readers Write

Thanks to Dr Graham Sharpe who wrote from Wellington and enclosed some material about interesting developments in midwifery. Homeopathy is popular with midwives who use it during childbirth. Dr Sharpe also mentions a case known to him where a child died from a brain abscess due to a delay while homeopathic remedies were administered. The other case concerned a case of poisoning when a naturopathic remedy contained aconite. Aconite is severely toxic to the heart and this example shows why naturopathic remedies should be subject to the same restrictions and controls as other drugs.

Denis Dutton forwarded two articles as well. One from *Annals of Internal Medicine* (Vol 121, No.10) outlined the well-known complication of liver damage which can be caused by a wide variety of Chinese herbal treatments, in this case "Jin Bu Huan" tablets. The other article, entitled "Bitter Herbs: Mainstream, Magic, and Menace", is an editorial from the same issue as the journal above.

The FDA managed to ban the use of Jin Bu Huan, but their job will be made more difficult by the Hatch bill. This is "The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994" which was shepherded

through the US Congress by the quack-apologist Senator Hatch. Its language is so imprecise as to be a triumph for the promoters of quackery everywhere. The editorial ends with a plea for doctors to spend more time with patients exploring the "human interactions that are central to the physician-patient relationship."

### Hoxsey Cancer Quackery

Soon after I returned home from our annual conference, Bernard Howard sent me a travel guide for patients planning to go to Mexico and gift their money to a pack of criminal fraudsters who know that the Hoxsey treatment is useless. As well as the airfares to the US, the Hoxsey clinic charges are US\$1250-1600. Presumably this is to cover the costs of the "tonics" or as I call them, Kentucky fried medicine. As I explained at the conference, we know what these quack formulae contain and they could be made up in New Zealand for a few dollars.

### MVA Insurance Fraud

Los Angeles is the capital for staged motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) where professional criminals, unscrupulous lawyers and doctors participate in phony insurance claims. Until I read about this I was aware of a problem with "whiplash" (also known as chronic remunerative neck injury), which

has been a rich source of money for litigants. Phony claims fall into several groups: personal injury, claims for accidents that never happened or actual crashes involving unsuspecting drivers and staged accidents involving previously damaged vehicles.

Christchurch Press 24/7/95

### Faking It?

Vicki Hyde passed on to me a peculiar letter from a Dr Hussein of Jordan asking us to participate in research in the paranormal immunity of fakirs to pain. The letter is the usual mixture of pseudoscience. In fact, no individuals possess any "paranormal" immunity to pain, unless of course they are lucky enough to lack the spinothalamic tracts which carry pain messages to the brain.

Humans possess widely varying responses to pain stimuli which are subject to attenuation by cultural factors, conditioning and belief. Slowly rising pain stimuli can be centrally blocked. I have seen (and discouraged!) my daughter pushing needles through her finger. I reviewed the question of pain control in my paper on acupuncture which is available from our organisation.

Dr John Welch is base medical officer at RNZAF Woodbourne.

## Astronomy or Astrology?

India is home to both the world's third-largest scientific community and innumerable traditional astrologers. They locked horns during October over a total solar eclipse. While scientists and media sources encouraged people to watch the spectacle safely, many astrologers viewed it as harmful, and Prime Minister Rao was accused of taking a foreign tour to escape its effects.

## The dilemma at the heart of the proposed course on naturopathy

PR 25-25  
25 Nov 95

IN 1994 Aoraki Polytechnic (Timaru) applied to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority for approval of a Bachelor of Applied Science (Naturopathy) degree. This proposal met opposition from individuals and organisations such as the Canterbury branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand and the New Zealand Association of Scientists. After correspondence in "The Press", I recently visited the polytechnic to meet the staff of the department of natural medicine and learn more about the naturopathy course.

Since it was first proposed the course has undergone changes which have moderated some of my concerns, but several issues remain. My three core questions are:

1. Is naturopathy an applied science?
2. Is it a degree-level subject? and
3. Is Aoraki Polytechnic equipped to teach it?

Question 3 can only be answered by the NZQA accreditation committee, but the other questions need public debate.

To be at degree level a subject needs more than just to take three years of full-time study. Degree-level subjects require intellectual progression from year one to year three. The material taught must become more intellectually demanding, core subjects should integrate ancillary material more thoroughly, and teaching and learning should be more and more dependent on research and scholarship. The teachers of the course need to be active in research, and students need to become critical and independent thinkers. When the subject is an applied subject the ancillary and core material has to be integrated thoroughly with the practical work.

As I understand the Aoraki course, the core applied subjects, taught over two or three years, are naturopathic nutrition, phytotherapy (herbal medicine), homeopathy and iridology. Ancillary subjects, taught mostly for just one year, are chemistry, biochemistry, physiology, anatomy, pathology, psychology, and pharmacology.

Do the core naturopathy subjects become progressively more intellectually demanding from years one to three? Do they genuinely integrate the chemistry, biochemistry, physiology, and other ancillary subjects? Public evidence on this is lacking. I have difficulty seeing how, in my own subject, introductory level psychology could be meaningfully integrated with core topics of naturopathic nutrition and phytotherapy. Because applications to the NZQA are treated as commercial secrets, answers to these questions have necessarily been left to the NZQA.

**Aoraki Polytech has proposed to set up a degree course in naturopathy which it says it will run with full scientific rigour. The problem is that the claims of naturopathy are not accepted by scientists, so what is to be taught in the meantime? asks NEVILLE BLAMPIED.**

The claim that naturopathy is an applied science has been the most controversial part of the Aoraki proposal. New Zealand science organisations have responded negatively.

Defining "science" is difficult. I argue that, to qualify as a science, a subject needs (a) theory about some natural phenomena, expressed in a way that makes the theory testable (falsifiable); (b) systematic and rigorous methods for making observations of the phenomena; (c) a body of data (facts) about the phenomena, gained by using the methods; and (d) a commitment to developing new theories when old ones are falsified. An applied science is one where the theories and facts together are used to generate and refine technologies and/or to guide the actions of professional practitioners as they deal with natural phenomena, such as environmental destruction or human disease.

Applied health sciences are committed to the scientist-practitioner model of training and practice. This means that practitioners receive a rigorous and usually extensive training in specific underlying science(s) as well as training in professional practice. Continued scientific research is seen as vitally important to extending and improving practice, and innovations in practice need scientific verification before their widespread adoption by the profession.

The subjects within naturopathy certainly contain implicit theories (eg, the homeopathic hypothesis that "like cures like") but they have not been developed as scientific theories nor systematically exposed to testing by research. Although aspiring to be health practitioners, naturopaths do not seem to have adopted the scientist-practitioner ideal characteristic of other health professions. If they had done so, naturopathy would have a continuing commitment to clinical research and to scientific verification of practice. Instead, most seem to rely on client testimonials as evidence of clinical effectiveness.

If the naturopathy course is serious about training health professionals then it must leave behind the traditions of naturopathy and adopt the scientist-practitioner model. Failure to do so would be a bad mistake. Training people who will treat health problems is a serious business because mistakes can be fatal. How, other than by research, is the safety and effectiveness of any treatment to be established?

Given that a treatment has been found effective, only by research can its mechanisms of action be discovered. Commitment to scientific knowledge as the foundation of a health profession will neither guarantee cures nor prevent catastrophes, but scientific knowledge is still the most secure foundation on which to base practice. Although it is not the only form of useful knowledge, "scientific knowledge is the best and most important kind of knowledge we have" (Sir Karl Popper).

**Once the light of scientific inquiry is directed at homeopathy, iridology, etc, very little of current dogma and practice may remain.**

A commitment to scientific knowledge is essential if practice is to be kept safe and, over time, improved. It is also essential if practitioners are to be accountable to their clients and to the wider community.

How can a practitioner responsibly charge people for treatments where there is no reliable scientific evidence that the treatments work?

How can clients give truly informed consent to treatment unless made aware of evidence about it, or lack thereof? Securing informed consent to treatment is a minimal ethical requirement that all health practitioners must follow.

Some are quite willing to admit that research into naturopathy needs to be done, and the polytechnic has emphasised that it has a commitment to both training its students in research methods and to having staff engage in research. These are excellent aspirations, but will be a difficult challenge to fulfil. One major barrier is the immense complexity and difficulty of doing high-quality health research.

Suppose a person with a health

problem consults a naturopath, is prescribed a naturopathic remedy, and reports being cured. There are no fewer than five possible real outcomes in such a case. First, all that may have happened is that the person says he or she is cured when the health problem remains unchanged. Nothing has altered but what the person says about it. Few would regard this as a genuine cure. Perhaps, however, there has been real improvement in the person's health problem. What has caused this treatment effect?

A second possibility is that the specific active ingredient of the treatment was effective — a true treatment effect. Or maybe some non-specific aspect of the treatment was what worked. Or perhaps there was a placebo effect. Perhaps the condition spontaneously recovered and it was a coincidence that treatment occurred at the same time.

Finding out which of these is actually responsible is often very difficult. While it is possible to do sound single-case research, often investigators need to use many cases, sophisticated research designs such as double-blind trials, and complex statistical analyses before conclusions can be reached. Epidemiological and cost-benefit analyses are even more difficult. If students are to master such skills then their teachers must be highly competent in research and the students must have many opportunities to do research.

As yet, I do not think that the polytechnic can meet either of these requirements.

I do not agree with those who say: "We accept that naturopathy needs more research, and we are committed to seeing that more research is done" and then proceed to teach the current lore in naturopathy. This is like proposing to teach, say, lawyers, before making sure that the advice they learn to give is soundly based on New Zealand law and can keep their clients out of trouble.

The polytechnic and its staff thus face an acute dilemma. To responsibly train health professionals at degree level they must make a commitment to the scientist-practitioner model and to scientific research. But once the light of scientific inquiry is directed at homeopathy, iridology, etc, very little of current dogma and practice may remain.

Meantime, while waiting for the verdict of science on naturopathy, what are their students to be taught?

■ Neville Blampied is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Canterbury.



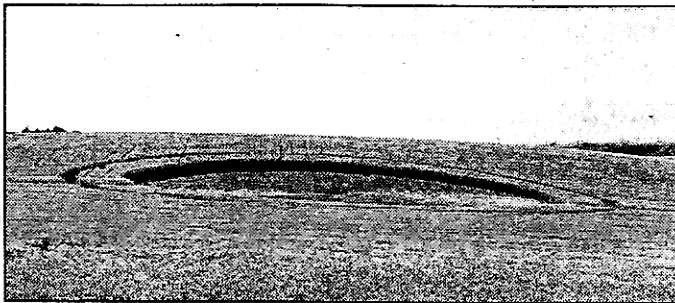
# Pair run rings around experts

BY ANNETTE TAYLOR

Rural  
News  
Sept '95

WHILE the originators of Britain's crop circles have hung up their trampling boards, arable farmers around the world still face the prospect of artistic creations appearing in their wheat fields.

Lincoln emeritus professor Bernard Howard told the recent 10th annual New Zealand Skeptics Conference in Auckland the circles were originally the work of two men, generally known as Doug and Dave, who after more than 13 years in the field are now in retirement. Others have



● A crop circle near Wanganui in January this year.

since taken on the craft and spread it to other parts of the world — one was sighted near Wanganui as recently as January this year.

The circles began appearing in the late 1970s and were quite substantial creations, generally sited on hillsides near busy roads for maximum visibility. Originally Doug and Dave made the circles on their hands and knees but soon developed a 'trampling board', that allowed enormous quantities of corn to be swirled.

Reaction to the circles among the self-appointed experts gave an example of how to study new phenomena, and how not to, Howard said. The small group of researchers involved brought with them their own personality weaknesses and delusions. Some proposed meteorological explanations while others favoured visits from alien spacecraft or 'earth energies'.

It was Doug and Dave's intention to make people believe the circles were caused by UFOs. In response to one researcher claiming they were the result of atmospheric vortexes, they began to create more complicated circles, adding on straight lines and

changing the direction of the swirls. This resulted in the particular scientist complicating his theory further to allow for the new changes, though eventually he had to concede defeat.

Farmer reaction to the circles in their fields was almost as varied as the number of explanations for their cause, and ranged from hostility to mercenary. One farmer promptly set up a little booth by his farm gate and charged people one pound to come in and have a look. He made around 5000 pounds - about ten times the value of the trampled crop.

But by 1991 the two circle creators were becoming tired and were aware that other people were receiving fame and fortune over the issue - none of which was going to the people doing all the work.

"They decided to come clean and told their story to the British tabloid 'Today' and were denounced as liars. Some said the pair were MI5 stooges, told to tell their story to hide the real nature of crop circles."

When asked to repeat a circle in daylight with a skeptical audience, Doug and Dave 'made a mess of it.' Since that time they have made other circles - at night time, while being filmed by a television crew. These were subsequently declared genuine by the experts, or 'cereologists' as they preferred to be called. And judging by the appearance of a circle in New Zealand this year, the technique is achievable by anyone with a bit of time on their hands.

## ■ Convinced

Trish Roberts (*Letters*, October 21) thinks the Skeptics have some nerve making rude remarks about the 74 percent who registered as believers in a TV2 *Nightline* viewer poll on the authenticity of the Roswell incident. For the record, I have yet to meet a single one of the more than 350 members of the New Zealand Skeptics who thinks there isn't life of some kind beyond the solar system. Given the stellar/planetary statistics, it is almost impossible to imagine otherwise.

It is a completely different issue whether, since the phrase "flying saucer" was coined in 1947, aliens have been buzzing cows, flattening corn fields and abducting hapless citizens in order to perform weird medical and sexual experiments on them - with or without the connivance of the US Government and the KGB.

On the evidence so far available, Earth is still the only planet known to harbour intelligent life. How much intelligence is a question that continues to vex the Skeptics.

Denis Dutton

Spokesperson, New Zealand Skeptics

## RHA approves Maori healing

Wellington (PA). — Traditional Maori healing will soon be available for Maoris in Hawkes Bay under an historic new contract signed yesterday between the Central Regional Health Authority and a traditional healing clinic in Napier.

Central RHA Maori health manager Rongo Wi Repa said in a statement yesterday the authority would be purchasing

a pilot programme covering assessment and diagnosis based on Maori customs, provision of traditional healing practices, and counselling and support for whanau (the extended family).

The service would be provided by a Maori traditional healer and supporting health workers from Napier's Te Whare Whakapikiora o te Rangimarie Clinic.

The pilot programme will run for 12 months, and will then be evaluated to assess its potential for other traditional healing services to be considered.

Mr Wi Repa said the contract was a major breakthrough for Maoris as the authority had recognised they were entitled to access to traditional as well as Western medicine. ODT 2/8/95

# On a Mission from God

David Riddell

*Australian creationist Peter Sparrow toured New Zealand recently.*

Peter Sparrow is a black-bearded, bespectacled, bear of a man. He is cheery, articulate, and an excellent spokesman for the Creation Science Foundation (a "faith-funded" organisation with a presence in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Britain), under whose auspices he recently toured New Zealand. Originally from Australia, he has been touring that country for a number of years spreading a similar message to the one he delivered here.

In his travels over a three-month period, he addressed 53 meetings throughout the country. My brother John and I caught up with him on the 50th such occasion, at the East St Apostolic Church in Hamilton. Also present was Graeme Williams, a temporary maths lecturer at Waikato University, whom I had contacted through the Usenet newsgroup talk.origins, and perhaps a hundred of the faithful.

The talk began with a brief account of Sparrow's own conversion to the cause. At school, he said, he had been convinced that science had proven God did not exist, and that the secret to success in life was survival of the fittest. This he understood to mean walking over everybody else to achieve his goals. His life became complicated, however, when he met and fell in love with a Christian girl, who wouldn't accept his arguments.

Confused, (he felt that for humanists there should be no

such thing as love, since this meant giving something of yourself, making you weaker) he fled his native Adelaide for New Zealand where, to cut a long story short, he was converted to creationism — and two seconds later to Christianity — by listening to some creationist tapes while doing the dishes. The tapes made him realise, he said, that God had made him, and therefore owned him, and had the right to make rules over his life.

A belief in evolution provided no such rules for living, and led to a life of lawlessness, devoid of meaning, and a tolerance of such evils as homosexuality, pornography and abortion. Creationism, by contrast, required an acceptance of laws and standards, and gave meaning to life. The story of Adam's Fall was also necessary to provide meaning for Christ's sacrifice on the cross: if there were no Fall, and if humanity were not born into sin, then Christianity was without foundation.

The creationist cause was therefore fundamental to the church's fight for its very survival: according to Sparrow, evolution represents an attack by Satan at the church's foundation. His main message, then, was that Christians should not be fighting at the level of issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, since these were only symptoms of the underlying evil of evolutionary theory, whose amorality was progressively eroding society. It was

necessary to get children out of the state education system into Christian or home schooling, to use creationist material in evangelical work, and to show up the flaws in the evolutionary model.

This he attempted to do at first by way of an analogy: he told a story of a printing press exploding and a completed book assembling itself page by page from the wreckage. Not surprisingly no-one believed the story, yet, he maintained, this was the sort of thing evolutionists expected people to believe. Chance and random processes produced only chaos, but evolutionists clung to the belief that they could produce order because the only alternative was creation and this required God.

He next produced examples of apparent design in nature: a nettle hair that was more complex than a hypodermic needle, velcro-like hooks on a plant leaf, and bacterial cells, which were far more complex than the needle point (looking very rough and blunt in the electron micrograph) on which they were sitting.

He showed photos of cliffs and canyons, produced in a day or two by the eruption of Mt St Helens, and argued that this showed that Noah's Flood could have created massive sediment deposits, and carved out landforms such as the Grand Canyon. Finally, he attacked the textbook picture of horse evolution, maintaining that since all the species of

varying sizes in one picture he showed all lived at the same time, they could not represent stages in a line of descent, any more than a girl could be the same age as her grandmother.

The talk was followed by the screening of a 1977 film, *The World that Perished*, a well-made if unintentionally hilarious retelling of the Flood story. (One small point: we were told how Noah sealed his Ark with pitch, then later that the petrochemical deposits were formed as a result of the Flood. Pitch is a petrochemical: where did Noah get his pitch from?)

Sparrow then went on to promote the books, magazines and tapes he had with him. These covered three tables, and included children's books, the CSF's *Creation* magazine, books on the scientific evidence for creation, and one with the answers to the most frequently asked questions creationists have to face. This one, he said, explained how the tuatara got to New Zealand from Mt Ararat. It actually spoke about the platypus in Australia, but, he assured us, change the name, and the argument still applied. This I had to see, so I headed straight for it. Predictably, it talked about land bridges. Across the Tasman Sea? Which is two miles deep? When according to the creationists the sea was at its shallowest during the flood and has only got deeper as the land masses rose up and the sea floor fell?

To his credit, Sparrow allowed plenty of time afterwards for discussion, and seemed a little flustered when I collared him on this one, hedging that maybe as things found their new levels a land bridge could still have existed temporarily. It was difficult to pursue any line

of argument for too long, however, as there were only three of us surrounded by several of Sparrow's supporters. I feel we handled ourselves quite well, and would like to think we planted some doubts in the minds of a few listeners. I was able to point out that descent of species should not be confused with descent of individuals, so comments about granddaughters and grandmothers, with respect to the horse family, were inappropriate.

I also went some way towards dealing with the matter of "random processes" in nature, showing that the notebook I was holding predictably moved downwards when released, rather than heading off in a random direction. The point was that there are natural laws and processes at work in the universe which make non-random things happen all the time, and that this applies to living things as well as everything else. He seemed to accept the fall-back position which was offered, that God could be responsible for these natural laws in the first place (you will never get a creationist to abandon belief in God, better to concentrate on Genesis), but wouldn't accept that this was quite a different matter from asserting the Book of Genesis was literally true.

Meanwhile, John was involved in a lengthy discussion on the validity or otherwise of teleological and ad hoc arguments. He also pointed out that whereas scientists argue constantly in journals over how evolution occurs, there is no disagreement over whether it does: to the scientific community, creationism is a dead issue. And Graeme had brought along some very impressive pa-

pers on self-replicating molecules, including DNA strands of only six bases. These clearly worried several in the audience, and completely floored one fresh-faced creationist who was about to launch into an argument on the statistical improbability of long nucleic acid chains ever forming.

Issues that never got properly addressed were the proper interpretation of "survival of the fittest" in a human context — that our primary strength as a species is our ability to get along with one another in complex societies, and the matter of the argument from design. The argument that if a needle is designed, then anything more complex than a needle must also be designed, is logically invalid. What about a snow crystal? (See previous comments on non-random processes.)

In any case, most of the audience had gone home before this discussion session began, and it is sobering to think of all those newly fired-up creationist evangelists who may have been spawned by this tour. With hindsight, I realise that it would have been better to notify other Skeptics around the country as soon as I learned of this, so that others may have been able to attend meetings, perhaps find out Sparrow's itinerary, compare notes, and prepare sticky questions for him. I was unaware until the night that the tour was so close to its finish. The meetings were not at all well publicised outside of the churches (I learned of them from a friend's home-schooling newsletter), and were clearly targeted at the converted. Hopefully next time an event like this happens, we may be better prepared for it.

David Riddell is a Hamilton Skeptic.



# Bent Spoon Debate

## Rebuttal

Walter C Clark, Chuck Bird and Nicky McLean criticise *Hitting Home* for not investigating women's violence towards men, that is, for not being another piece of research altogether. When biologists can produce papers about the hairs on the legs of one species of fruit-flies, this does not seem excessively specialised. One reason that that was not done is simply money. To have achieved the same accuracy would have required interviewing 2,000 women, doubling the cost.

According to the Center Against Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, 95 percent of all domestic violence is men beating women. Analysing violence along ethnic lines would likewise have doubled the cost, since presumably only about 200 of the present sample were Maori. It would cost as much again to interview 2,000 Pacific Islanders, also commonly characterised as violent.

Greg Newbold's references to Maori in prison are disingenuous. He of all people should know that Maori are more likely to be imprisoned not because they are intrinsically more violent than Pakeha but, among other things, because they are disproportionately in lower socio-economic groups and less well-educated, and (in consequence) less able to manipulate the system to produce the outcome they want.

Again, *Hitting Home* did not look for or find the specific extent of Maori men's violence against women because that is not the piece of research it was.

All that research certainly should be done, but it is to the credit of *Hitting Home* that it didn't pretend to attempt it. This was, after all, primarily about men's *attitudes* towards violence, not about which men are violent.

As for Bird's proposal that men be asked if they were abused, what would that prove? The most violent men might also claim to be the most put-upon, so?

Clark's and McLean's elaborate discussions of "provocation" are taken care of by the wording of the questionnaire (p 224) which specifies "ways of settling differences". "Banging the table" (Clark) is not mentioned, nor "restraint of a spouse intent on mayhem with a French cook's knife." They seem to think some lower threshold of abuse, one that they think justified, should be ignored. That it is not does not fault *Hitting Home*, it just shows their places on its spectrum.

Does Nicky McLean really think that a man who thinks it is okay to take a knife to his wife would draw the line at shouting at her? The more items he agrees to, the more abusive/violent he is. There is no suggestion in *Hitting Home* that the different levels of abuse and violence are equivalent. Obviously the scale is quasi-logarithmic, like the Richter and decibel scales, and hence more sensitive at the lower end. Once that is understood, "number of types accepted" is a perfectly valid measure.

Chuck Bird confuses defacto marriages with reconsti-

tuted families: it is step-parents who are more likely to abuse children than natural parents, regardless of the legal status of the marriage. This seems to be biological and has nothing to do with men's violence toward women.

*Pace* McLean, it will be news to co-author Robin Ramsom that he is a woman.

*Hitting Home* does have a significant flaw (as well as the truthfulness problem I mentioned in my main submission), not mentioned yet by its supporters or opponents. The level of non-response is very high, with only 60% of men contacted agreeing to be interviewed. It is hardly a way-out, New-Age supposition that violent men are less likely to talk about their violence than non-violent men. Therefore, *Hitting Home* probably significantly under-reports male violence and abuse against women.

Hugh Young, Porirua

## More Comments on *Hitting Home*

### Definition of Abuse

It could reasonably be expected that the term "abuse" would have been defined and its parameters explained at the beginning of the report. Instead it is not until p.30 that any definition is given — when it is, it is found to embrace a long list of behaviours (physical and psychological) of varying levels of seriousness. This does have the effect of trivialising the subject and of diverting attention from the more serious cases. The data would appear

far less confusing and a far greater reliance presumably could be placed on the results if the more serious aspects had been separated from the less serious from the start.

### **Lack of Balance**

On p.31 we are informed that "in this study 'domestic abuse' is used to mean the abuse of women by male partners". Such a restriction seems misguided given that behaviours in a partnership are never restricted to one partner. And often other people are involved. Such an approach to the subject resembles that of a biologist who decides to study the dynamics of a parasite-host relationship by concentrating on only one of the participants.

### **Exclusion of Ethnicity**

A basic criterion of any survey which purports to be scientific is that all avenues are followed which are likely to provide vital information. If this means disregarding claims that following this or that line of investigation "would lead to unhelpful, inappropriate and insensitive cross-cultural comparisons", so be it. To maintain that the survey's methodology was inappropriate for making such comparisons does seem a way of avoiding the issue, particularly when we are informed that an ethnic analysis became a significant issue in the consultations made during the development stage (p.35).

### **Questionable Methodology**

A number of the most puzzling and questionable aspects of the study appear in the section: The findings of Study 1 — a survey of 2,000 men. We are told that "most New Zealand men do not approve of a man hitting a woman," and that nine in ten do not approve of hitting

in any of twenty different circumstances (p.62). It seems this clear indication of a high level of disapproval did not satisfy the researchers. A "ten-point scale of disapproval" was applied from which each man was given "an approval of hitting score". Suddenly "non-approval" becomes "approval" in relation to hitting a woman.

The conclusion drawn from this questionable methodology is "that New Zealand men do not strongly disapprove of hitting". Somehow what began as a strong positive has become a strong negative, to the detriment of New Zealand men in general.

### **Contradictions**

On p.98 it is stated: "as in our research, the Dunedin study found that domestic abuse was more likely to occur when the male partner was young and when he was poorly educated, of low socio-economic level, and unemployed". Yet a major conclusion from the study is that "a man's socio-economic level, educational level and personal income group give us no clue of the likelihood of his being abusive to a woman partner." (p.146). Also little is made in the report of the fact that this "finding" was contrary to that arrived at in the majority of overseas studies.

How can questions be "less direct" and, at the same time, "more specific"? (p.35).

### **Major Conclusions of the Report**

There seems no justification for concluding (a) that there is an underlying male acceptance of abuse in New Zealand, and (b) that a substantial proportion of New Zealand women are abused by their male partners, both physically and psycho-

logically (p.21). The results of the survey, particularly when taking into account the wide definition of "abuse" and the suspect methodology, do not warrant these conclusions. It is worth noting that a desire to fit data to preconceived notions is a characteristic of pseudoscience.

### **Conclusion**

The NZ Skeptics Society is opposed to pseudoscience in any of its manifestations. There seems little doubt that vital parts of *Hitting Home* can be described as pseudoscientific. It is therefore a fair target for skeptical attention. I have to agree with those critics of the report who have concluded that it trivialises domestic violence and conveys a level of abuse perpetrated by men which is not supported by the evidence. I support fully the awarding of the Bent Spoon for 1995 to the report, *Hitting Home*.

*Warwick Don, Dunedin*

I have carefully examined the Department of Justice report on domestic violence entitled *Hitting Home*. I feel that this report fully deserved being made recipient of the 1995 Bent Spoon award.

*Robert Woolf, Auckland*

### **Correction**

Despite the third paragraph of my contribution to the September issue, I would like it to be known that I do distinguish affect from effect (and impact for that matter), and an issue would be assessed rather than accessed, such as men's abuse rather than man's. And in the last paragraph I wrote few persons rather than four persons. But otherwise, my scribblings must have been clear enough.

As for the report, I too had to stare long and hard at some paragraphs, including the one quoted by Mr Clark in his letter [September, p.25, first paragraph]. I think the authors mean that when asked about "abuse" people disapprove readily, but if asked less directly about general abuse by being offered specific actions not labelled as abuse, many more say that they might do that, or could understand someone doing it. My bafflement peaked on p.148 of the report with "...most likely to agree with this statement were the non-abusive men" ... "a clear relationship between seriousness of abuse and level of agreement with the statement" ... "four out of ten in the most serious abuse group agreed...two out of ten in the least serious group."

After a lot of thought, and checking with my father, I concluded that the paragraph was saved from literal self-contradiction thanks to overlapping definitions of "non-abusive", "most serious" and "least serious" groups. A plague on the whole business!

*Nicky McLean, Lower Hutt*

### Support for Award

Hugh Young writes, "Hitting Home is careful, thorough, mainstream scientific research." And later, "It is social science, not 'hard science'..."

It seems to me he is using definitions of "careful", "thorough", "mainstream", "scientific", and "research" which are quite different to those commonly used in the community of "hard science".

*Hitting Home* is a muddle. One could give numerous examples but Page 88 is a classic. It lists a "Seriousness of Abuse Scale (SOAS)" although this

seems to have become contaminated with frequency. What to make of this sentence explaining the scale? "Where two types of abuse had the same frequency, the one with the lower number of times in the past year was given the higher ranking."

Some time last year a young couple from next door came to use our telephone. Later the man shot and killed the woman. According to the SOAS that ranks as **less serious** than "Threatened her with knife or gun".

Hugh Young seems so certain of things which he cannot know as established facts. "Any torturer will tell you that the 'best' torture is purely mental." How many torturers does he know? Has he consulted a random sample?

Hugh Young again writes, "It is a truism among anti-violence workers (but apparently unknown to the critics) that domestic violence cuts across class boundaries, and a high court judge or cabinet minister is just as likely to beat his wife as a freezing worker or opossum [sic] trapper." This gets us to the real point: how do they know? This is just political correctness.

I spent 25 years in teaching where I encountered a number of families where there was violence against children and wives. My experience was that domestic violence was very strongly correlated with socioeconomic class and ethnic group. Furthermore most of the serious stuff was inflicted by men.

Now I am quite prepared to be shown to be wrong (I certainly did not encounter a random sample), but this will require evidence; I will not be convinced by a politically cor-

rect truism common among social workers. Just how many wives of cabinet ministers and high court judges are to be found in women's refuges for example?

Hugh Young again writes, "the report came to this counter-intuitive conclusion by careful scientific study...". It did not. It confirmed a "truism among anti-violence workers" by means that will naturally confirm prejudices.

The statistic that I found least believable is that 67% of New Zealand men had personal knowledge of physical abuse by a man or a woman. Because this implies that 37% have no such knowledge and I find that incredible. What kind of sheltered life do these people lead?

*Jim Ring, Nelson*

### No Evidence

I enjoyed reading the opposing points of view regarding the Bent Spoon Award, but was surprised to be advised by Hugh Young on p.24 that "We Skeptics are now on record as thinking it beyond question that once a woman has struck a man, he need take no responsibility whatever for all his subsequent violence".

I have personally never seen a scrap of evidence to support that statement and can only conclude that someone has been "behaving like a tabloid newspaper" having "taken information out of context, rewritten it in a biased way, and generally put the kind of spin on it that we so often accuse our opponents of doing".

*John Turner*

# Bent Spoon Summation

Since the call for responses to the awarding of the Bent Spoon to the Justice Department's Hitting Home report, we've received responses from 16 people, some of which of which have been published in this and the previous *Skeptic*. Others were in the form of private commentaries or conversations. One member contacted the authors of the report directly for clarification and further comment, and passed on the correspondence that ensued.

Our thanks to those who took the time to find and study the report and respond.

Five committee members have taken a closer look at the report and the award, and have supported the decision. While noting that it would not be possible to canvass all members about Bent Spoons (or get all members to necessarily agree), they have also made suggestions for broadening the decision-making process in the future.

Of the formal responses received, 14 supported the award, with comments ranging from a single sentence to a five-page analysis; two argued against the award (one of these came from a non-member).

In three responses, criticism was levelled directly at the press release announcing the Bent Spoon, primarily for poor choice of wording. Without being overly defensive, it is difficult to tackle a major, detailed report such as this one within the confines of a standard, 500-word press release using the pithy phrasing that the media will take note of.

While I could argue the points individually (surely one

can still use the term "fine print" metaphorically), that would not be appropriate at this stage, given the general support for the award. We do try and be as professional as possible in our media dealings — if some members feel that we could have done better in this case, then we acknowledge that criticism and will strive to do better.

The selection process for the awards (outlined in the last *Skeptic*) appears to have met with general acceptance. Suggestions for broadening the selection group have been noted and we look forward to a more inclusive process — and a greater number of nominations — in the coming year.

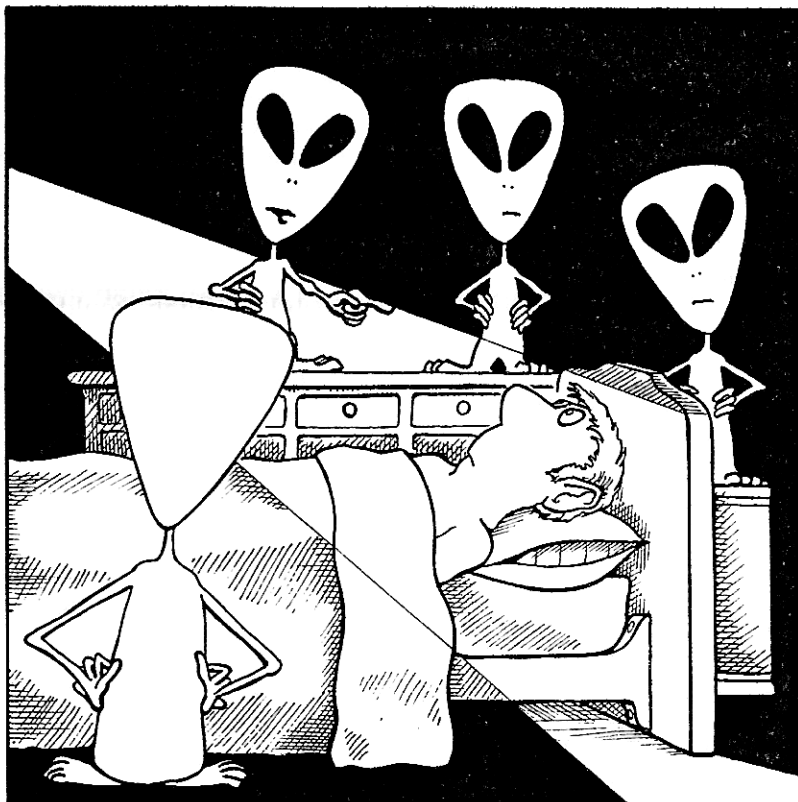
The controversial and, in some respects, highly emotionally charged aspects of this debate — from the AGM discussion on — could well have seen

this process disintegrate into a very messy, personalised fight that would not have done anyone, individually or the Skeptics as a whole, any good. *But it has not.*

A couple of responses suggested that this discussion should not have taken place, raising concerns that it could damage the credibility and effectiveness of the Skeptics as an organisation.

However, that we are able to have major differences of opinion, yet remain willing to argue rationally and reasonably, is, I believe, a reaffirmation of the sorts of principles for which the Skeptics stand and makes me, for one, proud to be a member.

Vicki Hyde  
Chair-entity  
NZCSICOP Inc.



*"You thought they were FREE, didn't you Jimmy...? Well, NOTHING in this Universe is really free, Jimmy, NOTHING. We want payment for the steak knives..."*



# Psychic Stuff-Ups

*The world's best psychics seems to have cracks in their crystal balls, says the Skeptical Inquirer.*

Top psychics who published their prognostications in US supermarket tabloids such as the *National Enquirer*, the *National Examiner* and the *Weekly World News*, indicated 1995 was supposed to be the year Rush Limbaugh was forced to go on welfare, Whitney Houston married Mike Tyson, Peter Jennings became the first journalist in space, and Disney World was wiped out by a hurricane.

"Once again, even the most talented psychics seem to have had trouble predicting the major unexpected events of the year," said Gene Emery, who compiled the 1995 predictions for the magazine

The *National Enquirer's* stable of psychics predicted in the tabloid's January 10 and June 20 issues that:

- ❖ The president's cat would be kidnapped and held for \$1,000 ransom by a homeless driver who would be captured after he also tried to snatch the Vice President's poodle.
- ❖ Burt Reynolds and Loni Anderson would remarry.
- ❖ Peter Jennings would do the evening news from orbit aboard the Space Shuttle.
- ❖ "A child genius will stun judges at a 7th-grade science fair when he presents a working time machine" made from parts of a microwave oven.
- ❖ Jay Leno would become David Letterman's sidekick on Letterman's *Late Show*.
- ❖ "Scientists will discover a beneficial virus that can turn ordinary rocks into a pro-

tein-rich food. And some experts will predict the find will lead to the end of world hunger."

- ❖ Tonya Harding would be "denied permission to open the nation's first all-nude ice skating rink."

The *National Examiner's* top psychics said 1995 would be the year that:

- ❖ President Clinton was shot in the jaw by a disgruntled postal worker.
- ❖ "A meteor the size of a Buick will strike a used car dealership in Las Vegas. No one will be injured in the crash, but the crater will open up a vast underground reservoir of drinking water, solving the desert town's water shortage."
- ❖ Basketball player Shaquille O'Neal quit basketball to become Rookie of the Year in baseball.
- ❖ Michael Jackson's "already weakened schnozz" would "permanently collapse" after an outraged mom punched him in the nose during a public appearance.
- ❖ Rush Limbaugh would "lose his fortune and become destitute. Forced on welfare, Rush will become a Democrat."

The psychics at the *Weekly World News* predicted that in 1995 a volcanic eruption would create a new land mass that tied the United States to Cuba, frog legs would become the rage in fast-food restaurants, and 80% of Americans would totally shave their heads.

Jeane Dixon, one of the country's best known psychics, in the July 25 issue of the *Star*

forecast "a stunning outcome to the O.J. Simpson trial will bring a result no one predicted. I can see that O.J. will walk."

She was right. But Dixon could just as easily claim success if Simpson had been found guilty or the jury had failed to reach a decision.

"A guilty verdict or hung jury will keep O.J. Simpson in jail through most of this year," she predicted in the January 17 issue. "I don't see him walking away a free man until an appeal," she announced in the April 25 issue. And in the October 10 issue, published after the verdict, Dixon predicted that "O. J. will be released from jail, but there will be a second trial and he will be incarcerated at least one more year."

As always, there were the typical forecasts: celebrities taking new occupations (psychic Shawn Robbins said Hugh Hefner would give up his Playboy empire and become a sunflower cultivator); promises of cures for AIDS, arthritis, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease; and predictions that space aliens would be discovered.

Also, there was the usual crop of vague predictions that left plenty of wiggle room in case they didn't come true.

In the December 13, 1994, issue of the *Globe*, for example, Mystic Meg forecast that Liz Taylor "will stumble across a formula that could spell an AIDS breakthrough." Jeane Dixon said, "A scandal in a religious cult could lead to murder, suicides, and a doomsday vigil in the spring."

Sometimes the predictions are laughable because they reflect so little knowledge of the real world, such as when psychics predict that someone will be elected president during the years when a presidential election isn't scheduled.

Dixon falls into that category with her prediction in the January 17 *Star*, saying, "A new, antibiotic-resistant strain of influenza causes coast-to-coast misery in early winter and again in early spring. Scientists will trace the virus to polluted water." Antibiotic resistance is hardly surprising — antibiotics don't work on viruses, which is why you don't prescribe them for the common cold, flu, AIDS, etc.

Unfortunately, the psychics gave no warning of the Oklahoma City bombing, they haven't been able to find the Unabomber, and they apparently had no inkling of Christopher "Superman" Reeve's tragic accident.

As for 1996, the psychics have already said it will be the year Hawaii sinks into the ocean, banana peels are found to cure cancer, Rush Limbaugh becomes the Republican nominee for President, Lance Ito becomes Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, the federal government decides to turn the Grand Canyon into a nuclear waste dump, and all the athletes in the '96 Olympics are forced to undergo species tests — after officials learn that a woman who won the gold medal in the shot-put is really a girl gorilla!

# Forum

## Chelation Study

Ian McWilliam's comments on the Dunedin Chelation Study in the September *NZ Skeptic* indicates the many difficulties in understanding medical research papers. In consideration of his critique of the study:

Re the number of patients:

1. Whilst 32 is not many, they were all typical claudication sufferers, being mainly smokers, male, and average age 67.

2. Van Rij et al arrived at this number in the correct method: using "power" and type error and allowing for detecting a predicted significant improvement in the order of 10% in terms of walking distance. Thus the study would easily detect the sorts of improvement that would be clinically significant (ie the 50-100% touted by some chelation clinics).

Re Mr McWilliam's doctor friend's analysis:

1. His statement that only 12% of the controls achieved 100% walking distance improvement versus 26% for the chelation group is poor presentation of statistics: We don't know how many of the controls achieved 99% or similar walking distance improvement.

2. Van Rij et al quote a change in the average walking distance to pain (ie how long before the patients stopped walking because of pain) in the order of 25 metres improvement for the controls versus only 12 metres for the chelation patients. In other words the chelation group did worse. An average is a better statistic in this case than the ones quoted by Mr McWilliam.

3. Mr McWilliam's statistical analysis (95% confidence limits) is irrelevant given no explanation of the statistical method used and who performed the test.

Comments that "Those who supply the expensive drugs, equipment and surgery would lose much if research into other simpler, less expensive..." ignores the extensive research by the "heart industry" into the likes of aspirin and warfarin, hardly expensive medications.

I have found the results of the Dunedin Chelation Study significant for my clinical practice: It has reaffirmed my clinical observation of several patients who have undergone chelation; they all feel significantly better for the extensive attention they receive and the improvements they achieve in their lifestyle — i.e. enhanced placebo effect. Unfortunately the cost of this "placebo" is excessive, its long-term effects questionable and I have a degree of unease when I consider the number of chelation-treated patients I have had die from their heart and circulation disease within two years following therapy.

Jim Vause  
Blenheim

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### **Moving Around?**

There may be psychics out there, but none of them help with the Skeptic. *If you change address, please tell us.* We want you to enjoy your magazine.

(Has anyone seen Mike Dickison...?)

Eagle-eyed skeptics may note that this issue is labelled "Summer" rather than "December".

With everything closing down for Christmas, you won't be receiving this before January. Sorry about that.

### **New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (Inc.)**

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