

# NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

SPRING 1998 — NUMBER 49

## Dealing with BS — Broadcasting Standards and...

*Vicki Hyde told the Conference how the Skeptics' complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority had progressed.*

*The story so far...*

As outlined in the last issue ("Real TV? How TVNZ Turned a Hoax into a Documentary"), the Skeptics brought their first-ever complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority regarding the way in which the hoax documentary *Alien Abduction Incident in Lake County* was broadcast by TVNZ. In the complaint the Skeptics maintained that there had been five specific breaches of the Code of Broadcasting Practice for Television.

We told TVNZ that we thought their removal of the credits identifying the programme as fiction and their running of a misleading disclaimer before the programme was in breach of G1 requiring broadcasters to be truthful and accurate on points of fact. The programme itself was a piece of fiction, but in choosing to eliminate indicators of that and in the word-

ing of the disclaimer, TVNZ as a broadcaster was neither truthful nor accurate in their representation of the programme.

We said that G7 had been breached, as broadcasters are enjoined to "avoid the use of any deceptive programme practice in the presentation of programmes

which takes advantage of the confidence viewers have in the integrity of broadcasting". TVNZ's response was that this was "usually taken to refer to technical trickery" and was therefore irrelevant. However the code does not have anything in it which states that deceptive programme practises are limited to "freeze frame and the like", as TVNZ claimed.

It's interesting to note that this attempt to limit the extent of the codes by claiming some form of spurious application or specificity appears to be a standard one on the part of TVNZ. I had a call ⇒ p3

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# The Omen

EVERYTHING was roses and buttercups until that fateful day. An omen, it was, for sure. In July, on Friday, only 17 days before the 13th, we had born on our humble dairy farm a calfie. She had four legs, nice black and white patches, a cute butt and two heads, four eyes, four ears and two tongues.

She wasn't in the best of health, being still born, and that in itself is probably part of the curse. If she had been skipping around the paddocks and sucking up colostrum, the mind boggles at what might have been. We would have been on *Holmes*, for a start. We would have blown Ruakura's petty little cloning of a sea weed eating cow off the front pages of the local paper and captured world fame instantly. When she grew up we could have done all the gypsy fairs, charging mega-dollars for entry.

But she didn't. And that's where it all began. Shortly after the calf's (or should it be calves'?) arrival, mysterious things began to happen. I lost a library book and the fruit cake I was making that day burnt. My daughter got given a tape of Aqua, the people who do the Barbie song and we have had to listen to it most days. Our best friend, for no good reason, decided to move from just down the road to the very bowels of the universe, to Te Pahu, miles from anywhere. (Actually, he did it months and months ago, but, and I stress, but if I counted backwards I would probably find the day he made the decision was the very same day the calf was conceived.)

But worse was to come. The very next day after the birth of the hydra, we discovered that our new house that we had just moved into, had cost so much more than we had anticipated, that we were stone broke. Overnight, we were transformed into peasants, complete with sack outfits, wooden teeth, boils and highly superstitious minds. Now being impoverished, we were unable to raise the funds to attend the annual gathering of the rest of the Skeptics lower down the Island.

Denied access to logical and rational thought, we sank deeper into the power of the two-headed calf. Our house has been overrun by spiders. There was an eclipse of the sun just over Gordonton the other day. After spending a morning in the alternative bookshop, The Crystal Goddesses Third Eye Healing Centre, we now know there are things we can do. We don't have to be helpless victims. (Not that there's anything wrong with being a victim — it looks better on your

CV than "stinking, rotten oppressor.") We can light lavender-impregnated candles, hang chunks of quartz from dangly places, plant energising herbs, floss our teeth listening to dolphin songs and change our daughter's name to Windflower.

Let's be honest here. It's a lot easier not being a skeptic. You can go to parties without worrying about being cornered and viciously savaged. It's much easier to make plans for the future when it's all set out for you in the stars. When your life gets really crappy — because life often is — you can hope things will improve in your next one. But anyway. Things must be what things must be. I hope everyone had a thoroughly rotten time at the Skeptic's conference and we were perfectly content sitting at home, all by ourselves. Just Moonflower and WillowWildMan and myself.



PS. The Dead Calf Collection Man came and picked up our two-headed wonder. I haven't found out if he paid twice yet.

## Contributions

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

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122 Woodlands Rd  
RD1, Hamilton  
Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

Deadline for next issue: 10 November 1998

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 from a woman who was also in the throes of making a complaint and she had encountered exactly the same response. So it pays not to believe them if they try to manipulate the wording of the codes.

We cited other standards, G16 and G19, which state respectively that "news, current affairs and documentaries should not be presented in such a way as to cause unnecessary panic, alarm or distress" and "care must be taken in the editing of programme material to ensure that the extracts used are a true reflection and not a distortion of the original event or the overall views expressed".

TVNZ claimed that G16 and G19 were not relevant because both refer only to News and Current Affairs programming, into which *Alien Abduction* did not fall. However, the codes clearly state that these apply to News, Current Affairs and Documentaries. They tried to weasel-word us again. We figured that TVNZ had tried to make the thing look like a documentary, so they should have to hold to the standards required.

Ironically, TVNZ did admit that the events depicted may have misled or alarmed viewers, and they accepted that they had breached Code G11, which requires broadcasters to "refrain from broadcasting any programme which, when considered as a whole:

i) Simulates news or events in such a way as to mislead or alarm viewers."

TVNZ's ultimate response was to promise that if and when the show was re-

screened they would reinstate the credits. This was not acceptable, in our view. We wanted TVNZ to make a formal statement admitting to their deception and informing viewers of the fact that this occurred.

The complaint then progressed through the official channels of the Broadcasting Standards Authority itself. On the 18th of June, four months after the programme had been broadcast, we received the five-page written decision from the BSA. This said that they had upheld our contention that G7 had been breached but declined to uphold any other aspect.

So we had a partial victory.

The BSA ruled against TVNZ's attempt to limit G7 to technical trickery, and said that the "standard applies when the broadcaster employs a practice which results in the viewer being deceived". TVNZ had already admitted that some viewers may have been misled, and the BSA emphasised that the inclusion of an introduction "deliberately designed to create ambiguity" meant that G7 had been breached along with the G11 (i) breach TVNZ had agreed to.

I had thought that G1 was clearly breached also — that's the code whereby broadcasters are required to be truthful and accurate on points of fact. The BSA's decision noted that the programme was a work of fiction and so it couldn't breach standards which referred to facts. The decision also noted that the fictional nature of the programme reduced the level of potential seriousness of the action.

Sadly they had missed the entire point of the complaint — we *knew* the programme was fiction, we had no problem with that; it was the fact that TVNZ had been neither truthful nor accurate in their manipulation of the programme's presentation and content that was the focus of our complaint.

I tried gently pointing this out in a final letter, but the only recourse to questioning the BSA is to take the matter to the High Court.

### Action? What Action?

And what of the action to be taken in response to this acknowledged breach?

We thought TVNZ should be made to admit that they had manipulated programme content and presentation so that people would be aware that our national broadcaster is not above lying in their quest for ratings.

We'd asked for a public statement from TVNZ telling the public what they had done. The BSA agreed that this was the most appropriate of its possible powers under the Broadcasting Act. However, they said, because of the "one-off" nature of the broadcast which meant there was "no readily apparent programming outlet to which to attach such a statement" acknowledging the breach, the BSA decided not to impose such an order.

Some of you may have seen Frank Haden's column in *The Dominion* nominating the BSA as a Bent Spoon accessory for this.

I did try to get some general clarification, after all this suggests that there is little point in complaining

about any programme that is not part of a series, if indeed the Authority requires some sort of related programme outlet to which to attach such a statement.

It would be unfortunate, I wrote, for TVNZ to feel it has licence to broadcast any type of programme it likes — a snuff movie for example — feeling secure that the one-off nature of the programme means no order can be imposed. The response was that the Authority does not discuss individual decisions, so I'm no more the wiser now.

There are other things which the BSA could have done — things like requiring TVNZ to pay costs of up to \$5,000, or refrain from broadcasting, or — even better — refrain from broadcasting advertising for up to 24 hours. While we might dearly wish for the latter, we didn't think it reasonable to ask for.

So at the end of this six-month process, TVNZ has, somewhere in its archives, a low-budget fake documentary which now has its credits attached. They did, apparently, tell their programming staff that removing the

credits was "an error of judgement". They have won the Bent Spoon this year, and have further tarnished, if indeed that is possible, the already tawdry image of broadcasting in this country.

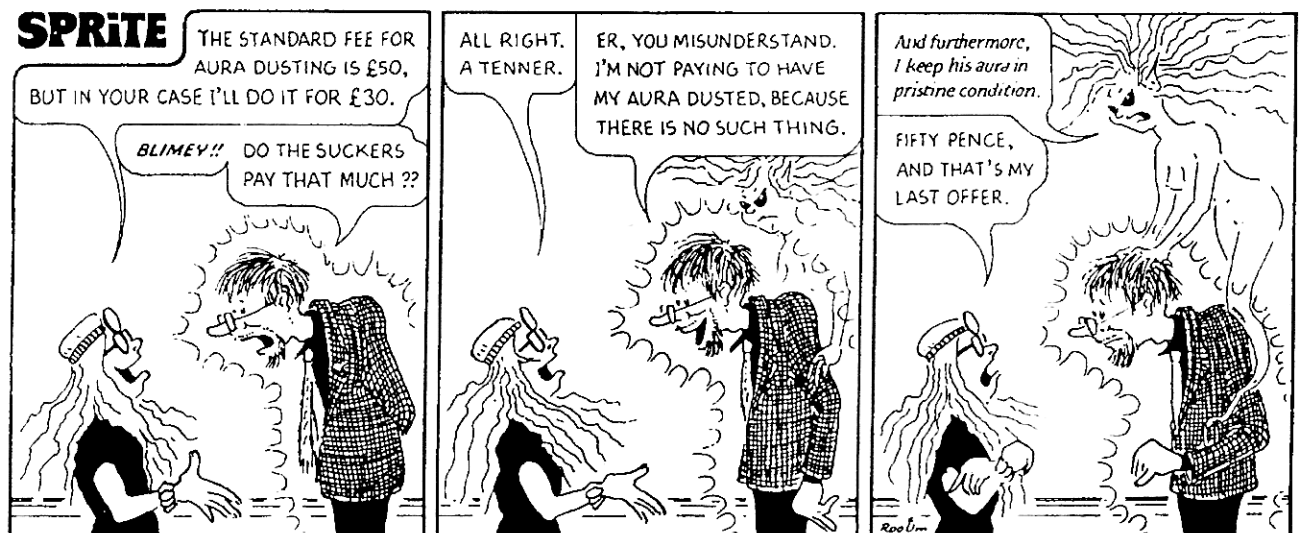
We hope that maybe next time they think about manipulating material to boost ratings, they will think again. But next time you watch a documentary, or see a piece of reality television or news footage, spare a thought for whether there could be credits for script-writing languishing on the cutting room floor...

This was the first complaint the Skeptics had made to the BSA, and I suspect it won't be the last. Certainly the legislative backing for things like the BSA and the codes of practice helps to make it clear that this is a serious process. Indeed the BSA does have the power to decline to determine a complaint if it is considered frivolous or trivial and, where it considers the seriousness of the complaint merits it, the BSA can also hold formal hearings.

From a personal viewpoint, the length of time taken to work through the process was frustrating, as was the final outcome. Mr Stace, during the conference session on this issue, suggested that if people wished to take issue with the process itself, then lobbying the political powers that be (such as the Minister of Communications) would be necessary. The BSA operates under the strictures of the Broadcasting Act.

Despite the rather limp-wristed nature of the response, I think it was worth doing and would encourage you to consider taking up the pen yourself.

The BSA is happy to provide leaflets outlining the process required. The main points are to ensure that your first complaint in writing goes to the broadcaster (*not* the BSA), with the term "formal complaint" clearly noted, along with the programme name, channel, screening times, and which codes you think it breached and why. They must respond noting their decision or action within 20 working days and,



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)

if dissatisfied, you can then refer the complaint to the BSA for investigation and review.

You can get a full copy of the codes from the BSA for \$10 (Box 9213, Wellington), or check out their Web site at <http://www.liinz.org.nz/liinz/other/bsa>. The codes are also kept on file by the main public libraries (and you can even venture into the lion's den/s — television and radio offices are likely to have copies on hand).

### Hit Them Where It Hurts

However, given the commercial nature of television these days, it may be more effective to write to the programme sponsors and the advertisers peddling their wares during the time-slot. Tell them that you think they are tarnishing the image of their product by being seen alongside unprofessional, poor quality programming. That it saddens you to see such a useful, prestigious, well-regarded, quality offering in such company, and that you have regretfully decided you can no longer purchase their product or service as a result.

I suspect that that will get you a response much quicker than the broadcasting complaints process...

That said, please do try and remember to write letters of congratulation to producers and programme sponsors when they do get it right, when they do produce or support quality programming. Letters of praise are rare and are often remembered by the individuals concerned for far longer,

which is one reason why we have Bravo Awards.

Or, to be really sneaky, my final suggestion is to go for the double whammy. Here's one you might like to try — write to Down to Earth telling them how much you appreciate the fact that they sponsor a quality documentary slot in *Our World*.

Then casually mention how you consider it a real shame that *Our World* won't actually show "our world" because TVNZ is holding on

to 40 unscreened Natural History Unit documentaries. After all, as a sponsor for *Our World*, Down to Earth should be keen to encourage the screening of award-winning material produced right here in New Zealand...

At the very least, you'll boost your letter-writing skills — who knows, maybe you'll even help to boost our television standards. One can always hope.

Vicki Hyde is Chair-Entity of the NZ Skeptics, and a stirrer.

### No More Ms Nice Guy

*Here's where we get really nasty...thank you to whoever suggested this plan of action at the conference.*

United Paramount Network  
11800 Wiltshire Blvd  
Los Angeles  
CA 90025  
<http://www.upn.com/email1.html>

Dear Sirs,

I need to find out if UPN would be concerned to hear of the deletion of actors' credits (and those belonging to all production personnel) from a UPN television programme broadcast here in New Zealand.

As far as I am aware, the deletion of all the credits from *Alien Abduction: Incident in Lake County* was a decision made by our national broadcaster, Television New Zealand, without asking your legal department first if this would be considered acceptable.

TVNZ has said that they hoped, by removing your name and all information regarding the programme's origin, that they could boost its ratings. The action has led to them being censured by our Broadcasting Standards Authority for being in clear breach of our country's broadcasting codes, but we were wondering if they had breached any legal responsibilities to you also.

We have been wondering if this would be an issue which would concern you, as the producers, or possibly Actors' Equity or other various talent organisations? Do you require, as a production company, for broadcasters to show your credits as part of the broadcast, or is it not an issue?

I would be grateful if you could provide any advice as to who we should be contacting to raise our concerns regarding this issue.

Sincerely,  
Vicki Hyde

c.c. Actors' Equity and Buzz International (a large talent agency in California representing Equity and non-Equity actors)

*We'll let you know if we get a response. Us, stirrers? Naaaahhh.*

# Genesis Revisited: A Scientific Creation Story

By Michael Shermer

IN THE beginning (specifically on October 23, 4004 B.C., at noon) out of quantum foam fluctuation God created the Big Bang out of inflationary cosmology. He saw that the Big Bang was *very* big, too big for creatures that could worship him, so He created the earth. And darkness was upon the face of the deep, so He commanded hydrogen atoms (which He created out of Quarks and other subatomic goodies) to fuse and become helium atoms and in the process release energy in the form of light. And the light-maker he called the sun, and the process He called fusion. And He saw the light was good because now He could see what he was doing. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be lots of fusion light-makers in the sky. Some of these fusion makers appear to be more than 4004 light years from Earth. In fact, some of the fusion makers He grouped into collections He called galaxies, and these appeared to be millions and even billions of light years from Earth, so He created tired light so that the 4004 B.C. creation would be preserved. And created He many wondrous splendors such as Red Giants, White Dwarfs, Quasars, Pulsars, Nova and Supernova, Worm Holes, and even Black Holes out of which nothing can escape. But since God cannot be constrained by nothing, He created Hawking radiation through which information can escape from Black Holes. This made God even more tired than tired light, and the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the continents drift apart by plate tectonics. He decreed sea floor spreading would create zones of emergence, and He caused subduction zones to build mountains and cause earthquakes. In weak points in the crust God created volcanic islands, where the next day He would place organisms that were similar to but different from their relatives on the mainlands so that still later created creatures called humans would mistake them for evolved descendants. And in the land God placed fossil fuels, natural gas, and other natural resources for humans to exploit, but not until after Day Six. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And God saw that the land was lonely, so he created animals bearing their own kind, declaring "Thou shalt not evolve into new species, and thy equilibrium shall not be punctuated." And God placed into the land's strata, fossils that appeared older than 4004 B.C. And the sequence resembled descent with modification. And the evening and morning were the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that hath life, the fishes. And God created great whales whose skeletal structure and physiology were homologous with the land mammals he would create later that day. Since this caused confusion in the valley of the shadow of doubt God brought forth abundantly all creatures, great and small, declaring that microevolution was permitted, but not macroevolution. And God said, "Na-

tura non facit saltum" — "Nature shall not make leaps." And the evening and morning were the fifth day.

And God created the pongids and hominids with 98% genetic similarity, naming two of them Adam and Eve, who were anatomically fully modern humans. And in the ground placed He in abundance teeth, jaws, skulls, and pelvises of transitional fossils from pre-Adamite creatures. One he chose as his special creation He named Lucy. And God realized this was confusing, so he created paleoanthropologists to sort it out. And just as He was finishing up the loose ends of the creation, such as putting the pit in avocados, God realized that Adam's immediate descendants would not understand inflationary cosmology, global general relativity, quantum mechanics, astrophysics, biochemistry, paleontology, and the other ologies, so he created creation myths. But there were so many creation stories throughout the world God realized this was confusing, so he created anthropologists, folklorists, and mythologists to sort it out.

But confusion reigned in the valley of the shadow of doubt, so God became angry, so angry that God lost His temper and cursed the first humans, telling them to go forth and multiply themselves. But they took God literally and 6,000 years later there are six billion humans. And the evening and morning were the sixth day. So God said, Thank me its Friday, and He made the weekend. And He saw that it was a good idea.

Michael Shermer is publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and director of the Skeptics Society (US).



# Skeptics Conference 1998

SKEPTICS conferences are always a bag of allsorts. Having piped up at last year's AGM and suggested the next conference should be in Wellington, I was landed with organising it. Thankfully, I had the Wellington Cabal to help: Cynthia Shakespeare, Tony Vignaux, Richard Sadleir, Mike Clear, Bob Brockie and Wayne Hennessey.

We were lucky in the venue — a brand-new lecture theatre block behind the Old Government Buildings, the largest wooden building in the Southern Hemisphere, or so the DoC signs said. We had a great turnout — over 140 people turned up from all over the country. And we garnered some great publicity — Brian Edwards had me on his show and encouraged shameless plugs.

A few moments stick in my mind:

- ❖ John Welch opening the proceedings with do-it-yourself acupuncture. The sight of a hundred people twiddling needles into their hands was almost too much for me — I had an urge to run in and shout "April fool! We just wanted to see if you would".
- ❖ A booze session at the Backbencher afterwards where we all agreed that "skeptics" was too negative a name, and we should come up with something better — and couldn't. The closest we got was "The Emperor-Strippers". Must have been the whisky...
- ❖ Maryanne Garry's marvellous multimedia presentation on false memo-

ries, and the hair-raising last-minute contortions Maryanne and Tony had to go through to get the thing running. W.C. Fields warned never to work with children or animals; had he lived to the '90s, he would have added "...and laptops."

- ❖ Those nice folks from Victoria University Book Centre, who ran an undoubtedly profitable sales table in the breaks (skeptics sure like books). They just couldn't contain their curiosity and kept sneaking into the talks.
- ❖ David Russell from Consumer's Institute receiving, albeit somewhat late, his 1992 Bent Spoon, lovingly hand-crafted for him by Richard Sadleir. He claims to be a reformed character, and pointed out that psychics and quacks who make a living out of the gullibility of others are probably in breach of the Fair Trading Act and the Consumer Guarantees Act. Someone should tell them.
- ❖ "Hey, wouldn't it be neat if we printed weird occult and alien symbols on people's name badges to indicate whether they'd paid

for lunch or dinner? I can set it up in my database — it's easy." Thus spake the overconfident computer nerd.

- ❖ The Amazing Gold Bar of Feike de Bock. Despite this being a Skeptics Conference, half the audience still thought it was real.
- ❖ Anton the Magician, collecting names of animals from audience members for a mentalism trick, bemoaned that they were all the traditional big mammals. "What about a sipunculid?" (Anton works on marine mammals at Te Papa.) I still can't figure out how they did the automatic writing...
- ❖ And Mike Hill's amazing revelations about how satanic abuse arrived in New Zealand. Coming soon to a Truth Kit near you.

Well, life is back to normal now. No more answering dozens of conference e-mails a day, or ringing every gift shop in town trying to find a hundred Amazing Miracle Fortune-Telling Fish for the conference dinner.

Great fun, but roll on Auckland 1999 — I'll be a spectator again.

*Mike Dickison*

Some of you may recall Mike plugging the following two books at the conference. Both are concerned with the anti-science backlash, promulgated mostly by the academic left in the USA: post-modernism, relativism, radical feminist critiques of science, ethnocentric science, and so on. It's a movement that's beginning to assert itself here, and we should be informed.

*Higher Superstition*, by Gross and Levitt (Johns Hopkins 1994, pb 1998) — The book that started the controversy. An excellent introduction.

*The Flight From Science and Reason*, ed. Gross, Levitt, and Lewis (Johns Hopkins, 1997) — The proceedings of a conference sponsored by the New York Academy of Sciences. Numerous different authors and subjects.

The Victoria University Book Centre are offering a 10% skeptic's discount on both volumes, and are happy to take orders from all over. The price will depend on what the dollar does, so do ask. If you're interested, contact Jayne or Helen:

Ph (04) 496-5516; Fax (04) 471-2124; victoria-book-centre@vuw.ac.nz

# Chair-Entity's Report 1998

IT'S BEEN a busy year on many fronts for the Skeptics, with a number of major firsts:

We started the year in the New Age of Technology, with a majority of the committee now on an electronic mailing list that has proved invaluable for discussions, alerts and agreements on a whole host of topics.

We made our first complaint to the Broadcasting Standards Authority, which was (mostly) successful, and flagged public awareness of the importance of professional standards with our national broadcaster.

We made our first foray into the education area, following suggestions at last year's AGM that we look at how to encourage critical thinking in the young. We sponsored a page in *Starters and Strategies*, a well-respected teaching resource publication that goes to 26,000 teachers nation-wide from primary level on up. Heather Mackay led the charge there, and we look to further activity in this area, I hope with support from other like-minded groups.

We undertook our first large book order from Prometheus Books, shipping

42 selected volumes here to boost the bookshelves of the skeptical. In the past we've benefited greatly from Jeanne van Gorkom's hard work with her bookshop and her willingness to lug suitcases of books to the conference.

We made our first-ever public commendation of a politician — a rare thing these days — honouring Nick Smith with a Bravo Award for his public condemnation of psychics getting involved in the hunt for Ben Smart and Olivia Hope.

And for a major second — we now have our second-ever Treasurer, with Clare Simpson taking on the role when Bernard Howard went overseas. Her official term started, appropriately enough, on April 1st. Many thanks to Bernard for his years of stalwart service in keeping an eye on skeptical funds. I should hasten to assure you that our increased spending this year was in no way related to Bernard's absence....

Our ever-vigilant watch on the media continued as always, and we've had a lot of media contact this year. We started the year with Denis Dutton and me making a series of predictions for the Holmes programme. While

the programme itself was a disappointment in that you couldn't tell the skeptics from the psychics (apart from the jewellery), we can announce consistent triumph in the successful prediction stakes.

Ones which we have achieved already include: a plane crash causing loss of life sometime between April 1-15 with red in the plane's livery (two); a major earthquake in Asia (two; four if you count Turkey as part of Asia); continuing difficulties for the New Zealand Cricket team (enough said). I was disappointed that Jim Mora apparently wasn't game to use Denis' best prediction — "that Paul Holmes' romantic entanglements would continue to provide a source of intense media speculation"...

Gary McCormick dropped by and seemed startled to find how nice skeptics could be. Early in the year *North & South* ran a very positive profile on Yours Truly, pointing out how much fun skeptics have. So maybe we're starting to change that image that appalled us at last year's conference. We'll need to work on it some more, I suspect.

We're looking forward to the 50th issue of the Skeptic coming up at the end of the year. There have already been suggestions that we mark the occasion with something special, having missed our 10th anniversary some years back. By all means beam us any ideas you may have.

*Your Chair-entity*  
Vicki Hyde

## Skeptical Web

If you're a fan of oddities such as those showcased in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, you'll love the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices. This home of quackery features some amazing fraudulent gadgets. Learn, for example, about prostate cures like the light-bulbed prostate gland warmer or the frighteningly named recto rotor. These delights and more await you at <http://www.mtn.org/quack/>

The National Center for Science Education, Inc., which provides information and advice to keep evolution in the science classroom and "scientific creationism" out, is at <http://www.natcensci.ed.org/>



# Accounts for Year Ended 31 December 1997

## Income and Expenditure

### Income

Members' Subscriptions	8,558.38
Interest Received	1,837.64
Surplus from Conference	2,144.77
Net Sundry Sales	187.00
Miscellaneous	<u>231.73</u>
<b>Total Income</b>	<b><u>12,959.52</u></b>

### Expenditure

NZ Skeptic production & distribution	6,968.55
Computing, membership list	618.75
Miscellaneous printing	213.08
Clerical, secretarial	304.67
Donation, Ian Plimer Defence Fund	1,000.00
Fees	<u>50.00</u>
<b>Total Expenditure</b>	<b><u>9,155.05</u></b>
<b>Excess Income over Expenditure</b>	<b><u>3,804.47</u></b>

## Auditor's Report

I have audited the financial statements of the Committee for the year ended 31 December 1997 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 31 1997 and the results of its activities for the year ended at that date.

*F.G. Shaw, ACA (Retd)*  
27 February 1998  
Christchurch

## Balance Sheet as at 31 December 1997

Members Funds 1/1/97	23,642.53	Bank Account	1,447.00
Income over expenditure	<u>3,804.47</u>	Term Deposits	<u>26,000.00</u>
	<u>27,447.00</u>		<u>27,447.00</u>

## Scenes from the Conference



Left: David Russell receives his 1992 Bent Spoon from Mike Dickison, Denis Dutton and Vicki Hyde.  
Right: Agnes-Mary Brooke, Mike Bradstock and Frank Haden in the Backbencher.

## Aligning Chaucer to the stars

DOMINION 19 AUG 98

OVERTURNING traditional understanding of 14th-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer by fitting his work into the zodiac has earned Wellington astrologer Garth Carpenter a mainstream PhD but, so far, no reaction from Canterbury.

Parts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have always been known to contain astrological allusions, but it has taken Dr Carpenter to work out the overall connections that fit the vast work into a planetary universe.

According to Dr Carpenter, Chaucer sets the 12 signs of the zodiac in opposing pairs to express the interplay of tensions between the main characters. In the tales he makes two rounds of the zodiac, starting with *The Knight's Tale*, aligned with Aries, and ending with *The Parson's Tale*, aligned with Pisces.

Dr Carpenter says each sign clearly fits different pilgrim characteristics and moral situations.

He has found that the times of important events in the tales also clearly relate to the death or martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, "yet the whole purpose was to visit a Becket".

The zodiacal pattern allows Chaucer to symbolically present the evolution of the pilgrims from a primitive state of values and behaviour to a pure state in which they are able to enter Canterbury, the new Jerusalem. "There are astrological references and there's been work done on exploring the allusions ... a lot of footnotes, but that the whole should be an astrological textbook is a quite radical suggestion."

Dr Carpenter also suggests that the tales may be the apparently unwritten fifth part of Chau-

cer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, in which he had promised his son, Lewys, that he would explain the principles of astrology.

Victoria University English literature lecturer Geoff Miles said the thesis convincingly demonstrated that Chaucer was a skilled and knowledgeable astrologer, and vindicated his accuracy in cases where he had been accused by modern scholars of carelessness or ignorance.

"This thesis is a significant contribution to an important area of medieval studies into which few modern scholars have the expertise or confidence to venture."

Dr Carpenter plans to turn his thesis into a book, though he said 10 years of research had left him "near bankrupt".

There has been no reaction from British academe: "I don't suppose they've heard of it yet."

## Oil drilling may anger Maori god, court told

DOMINION 20 AUG 98

PETROLEUM exploration violates Maori lore and drillers risk the wrath of Tawhirimatea (god of the air) by flaring oil and gas, the Environment Court has been told.

Rata Pue, a spokesman for Taranaki Maori group Te Ohu Motunui, said yesterday, during the second day of hearing appeals against Fletcher Challenge Energy drilling near Motunui, that drilling offended Maori lore for several reasons.

Drilling and the associated flaring did nothing to enhance the concept of toi, the Maori relationship with the sun, as any aerial contamination put barriers between Maoris and the sun.

Exploration unbalanced the relationship between Papatuanuku (earth mother) and Ranginui (sky father), Mr Pue said. Flaring of oil and gas risked the wrath of the son of Ranginui, Tawhirimatea.

The proposed Pohokura well site at

Motunui was only several hundred metres from "a dwelling house of our tipuna [ancestors]. Lighting a fire just outside this dwelling house would affect the tapu of that house," Mr Pue said.

There were alternatives to flaring at Pohokura: the gas could be reinjected into the ground or a pipeline built to the nearby Methanex methanol complex, he said.

The appeals, being heard by Judge David Sheppard, are continuing. — NZPA

## Catholic Church set to pardon witches

DOMINION 12 AUG 98

By FRANCIS HARRIS

THE Catholic Church is establishing a commission in the Czech Republic to consider whether to pardon hundreds of people who were burned at the stake as witches.

The decision follows a 1994 call by the Pope for the church to "examine its historical conscience".

The inquiry, which begins this month, will be the first in the world to re-open the cases of convicted witches. Church officials say it could lead to a worldwide reappraisal of witch burnings. It will start with a review of the

Sumperk witch trials of 1679, when about 100 people in Moravia were burned.

During the "Burning Times" between the 12th and 18th centuries, conservative estimates suggest that church-sanctioned hunts resulted in about 100,000 Europeans dying by fire or torture.

The commission, established by Jan Graubner, the Archbishop of Olomouc, east of Prague, will review the evidence in the trial of Dean Krystof Alois Lautner,



An engraving of witches being burned at the stake in Germany in the mid-16th century

the only churchman convicted of witchcraft in the Czech lands.

Some churchmen clearly hope that the Sumperk commission may be imitated in

other countries.

Witch-hunts became common in Catholic Europe after the publication of Pope Innocent VIII's bull on witchcraft in 1484 and the church-approved witch-hunters' guide, *The Hammer of the Witches*.

According to the authors, witches indulged in strange

practices such as collecting male genitalia and placing them in bird's nests. One man sought out a witch to retrieve his lost organ. He found several in a nest. "And

ST 8 Aug 98

- So you want to be a rock 'n' hours of practice have less to ss than your sign of the zodi- to a survey published yes-

birth dates of 1800 artists, kopedia, a new guide to rock l fortune shone on those born n spring and summer months as Taurus, Aries, Cancer and

under the chilly autumn and of the Northern Hemisphere l struggle, according to the

ed after near miss

JUL 98  
resident Joseph Estrada said called in police and had the ce sprinkled with holy water andelier nearly hit him on his on Tuesday. "What happened s," he said. "Not one minute Estrada and I were walking Estrada, a firm believer in y, said he had called for a tion and also had every room palace blessed by a Catholic la, sworn in earlier on Tues- just left the palace music room inet members when the chan- incident raised speculation on bad omen for the presidency.

**Crash! Bang!**  
**It's a Capricorn**

apricorns are most likely to cause around the home, according to a vey. Insurers Zurich Municipal had more accidental damage- m people born under this star r any other. And it appears the bull in a china shop is just a myth s are the most careful homeowners. Most expensive claims are made who must have either the mixture or the biggest disasters. Most clumsy star sign is Scorpio. clumsiness the star signs are Scorpio, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, , Pisces, Gemini, Aquarius, Libra, us. - PA **EVENING POST** 27 JUL 98

**ies**

ried to take out a e witch said: 'You ke that one', adu- it belonged to a st." ng witches was a d brutal process. ere tortured to ex- nce against their 'itch-hunters were hired by local au- times of need and i their victims'

clash between the the supernatural enheim, Germany, hen a policeman n on suspicion of rewolf.

**Sunday Telegraph**

survey, with Aquarians, Scorpions and Sagit- tarians faring worst of all.

"The evidence is quite clear to us. If you're Taurus, Aries or Cancer we're more likely to see you in the charts," said Rockopedia's editor David Roberts.

Famous musical Taureans include Ste- vie Wonder and U2's Bono, while Aretha Franklin and Blur's Damon Albarn were born under Aries. - Reuter

## Mystics foretell economic futures

**EVENING POST** 1 Aug 98

SINGAPORE. - Foretelling the end of Asia's economic crisis can be a cryptic business.

While economists draw on supply and demand fundamentals for answers, Chinese fortune tellers - citing stars, cards and ancient oracles - have reached a post-millennium consensus.

"The economies in the south will not recover until after the year 2000," Wang Shi Hui said confidently. "1999 will be bad, even worse than 1998."

Wang, 30, is a young fortune teller or geomancer, a modern practitioner of the traditional divination art.

For her, an economic crisis, like all earthly-based disasters, are written in the stars - it is just a matter of interpretation.

"Asia's economies will come back to health only in the year 2004," she said. "Until then it will be sick, sick, sick."

Geomancy, or feng shui, literally meaning wind and water, is an ancient practice gauging the harmony between five traditional elements - metal, fire, wood, water and earth.

Its origin dates back to the I-Ching, a 3000-year-old Chinese art form of divination.

Feng shui, closely related to for-

tune telling, attributes success or failure mainly to the workings of mysterious earth forces. Feng shui requires the strategic placement of objects in the universe to achieve harmony and produce a good flow of "energy" to attract good spirits. Fortune follows from there, scholars believe.

Feng shui scholars said that the elements were out of balance in Asia in 1997.

"The fire element was too strong," Wang said. It overpowered all the others and destroyed wealth. The fire peaked in April 1997 and it will bottom sometime in end 1999." - Reuter

**Air diet kills** **DOMINION** 3 JUL 98

A woman, 53, trying to stay alive on air alone as part of a new age spiritual cleansing process has died after suffering a stroke. Lani Morris, of Melbourne, died yesterday in the intensive care unit at Brisbane's Mater Hospital, where she was admitted last week in a critical condition believed to have been related to dehydration. A 60-year-old Brisbane man has been charged with grievous bodily harm.

## Doubts over sex abuse claims

**DOMINION** 1 JUL 98

By ERIN KENNEDY

ACCUSERS who claim to have recovered memories of sexual abuse are almost all female, white, highly educated and many have read the same self-help manual, according to a study published in the latest *Medical Journal*.

The study, by sex abuse expert Felicity Goodyear-Smith, honorary lecturer Tannis Laidlaw and Auckland University associate professor Robert Large, says it is unlikely that many abuse memories recovered in adulthood are a true reflection of history.

"Allegations of long-buried memories of child sexual abuse commonly arise from troubled adults attending therapy for unrelated life problems such as eating disorders, depression or relationship problems," the study says.

Those surveyed were families in which an adult had been accused on the basis of recovered memories of sexually abusing related children, and the allegations were denied.

Sixty-nine respondents to the 94 surveys met study criteria, giving a response rate of 73 per cent.

In total, 36 fathers, 23 mothers, eight siblings and eight other relatives of 73 accusing adult children returned surveys.

In 53 per cent of the cases, the respondent had been accused and in 46 per cent the respondent was a relation.

All the fathers and 98.6 per cent of the mothers were European. The study says all the surveyed accusers were achievers, and nearly half were said to have excelled at school.

More than 38 per cent had attended university and 26.7 per cent had graduated.

"However, this was a disturbed group, with 86 per cent described as being under stress in the past two to three years."

More than 20 per cent had been hospitalised for psychiatric treatment at some time.

Memories were said to have been buried or repressed for an average of 22 years, with no detailed accusation, other than "sexual abuse", made in more than half the cases.

"Although we had no way of investigating whether or not events had occurred so many years in the past, comparisons with epidemiological data suggest that this group is statistically different from those families where incest is known to have occurred," the study says.

"Indeed, as a group, if not individually, the profile of accusations lacks credibility."

"...The data of this study present disquieting evidence that mistakes are being made by professionals in the child abuse field, resulting in a new class of victims..." it says.

**Have faith.** England's soccer coach Glenn Hoddle and his business relationship with faith healer Eileen Drewery came under renewed scrutiny today as club officials demanded to know who pays her bills. Chelsea chairman Ken Bates called for an inquiry after England's Football Association admitted paying Drewery a £75 (\$NZ253) fee for each player who had a consultation while on international duty. **EVENING POST** 27 JUL 98

# Planetary Alignment Doomsday in 2000?

Bill Keir

*Oh My God, it's the End of the World! Again!*

IN A RECENT *Herald* report, alarmist forecasts for May 5, 2000 speak of an "alignment" of the six inner planets, the Sun and the Moon, "for the first time in 6000 years" which "could wreak havoc on Earth".

Let's look at some of the facts. Firstly, the word "alignment" is an exaggeration. The diagram shows the positions of the six planets predicted for May 5, 2000. They will be separated by an arc of about 25 degrees viewed from the Earth, and, if you exclude the Earth, over 50 degrees viewed from the Sun. This is hardly an alignment — your space craft would have to take quite a zig-zag course to stop over at each one. Call it a "gathering" if you like.

Secondly, it is not a rare event. Similar gatherings have occurred several times in the last 150 years with slight variations in the configurations.

On February 7, 1982, all nine planets were on one side of the Sun confined within an arc of 95 degrees as viewed from the Sun, and the doomsday press had a field day. In the same year, on May 30, there was another alignment which wasn't mentioned in the press. Not all the planets were on the same side of the sun, but the "line fit" was slightly better. A similar situation occurred a few months later in November 1982.

In December 1997, seven of the planets were gathered within an arc of 60 degrees viewed from the Sun. Earth and Pluto were well out of line so they spoiled it. There were similar events late last century, in 1902, in the 1930s, 1962, and two in the 1970s. The May 2000 event will not be very special compared with these, with only six of the planets involved, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto having the audacity not to conform.

Thirdly, the compounding effect of the gravitational pulls would be insignificant even if the alignment were perfect. Gravity is a very weak force, and a good high school physics student will tell you that it is a function of mass and distance. So, although Jupiter and Saturn are several hundred times the mass of the Earth, they are so far away that their effects on Earth are negligible even when they are aligned.

The Moon, although vastly smaller than the Sun, has much greater gravitational effects on Earth than the Sun does because it is so much closer. For the same reason the Moon has greater gravitational pull on Earth than the combined gravities of the planets would ever have even when aligned.

The Sun, by far the largest mass in the solar system, and closer to us than the giant planets, has only a slight compounding effect with the Moon's gravity by slightly increasing the

Earth's ocean tides when the Sun, Moon and Earth come into alignment. This happens every two weeks at the full and new moons.

In 1974 two science writers, John Gribbin and Stephen Plagemann, coauthored a book called *The Jupiter Effect*, in which they forecast that, by a complex chain of events, the 1982 planetary alignment would trigger earthquakes. The book sold millions but the scientific community discredited it and the authors retracted the claims. In 1982, after the planetary alignment had passed uneventfully, they wrote another book *Beyond the Jupiter Effect*, in which they admitted their mistake. But this book was hardly noticed.

The May 2000 event will not even be an interesting observation occasion. Viewed from Earth, the planets will be so close to the Sun in line of sight that, with the possible exception of Venus, they will be invisible.

Careful investigations have found no correlation between planetary gravitational variations and events on Earth. There may well be some disasters on Earth in May 2000, but they will not be caused by the alignment of the planets.

Bill Keir is a freelance journalist and member of the Auckland Astronomical Society.

*Literature references are available via the editor.*

# A Skeptic's Dilemma

Clare Codling

AS A CONFIRMED, but lightweight, sceptic, I have had to endure many jibes from friends and colleagues as I questioned information reported in the newspapers and on the news. Equally, I have had to explain what being a sceptic is really all about — not straight dismissal of, but the opportunity to question information that is presented as fact.

So, given that I am happy to dismiss such truths as aliens, psychics and ouija boards, I now find myself plunged into the middle of a full-blown sceptical conflict — one which is difficult to resolve.

It goes something like this. Two months ago a great friend of mine had the misfortune to fall from a ladder whilst pruning his trees. The fall while not from a great height was extremely awkward and resulted in a broken back (burst T12 for those of you with a medical bent). He was fortunate enough to receive extremely good medical care, including the insertion of some very impressive "scaffolding" to ensure his back had as much strength as was possible.

As a result of the accident he is now paraplegic and, while his spirits are good, the probability of mobility from his stomach down is almost zero. He has always been an extremely active person and has never been one to be depressed by his situation, or to accept that anything he has been told is necessarily true (the makings of a sceptic himself maybe...).

Together we have undertaken huge amounts of research: contacting people in similar situations (the Internet has come into its own here), tracking down the possibilities of new drugs that are currently being trialled and chasing up all the different types of rehabilitation that are available. The medical profession does not seem to offer any hope for recovery; their emphasis is purely upon rehabilitation.

Now he is in a situation where he feels that he must try every avenue available to him and so he is turning to "alternative" medicine calling upon acupuncture, Samoan massage and homeopathic drugs.

Here is the dilemma: as a sceptic I cannot accept that these treatments can be given any credence, however, as a friend I must support him in his beliefs and purchase those herbal remedies that will "enhance nerve regeneration", "help to heal internal bruising" and so on.

Where is the line drawn? For me, it comes down to the need to enjoy a healthy understanding of both medi-

cine and quackery, and to apply them both in the appropriate circumstances. Clearly, my friend is in a situation where traditional medicine is not so much failing to provide, as offering the best that it can — rehabilitation for a new lifestyle.

This is not enough for him and he still believes that hard work and mindpower will triumph over his nerve damage. If the homeopathic drugs provide him with the extra belief that he can make progress, then so be it; after all, we have all read about the placebo effect on numerous occasions.

I would be the most delighted sceptic of all if I were able to report to you all in six, twelve or even eighteen months that my friend had persevered with everything he believed in and was now able to walk. We would never be able to prove what helped his recovery, we would never be able to trumpet the homeopathic remedies as "wonder drugs". But at the end of his experiences I don't think I would mind. Ultimately as a sceptic and friend, I must do the best for my friend, and if that includes a little white lie to bolster his confidence in alternative treatments, then so be it.

## Skeptical Demographics

The paid-up membership of the Skeptics has hit the 500+ mark, with two-thirds of the membership divided reasonably equally between Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and Dunedin and parts south holding another 50 members.

We do have overseas members (about a dozen) and 50 copies of the *Skeptic* are sent overseas to CSICOP itself for distribution as part of the international newsletter swap arrangement. Our newsletter holds up very well amongst the broad variety of publications put out by skeptical groups.

Spare copies of the *Skeptic*, and of the membership form, are available for anyone wanting to undertake a membership drive in their area.



# The Noble Pharmacist

Jim Ring

NEW AGE theory holds that practically all cultures had a tradition of using medicines (mostly herbal) and that there is a danger that "Western medicine" will replace these, so losing irreplaceable knowledge.

It is also held that such cultures in some way "own" their (often secret) knowledge and it is in some danger of being "stolen" by Western drug companies. That when drug companies discover (by independent research) new drugs from natural materials, the indigenous people of the area have a prior right to any profits made. There are some hidden implications involved here. It is being assumed that such societies, before contact with the modern world:

- ❖ had a theory of diseases with natural causes
- ❖ were capable of accurate diagnosis
- ❖ believed that diseases could be cured without supernatural intervention
- ❖ were capable of evaluating the effects of medicine (a very difficult task)
- ❖ held that specific products should be used against specific diseases
- ❖ had a pharmacy of efficacious drugs

In fact no society complied with this list until modern times. The Chinese believed in swallowing a large variety of products for the sake of their health. But to quote Richard Gordon from *The Alarming History of Medicine*:

*The ancient Chinese, like the mass of mankind before the 19th century mostly lived and died with only the therapeutic botheration of traditional and futile sorcery.*

Europe inherited a tradition of medicine from ancient Egypt and Greece but it was not generally held that specific products should be used against specific diseases. Medicines were usually not single herbal remedies, but a concoction of (often-nauseous) ingredients. The Royal College Pharmacopoeia in the 16th century included herbs but also viper's oil, crab's eyes, wolf fat, live frogs, human placenta, hanged man's skull, powdered mummy, etc. Medicine was a magic spell.

Even in the European tradition, medicine was not always swallowed. It might be rubbed on the skin, packets might be put under pillows or carried on the person, or it may be burned and the smoke inhaled. There were a variety of recipes for "weapon salve" and which one to choose mattered little because the medicine was applied not to the wound but to the blade. With our knowledge of hygiene we can recognise this as a medical advance.

Using a medicine other than by absorbing it, must often have been an advantage. Plants contain a variety of potent chemicals that protect against them being consumed by animals. Our food plants have been selected

from varieties that contain a minimum content of toxin, or we consume only those parts that are safe. Many medicinal herbs contain potent toxins and are safest when taken in homeopathic doses.

*The Secrets of Fijian Medicine* by Dr M. A. Weiner PhD tells how he visited traditional healers in Fiji to collect their lore on (largely herbal) medicines. The author had apparently visited several countries on a similar quest and been remarkably successful in collecting the names of a wide range of useful remedies.

*Secrets of Fijian Medicine* lists a number of herbal remedies for a variety of ailments — all apparently used by present-day Fijians. But just how ancient are these traditions? Independent accounts of traditional Fijian society exist from the Rev. Thomas Williams (1858) and Lieutenant Charles Wilkes USN (1845), the commander of a US expedition. Both accounts deal with disease and its treatment, and Wilkes describes in some detail the observations made by the surgeon of his expedition.

These accounts agree that the ideas of "medicine" or "cure for disease" were largely non-existent in Fiji. The surgeon disparaged the traditional treatment of wounds but this may have been professional jealousy. Fijians paid more attention to hygiene than did Western surgeons of that time. Other observers were impressed



with the way battle wounds were treated and considered the treatment methods equal to European practice. These accounts make it clear that Fijians regarded all forms of disease as having supernatural origin. Presumably they would have regarded any attempt at a cure as folly.

The only account that I have been able to find of the consumption of anything approaching a medicine is that a chief's child might be given a piece of human flesh at a feast (not normally consumed by women or children). It was believed that this was a prophylactic against the "wasting sickness".

A disease (probably yaws) was endemic in Fiji and all children were said to catch it but no intervention was attempted other than treatment of one of the symptoms, ulcers. These were treated by scraping away the ulcerated flesh and washing the wound; no ointment or medicine was applied.

Supernatural intervention was sometimes implored for highborn people who became ill, but medical treatment for sickness was unknown. The treatment for sickly children, the chronically ill and the elderly infirm was to kill them.

In New Zealand, some extravagant claims have been made about herbal medicine as used by ancient Maori. Many of those rejecting the most extreme ideas still believe that living elders retain ancient traditions of Maori medicine, and that there were a number of efficacious herbal remedies in use before European contact. Some have also claimed that these

remedies are a useful (and cheaper) alternative to Western medicine. It is also held that this knowledge constitutes an "intellectual property right", which has monetary value.

I have been unable to find a first-hand description of Maori attitudes to sickness and health before European settlement (can any reader help?). However the opinion of Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck), is quite clear. In *The Coming of the Maori* he states that although constipation and diarrhoea were treated with herbal remedies, other ailments were not.

*The possibility of (other) herbal remedies were not explored by the Maori because of the accepted theory of the causation of disease.*

*In practice, any departure from normal health was ascribed to attack from malignant spirits.*

Therefore treatment involved exorcism and purification by a tohunga.

*After European contact they began...to try out native plants.*

*The pseudopriests began to find curative properties in different plants which they kept secret so as to acquire more followers.*

Te Rangi Hiroa's opinion was that these people were no different from European quacks. This was also the opinion of the government of the time because the Tohunga Suppression Act was passed to prevent them from imposing upon the credulity and superstitions of the people.

A further claim made for "Maori traditional" medi-

## Skeptical Intelligencer

The *Skeptical Intelligencer* is a quarterly magazine published by the Association for Skeptical Enquiry (ASKE), the UK's skeptical organisation. Each 70+ page edition contains articles for the intelligent lay reader on paranormal, pseudo-scientific and anti-scientific claims.

A subscription to the *Skeptical Intelligencer* alone costs £15 per year. Membership of ASKE (which includes a subscription) also costs £15 per year. Please send payments in Pounds Sterling (cash or instruments of payment) to: ASKE, 15 Ramsden Wood Road, Walsden, Todmorden, Lancs, OL14 7UD, UK

cine is that it must have been efficacious because early explorers commented on the excellent health of the people they encountered. But according to Te Rangi Hiroa, these "traditions" only started after contact with European settlers. This was the time when Maori were falling victim to introduced disease in such numbers that it was predicted they would soon become extinct.

It may be that there were cultures that had a theory of disease and cure, and that used non-supernatural methods for treatment, independent of Western science. But it is essential to show that such ideas existed before European contact. As usual the onus of proof is on those propounding the theory. One thing is certain: Fiji and New Zealand do not provide examples.

Jim Ring lives in Nelson and is a frequent contributor to the *NZ Skeptic*.

# Skepsis

## Think Big

Hypnotist Lawrence Follas claims he can increase the size of a client's bust by telling her to imagine her breasts are growing (*Sunday News* 24 May). He says his client's breasts have grown 2cm in three months, and some women in the States have added an extra 6cm by the method. The programme involves seven one-hour sessions at \$75 each. A tape of Follas's hypnosis session is given to the woman who must listen to it every day.

The method couldn't have come at a better time now that the silicone bubble has burst. I imagine many plastic surgeons are quaking in their gowns. I wonder if Mr Follas is planning equivalent therapies for size-challenged men. Not just the mind boggles.

## Unforeseen Apathy

All is not well with our psychics. Or so it appeared in a sad story in July 5 *Sunday News* (which spelt the word "Pyschic", an interesting variation). A clairvoyants' association was formed in Nelson by Margaret Birkin because of what she saw as rip-off telephone service bogus psychics flooding the market. (How one can tell the difference between a bogus psychic and the real thing is not divulged).

Ms Birkin, renamed Jane Birkin in the picture of her posing beneath her psychic pyramid, was clearly upset by these "unethical" clairvoyants, but even more up-

set that not a single person has shown any interest in her society since it was formed last February.

I think she should have foreseen it.



## Hillarity

The world's number one woman is not averse to a little dalliance with mediums. Hillary Clinton came under intense media speculation because of her relationship with famous guru Jean Houston (*Listener* 18 July). It was revealed that Houston had urged Hillary to hold imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi (Hillary apparently drew the line at conversing with Jesus).

I personally feel she might have been more usefully put in touch with the likes of Jacqui Kennedy, Mrs Profumo and Mrs Casanova.

## Blessing Jest

Believe it or not ...

Maori are no fools. The Ngati Whatua spotted a golden opportunity to make a fast buck when Transit New Zealand started constructing part of the Northern motorway across their

land (*BOP Times* 5 June). They said there was a waahi tapu (sacred site) on the land between Albany and Silverdale, and the workers and motorists there should be blessed frequently for their protection.

Transit fell for it, and are paying the tribe \$80 an hour for the frequent blessings; prior to which tractors, graders and other machinery had been mysteriously breaking down (I can't imagine why). I can see a great future for this tribe, starting with the electric power companies.

## Don't Give Up Your Day Job Doc!

It seems the more precise medical science becomes, the richer grow the alternativists, complementarists, call them what you will. This was the drift of "Scalpel" in an article on the growth of quackery: Religious fervour over homoeopathy reviled (*NZ Doctor* 22 July).

He described how he stopped to help a teenager injured in a motor accident. Another passer-by thrust a bottle of arnica at the victim "with almost religious fervour". Scalpel's writings then got a bit lost in the ethics of unproven medicine in the health service, especially when he said, "Do they (alternative methods) really work? As long as patients are no worse off, it probably doesn't matter."

What a pathetic comment! Where did this doctor train, for goodness' sake? Of course it matters! Why do these misguided docs shrink

from their duty, lose their common sense, and take the easy way out? I was taught at medical school never to sanction anything for my patients that I wouldn't be prepared to take myself, or give to my own family (including mother-in-law).

Dr Scalpel did at least warn his colleagues on going so far as to cease heart, asthma or other important medicines, something that happens around New Zealand, even in our area, all too frequently.

I will finish with his closing words, which show that his heart's in the right place.

"Must retire for a snooze, so will light a candle, incant awhile, meditate facing Mecca, slip on a copper bracelet, ignite a joss stick, swallow my selenium and garlic pills (and the kelp of course), slip down some mega vitamins, and two or three Berocca, as it has been a stressful day. Beneath the magic crystal swaying by an embroidered wall hanging I should slumber well. Just as well, I have not been improving."

I think Scalpel must have been at the Healthy Life Expo in Tauranga last weekend. Everything the brain-dead could possibly need was there. The place was packed with scruffy obese would-be health freaks looking for a quick alternative to giving up alcohol, tobacco, drugs, overeating and sloth. I have never seen such an unhealthy collection.

Neil McKenzie is very skeptical about OOS!

## Counselling, Criticism and Skepticism

I was interested to read the letters by Jim Ring and Felicity Goodyear-Smith to my article with the above title [NZ Skeptic 47].

Jim reiterates his view that the Cambridge-Sumerville study (which finished in 1978) is the only large-scale long-term study of counselling which can reasonably be regarded as good science. To use one study to evaluate a field on the basis of how it was practised 20 years ago and ignore the large number of books and specialist journals (e.g. *Psychotherapy, Evidenced-based Mental Health*) which are devoted to it seems just a tad closed minded.

Felicity may be surprised to know that I agree with most of what she says. Yes, if people have family and friends they can talk about their problems with, then do that before spending money on a psychotherapist or counsellor. Yes, I agree that reworking the past, unless it is actively intruding into the present, is a waste of time and may be harmful. Her comments on feminist social science however confuse me, since I was not aware I was advocating a feminist stand.

Felicity says preferred psychological interventions should be those shown to be effective and safe by controlled outcome studies. Again, "yes".

However I wonder whether medical practitioners (like Felicity, and I think Jim is also a

medic) who criticise counsellors and psychotherapists for lack of a scientific basis might be pots calling the kettle black. Dr Ian Chambers (director of the UK Cochrane Centre) is quoted in the *British Medical Journal* (6 June 1998) as stating that more than 60% of orthodox treatments (in medicine) have not been scientifically proved. This is the reason that there is now a strong movement in medicine for "science-based medicine", just as there is a movement within counselling and psychotherapy for "science-based practice". Both, I believe, should be applauded.

Gordon Hewitt

## Skeptical about OOS

I'm sure that I am not the only reader puzzled by the simplistic dismissal of OOS by your medical commentators over the years. However, I've only now found time to put abused finger to keyboard. I have no intention of getting into a technical discussion of the definition of a disease or an injury, but I take exception to the tone of Neil McKenzie's Skepsis column [NZ Skeptic 48]. This column suggests that the lack of a "dose response" implies the lack of an OOS problem.

There are, presumably, numerous factors, in addition to time spent typing, playing an instrument, or working on a production line, that would affect the degree of discomfort. The lack of a simple "dose response" seems to me quite unsurpris-

ing. The step from "lack of dose response" to "lack of a problem" is akin to arguing that sufferers of migraines, asthma, or cancer are imagining their symptoms until the exact mechanism is understood. I see ironic parallels between McKenzie's assertions and the arguments of anti-evolutionists. The mechanism is not understood, therefore it doesn't happen.

A detailed examination of the issues by some experts on both sides of the argument might make a good article in a future issue of *New Zealand Skeptic*. Workers doing various repetitive tasks have complained of pain for centuries. Computer keyboards have brought some of this pain to those who, like myself, have nothing to gain by faking symptoms.

Michael Reid

## OOS

Mr Matthewson's views on OOS are definitely not "a breath of fresh air" [Skepsis, *NZ Skeptic* 48]. His denials are the same unhelpful reaction to this problem which has characterised a section of the medical profession for the last 15 or so years. This group needs to reflect on their unwillingness to accept what numerous patients are telling them and on their eagerness to invoke malin-gering (this is what it adds up to) as an explanation. The medical profession doesn't know everything and a little less arrogance from this group might be appropriate.

Tony Walton  
(sometime union delegate)

## Should We Change Our Name?

Say you're a sceptic and you can almost bet on the reaction: "Well, I'm sceptical about scepticism." (Groan!) Everyone thinks they know what we do and think, and everyone (especially if they're invited to be our after-dinner speaker) wants to tell us how to do it better. And like civil libertarians, the media think they can guess what we will say about any subject.

More of a worry is the assumption that we are cynics, debunkers and opponents of belief in anything (and may therefore be disregarded). One way out of that would be to change our name. At an impromptu brainstorm at the conference, it was Vicki Hyde who suggested "Emperor Strippers" — although "Goggle-eyed Little Boys in the Crowd" would be more accurate.

I have another suggestion: **The Missouroids.**

The *what??!* You don't get it? Good, so you won't jump to any conclusions about what we're on about, will you?

Traditionally, people from Missouri are doubters: "I'm from Missouri, so you'll have to show me." It's called "the 'Show Me' State". And that's what we do, to the life. With an "-oid" to show we're not really from there, and also give a scientific, spacey touch. It could have been "Missourans" but that sounds too much like Mis-sourians — the real thing — or "Missourish" but that sounds as if we wear black and won't drive cars.

So it's an opaque name? So are Tecorians, Zonta, Sorop-tomists and Probus, and

even Lions, Rotary, Gideons and Mormons are hardly self-explanatory, we're just used to them.

We'd be "the Missouroids, formerly the Skeptics" for a while (giving us some of the cachet of [...Prince]), but that could all be grist to our mill. We could make an occasion of changing the name, and use it as another opportunity to put the message across. At the risk of bringing in a whole other set of associations, we could do it on July 3, the Feast of St (Doubting) Thomas. (Hang on! "The Thomasoids"? — no, little spell checker, not "haemorrhoids".)

Hugh Young

### What do the rest of you think?

*Hugh does have a point in that many people outside the Skeptics assume they know what we are interested in.*

*So we're assumed to be rabid atheists or close-minded nay-sayers. While we probably include both types in our ranks, I think the bulk of us would be happier to claim that we're merely interested in asking questions of unusual claims.*

*Should we insist on using our formal name — the NZ Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal? Apart from being a real mouthful, it's not the whole story either. We don't do a lot of scientific investigation (at least not here in New Zealand), and we're probably as equally concerned these days with pseudo-science as the paranormal.*

*My rather whimsical suggestion of the Emperor Strippers stemmed from the most useful analogy I've come across in describing our mission. I suspect that it would lead to all manner of misunderstandings with regard to speaking engagements though...*

Vicki Hyde, Chair-entity

# Beer and Skittles: A Flood of Improbabilities

*John Riddell finds some creationist claims really are testable, unfortunately for them.*

A FEW weeks ago a couple of Jehovah's Witness walked down my drive and told me if I wanted to live forever I had to believe the same things they did.

"Great", I said, "That sounds like Paradise." "It is", they said. But there was a problem. A bit before that some Mormons had cycled down my drive and told me that if I wanted to live forever, I had to believe the same things they did. But they didn't believe the same as the Jehovah's Witnesses. What if I chose the wrong one? What if I became a Jehovah's Witness and it turned out only the Mormons went to heaven?

Or maybe they were both wrong. They both make testable claims. One thing they have in common is they both believe the story of Noah's Flood is true. There are millions of species on Earth now. Even Creationists admit you couldn't get that many species onto an Ark. I heard a Creationist speaker (a Mr Sparrow) recently say that there were 50,000 different "kinds" of animals on the Ark with an average size of a sheep. I don't know where he got these numbers from, but it gives us a place to start. It really doesn't matter what number you use. The more animals you try to put on the Ark, the less room there would be for each of them and the more food and water would be needed. If you try to put fewer animals on the Ark, you need a very fast rate of evolution to get the millions of species that are around today.

Noah's Ark was supposedly 300 cubits long by 50 wide and 30 high (Genesis

6:15). A cubit is about 18 inches. This is about 450 x 75 x 45 feet or 139 x 23 x 14 metres. The volume would be 44,471 cubic metres. If there were 50,000 animals on the Ark, this would allow about 900 litres per animal. A small sheep might weigh 50 kgs and occupy about 50 litres of space. To maintain its weight it would need 1 kg of dry matter and 2-3 litres of water per day.

The Bible isn't very clear how long the flood was supposed to last. It is usually assumed it lasted about a year. Fifty thousand times two (male and female) times four (kg of food and water) gives us 400,000 kg/day, or (multiplying by 365) 146,000,000 kg/year, and this would occupy about 146,000 cubic metres. Three times the volume of the Ark.

"Ah," says the Creationist, "They didn't have to store the water. They could have drunk the rainwater or perhaps the diluted seawater. Therefore there is enough room on the Ark." Perhaps, but what did they do with the water when they were finished with it? Was there a hole in the bottom to let it drain out?

Effluent disposal would have been a problem. It has been suggested that Noah and his sons shovelled all the sewage off the back of the Ark. This was said to be proven when Columbus discovered it in 1492. You have to hand it to Noah and his family. There were 8 people on the Ark (allegedly). That's 50 tons of food and water per day that they each had to deliver to the animals, and then remove from the cages in its

less delectable form. That's four tons to shift per hour. Every hour. No sleep.

Remember the Ark had one trapdoor, and that was closed (Gen 8:6). It probably got quite stuffy inside. It would have been dark without windows and unpleasant without gumboots. Glass hadn't been invented. Imagine Noah and his family shovelling their four tons per hour in the dark. They didn't have electricity and they couldn't light a candle. Even if there was enough oxygen, there would have been too much methane to risk an open flame (flatulence is flammable).

On top of all this they must have all been very sick carrying all the diseases and parasites that only survive on humans. Lice, tapeworms, measles to name a few. And even though Noah and his family were supposed to be good, one of them had to have gonorrhoea and syphilis or else those diseases would have ended with the flood. You can't catch them from a toilet seat. I suppose they caught them at the Ark launching party. ("Of course there's room on the Ark for you, my dear.")

Another thing that bothered me was where Noah got the money to pay for the food. I suppose he could have rung up Wrightsons, booked it up on credit, and hope the flood would destroy all the records. The whole story sounds a little bit unlikely. If I have to believe in the flood story to get to heaven and live forever, then I think I'm in a lot of trouble. I don't think I'm going to become a Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness.

*If undelivered, return to:*

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### **Legal Eagle Required**

As a follow-up to inspiring comments made by David Russell at the recent conference, we are looking for someone with possibly a little legal training (or a lot of enthusiasm) to undertake some research on behalf of the Skeptics.

What we would like is a summary of the Fair Trading Act and the Consumer Guarantees Act, the role of the Commerce Commission and the Disputes Tribunal in bringing complaints against those making misleading claims as to the efficacy of their product or service (whether psychic hotlines or dubious cancer cures).

The aim is to produce a clear, reasonably concise description of what is involved in bringing such a complaint, the requirements that need to be fulfilled and a rough idea of the sorts of costs involved. There have been suggestions that NZCSICOP take an active lead in this area. This is one way in which we can do this, but we need your help.

Anyone with the time and energy to take this project on is urged to contact Vicki Hyde, Chair-entity, at Box 19-760, Christchurch, or email at [nzsm@spis.co.nz](mailto:nzsm@spis.co.nz).

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

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