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The Ethics of Scepticism

David Novitz

One of the memorable presentations at the 1997 Skeptics' Conference was David Novitz's assessment of whether organised scepticism has a place in a liberal democratic society.

SUPPOSE that we are all under the influence of a drug that induces amnesia, and as a result we cannot remember anything at all about our personal circumstances. We don't know whether we are rich or famous, powerful or weak, what language we speak, how intelligent we are, what educational or professional qualifications we have, what race or religion or society we belong to. But suppose, too, that we are all ideally rational human beings, each of us aware of what we should like to secure for ourselves and for those we love. In this amnesiac condition we are locked into a room, and asked to consider a single problem: how ought available benefits and goods to be distributed in any society?

It is with this scenario that John Rawls begins his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971, Ox-

ford University Press), and the answer he gives to this question — an answer that tells how people behind what he calls this "veil of ignorance" would choose to distribute the benefits and goods in any society — amounts to his theory of justice.

Rawls argues that since people behind the veil of ignorance won't know how much power they have, what their situation is, or what metaphysical beliefs they will have, they will opt to organise the state in a way that guarantees "liberty of conscience" — the freedom to hold and propound beliefs without fear of ridicule or persecution. This makes some sort of sense because we will not know what beliefs we may come to have or how sincerely we will hold them. And, so Rawls supposes, we will recognise the acute discomfort of $\Rightarrow p3$

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Convivial Conference

THERE'S no denying it. We're a strange lot. Sitting in the small hall during the annual Skeptics get-together and listening to the varied, and often colourful, discussion, it struck me how dissimilar we all are.

Which is what it is all about really. Get two skeptics together and you can guarantee they will have strongly opposing thoughts on a range of subjects. What is important is the way they view the world and look for the evidence.

So what emerged from this year's most singular, important event, the 1997 Skeptics Conference, The Body Skeptic?

For a start, we all had our auras photographed. Explaining this to my six year old was a bit dodgy — she was most impressed with her pretty pink and blue one, and not terribly receptive to the idea that it was an electrical discharge.

The first morning was a remarkably introspective look at medical science, from a number of its practitioners. We learned, for example, that colour therapy is as effective in treating lower back pain as surgery, and has fewer side effects.

Medicine, we were told by Professor Alan Clarke, is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability. More science leads to more uncertainty as research usually leads to more new questions than answers.

In the afternoon Denis Dutton spoke on the cargo cult mentality behind much of UFO mania, and Mike Bradstock gave us some examples of media disinformation.

The highlight of the weekend had to be the Skeptics' first ever auction, which netted close to \$800 for Skeptical causes. The items included a brass plaque commemorating the past president of the British Reincarnation Society, and an authenticated piece of the Wizard's True Staff, complete with photograph. My six year old daughter Iris opened the bidding on a Nick Kim framed and coloured cartoon. Then there was the weeping icon - a Jonah Lomu Interchangeable, which had its eyes cunningly drilled out and its plastic head filled with glycerine.

What was truly astounding about the auction was watching hardened "skeptics" paying over good money for such items (I wish I'd got the piece of the Wizard's staff...). Denis Dutton has a new vocation in auctioneering if he tires of academia. The TV3 cameras were there and rolling, but alack, events in Paris the next day nudged any such coverage out

of the window (along with any other news for the following week...).

The following day, bright and early, Jay Mann laid to rest the demons of Chinese Restaurant Syndrome — there'll be an article in the next issue. Then David Novitz looked at how skeptics, while often perceived as intolerant, perform a necessary role in the highly social process of acquiring knowledge — see the main feature in this issue.

Then we had our asses whipped by various media personalities—including George Balani and Debra Nation. Debra passed on some gems gleaned from her colleagues, a few of which brought tears to the eyes. (The exact words have been repressed, but something to do with us being a bunch of space cadets who don't believe in anything that can't be stuck in a bottle of preservative).

One interesting observation was that skeptics are seen as extremist, with new agers and fundamentalists on the other end of the spectrum. The reasonable path is perceived to be somewhere between the two. For all that, it was good to note the media increasingly referring to skeptics for comment. Speaking about the media, watch out for the December *North and South* which is running a piece on our chair-entity, Vicki Hyde.

PS The best cure for lower back pain is still three days' and no more, bed rest. (All I have to do now is figure out how to get a bad back...)



Contributions

Contributions, whether written articles or newspaper clippings, should be directed to:

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Preference will be given to copy supplied by email or sent on an IBM-compatible disc in ASCII text, Word or WordPerfect formats. Discs will be returned if clearly labelled.

Please indicate the source publication and date of any clippings.

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⇒ *p1* being ridiculed or persecuted for beliefs that we cannot help holding and that we hold with sincerity. Hence we would all prefer a state that is neutral as between conflicting philosophical, religious, and moral beliefs.

This reflects a view common to all liberal theories of the state: individuals should be free to organise their lives around such beliefs — and the only constraint Rawls places on this freedom is “the common interest in public order and security”, which I assume includes the prevention of what Mill calls “direct harm” to other citizens.

Alleged Implications for the Skeptics Society

This view of the liberal state is widely held. If it is right, one has to ask whether the Skeptics Society and the public role it plays conforms to its ideals. For certainly at first glance — and perhaps at second, third and fourth glance as well — the society is an institution that is publicly intolerant at least of a select range of metaphysical beliefs and ideals. It criticises, and sometimes ridicules them, through the media, and through the feared (and frankly terrifying) Bent Spoon Award, which is meant to shame and embarrass people into abandoning their beliefs, or at least adopting a more circumspect attitude towards them.

Worse, the society (although “not into censorship”) campaigns to prevent certain ideas from being taught, and given “equal time” schooltime — eg. creationism. In other words, the

society strives publicly to upset the neutrality of the state where at least some of our metaphysical beliefs are concerned.

This can have serious consequences. It may mean that people will be excluded from public office or from jobs because of their beliefs. It may mean people can be publicly ridiculed, or ostracised. Both amount to forms of persecution that have characterised ideological intolerance throughout the ages.

The Proper Objects of Public Skepticism

Does this show the society is illiberal — that its practices and programmes are inconsistent with the ideal of the liberal state? The answer to this question must depend on the beliefs and ideas the society targets. We need to enquire closely into the proper objects of public skepticism before we can denounce the society as subversive of the liberal pluralism. If the society targets all the beliefs with which it disagrees, and subjects them to public ridicule, it runs the danger of persecuting people because of their religious or other affiliations. And to do this is to deny “liberty of conscience” to individuals. If, however, the society makes too few beliefs the objects of public skepticism, it is likely to undermine its major purpose and function.

So what are the proper objects of public skepticism? It would be wrong to take all false beliefs — still less all doubtful ones — as fair game. This would cast the net too widely, would arguably include most religions,

and, given the sometimes derisive style and caustic strategies of the society, could amount to persecution.

Nor is much purpose served by arguing that the concern of the society is to attack only those beliefs that are harmful. For it is a fact that no belief is directly harmful. What does the harm are the actions a belief may lead to. But the trouble with defending public skepticism in this way is that it's not just false or groundless beliefs that lead to harm. There are true beliefs — grounded in science — that can be used to harmful effect in society. Yet these are not the object of skepticism. Skepticism involves disbelief — and it's dishonest to advocate the disbelief of a harmful idea if it is true. Harm, therefore, is no ground for skepticism. Any belief, true or false, can lead to harm. And whether or not it does, has more to do with the values and attitudes of the believer than it has to do with the content, shonky or otherwise, of what is believed.

Perhaps, then, skepticism is called for in the case of beliefs that are both false and potentially harmful. This sounds promising, but will not altogether do — partly because any false belief is potentially harmful. Religions generally advocate false beliefs, and many of these do little more than console the faithful. Yet there is always the extremist who will turn the innocuous into the dangerous. But public criticism and ridicule of all such beliefs must involve the public criticism and ridicule of re-

ligious beliefs, and if Rawls is to be believed, this contradicts a basic tenet of the liberal state. We need to narrow the scope of skepticism further, and direct a skeptical attitude to false beliefs that are not merely potentially harmful, but are either actually or very probably harmful — those that currently do palpable harm, or else are adjudged likely to do harm, and do so because they are false.

To criticise publicly beliefs of this sort is to act to protect people from harm. Any defensible moral theory will tell you this is justified. More importantly, public skepticism directed at beliefs of this sort is fully consistent with the ideal of a liberal and pluralistic state.

When we delineate the proper objects of skepticism in this way, it becomes clear that the Skeptics Society can tolerate many religious beliefs, since although arguably false, most are also arguably harmless. Still more, the society can consistently advocate a liberal state which is neutral as between

conflicting metaphysical beliefs, while at the same time advocating that the state should not be neutral if there is the strong likelihood that such beliefs will be used to harm others.

So, for instance, the recent and ongoing history of racism suggests the state should act to halt the propagation of false, pseudo-scientific, views about racial groups — because we know they have so often been used to harmful effect.

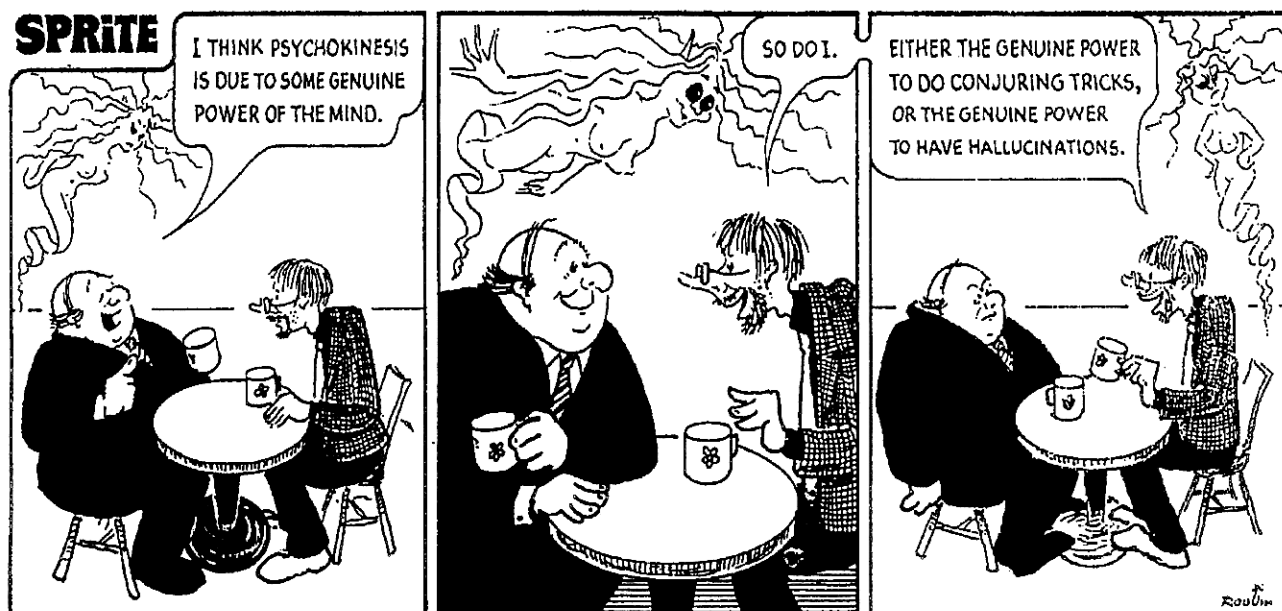
What is Harmful?

It would seem, then, that the aims of the Skeptics Society can be made to be consistent with the ideal of a just or a liberal democratic state — as construed by Mill and Rawls. But the society will remain consistent with the ideal of a liberal state only for so long as the object of public skepticism is those false beliefs that are very likely to, or that actually do, engender harm. But what harm, some might ask, does Uri Geller do? He is an illusionist with pretensions, but if people are taken in and teased by those hugely en-

tertaining pretensions, does it hurt? And what about fire-walking? Who does it hurt to pretend I have supernatural powers that allow me to skid painlessly across glowing coals where anybody else's feet would be reduced to smouldering stumps?

One could trivialise the case for the skeptic by maintaining that to wilfully engender false beliefs is to harm the person one deceives. But it is easy to see that this is not true and, in any event, it has illiberal consequences — most especially the consequence of making freedom of belief a thing of the past. Better to look to the facts to determine whether anyone has been harmed by pretensions of this sort.

The answer, of course, is a resounding yes. People are regularly harmed by the false claims others make concerning their powers of foresight, of healing, mystical powers to control natural forces, and so on. That is why one is right to take a skeptical attitude to the Gel-



Donald Room, *Skeptic* (UK)

lers and the firewalkers of this world.

Epistemic Responsibility

There is another general reason why skepticism of this sort is morally desirable. It has to do with the fact that knowledge is a vitally important commodity on which our lives and well-being depend.

Most of what we know is not the product of our own inquiries. We depend extensively on others for the knowledge we live by, so that we form part of, and tap into, a community of knowers — an epistemic community — that shares what it knows and that guides us and others in our various endeavours.

People can be more or less responsible in the way in which they generate the beliefs and the ideas which are the currency of an epistemic community, and on which all of us depend. An epistemic culture can be responsible or irresponsible. Pharmaceutical firms, like physics and sociology departments in universities, and departments of Naturopathy and Homeopathy in Aoraki Polytechnic, all subscribe to certain practices of inquiry, but not all are equally responsible in the way they generate the information they disburse for our consumption.

Part of the reason for the existence of a Skeptics Society is to advance the right sort of epistemic culture; it is to attempt, through public pressure, to ensure epistemic responsibility — to ensure proper, well-tried, procedures are adopted in generating the knowledge-

claims that we use to organise and live our lives. A failure to do so can seriously mislead; although I stop short of saying that it must always seriously mislead. Whether or not it does — whether it merely comforts the bereaved and the dying or consoles the deprived, or whether it prevents proper endeavour and is likely to cause injury, loss or death — are empirical questions to be decided in each case. There are no rules here; certainly not the rule that all false beliefs are fair game.

The Impartial Skeptic

Mere falsehood, then, does not justify public skepticism. Crucial, as well, is the fact that particular beliefs and epistemic practices are harmful or are likely to be harmful. This, plus the fact that criticism of bad epistemic practices helps preserve epistemic responsibility in a community of knowers, seems abundant moral justification for the existence of the society — that is, for the public criticism of received doctrines and putative knowledge.

But there is a caveat. Such public criticism has to be impartial. One must be willing to subject any putatively false and harmful idea to critical scrutiny — not just those ideas that one finds politically or ideologically uncongenial. For unless the society is seen to be impartial in this way, it will not be able to command the confidence of the public it addresses. Instead, it will be perceived as a front for the ideas that it finds attractive — the political ideology

and professional interests it supports.

To criticise only those ideas that are seen to be “politically correct”, or those that are seen to be “alternative”, will bring many to think of the Skeptics Society as reactionary body that is more intent on peddling its own view of the world than it is on a dispassionate enquiry intent on exposing intellectual fraud.

One can see why this view is held. In public at least, the society does a lot to criticise the current fads of the politically correct; it is devastatingly critical of alternative therapies, of so-called recovered memories, of the money-spinning talents of Uri Geller, healers, and spiritualists. It functions as a rearguard movement in defence of some of the doctrines of Enlightenment thought.

But it does less to criticise the questionable racial theories of those who wrote *The Bell Curve*; it does little to criticise the spurious science of economics on which much of the arguably harmful, perhaps false, economic thinking in this country is based, or received medical practices which are under-researched and of dubious value. It says little, if anything, about the strange deterministic claims of evolutionary psychology. And it has nothing publicly to say about the theory of Social Darwinism that apparently justifies the public neglect of those who cannot cope in this society.

If the society is to retain its moral credentials, it will need to be seen to function

in the way the Consumers' Institute does. The latter considers products with a mind to the interests of the consumer; not with a mind to its own economic interests. Were it to be motivated in its judgement by its own financial interests, we would rightly think it partial, and see it as a front for its own economic inclinations. As a result, it would lose our con-

fidence and fail in its mission.

In just the same way, the Skeptics Society will need to look critically at any putatively false and harmful idea in order to establish its epistemic and moral credentials - and it will need to expose such ideas, without fear or favour, when they are lacking. If the society fails in this respect, it will act as lit-

tle more than a ginger group. It will act with diminished epistemic responsibility, and will fail to acknowledge in its own practice the standards of epistemic and moral responsibility that the society sets for others.

David Novitz is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Canterbury

1 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.205-210.

Recovering Memory Banned by Psychiatrists

A ban on using any method to recover memories of child abuse has been imposed on members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. They face a series of sanctions if they persist in using the controversial techniques to treat their patients.

The publication of professional guidelines comes after months of internal arguments over details contained in a report on recovered memory, which will not now be published until next year.

Psychiatrists who continue to use methods to unearth memories of past sexual abuse would ultimately face being reported to the General Medical Council for professional misconduct.

The RCP regulates the training of psychiatrists and admits doctors to its membership. Sanctions would include removing training status from senior psychiatrists, removing doctors from membership and reporting psychiatrists to the GMC, said Prof Sydney Brandon, a fellow the college and convenor of the report, *Reported Recovered Memories of Child Sexual Abuse*.

When the specialist sections of the royal college failed to agree on the full report, commissioned in 1994, it was agreed that guidelines taken from it would be published instead. The agreed guidelines published today have become college policy.

When the report is published next year, it will not be as a college document but as a paper signed by individual authors. Nonetheless the guidelines are firmly against the practice of "recovering memory" because of concerns that the techniques employed can

give rise to strongly-held false memories and lead to false accusations. So-called false memory syndrome has led to adults making uncorroborated reports of childhood sexual abuse by fathers and other people years after the alleged events.

The royal college guidelines say there is no evidence that recovered memory techniques can reveal memory of real events or accurately elaborate factual information about past experiences.

The guidelines say that psychiatrists should resist "vigorously" moves by adult patients to report allegations or suspicions to the authorities. Telling the police of "spontaneous reports" by children or adolescents of recent or current allegations is mandatory, psychiatrists are reminded.

Prof Brandon said yesterday: "It is the aim of this report [the guidelines] to provide our members and fellows with balanced and practical guidance with a view to promoting good practice. We clearly came to the conclusion that it is possible in the intense relationship that can develop between a therapist and a patient to produce entirely false memory."

Dr Sheilagh Davies, chairman of the college's Faculty of Psychotherapy, one of the sections unhappy with the original report, said: "Events in people's lives do trigger memories. In therapy, memories can arise which it is impossible to corroborate. The guidelines take a common sense approach."

Celia Hall is medical editor of the *London Daily Telegraph* where this article first appeared (October 1, 1997).

Forum

Creationism Again

Ten or twenty years ago, prominent overseas creationists once toured in a blaze of publicity. They spoke in public schools and received plenty of air time on National Radio and prime time TV. Some of us were out there fighting, and we felt we won most of the major battles.

David Riddell (*NZ Skeptic*, Spring) quotes Carl Wieland on the "unproductive" American approach. Quite so, they lost, but the new efforts do not look the same league. It is true that they are doing well in "home school" circles, but years ago we faced a full attack in the public school system. There are still battles to be fought but the situation looks, at least to me, a lot brighter than is being suggested.

Most discussions of creationism focus on the American sibling organisations, Creation Science Foundation and the Institute For Creation Research, or their Australian offshoots. This is not surprising because these organisations have attempted to subvert the American constitution and introduce fundamentalist Christian teaching in schools. They have been very successful in having only a castrated form of biology taught in American schools and ensuring that only a minority of US citizens believe that organic evolution has occurred.

However, I believe that worldwide, these organisations have been of only lim-

ited importance and the creationist message has been carried by a much more powerful and very much wealthier body. Years ago, when I was involved in science teaching and combating creationism, the majority of the information used by our opponents came from the World Wide Church Of God, either its radio stations, or the magazine *Plain Truth*.

Nearly every year there was a major article attacking evolution and these were then usually reprinted as an A4 size booklet. Thus a huge proportion of the creationist literature originated from *Plain Truth*. Most biologists concerned with countering creationism seemed to assume that their main enemy was the Creation Science Foundation, but this organisation had little money. It was *Plain Truth* and the church's radio broadcasts, backed by an enormous income, that reached millions.

By comparison, the people left in the field have only peanuts. Creationism is still alive and well but the major driving force behind it is dead and gone. The war is bound to continue for many years but let us not be pessimistic, we are on the winning side.

On other matters: three cheers for Neil McKenzie, that is the kind of medicine we need. But I feel uneasy when you print clippings like "Sex with aliens erotic, says star". This is the kind of material invented by journalists and I think we should be skeptical about whether the lady said anything on this topic.

Jim Ring

Did You Hear the One About...

Dear Editor,

What would happen to a homeopathic patient who took a massive underdose?

Clive Trotman



Counselling Caution on a Cure-all

Some problems cannot be resolved by just "getting it all out of your system", reports Nigel Hawkes.

COUNSELLING, the 1990s remedy for life's problems, is ineffective when used on its own to help those at risk of depression or other mental illness.

The conclusion, reached by the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York, will come as unwelcome news to the growing army of counsellors, now believed to run into tens of thousands.

No disaster is complete until those involved have been offered counselling, a technique which involves sharing worries by talking them through. The bereaved, the unemployed, the divorced and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are all considered to be at high risk of suffering long-term damage unless it can be averted by counselling.

But the study by the York centre concludes that "counselling by itself has not been shown to produce sustained benefit in a variety of groups at risk". Among women who have had a miscarriage, for example, none of the three trials into the effectiveness of counselling showed a sustained effect.

The same was true of bereavement counselling. The report says it showed no effect on quality of life, satisfaction or frustration levels in people close to deceased cancer patients, and no difference in depression among spouses of people who had committed suicide.

"There has been a rapid growth in the employment of counsellors, particularly within primary care", the report concludes. "However, there is little evidence that generic counselling, provided by itself, is particularly effective. More attention needs to be given to the content and effectiveness of specific forms of counselling and the skills of counsellors before this approach is extended too widely."

The York centre was set up with government money to provide independent advice on different treatments. It does so by reviewing the literature, not by conducting its own research. In this case, it has reviewed all the available studies of the effectiveness of various forms of counselling in helping people with mental health problems.

Mary Turner-Boutle, editor of the bulletin in which the findings appeared, said yesterday: "There is a great shortage of research evidence in this field, but what there is fails to show that counselling in general is effective. But we did find that specific sorts of counselling, in particular cognitive behavioural therapy, can have good results."

A spokesman for the British Association for Counselling said that she thought the conclusions were rather sweeping: "We have never claimed that counselling by itself is a panacea for every-

body," she said. "But we find that GPs are extremely satisfied by the effectiveness of counselling used in conjunction with other treatments, such as drugs for example." The association's directory of counsellors in private practice lists 2,500 names, up from 800 in 1988.

About 60 per cent of GP surgeries now employ counsellors, with two thirds of their salaries paid by the NHS. Nobody knows how many counsellors there are, but membership of the association is more than 15,000. Many counsellors have set themselves up with little or no qualifications, and competence varies widely.

"This is a terribly difficult area in which to conduct research," the association spokesman said. "Often only the patients and the counsellor know what has gone on, and patients are usually reluctant to talk about it. Are they happier? Can they cope better?"

Ms Turner-Boutle says: "This is such a burgeoning field, with such a proliferation of counsellors, that it is important to try to measure how successful it is. We are not saying that counselling is useless, but that there is no evidence to demonstrate that it is effective."

*Reprinted from the Times,
August 19 1997*

Voodoo blamed for boat deaths

EVENING POST 12 SEP 97

MONTRIOUS, Sept 11. - Relatives of victims of a Haitian ferry disaster burned a boat belonging to a competing line yesterday, saying the rival owner had sunk the vessel using voodoo magic, a local official said.

"The owner of the Calypso line had given three days for the boat to sink, and everyone knew that," said Simon La Pointe, Mayor of La Gonave's main city Anse a Galets.

The ferry La Fierce Gonavienne capsized and sank just 50m from shore before dawn on Monday when passengers eager to disembark crowded to one side. Only 30-60 of the perhaps 300 passengers survived. The rest were trapped inside the ship as it sank to 30m below the surface.

United States Navy salvage experts are on their way to help recover about 150 bodies still trapped in the sunken ferry.

Several bodies have washed ashore since the United Nations scrapped its recovery mission yesterday. Another 25 were washed ashore just after the accident, bringing the body count to 86.

However, it is uncertain how many victims are still trapped in the ferry. Officials said about 260 tickets were sold for the trip from the island of La Gonave to Montrouis but that number did not include children. - Reuter

Minister of this

CONTACT and that OCT 3, 97

British PM Tony Blair obviously couldn't wait to see what important links his new Labour Government could forge with our strange lot. He recently sent a Mr John Speller to Wellington. Mr Speller, we were told, is Under-secretary of State for Defence and is responsible for defence, personnel, defence land, medals, museums, the meteorological office and ... sightings of unidentified flying objects.

Newsfront

Notice to Members

Do you live in Invercargill, New Plymouth, Tauranga or other provincial metropolis? If so, perhaps you are a rather lonely skeptic, and think there is not another for miles around. It could be, though, that there is another skeptic living almost next door, of whose existence you are unaware (such is the confidentiality of our membership list).

In the hope of bringing skeptics together, and of increasing social contacts between like-minded people, we are proposing to send to selected active members a list of other members in their area, with a view to more "togetherness".

If you are uncomfortable with this idea, please inform the Chair Entity or Secretary and your wishes will be heeded.

Bernard Howard, Secretary

EVENING POST 19 NOV 97

SUPPLEMENTS

Ginseng fails exercise test

GINSENG has been touted as a remedy for fatigue, a reviver of sexual appetite and a booster of athletic performance. A recent evaluation of the last claim found no effect from the popular herbal supplement.

Researchers at Wayne State University, in Detroit, measured signs of exertion (oxygen consumption, blood lactic-acid concentration, heart rate and others) in 31 healthy men while they worked at maximum effort on stationary cycles. The men were then divided into three groups.

For eight weeks, one group took 200mg a day of a Panax ginseng concentrate (also called Chinese or Korean ginseng), another took 400mg a day, and the third group took an identical-looking placebo.

When the men were retested after eight weeks, supplementation "was found to have no effect on any of the physiologic and psychological parameters examined," wrote researchers Hermann Engels and John Wirth in this month's Journal of the American Dietetic Association. □

Washington Post

Love or money far from clear

EVENING POST 20 NOV 97

By SHARON WILLIAMS
Hutt reporter

Clairvoyants might have an edge on the rest of us - but when it comes to love or money the spirits can't help.

A Lower Hutt clairvoyant, who did not want to be named, has been declared bankrupt but it seems even she, with help from her other-worldly contacts, could not see it coming.

"As a clairvoyant, I understood something was going to

happen, but as a clairvoyant you can't read for yourself. It's absolutely the worst thing you can do. You know something is going to happen but you are not entirely sure what it is."

Clairvoyants, however, might just have the edge in revenge which, if you are looking into the future of someone who has done you wrong, can be very sweet.

The woman said the bankruptcy was a private matter between her and a girlfriend who fell out over a debt and a man. She had no other creditors.

"This person was a very close friend for 12 years. It was all to do with a man. At the end of the day, there certainly is not going to be a long-term future for her with him. I don't know what she expects to achieve from this."

"I tried to see whether she would go that far but because you're personally involved you can't be objective."

As a bankrupt, she cannot run a business but she plans to pay back the debt and apply for her bankruptcy charge to be annulled.

Mourners seek remedy in homoeopathy

EVENING POST

6 SEP 97

By MEGAN LANE

Petone homoeopath Bernadette van den Kerkhof has been inundated by people wanting to know what to take to cope with Princess Diana's death.

More than 20 mourners have called her at the Petone Clinic of Homoeopathy and she has been stopped in the streets by friends asking what to take for grief.

"It seems quite appropriate as the

royal family are strong advocates of homoeopathy, as was Diana herself," Mrs van den Kerkhof said.

So what can you take for grief?

"First you should try Rescue Remedy, a blend of five bach flowers, which calms a person in shock. People take it before exams, before going to the dentist, when they are feeling a bit agitated."

"If you feel you need something stronger, try ignatia. It is deeper acting, for people who can't cry or are overwhelmed and can't stop crying."

She said Rescue Remedy was widely available from health food stores, some chemists and homoeopaths. It could be taken whenever a person felt overwhelmed, whereas ignatia should only be taken three times over 24 hours.

"Don't touch the remedies, instead leave them to dissolve under the tongue. Avoid eating or drinking for about 10 minutes after."

"If you are still not dealing with the grief, get in contact with your homoeopath."

Reporter sees red over aura photographs

CONTACT, 28 AUG 97

ALL RIGHT, I admit it, I'm not as sceptical as some people when it comes to horoscopes, aliens and all those other things science has yet to rubber-stamp.

As a bit of a believer in the mystical and supernatural, it was with an open mind I visited John Moynihan last week to have my aura photographed.

According to John, everyone is surrounded by an aura - a bio-magnetic field all humans produce.

And it's only in the past few years that technology has advanced so that auras can be captured on film.

The service is be-

coming popular: within the first month of using the camera John has photographed around 100 clients.

John, better known for his hypnotherapy work, normally charges \$35 for an aura photograph, which includes a sitting and interpretation of your results.

Having the photo taken was quite like sitting for any other photographer, although I had to place my hands on magnetic-field sensors and sit still for a while, filling my head with warm, happy thoughts, to accentuate my aura.

John's first exclamation when my picture rolled off the printer was "oh, you lecherous being".

He explained my aura showed I tend to enjoy the more "sensual" experiences life has to offer.

"You're also bloody healthy," he said.

John describes my aura - red, strong and large - as very "passionate" - and says it indicates I am vibrant, happy, enjoy having fun and will be successful.

Clients get a personalised print-out of what



SCARLET - Contact reporter Kathy Bethell is her own personal "red light" zone.

their aura means.

The machine interprets my aura as "the urge to achieve results, be successful and desire the things which offer intensity of living and fullness of experience."

As well as being a bit of an ego boost, the experience was an interesting bit of self-discovery.

If you have an open mind about this sort of thing I suggest you give it a go because, as John says, knowledge is power.

Discovering your aura can not only put

you in touch with yourself on a new level, it can also help you decide which colours suit you, how compatible you are with your partner and identify possible future health problems because your aura reflects your general health.

John advises clients to frame their photo and sit it on their desk because he believes it is virtually impossible to be depressed if you can see your aura.

"It makes you realise you're more than just a mere human."

Cellphone site would breed

Livestock breeders say that siting the fertility of the nation by siting a cellphone base station bank for bulls.

The company is already facing its plans for siting cellphone schools. One of the country's sperm for country's dairy herds posed cellphone base at Tamaki would affect production.

Ambreed, a Dairy Board between Hamilton and Cambridge of the planned 29m high mobile in Pickering Rd. The tower would affect cellphone reception.

Ambreed general manager there was no evidence to show that the tower would harm. The country's top \$4 million.

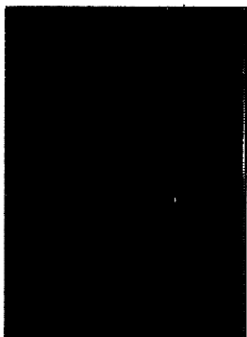
Ambreed.

"Our company would be affected," Mr Bowen said. And the opposition from Cambridge Stud owner Patrick was "very uncomfortable" about could have on his thoroughbred.

The tower would also be located Cambridge Stud, home to thoroughbred stallions, Zabu Power recently took out the double in Australia. "If I could from Telecom that there were thoroughbred breeding stock enough for it to be built," Mr

"But since there are no stallions at the stud because of

Telecom's application with the kato District Council's hearing wahia on Wednesday. - NZPA



MYSTIC - John Moynihan's aura.

Darwin theory the winner by a short leg

DOMINION 15 MAY 97

By NIGEL HAWKES

THE evolution of lizards on a group of tiny Caribbean islands has given Darwin's evolutionary theories a leg-up.

Fourteen years after lizards were introduced to the islands, they were found to have adapted in the ways that natural selection would have predicted. Hind legs became shorter so that they could perch successfully on the islands' thinner plant stems and branches. The more the vegetation differed from the island where the liz-

ards originated, the shorter their legs became.

The study shows how quickly a species can adapt to circumstances. Critics of Darwinism often claim that few such examples have been documented.

In 1977 and 1981, Anolis sagrei lizards were taken from the island of Stanley Cay - which has reasonably large trees - and transferred

in groups of five or 10 to 14 to other uninhabited, lizardless, islands. Earlier studies by Jonathan Losos, of Washington University in St Louis, had shown that the size of lizards' hind limbs depended on the size of the branches they perched on. Those perching on narrow branches or twigs tended to be small, with short hind limbs, but on bigger trees the creatures had longer limbs, making them swifter to escape predators. The assumption was

that the move would lead to an evolutionary trend to smaller limbs, and that is exactly what Dr Losos reports in *Nature* magazine. On the smallest islands, no lizards survived, but on the larger ones they flourished. One island had more than 700. This rate of evolution is hundreds or thousands of times faster than seen in the fossil record, but comparably rapid evolution has been seen in studies of fish moved from their habitat. - *The Times*.

one rries

EVENING POST 17 DEC 97

...fear Telecom is putting top dairy cattle at risk when close to a key sperm donor.

...strong protests over transmitters close to leading marketers of ... said he feared a pro-re, south of Hamilton,

...subsidiary midway between, is 400m from the site of the telephone network site ... will improve Waikato

Graham Bowen said ... what effect transmission on sperm production. ... dairy bull is based at ...

...bred was backed by ... Hogan, who said he ... the effect the station ... stallions.

...than a kilometre from ... of Australasia's top ... His son Might and ... field-Melbourne Cup ... get a written guarantee ... ld be no effect on my ... when I would be happy ... ogan said.

...h guarantees I have to ... ct it could have on the ... its close proximity." ... be considered by Wai- ... s committee in Ngarua-

BRIEFLY

EVENING POST 14 JUN 97

as odds cut

TAIN. - Growing suspicion ... ere could well be "some- ... ut there" has led a British ... ker to slash the odds on ... covery of extraterrestrial ... illiam Hill yesterday cut ... n humans making contact ... er forms of intelligent life ... before January 1, 2000 to ... okesman Graham Sharpe ... We've been lowering the ... ver the past couple of ... " They were 1000-1 at one ... before falling to 100-1. ... are beginning to accept ... ere is more and more out ... hat more is known than ... n given public airing." -

RUSSIA

EVENING POST 8 SEP 97

Madness no illusion, priest warns

MOSCOW, Sept 7. - A Russian Orthodox priest has warned one can go mad or become suicidal from attending the shows of US magician David Copperfield, currently on tour in Russia.

"Your participation and even your presence as spectators during such occult performances have spiritual and physical con-

sequences that can lead to madness and suicide," Father Tikhon, the head of Moscow's Sretenskiyi monastery said.

He said Muscovites risked becoming spiritually dependent on evil forces by attending a Copperfield show.

The magician is to give his first of several shows in Moscow

today as part of celebrations for the city's 850th anniversary.

Tickets - some up to \$US600 (\$NZ955) a piece - sold so quickly organisers added two shows to the three already scheduled. Copperfield, who once made the Statue of Liberty "disappear", said anything he caused to vanish he made reappear again. - AFP

Fame from outer space

GUARDIAN WEEKLY 20 JUN 97

Ed Vulliamy in Roswell

"JUST write 'one' where it asks how many in your party," beamed Ruth Moeller at the registration desk of the International UFO Museum Research Centre. "Unless of course there's someone with you that I can't see."

There was nothing illogical about such a remark in Roswell, New Mexico. Earlier this month the streets of this scrappy town on a high, arid desert plain were filled with processions of silver beings waving spidery fingers at passers-by clad in "I was abducted" T-shirts. Motels promised "earthlings welcome". The packed car parks still had room for "UFO parking".

Roswell is the high temple of the swelling number of UFO freaks in the United States and worldwide. Some 50,000 people attended the exhaustive week-long UFO Encounter 97 Festival, staged to mark the anniversary of what happened here half a century ago.

Something crashed to earth near Roswell on Independence Day 1947. If you are the US air force, or what is termed around here a non-believer, it was a weather balloon, and the little grey people seen being taken from the doomed craft were - as the air force told the world only this month - crash-test dummies for high-altitude parachute research.

But if you are any one of the believers packing the town, then it was a UFO, and the little grey people were ... well, little grey people from some other heaven, and what has happened subsequently has been a cover-up of that fact.

But the core of the festival was



A Roswell police officer meets a friendly life-form

PHOTO: J DAVID AKE

the series of seminars and debates packed by the faithful, churning over the arguments fired into a frenzy by the news that University of California scientists have analysed fragments supposedly from the crash site - and found them to be isotopically incompatible with any earthly compound.

The high point, however, was the alien costume contest, conducted with the deadly earnest of a Milan

catwalk show. The favourite was Morianna, a shapely alien belly dancer painted silver. She/it wore only a silvery lacy bra and a micro skirt but failed to win. "That ain't no costume," complained one of the judges.

Indeed, this is God's country as well as the UFO capital, as the sign outside one prefab church defiantly proclaimed. "Jesus Christ was the only heavenly body God sent crashing down to earth."

Dirty Auras Done Dirt Cheap

Annette Taylor spends an afternoon checking out the alternatives.

IF THERE was any doubt as to whether we'd found the right place, the music drifting on the wind guaranteed we were approaching Hamilton's first Healthy Life Expo. It could not be denied — its haunting, lingering melodies wrapped tentacles of peace and understanding around our neurons. Or tried to.

As we ambled along the pathway to the outdoor pavilion, the musician on the lakeside stage was doing his best to be soothing. Closer inspection confirmed it was relaxation music, and CDs were available. For \$90 I could buy the lot, and then reconnect with nature and the rest of the universe.

Tempting, but I wondered what else was on offer, and left the whales and songbirds to get on with it. Inside the pavilion, there were a lot of people. Not as many as at the previous day's Agricultural Fieldays, but more than I'd like to see in my living room. And they were spending up large. The sound of wallets being emptied of their contents almost obscured the relaxation music.

Upon entering, I found myself faced with a confusing array of products, services and bodies. There were any number of books on improving one's psychic abilities or brushing up on tarot skills, and colourful prints of wolves and American Indians to take home and hang up in the flotation chamber.

There was even a nice woman who specialised in native American psychic readings, but it was the Kirlian photography stall that uncannily drew me. There, Jenny (last name withheld) told me for \$25 I could get a reading on the condition of my spiritual health. I wasn't sure if that included a detailed analysis by an ever-ready clairvoyant, but it sure meant I got a pretty picture of myself complete with aura (hopefully with yellow being the dominant colour — the colour of the intellect, mind you; violet is the mystical, magical colour, featuring eroticism and charm). Hm.

But no, even though this stall had the very latest Whizz-bang machine (cost withheld) from Russia, there was an even more alluring stand just across the way. Hard to walk past, especially when one has been living in a house truck for a while. For a small financial outlay, I could get my aura cleaned.

Yes, it is a little known fact (amongst skeptics) that your aura gets dirty, just like collars on shirts and singlets. It's just like a magnet and picks up bad energy. Supermarkets are particularly bad places — your aura can be squeaky clean, and wham, the minute you step inside that air-conditioned place, it gets dirty. Just like a video with bad heads, I guess.

It was about this time that I stepped on the toes of a journalistic colleague. I'd first

met him some years ago when he did the PR for a scientific organisation in Hamilton. And here was I, with my bother boots (Doc Martens) standing on his naked feet. It turned out he was standing on people's backs, in the time-honoured discipline of Thai massage. In my embarrassment at squashing his digits, I confused this with Tai Chi, which was not good. Knowing me for a skeptic, he told me to return later and he'd stand on my back for me.


But there was still so much to see. The stall which intrigued my better half the most turned out to be the one which was all but impossible to get to. People were jamming themselves as close as they could get — to find out about the new technology that would enable you to create a stress free zone. The best I could do was grab a leaflet and content myself with a lingering glance.

All the fuss was about a wee gadget, called an EM-Power Modulator. This little beastie, developed in Australia, uses no power, is maintenance free and likes to take on electromagnetic radiation. You only need one of these machines per office or small factory, or one per floor. It works via proprietary frequency modulation of harmonic "mathematical" factors of energy output and operates on non-Hertzian (non-electrical) energy frequencies. All this for only

\$439. My stress at trying to get close to the folk personifying the stall was such that I had to leave.

It had been an interesting afternoon. I had expected to be amused by the whole thing, but found myself quite discouraged — at the fact that not only were there so many unscientific thera-

pists out there, but that they were in hot demand. By the time I got to the booth of the healer who practised spiritual surgery via a spirit who was a doctor and healer in her last incarnation, my aura was starting to drag. No amount of cleaning would make it better. Nor would any of the health drinks

(grown naturally, caffeine free) or vegetarian food. What I needed, and urgently, was fish and chips and a video, preferably starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Something to give my inner peace a good kick and cause imbalance to my chakra. I never did get my back stood on... 

Merchandising the Alien

THE GREYS may have crash landed on Earth in 1947, but the real invasion happened about two years ago when Bill Barker's SCHWA merchandise first hit the streets. Since then it seems that there is Grey merchandise for every possible cultural slipstream; for the young and hip there's trendy skateboarding gear, Fimo rave pendants and drug paraphernalia ("Take me to your dealer"); while for the committed believer there are various clay, bronze and pewter renditions of the aliens, with or without crashed saucer-craft, in numerous commemorative editions.

The aliens now rank alongside Bob Marley and Sid Vicious in the echelons of tacky Carnaby Street goods for eastern-European tourists; they have abandoned their role as emotionless abductors of hapless Americans for that of media friendly pop culture emblems. First America, then Britain, Germany, France, Scandinavia, Japan, and, finally, a couple of years later, the streets of Moscow will be theirs. This truly is world domination, far more terrifying than anything H.G. Wells could ever have imagined.

So what then if they are real after all? How do the true abductees feel about the gleeful iconification of the terror that comes in the night? And what about *them*? After fifty years hidden in impenetrable underground fortresses, their cover has been blown in a major way.

How would you feel if you landed on another planet only to find posters of yourself smoking a spliff on every street corner? How do they expect to be taken seriously as ambassadors from another world when T-shirts portray them crammed into Volkswagen Beetles or wearing tie-die bandannas? Who's going to listen to your message of environmental salvation when you also advertise cars, cigarettes, beer and banks?

Maybe right now the Greys are consulting their lawyers within the secret government, preparing a huge copyright infringement suit that will topple Western economies like dominoes. Or perhaps, more sinister still, it is they themselves who are behind the merchandising assault, numbing our brains before total consumer annihilation.

What effect this is having on the "real" alien industry, the researchers, writers, therapists and believers that inadvertently paved the way for this invasion, will be interesting to see. I suspect that the merchandising phenomenon will have petered out by next summer, but where will that leave ufology and its practitioners? Bitter that no one copyrighted the Grey? Gleefully awaiting a fresh crop of young believers weaned on *The X Files*? Or laying down their implants with a sigh and returning to less glamorous day jobs, the boom over?

Personally I think the hard core will get harder, forcefully separating the sheep from the goatsuckers and leading them over the hill and far away into Magonia. We will see more in the way of loose religious groups, self help programmes and awareness development systems such as the one Whitley Strieber appears to be creating at the moment. All entirely harmless, probably even beneficial to a lot of people, but it's not exactly *The X Files*, is it?!

The expectant air of revelation could never be more pal-

pable than it is today; some people seriously considered that UFOs would play a major part in the American presidential campaigns; the philanthropic Rockefeller Foundation is lobbying and sweet talking the White House to release information; NASA reveals that there was life on Mars after all and Bill Clinton answers questions about Roswell at public appearances.

Seeing a UFO is no longer an embarrassing secret; it is now as much a fact of life as ghosts or telepathy; everybody knows they're there, it's just a matter of whether it will happen to them. But for the world-weary underground, eager for fresh knots to untangle, UFOs are rapidly becoming boring; the depths have been plundered and already the abduction phenomenon is transforming into a mind-control scenario.

For now, however, Area 51, MJ 12 and Budd Hopkins are the truth. But soon the UFO mystery must evolve, getting more complex as the claims get more ludicrous. For the Greys, though, this is the end; only when they were invisible were the aliens truly real. Once assimilated into the mainstream, the subculture must move on; but perhaps like their Nordic colleagues, they will return sporadically a few years down the line to remind us of happier, innocent times in UFOdom.

Go on home little Greys, your mission is over.

*Reprinted with permission
from The Magonia website,
www.magonia.co.uk*

From the Conference

Income and Expenditure Account, Year Ended 31 December 1996

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

Income

Members' Subscriptions	10,051.83
Interest Received	1,235.08
Surplus from Conference	635.31
Net Sundry Sales	259.00
Surplus on visit by R. Dawkins	1,765.16
Surplus on visit by I. Plimer	<u>3.03</u>

Total Income **13,949.41**

Expenditure

Newsletter production/distribution	5,017.81
Stationery	120.63
Production of Truth Kits	309.33
Secretarial, clerical	418.04
Donation, Peter Ellis Defence Fund	2,500.00
Audit fee and bank charges	<u>51.50</u>

Total Expenditure **8,417.31**

Excess Income over Expenditure **5,532.10**

Balance Sheet as at 31 December 1996

Members Funds 1/1/96	18,110.43	
Income over expenditure	<u>5,532.10</u>	
Bank Account		1,642.53
Term Deposits		<u>22,000.00</u>
	<u>23,642.53</u>	<u>23,642.53</u>

Auditor's Report

I have audited the financial statements of the Committee for the year ended 31 December 1996 in accordance with accepted auditing standards, and have carried out such procedures as I have considered necessary.

In common with other organisations of a similar nature, control over income prior to it being recorded is limited, and there are no practical audit procedures to determine the effect of this limited control.

Subject to the above, in my opinion the financial statements give a true and fair view of the Committee's financial position as at December 31st 1996 and the results of its activities for the year ended at that date.

F.G. Shaw, AÇA (Retd) 10 August 1997 Christchurch

Chair-Entity's Report 1997

I think the world got a pretty big warning this year as to the dangers of pseudoscience and gullibility when the 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide in the belief that they were to be resurrected in some fashion on board a UFO following the Hale-Bopp Comet. It's not that we like to say "I told you so", but...

Apart from correctly predicting that we'd see cult groups do odd things in the run-up to the millennium, the Skeptics have had a fairly typical year.

Following on shortly after last year's conference, the Richard Dawkins tour went extremely well, with venues packed to the gills and more to listen to the world-famous evolutionary biologist and proponent of public science education. We managed to divert Richard sufficiently from a much-needed holiday to get him to speak at Canterbury, Otago, Victoria and Auckland universities. My thanks to all those involved in organising the venues, publicising the lectures and crowd control.

We undertook our first-ever sponsorship drive to assist us with the costs — hearing that Richard was getting \$2,000 per speech for the Australian circuit had us pretty worried. We received excellent financial support from the British Council and the Royal Society of New Zealand, as well as both financial and location support from the science faculties of the universities involved. None of it would have been

possible without our wealthy and generous brethren across the Tasman. As you can see from the Treasurer's Report, we came out with a healthy surplus, despite our best efforts to spend it on publicity, accommodation, hire costs and a healthy speaker's fee. We have earmarked that money to provide more than just the traditional bottle of wine to other international speakers that come here.

Apart from that flurry, actual activity was quiet on the Skeptical front. One advantage of organising the conference this year has meant that I now have a big long list of people who said "I'd love to speak at the conference but I'm out of town that weekend". I'm planning to track them down when I've recovered and set up a more regular meeting schedule over the next year — any volunteers or suggested topics are more than welcome.

Bent Spoon nominations came thick and fast, and demonstrated the range of organisations who have odd ideas about how to present science and display their ignorance and lack of critical thinking. The New Zealand Correspondence School won narrowly over the National Institute for Water and Atmospheric Research, with the *Sunday Star-Times* and various others bringing up the rear.

It's interesting to note that the *Sunday Star-Times* also won two Bravo Awards this year for local journalistic efforts — we hope that the

narrow escape isn't repeated in the future....

I was pleased to see nominations come in from the membership and would encourage you all to keep an eye out for the occasional excellent item as well as the inane — we take nominations all year.

I also urge you to take the opportunity to send material in for the *NZ Skeptic*, particularly locally sourced material or topics close to your heart. Annette Taylor has done a sterling job with the publication this year — obviously organising the conference last year hasn't dimmed her enthusiasm.

Bernard Howard, as usual, was a most stalwart Skeptic, wearing his typewriter ribbon to a frazzle as Secretary for the Society and watching the pennies as Treasurer. Both he and I — and I'm sure a number of you — were saddened by the death of George Errington earlier this year. George had been one of those quiet background workers who do such a lot for organisations like ours and he will be missed.

The Christchurch Cabal continues to run things on a daily basis, though our far-flung committee have acted variously to comment on Bent Spoon and Bravo awards, organise the odd meeting and appear in front of a television camera from time to time. And, of course, you, the members, continue to show your support for our organisation. I thank you all.

Vicki Hyde
Chair-entity, NZCSICOP Inc.

Skepsis

Sharma Karma

Another "I've seen the light" American quack whizzed through New Zealand recently, spreading his own magical brew of antioxidants, lacto-vegetarian diets, bioFlavonoid herbs, and, wait for it, Maharishi Ayurveda compounds. Hari Sharma, Professor Emeritus at the Ohio State University, says that physicians are becoming pathogens, they are creating diseases. Like most saviours of the human race before him, he mixes scientific half truths and anecdotal stories to rubbish hundreds of years of painstakingly researched evidence-based medicine (*GP Weekly*, October 1997)

He blames the medical profession for all the admissions for drug side effects (18,000 deaths a year in the US), without acknowledging any of the drugs' life and cost saving benefits. "Prescribed Transcendental Meditation (and his products) and you could eliminate 50% of your patients' chronic illnesses within three years," he said to GPs gathered in Rotorua. "Dr Sharma has given us more wisdom in 20 minutes than I've heard in the entire conference," said a Keri Keri GP. God save us all, I say.

Knickers

A Korean company, Zion Esopinio Cosmetics, presented its new discovery, mineral-enhanced underwear, to the annual Invention Convention in Pasadena, California recently (*Reuter*,

13 September 1997). Called "PIO Power Underwear", the briefs are said to raise your spirits by relieving stress and steadying your nerves. If you're not happy imbibing minerals through your nether regions, they can be found in special socks, soap and bedsheets. This lends new meaning to the phrase "Iron-drawers". It might, however, prove a problem to those unfortunate with a mild degree of incontinence, who might be afflicted by crutch rust.

Simply Ache-To-Owe

The cheaper it is to produce, the more people will swallow it. I'm talking water. Going one further than homeopaths' successful exploitation of the weak-headed by water dilution, the bottled water industry is the champion swindle of the century.

Drinking bottled water every day for a lifetime could cost you \$75,000. The cost for the same quantity of tap water would be 1000 times less — a modest \$75.

The difference was calculated by the Water Companies of England and Wales (*International Express*, 24 September 1997). Chief executive Pamela Taylor accused bottled water producers of "one of the great cons of the 20th century". Any claims that bottled water aids health and fitness have no basis of truth, she said. "It is marketing's answer to the emperor's new clothes". Results of a survey on the multi-million dollar bottled

water industry showed that consumers pay "massively over the odds" for bottled water, and many brands contain nothing but tap water. The British Soft Drinks Association said people would not buy their drinks if they didn't like them. Wanna bet?

Moscow Magic

Proponents of the recently revived "Buteyko" cure for asthma say it is the greatest health discovery since personal hygiene (*Listener*, 13 September 1997). Russian doctor Konstantin Buteyko came up with the theory of shallow instead of deep breathing 40 years ago. He believed most people over-breathe, reducing the body's carbon dioxide supply, which is required to absorb oxygen supply then caused bronchial muscle spasm, causing asthma.

New Zealand's two trained Buteyko practitioners, Russell and Jenny Stark of Hastings, discovered the technique when it cured their own son of milk asthma in Australia. They claim Canterbury crusader Con Barrell is just one of many asthmatics who have been cured by an inexpensive treatment (\$475 for wage earners, \$395 for beneficiaries) that could save the taxpayer millions — NZ's RHAs spend \$112 million annually on asthma drugs for an estimated 450,000 sufferers.

Dr Julian Crane, medical director of the Asthma Society, is unconvinced. You could "drive a train through many of Buteyko's argu-

ments. The scientific community doesn't put much store by anecdotal evidence, but if a good scientific driven project came to us, we'd certainly look at it," he said.

The only trial, carried out on 39 Queensland asthmatics, was never published. Crane doesn't think the claim that big business is keeping a lid on the technique is fair. "Don't forget that the people who are doing the research are not fired by financial imperative, but by finding answers to clinical problems."

I think New Zealand's asthmatics should stop

smoking (50% of them smoke compared to 30% of the population), learn about asthma (only 1% belong to the Asthma Society) and get fit. This would be far more likely to lower the drug bill than yet another fad cure.

Take a Bow

My final accolade goes to the NZ *Listener's* excellent new editor, Paul Little. His weekly column in the September 8th edition was an intelligent truthful ray of sanity in a world of make-believe. His comments on the shooting down the hopes of monster-believers were most apt. He described the

unmasking of the perpetrator of the 30-year hoax of "Bigfoot" (John Chambers) as "one less nagging enigma to speculate about", even though some fanatic believers refuse to give up. "The gullibility factor is all powerful and they will believe," he writes. Good on him. We should get him to the next skeptics' conference. Mind you, it's sad to lose Bigfoot. Never mind, we still have Nessie and the Yeti. I'm off to the South Island for my Christmas holidays. I might find a live moa (Moa's Ark?). I could be famous next year. See you then.

Neil McKenzie is a skeptical GP.

Memory Man Hits Out

Two Nobel prizewinners are being sued for libel by Jacques Benveniste, the controversial French scientist whose research on the "memory of water", first published in 1988, appeared to provide a scientific basis for homeopathic medicine.

Benveniste refuses to name the individuals he is suing. However, *New Scientist* has learnt that his targets include Georges Charpak and Francois Jacob. Charpak won the physics Nobel in 1992 for his work on particle detectors at CERN, the European centre for particle physics near Geneva. Jacob, who works at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, received the 1965 prize in medicine for his molecular genetics studies. The third defendant is Claude Hen- nion, a physicist at the School of Industrial Physics and Chemistry in Paris.

All three researchers made comments presenting Benveniste in an unfavourable light in a series of articles published by the French newspaper *Le Monde* in January. Benveniste was angered by the articles, and is determined to refute any suggestion that he has been dishonest. "If you say I am a poor scientist, I have no reason to sue," he says. "If you declare I am a fraud, I am going to sue."

The lawsuit "doesn't frighten me", says Hen- nion, "but it will make me lose a lot of time". Charpak and Jacob refused to comment when approached by *New Scientist*.

In 1988, Benveniste claimed that water retains a "memory" of substances dissolved in it,

even after a solution is so diluted that not a single molecule of the substance remains. This concept underlies the practice of homeopathy, in which "activated" water is supposed to cure disease. Benveniste's research, published in *Nature* (vol 333, p 816), described immune responses mounted by human cells to repeatedly diluted solutions of allergens.

His work became embroiled in controversy, especially after *Nature's* editor, John Maddox, visited Benveniste's laboratory with the conjurer and investigator of the paranormal James Randi and Walter Stewart, a researcher at the National Institutes of Health near Washington DC who has investigated several contested experiments. After watching the work repeated, Maddox and his colleagues dismissed Benveniste's conclusions as a "delusion". They stated that his claims were "based chiefly on an extensive series of experiments which are statistically ill-controlled."

Benveniste's immunopharmacology laboratory has since been shut down by INSERM, the French medical research agency. But he has continued his work as the director of the privately funded Digital Biology Laboratory, based on the same campus in Clamart, south of Paris. In his latest experiments, Benveniste claims to have transmitted water "memory" over the Internet via e-mail

By Charles Seife in *New Scientist*,
27 September 1997

Beer and Skittles:

Great Aunt Molly and her Magic Hazel Rods

John Riddell continues his series on skepticism for pub night.

Have you ever had a go at water divining?

You wander around with a forked stick until it points to water. It's good fun, but you have to watch for passing clouds or you might poke your eye out. Or at least you would if it worked. My mother gets quite cross at the suggestion that Great Auntie Molly couldn't find water with a bit of hazel. She found water when nobody else could.

Water divining, dowsing or witching, is the (alleged) art of finding underground water. Traditionally, the diviner uses a forked stick, but in modern times a couple of bits of bent wire are also believed to work. Some use a pendulum. People also dowses for gold, oil, archaeological sites and Ley lines — I wonder sometimes how the dowsing rods know what to look for.

Susan Blackmore and Adam Hart-Davis, in their excellent book *Test Your Psychic Powers* (Thorsons, London 1995), write:

"Imagine a dowser walking through a field. Suddenly her hazel rod twitches and dances in her hands. She stops, and marks the spot. Later an underground stream is found beneath the turf."

What's wrong here? The phrase "underground stream" conjures up an image of a tunnel, through which water is flowing. The

sort of stream in the movies where the hero and heroine are trapped in a cave and they have to swim through it to escape. "Look Tarzan, the water is moving. If the water can get out of here, so can we."

The implication is that if you dug your well a little bit to the left or right, you'd miss the stream. In real life, underground streams flow through gravel, sand and clay and may be many kilometres wide.

I live in the middle of the Waikato river valley - lots of rainfall. There isn't anywhere within a 10 km radius where the water table is more than 10 metres underground. Nine times out of ten, it is less than two metres (in winter, perhaps three metres in summer.) Note the term "water table" as opposed to "underground stream". If you think about underground water in these terms, it makes the job of finding underground water seem less difficult. The question becomes not "Is there water here?" but "How far underground is it?"

Despite this, people will sagely point at a spot on the ground and say "Drill here" — as if that spot were somehow different from all others on the 10-acre block. I'd be more impressed if they could point to where water was not.

A few years ago we bought a block of land. One of the

first jobs was to put in a water supply. The soil type was a "heavy clay". It isn't free draining and holds water. Even in summer, while the surface might be bone dry, there is water only a metre underground. But while there are millions of litres of water within arm's reach, water flows through clay very slowly. After you've pumped all the water out of the well, you might have to wait for a day or two for the well to fill up again.

I needed a sand diviner to tell me "Drill here. There's a large vein of sand at 5 metres." I could then have pumped large volumes out of this quickly and cheaply. As the water is pumped out of the sand, more water flows in from all directions to replace it. (if the sand/clay interface has a large enough surface area.)

I didn't need a diviner. I already knew there was lots of water everywhere but people kept telling me "Oh, you should talk to Fred*, he does water divining." The fact that people kept telling me about diviners told me two things. First, lots of people believe in water diviners. Secondly, and more importantly, they have no understanding of the real problems of "finding water." Of what use is a water diviner when there is always water underground?

There are some places

* not his real name.

where water is harder to find. You can tell a lot about the underground water by looking at what is above ground. The slope of the land, the soil type, the yearly rainfall, local plant life, nearby rivers and streams, all provide clues about where the underground water will be.

So is it the water that makes the stick move, or the dowser? Blackmore and Hart-Davis suggest a simple test.

Take a small bucket and fill it with water. Place it in the middle of the lawn and see if the dowser can get the divining rods to move when they are passed over the top of it. At this point the diviner may think that he has proven his ability, but the test isn't over yet. Next, place a larger bucket over the first so the bucket underneath can't be seen. Ask the diviner to do it again. Hopefully he will succeed again.

Finally, go behind the house and bring back 5 or 10 more large buckets. Randomly hide the bucket with the water in it under one of these larger buckets. Don't let the diviner see which bucket it is under. Now ask the diviner to find the water. He should find it nearly every time. But he won't. As yet I don't think anybody has passed this final test.

Do several trials. If you hide 1 small bucket of water under one of 10 large buckets, the diviner has a 1 in 10 chance of finding it. If he gets it right 8 or 9 times out of 10, maybe he really can divine, or maybe you were unable to prevent him from cheating. Check the experimental conditions again. If

he only gets 1, 2 or even 3 out of 10, then he can't do it.

OK, so why do the sticks move? The simplest explanation seems to be that the diviner's hands are never really still. If you hold your hands in front of you, your nervous system is constantly sending signals to your hands to move up, down left and right. This constant stream of signals is necessary just to keep them in the same place.

Try it. Hold your hand in front of you and try to keep it still. Look closely and you'll see your hand wobbling. A diviner's hands also are constantly moving like this just to keep the divining rod reasonably still. The divining rod moves, not so much because the diviner makes it move, but because he fails to prevent it from moving when he expects it to. When he (or she) passes the rods over the bucket of water, he knows there is water there. He is expecting the rod to move, so he doesn't prevent it from moving.

I don't think many diviners are faking it. Water divining is like a magic show where the diviner is both the magician and the audience. Because they never test themselves under controlled conditions, they don't realise they are fooling themselves.

Every good skeptic knows you shouldn't reject any claims before it's been properly investigated, but we're past that point for water divining. I'll be willing to eat a live hedgehog if somebody can do it under controlled conditions. But at the moment, the hedgehog looks safe.



The Mark of the Beast

I was recently reflecting on my career as a scientist, and realised that this year is the 50th anniversary of my first scientific paper.¹

In 1947 I was a "scientific civil servant" in London; I worked in a part of the Ministry of Food devoted to protecting our food stocks from insect pests. The organochlorine insecticides had recently become prominent, following the miracle-seeming prevention of post-war epidemics of insect-borne diseases by the use of DDT. My job was to find ways of measuring small amounts of these substances in food, on surfaces, etc.

The substance of particular interest to me was not DDT, but another organochlorine insecticide nowadays execrated under the name "lindane", which then was known by other names. The molecule of this substance contains six atoms each of carbon, hydrogen and chlorine, ie its chemical formula is $C_6H_6Cl_6$. In the jargon of the laboratory it was known as 666. I do not remember that we saw anything unusual in this. We probably knew something of the Book of Revelation, but in a quite separate mental compartment from the chemical one. In those optimistic post-war years we confidently looked forward to the withering away of superstition. I would have been astounded had I been told that in fifty years time, a Government appointed committee would have carefully avoided the number 666 in drawing up a list.²

Bernard Howard

1) BH Howard, [1947] *The Analysts*, vol 72, pp 427 - 432

2) Waitangi Tribunal's numbered list of claims [see *Sunday Star-Times*, 14 September 1997, 17]

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New Financial Year

For the eventual convenience of all concerned, the Skeptics Society is moving to a new financial year in 1998, running from January to December, and collecting all subscriptions at the start of the year.

The subscription invoice in this issue is for the 1998 year.
Some of you will have received 1997 subscription final reminders in the previous issue; this is not a repeat of that reminder, but an invoice for the coming year.

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