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Satan's Excellent Adventure in the Antipodes

Michael Hill

This is an abridged version of Professor Hill's presentation to the 1998 Skeptics' Conference.

During the witch-hunts of the Early Modern period, a regular pattern emerged. Volumes would be written by theologians and lawyers setting out the diagnostic criteria for identifying and processing witches; these then formed the basis for witchcraft investigations and trials.

Similarly, preachers would vividly describe the physical and behavioural stigmata associated with demonic possession, and these would then be exhibited by certain members of their congregations.

The point is that the satanic scenario had to be well established in official dogma and, more generally, in peoples' minds before an episode of witch-hunting got under way.

Much the same process occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, first in North America and subsequently in Australia and New Zealand. It is possible to trace the origins of claims about the existence of alleged satanic cults and

to show their impact as they inflated the everyday anxieties of people — especially parents with children in paid childcare — and grew to become a widespread moral panic.

Furthermore, moral panics often rely on moral entrepreneurs for their propagation, and, in the case of the "satanism scare" which began in 1980, it is clear that a small number of "expert" claim-makers played a key role in disseminating the satanic scenario. The same moral entrepreneurs have been highly active in Australia and New Zealand.

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Satan's arrival in North America

A series of influences fed into the satanism scare, including the growing interest in alleged satanic forces by Christian fundamentalists from the 1960s onwards, but the year in which it took a definite shape can be dated fairly precisely as 1980. In that year, two very different volumes were published which converged to produce an escalation of claims about satanic ritual abuse throughout the 1980s.

The first was a book called *Michelle Remembers*, by a claimed "survivor" of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA), Michelle Smith, and her therapist — later husband — Lawrence Pazder.

In this gothic narrative, later to be discredited, Michelle recalls as a five-year-old "being tortured in houses, mausoleums, and cemeteries, being raped and sodomised with candles, being forced to defecate on a Bible and crucifix, witnessing babies and adults butchered, spending hours naked

in a snake-filled cage, and having a devil's tail and horns surgically attached to her" (N & S:45). At one point in the account there is a personal appearance of the Devil (complete with tail) and an epic battle with sound effects as Jesus and Mary emerge to give support to the victim. Michelle's Christian faith finally defeats the satanists, who release her, after which she completely forgets her experiences until 20 years later when she is in therapy with Dr Pazder.

Pazder had worked in West Africa and had taken an interest in witchcraft rituals, some of which involved being buried in a pit: it is worth noting that burial or entombment was to become one of the frequently reported components of the SRA scenario. The book was a best-seller and it was not long before other women began to recover "memories" of similar satanic events.

The other relevant volume to appear in 1980 was the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of*

the American Psychiatric Association (DSMIII), which for the first time included the categories of "Multiple Personality Disorder" — later to be relabelled Dissociative Identity Disorder — and "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder".

These were to become the most common diagnoses applied to those thought to have been the victims of satanic abuse, and very soon a group of prominent US psychiatrists who specialised in hypnotism had established an organisation to advance the treatment of Multiple Personality and Dissociation. In this way a phenomenon — demonic possession — which had initially been the preserve of fundamentalist Christians began to be validated by a group of secular professionals.

Pazder's influence was soon to be exercised in raising the satanism scenario in the investigation of what was to lead to the longest and most expensive investigations and trials in American history, centring on the McMartin Preschool. The claims and the investigative techniques involving interviews with preschool children were to be repeated in a number of subsequent investigations in America and elsewhere.

Two central figures in the group of "experts" investigating the McMartin preschool were social worker and interviewer Kee MacFarlane and psychiatrist Roland Summit. MacFarlane was aware of the problems of interviewing small children and introduced novel procedures, such as using

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hand puppets in the interviews, wearing colourful clothes, and making use of anatomically correct dolls. Given the growing interest in multiple personality and ritual abuse, children were told that if they did not remember incidents at the preschool this was because they were dissociating, and that the job of the interviewers was to help them remember. This led to a form of insistent interviewing, in which denials of abuse by children were discounted in the search for "truths" which the interviewers believed were being suppressed.

Roland Summit's ideas provided a pseudo-scientific rationale which underpinned the approach taken by the investigators. He had written a 1978 paper outlining what he termed "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome", arguing that children never fabricated accounts of sexual abuse and thus were to be believed when they disclosed them, regardless of how incredible their accounts were. However, children who had been victims of incest would often recant in order, he claimed, to maintain family equilibrium.

Here were two components which were reiterated by many of those involved in subsequent investigations. They became enshrined as dogma in the phrase "Believe the Children" — and in the maxim that children never lie about sexual abuse unless they are recanting.

Because of this, it is extremely important to note that Summit's supposedly scientifically-phrased "Syn-

drome" was based on no research, being in his own words "impressionistic". For the twelve years before he constructed the "Syndrome" he had done no therapy with children under 7, and even then the children were not in treatment for sexual abuse (N & S:145). This is very important, because Summit's "Syndrome" was subsequently asserted in legal proceedings as a way of dismissing children's denials of abuse.

Two other figures involved in the McMartin case, one of whom has considerable importance in New Zealand, are David Finkelhor and Astrid Heger. Finkelhor gathered evidence of day-care cases throughout the country between 1983 and 1985, finding some three dozen ritual abuse scandals. No attempt was made to evaluate the reliability of the allegations involved, and the study simply assumed that all were valid, even if no arrest or conviction arose.

Given the mounting hysteria about this newly discovered phenomenon, it is not surprising that this number of allegations had arisen. When Finkelhor's jointly written book *Nursery Crimes* eventually appeared in 1988, it became a Bible for believers in ritual abuse.

Dr Astrid Heger was a fourth McMartin investigator, and she popularised a diagnostic technique which became influential in other parts of the world. Her investigation of children's genitals, and especially her belief that sexual abuse could be detected by the size and shape of young girls'

hymens, for instance, became an abuse indicator in the Christchurch child abuse investigation at the Glenelg Health Camp, while the related "anal wink" or dilation test, which was supposed to indicate molestation, triggered a major sexual abuse investigation in Cleveland, Britain, in 1987. Though evidence gradually accumulated to show that these alleged stigmata of child sexual abuse were meaningless, Heger still persisted in maintaining her original diagnoses as an expert witness at the McMartin proceedings in 1987; the judicial process finally resulted in a dismissal of the charges.

Two other American figures, both social workers, were to have a significant impact on the dissemination of the satanism scenario. First, Pamela Klein, a rape crisis worker from Illinois, drew up a set of "satanic indicators" which included such symptoms as bed wetting, nightmares, fear of monsters and ghosts, and a preoccupation with faeces, urine and flatulence. These were to feature in a number of subsequent investigations of alleged satanism in several countries. Her credentials had been questioned by an Illinois judge, who stated that she was "not a legitimate therapist" and was not licensed to practise (Pope, 1991).

In July 1985 she settled in Britain and was very influential in generating a network of satanic claims-makers through her contributions to conferences and seminars, including one involving senior police officers. As we will see, Klein

was also influential in New Zealand.

Pamela Hudson is the other key figure. She too produced a list of satanic symptoms and forms of abuse which had wide distribution among abuse workers. Of particular importance was her list of 16 reported forms of physical and psychological abuse. These included being locked in a cage, being buried in the ground in a coffin or box, being tied upside down or hung from a pole or hook, participating in a mock marriage, seeing children or babies killed, having blood poured over them, and being taken to churches and graveyards for ritual abuse.

Hudson had a particular interest in the robes and masks which perpetrators were alleged to wear, and the cover of her book, which received wide circulation, shows just such an image which a child had supposedly drawn.

Satan migrates to the Antipodes

In August 1986, Australia was host to the largest child abuse conference in its his-

tory, the Sixth International Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. It was held in Sydney and was attended by Summit, MacFarlane, Heger and Finkelhor, all of whom gave addresses about their work. MacFarlane was invited to conduct a further workshop after the conference for the benefit of local child abuse experts (G:29). Prominent members of Australia's child abuse agencies participated in this conference.

There are fascinating links and parallels between the McMartin case and the first allegations of satanic involvement in Australia. In October 1988, a woman reported to police her suspicion that her three-year-old daughter was being abused at her day-care centre by a man named "Mr Bubbles". In the ensuing interviews with police and social workers, children attending the day-care centre claimed they had been abducted, given drugs, assaulted with knives, hammers and pins, sexually abused, filmed for pornographic movies and forced to watch animal sacrifices and satanic rituals.

Also involved in interviewing some of the children in the "Mr Bubbles" case was a Sydney psychiatrist, Dr Anne Schlebaum. She was called in after the children had made their allegations, and she fervently believed their occult stories and reports of animal killing. Her beliefs were further developed in a speech she made to the November 1990 conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychology, Psychiatry and Law. Her speech was titled "Nursery Crimes - A Perfect Little Holocaust in the Suburbs", showing the affinity of her claims with the work of Finkelhor.

The "Mr Bubbles" case generated a great deal of media attention, and within a short period of time police in Western Australia, Victoria, the ACT, Queensland and New South Wales were investigating allegations of bizarre satanic cult crimes involving sexual abuse of children, the sacrifice of humans and animals, rituals in which blood was consumed, and black mass rituals. Among specific allegations were those that could be



Donald Room, *Skeptic* (UK)

found on the lists of satanic "indicators" which had been devised by American "experts" — children being locked in coffins became one of the common claims in a number of investigations.

What is of considerable interest in the Australian dissemination of the satanic scenario, and something which will also be found in New Zealand, is the part played by publicly funded agencies. For instance, in 1993 and 1994 two editions of a pamphlet on *Ritual Abuse: Information for Health and Welfare Professionals* were published by the NSW Sexual Assault Committee, a subsidiary of the Ministry for the Status and Advancement of Women. Among other sources the booklet quotes the work of Summit, Finkelhor, Hudson, and a 1991 publication of the Los Angeles County Commission for Women on *Ritual Abuse* — the same sources were to become the basis for satanic claims across the Tasman.

Satan's New Zealand Stopover

The satanic cult scenario was introduced to New Zealand in May 1990, when Pamela Klein spoke to a Child Sexual Abuse conference. In a rambling speech on the subject of post-traumatic stress disorder and associated disorders in children, she referred to "horrific satanic cult situations" and went on to claim that children in satanic cults were "purposely programmed to develop multiple personalities". Here we see once again the significance of the new diagnostic labels introduced to the

1980 psychiatric manual in providing apparent scientific legitimacy for a scenario which might otherwise be subject to critical scrutiny.

Early in the following year, 1991, the Ritual Action Network — later to be called Ritual Action Group — was established in Wellington. The group received public funding from the Department of Social Welfare through the Family Violence Prevention Co-ordinating Committee. Its membership was composed mainly of counsellors and social workers, but also included a police officer.

The key members of the group were Ann Marie Stapp and Jocelyn Frances (O'Kane), both social workers, the latter practising hypnosis and recovering memories of satanic cult abuse on the part of several "survivors"; Laurie Gabites, a police officer who had visited the United States and brought back SRA material; and Nigel Marriott, a probation officer. Marriott was a graduate in Classics and had written a Masters thesis on Graeco-Roman love magic, in which — by his own admission — he was a dabbler.

They circulated material from the States on satanic cult allegations, including Pamela Hudson's list of satanic indicators and diagrams of supposed satanic symbols and alphabets. By 1991 the group had attracted considerable credibility and was able to propagate its views among Social Welfare staff, police, and staff from other government departments.

But the main focus of satanic allegations was to be Christchurch, where in September 1991 a Ritual Abuse Workshop presentation was a prominent feature at a Family Violence Prevention Conference and was presented by Stapp and O'Kane on behalf of RAG. The content of their paper is important because it shows the degree of cross-fertilisation between American anti-cult and anti-satanic literature. The sources quoted in this section of the paper are the same Los Angeles Report as that cited in New South Wales and the claimed accounts of ritual abuse "survivors" in Wellington.

It was just seventeen days after this story appeared that the first allegations in the Christchurch Civic Crèche case were made by a mother who had earlier written a pamphlet on sexual abuse.

With the credentials the RAG network claimed for itself, their reports gained credibility with a wider audience. In turn, this wider audience may also have become predisposed to accept even more bizarre claims. Claims about child pornography, and about the existence of organised sex rings and cults which practised ritual abuse, had featured prominently in media reports prior to the September conference and were to reappear subsequently.

The linkage between child pornography and ritual abuse had been an important feature of the satanism scare in the United States and Britain. According to RAG members, cults often recruited family members from

generation to generation so that ritual abuse became a way of life.

The extent to which an SRA scenario was involved in the Christchurch crèche case has been somewhat masked by the Crown prosecutor's successful suppression of the more bizarre allegations which emerged in the children's later interviews, but it was undeniably part of the beliefs of some parents and formed a significant element in the police investigation. One mother who was prominent in the accusations against Christchurch crèche workers ran a newsletter called *End Ritual Abuse*, with funding from the Lotteries Commission. In it

she reprinted claims which originated in an American publication, *Believe the Children*, a movement that arose out of the McMartin case.

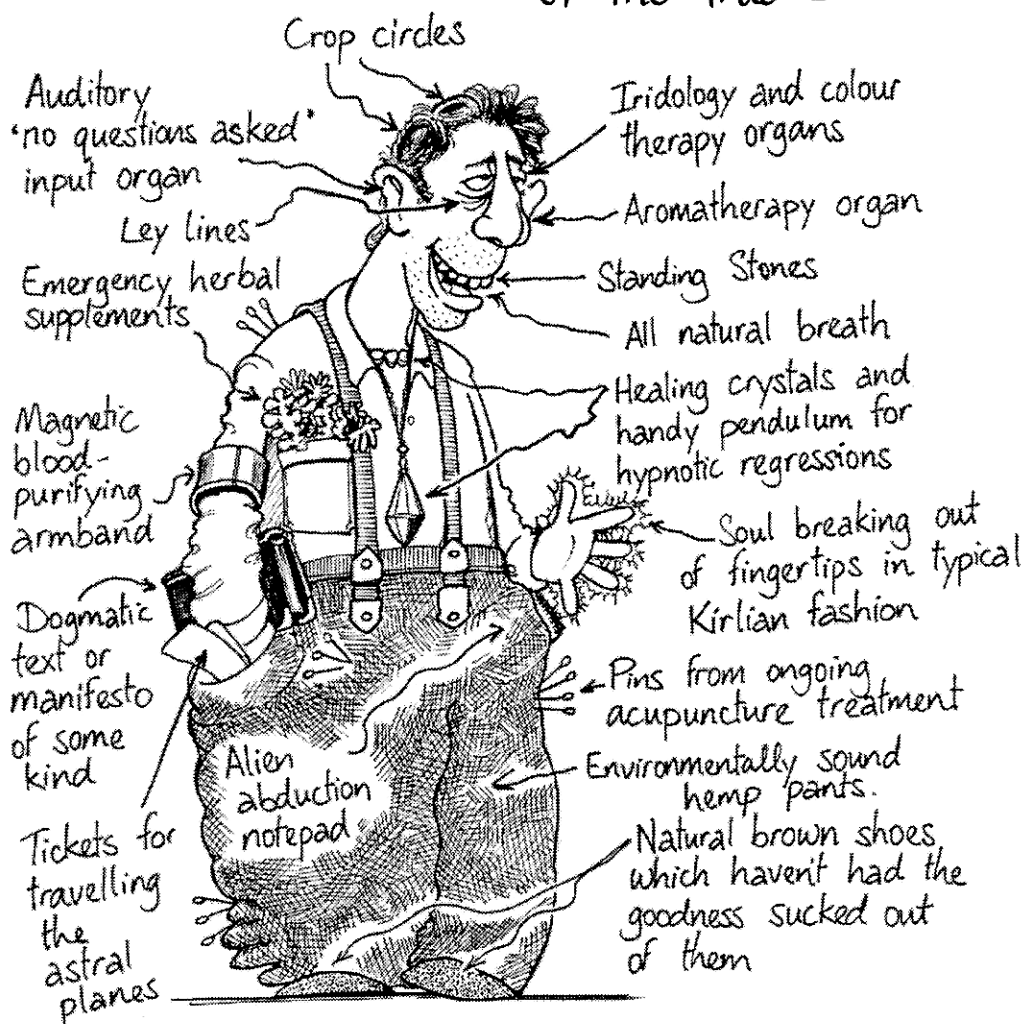
Pamela Hudson's work was a particularly important source of "indicators" of satanic stigmata. She was invited to Christchurch in 1993 by the Campbell Centre (Presbyterian Support Services), whose Director in 1992 — Rosemary Smart — had written a damning report on the Civic Crèche which assumed that Ellis was guilty; this was a year before his trial.

Smart's report was very influential and led to police investigation of the women crèche workers. A further in-

dication of the American influence on the case is the fact that the Commissioner for Children's office (then Ian Hassall) had sent Smart the Executive Summary of David Finkelhor's book *Nursery Crimes*, and in the report she cites him as an authority on child sexual abuse in childcare settings. Clearly Finkelhor is still regarded as a substantial expert in New Zealand child abuse circles.

The influence of Klein, Hudson, and Finkelhor has been noted, but it is interesting to note that other participants in the original McMartin debacle have had a continuing influence on the New Zealand child

Common Surface Features of the True Believer



abuse industry. Roland Summit visited in 1994 at the invitation of Doctors for Sexual Abuse Care, and in his speech he spoke of the "backlash" that claims-makers like himself were facing.

Perhaps his influence is detectable in the Appeal Court's acceptance of the notion that retraction of allegations by a child — which happened while Ellis's case was being appealed — is merely "denial", for as Sir Maurice Casey wrote, "It is not uncommon for child complainants in sexual abuse cases to withdraw their allegations or claim they were lying...We are by no means satisfied [the girl] did lie at the interviews, although she may now genuinely be-

lieve she did" (Court of Appeal, 1994:33).

One should remember the pseudo-scientific status of the "Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation syndrome" when such opinions are stated as established principle. Another McMartin protagonist, Astrid Heger, was invited by DoSAC no fewer than five times between 1989 and 1996. DoSAC has also invited SRA believers Arnon and Marianne Bentovim to New Zealand, as well as a number of the more extreme claims-makers in the recovered memory and multiple personality/dissociation debate.

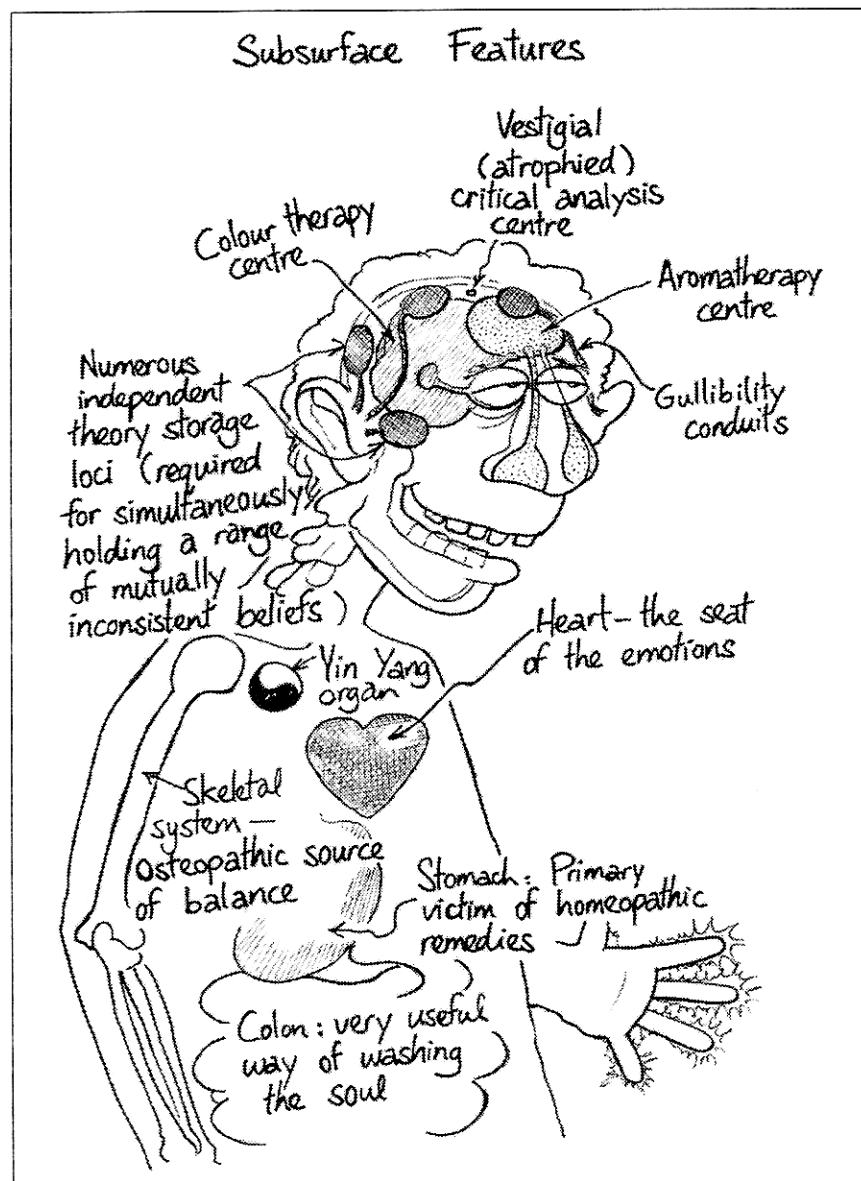
As long as such lack of balance persists in the sexual abuse industry there re-

mains a possibility that the SRA scenario will persist. Satan's excellent adventure is currently a lively feature in Australia, where it is fuelled principally by adult "survivors" and their supportive therapists. Satan's New Zealand stopover may have been more low-key, but for some of those involved in the Christchurch crèche case it has had devastating consequences.

One of the more disturbing features of the last decade is the way in which the uncorroborated claims of Satan-hunters have infiltrated the beliefs of secular professionals and semi-professionals such as psychiatrists, social workers, police, and government administrators. Despite the findings of a growing body of research which would urge scepticism over the SRA scenario and the related issue of therapy-induced pseudomemories, organisations like Doctors for Sexual Abuse Care continue to listen to a select group of true believers and to exclude critical views. In such an atmosphere of professionally-induced credulity, it is possible that Satan's excellent adventure may not be entirely ended.

Michael Hill is Professor of Sociology at Victoria University of Wellington.

References have been kept to a minimum. The two books referred to are (G) Richard Guilliatt (1996) Talk of the Devil, and (N & S) Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker (1995) Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt.



Guest Editorial

Ah Yes! I Remember It Well

Founding member Bernard Howard reminisces on the Skeptics' history in this guest editorial.

I belong to the constipated school of literary composition, so when the Editor invited me, only days before her deadline, to write an editorial for this special issue of the *New Zealand Skeptic*, my first thought was to say "No". However, further reading of Annette's letter told me to feel free to wander around NZCSICOP's history, and to write about anything I fancied from my long association. The common view that the aged have an irresistible urge to garrulous reminiscence is not wrong, so here I am, ready to bore you with thirteen years' memories of skepticism in New Zealand.

My own skeptical views are of much longer standing than that, as the yellowing 1950s edition of Martin Gardner's *Fads & Fallacies* on my bookshelf will attest, but the chance to exercise that interest in New Zealand came only in the 1980s.

In early 1982, *Scientific American* had an article by Douglas Hofstadter praising the attitude and activities of the recently formed Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, and enthusing over its journal, *Skeptical Inquirer*. This all seemed to be my kind of thing, and I sought specimen copies of this magazine through the NZ Libraries Interloan Service. The copies provided were from the library of the Consumers' Institute, a fact I liked to dwell on both during the recent cordial reception given the institute's present director at our 1998 conference, but also in the dark days of 1992, when the institute received our Bent Spoon.

Skeptical Inquirer proved of absorbing interest, and I have subscribed ever since. In my eyes, its only fault, and an understandable one, is its emphasis on US events. This makes it especially important that skeptical groups in other countries publish their own journals, such as the one you are reading now.

My first foray into a public display of skepticism was in the mid '80s. The *Press* printed a very one-sided credulous account of the wonders of "psychic surgery" in the Philippines. This was quite inexcusable, as *Consumer* magazine had not long previously published two articles exposing the whole fraud. I wrote a stiff letter to the editor in protest, my first of several on skeptical issues.

It is essential to respond to published nonsense publicly, to show that another point of view exists. I think we can flatter ourselves that such an uncritical report is unlikely to appear nowadays in reputable papers.

In the 1970s and into the '80s, the centre of skeptical activity in New Zealand was the Psychology Department at Otago University, from where Richard Kammann & David Marks published their pioneering book *The Psychology Of The Psychic* in 1979. At a time when many scientists were impressed by the "Geller phenomenon", these two academics took a very skeptical view. Similarly, they sharply criticised the experiments in "remote viewing", promoted at the time as the most convincing of so many tests of extrasensory perception.

On both matters further investigation has supported their conclusions. In the early 80s I had some correspondence with Dr Kammann (who has since died) in which he mentioned the formation of a national group to investigate these matters, but the idea came to nothing.

However, in late 1984 a more forceful voice was heard, lecturing us in an American accent on the Shroud of Turin and other weird things. During the next year, discussions between Denis Dutton and David Marks and a few others led to the revival of the idea of a national society, and on a hot February afternoon in 1986 a small group met at the University of Canterbury to decide whether the time was ripe to launch such a venture.

I did not enter the meeting until late, and the first words spoken to me were "we have decided to form a committee, but don't have a Treasurer yet. Are you interested?" Then, as now, I could not refuse anything Denis asked me, so I was appointed a few seconds after arriving. One of the points discussed of particular importance to the Treasurer was whether to set ourselves up as an exclusive elite, with a high subscription, or as a more popular mass movement with a low sub.

The latter prevailed, and I left the meeting with seven \$10 notes, the subscriptions of the founding members, who were Mr Kerry Chamberlain of Massey University, Dr Denis Dutton of Canterbury University, Dr Gordon Hewitt of Victoria University, Dr David Marks of Otago University and myself.

We worried about a name for our new baby — a snappy “New Zealand Skeptics” or a lengthy dignified “New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal” on the US model. The latter was our choice, but brevity has inevitably won the battle except for the most formal occasions.

Also discussed at our first meeting was the need to have an address, preferably a Post Office box. I was the only one there who had a personal P.O. Box, which I had rented when I first went to work at Lincoln College and live on the campus. The lady in charge of Lincoln College Post Office to whom I applied in 1964 was very apologetic that the only box she had free was number 13 (I wonder why). The offer of the use of P.O. Box 13 was greeted with hilarity by the committee, and seen as quite fitting for an organisation such as ours. This was our postal address for some years until I relinquished the box.

We aimed from the outset for publicity for our views, and had an early success. A well-known New Zealand psychic claimed he had “remote viewing” powers, and Dr Marks used his knowledge of this to test the claim. The encounter between the two proved the claim to be baseless, and the skeptics’ success was widely reported.

In early life the New Zealand Skeptics narrowly escaped a fatal accident. A member accused a psychic of being a fraud, the psychic brought a defamation action, and our member suffered severe financial damages. Fortunately, and because of the prudent way our public statements were worded, the Skeptics were not a party to this action, and so escaped what could have been a crippling

penalty. We emphasise that, whatever our private thoughts, accusations of fraudulence or cheating are taboo.

In 1986, we had our first Conference and Annual General Meeting, our incorporation under the Incorporated Societies Act, the first issue of this newsletter and, sadly, the departure of our co-founder David Marks for a professional chair in a new university in London.

Following the example of our American colleagues, a number of members of the committee committed large proportions of their personal wealth to a challenge — \$10,000 to any person who can demonstrate paranormal powers under agreed control conditions. As expected, psychics disdained performing for filthy lucre, and the thought of personal bankruptcy does not keep any of us awake at night.

Our relations with the media have always been important to us, and we very early adopted a carrot and stick approach.

The “carrots” are intended to reward journalists for critical and skeptical reporting, and to encourage more of the same. A handful are awarded each year, and we hope the handsome framed certificates are displayed with pride in the offices of newspapers, radio and even TV stations.

The “sticks” are our Bent Spoon awards, limited to one a year, for the most gullible piece of reporting or publishing. Unlike the awards for excellence, the Bent Spoons have no corporeal existence in this universe, and are sent telepathically to the recipient.

What I now see was a memorable event in our growth occurred in 1990 at a public meeting we held in Christchurch. I was approached afterwards by a

young couple interested in membership. No ordinary members these — in a few years she was our Chair Entity, he was organising our growing membership list; thank you, Vicki and Peter.

From the seven founding fathers, NZCSICOP has grown continuously; a few months after its beginnings, at the first conference, there were more than 80 members. Now there are about 500, an encouragingly high proportion of New Zealand’s population, comparing more than favourably with other countries.

Since the beginning, *New Zealand Skeptic* has been the chief means for members to share views and ideas. The four editors who have overseen its production have served it well by the wise selection of material, and the writing of thoughtful and incisive editorials.

One of the most exciting aspects of my work with the skeptics has been involvement in organising the visits of, and meeting, notable skeptics from overseas whom I would otherwise never have encountered. With substantial help from our Australian colleagues we have hosted James Randi (US, 1993), Susan Blackmore (UK, 1995) and Richard Dawkins (UK, 1996). We have also enjoyed visits from Ian Plimer (Australia) thanks to the NZ Rationalist Association, and the editor of *Nature* — I wonder if Sir John Maddox still has the charred T-shirt known as the shroud of Akaroa which he was given at the Palmerston North conference?

Rivalling the visits from overseas VIPs in my memory is the firewalk at the 1989 conference. At that time, a scientifically satisfying explanation for the successful carrying out of this manoeuvre had recently been published, but a

number of people were still peddling "mind over matter" training sessions for high fees. The Skeptics' firewalk, arranged by Denis Dutton and his physicist colleague John Campbell, went off with minimum discomfort and maximum publicity. Since then the "psychic" firewalkers have disappeared, and the practice has become a standard part of corporate management training gatherings.

Have 25 years of organised skepticism made any impression on the world? Have

fifty issues of *New Zealand Skeptic* made any local impression?

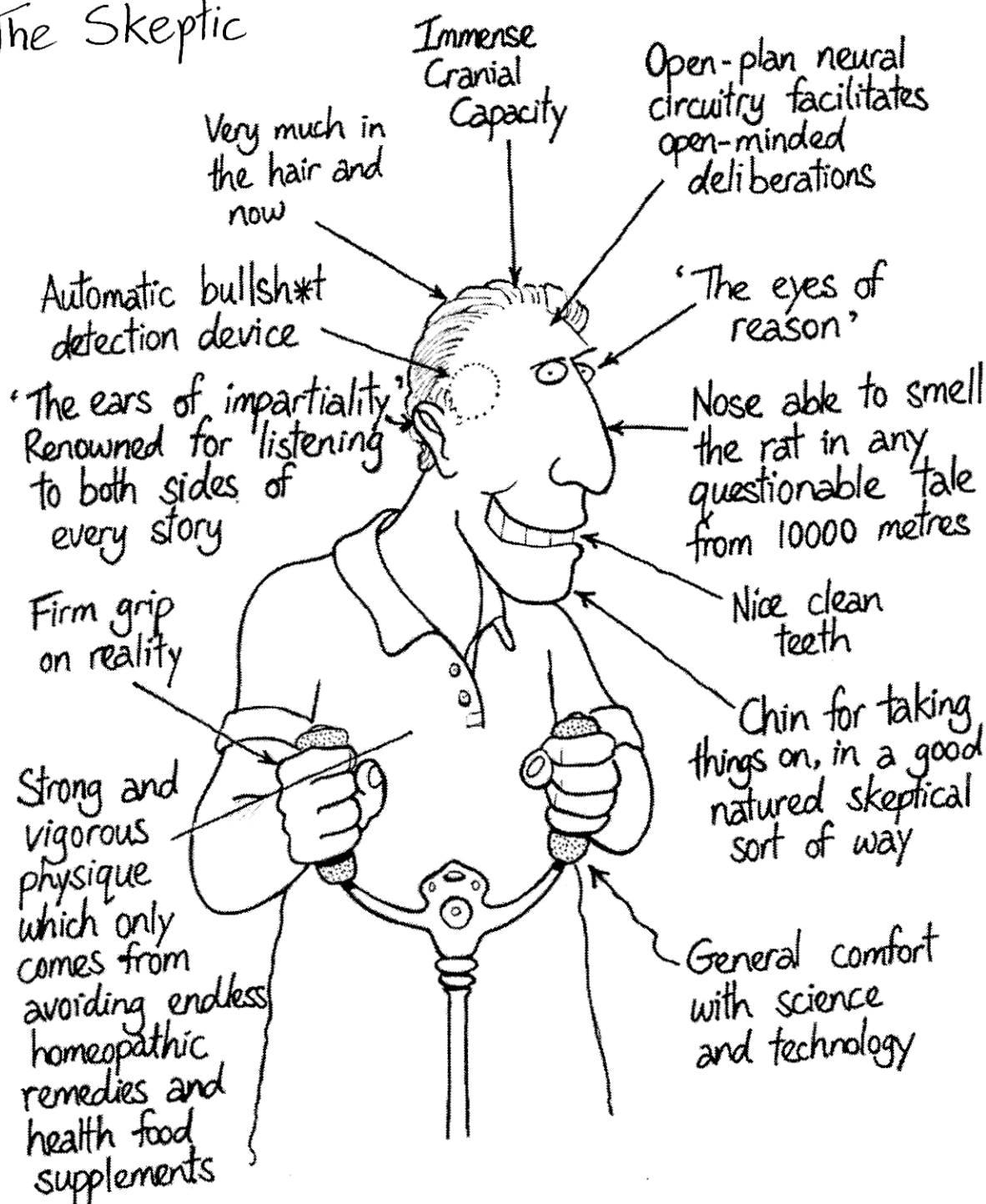
That gullibility abounds cannot be denied; charlatany and honest self-deception are seen everywhere. To read early issues of *Skeptical Inquirer* and of this newsletter induce strong feelings of déjà vu; so many of the topics exercising skeptics then are still with us, as well as some new ones — false memories, for example. Nevertheless, who knows to what pseudoscienti-

fic depths society might have sunk but for our efforts?

For myself, not to have taken part in this struggle is unthinkable, and my association has been a source of great satisfaction to me. I am sure our movement will be as necessary when our 100th issue is published as it is now. Sadly, I do not expect to be in a position then to write another guest editorial.

Bernard Howard

The Skeptic



The yeti does not exist, says China

Press 17 Dec 93

BEIJING — The yeti, or abominable snowman of legend, does not exist, Chinese conservation officials have concluded after nearly two decades of research in the country's mountainous regions.

"A number of systematic scientific expeditions have found that all reported sightings of the yeti were actually other wild animals," forestry and wildlife conservation director Zhang Jianlong told the official Xinhua news agency.

Zhang's pronouncement was the first official word ending a debate on the existence of the yeti, or bigfoot, Xinhua says.

"I just don't believe the story, and many scientists agree with me," Zhang says, adding that most bigfoot researchers lacked specialist scientific training.

"Encouraging some mass capture of bigfoot will severely hurt other wildlife and scientifically will come to nothing," he says.

His views are backed up by Zhang's colleague at the State Administration of Forestry, Liu Yongfan, who says that local conservation officials had failed to discover traces of the creature during many years of regular field patrols in the Shennongjia region of central Hubei province.

The officials say they hope to discourage people from offering rewards for the capture of bigfoot, as the site of the legends is a restricted conservation area.

Xinhua says one reward of 500,000 yuan (\$NZ122,000) had

been offered for one yeti, but did not say by whom.

Tales of a half man, half ape-like creature have centred around Shennongjia, a mountainous area of more than 3000sq km covered by primitive forests.

China has organised a succession of official expeditions into the valleys of Shennongjia beginning in the early 1980s, and some officials have taken local villagers' yeti sightings seriously.

In 1984, the government set up a committee for research into strange and rare creatures under the State Science and Technology Commission to take a hard look at the evidence — 40cm footprints, clumps of red hair, and droppings.

Most stories describe the creature as around two metres tall, with ape-like facial features and a body covered with red hair. It has no tail and usually leaves large footprints in the fields, they say.

But the government appears to have drawn a blank in its research and relegated bigfoot stories to the realm of fantasy.

"There are no basic primate foods such as berries or broad-leaved trees in the Shennongjia mountains, where most enthusiasts believe the creature lives," says Shennongjia reserve official Yan Xun. "The conditions in Shennongjia are unsuited for sustaining the life of any primate, including the so-called bigfoot."

—AFP

Boys in blue tell of little green men

EVENING POST 23 Nov 93

□ Flying squad
UFO believers have unexpected allies — police witnesses.

By JASON BENNETTO

A GROUP of retired and serving police officers in Britain are risking ridicule by coming forward to tell all about their alleged encounters with UFOs.

More than 20 officers have responded to an advertisement in Police Review inviting them to recount their close encounters of the third kind. These include stories of alien abduction and gigantic blocks of light hovering above their squad cars.

At least two former officers claim to have photographic evidence of their meetings with extra-terrestrials.

Their extraordinary stories are to be collected in a new book, *Policing The UFO*, to include interviews with at least 20 former and serving police officers and as many as 200 recorded incidents involving police from around the world. Many of the examples from the second category will be taken from previously unreleased Ministry of Defence papers.

The book's author, Irene Bott, has chosen to concentrate on police officers because of their relative position of trust in society.

"They are less likely to be written off as cranks, loonies or anoraks," she said.

Others may, however, think they are boldly going beyond the call of duty and risking ridicule and professional suicide.

For this reason, many appear to have waited until they have left the police before speaking out, although others who contacted the researchers feel so strongly about what they have witnessed that they are prepared to be named.

The reported encounters include:

□ An officer who claims to have been abducted and medically examined by aliens in the 1980s. The former officer is said to have been driving when he experienced disturbances to his vehicle followed by memory loss. He later recalled,

through hypnosis, being taken aboard a space craft and examined by aliens.

□ A police officer says he took five photographs of a UFO while on duty in the West Midlands in the 1980s, but that the MOD confiscated them.

□ A policeman and woman were out on patrol in the countryside and saw lights and a cylindrical object in the sky.

□ An officer who saw a disc-shaped object hovering 6m above the road.

□ A police officer who, in the 1970s, saw a wedge-shaped object in the sky that was about four storeys high and 15m long.

□ Declassified MOD papers from the 1950s to the 1970s that report investigations into reported sightings by police officers and incidents at military bases. The files name police officers involved and allegedly include accounts of helicopters being sent after UFOs.

Several reports have also come from officers in Sussex — one as recently as last month. The area is considered a fruitful zone for UFO sightings.

While most of the police officers who have been in contact are retired, some are serving and include an inspector.

Ms Bott said: "In a court of law the person who is most believed is usually a policeman. Also, these people are out day and night observing things around them so they are excellent witnesses."

"A UFO is simply an unidentified flying object, it's not little green men."

"Many officers do not want to talk about it openly while they are still serving because they can kiss their promotion chances goodbye."

So far she has been in touch with about 20 serving and former officers — two serving officers contacted her a couple of weeks ago and claim to have seen UFOs in the past month.

Nick Redfern, an author of several books on UFOs, who is assisting Ms Bott with her project, added: "These people are willing to fly in the face of potential ridicule, which shows how strongly they feel about what they have witnessed — these are strong, credible witnesses." The Independent

Finding harmony in the home

WESTERN NEWS 25 SEP 96

The secrets of health, wealth and happiness derived from the ancient art of Feng Shui are increasingly being applied to modern living.

An international trend is developing where home designs, layouts, furniture and furnishings are designed in accordance with the principles of Feng Shui (pronounced fung schway).

Kevin Turner of Ray White United Real Estate says a few local developers previously applied elements of Feng Shui in refining projects.

"Broader applications are now used by families and businesses to improve the harmony of their home or work environment."

Among designers and architects, Feng Shui is earning respect for its simple, yet effective approach.

"Furniture is placed correctly and rooms are painted in harmonious colours."

Feng Shui can also be applied outside the home. The physical landscape, is an essential part of this approach.

The four compass points are also influential.

"Feng Shui literally means the elements of wind and water."

The combination of this ancient belief with architecture and design aims to create the best living environment," Mr Turner says.

An easy introduction to this ancient art is the application of colours. With different colours, better harmony can be created in your home.

Green has an ancient association with growth, harmony, nature, the family and tranquility.

White is a popular interior colour allied with purity, innocence and starkness.

Pink is associated with romance, calming, healing and happiness.

Human fireball myth up in flames

DOMINION 4 NOV 98

IF THERE is one great myth facing burnout before the new millennium, it is spontaneous human combustion.

That is because scientists all over the world are pouring cold water on the human fireball phenomenon faster than advocates can come up with new cases.

The latest academic to scotch the myth is a New Zealander, Xiao Dong Chen, an associate professor at Auckland University's chemical and materials engineering department and an expert on spontaneous combustion.

He says that in each alleged case of spontaneous human combustion, there is a rational and chemical explanation, if all the circumstances are known.

In the past six weeks, Dr Chen has been giving lectures at universities in Auckland, Adelaide and Sydney on the improbability that humans can ignite from within, as coal piles and haystacks are known to do.

"It comes down to common sense. Could you or I sit there, without doing anything about it, if our bodies were on fire?" asks Beijing-born Dr Chen.

"You have to be somehow dead or unconscious or in some kind of a trance to stand that sort of process. And if you sit down and think about it, where is the



Spontaneous combustion has fired many imaginations, including Charles Dickens's.
Yvonne Martin reports

fire's start point? There isn't one."

The concept of spontaneous human combustion was first made famous by Charles Dickens's horrific description of the death of Krook, the rag dealer in *Bleak House*.

Believers allege that victims have been reduced to piles of ash in seconds, leaving just lower limbs or feet, while the rest of the room remains untouched.

Much of the skeleton disappears, though it would be resistant to burning even at such temperatures.

Explanations have included ball lightning, vampires, psychic suicide, magnetic storms and the wrath of God.

Dr Chen's conclusions back a study of 200 alleged cases, presented to the Edinburgh International Science Festival earlier this year.

David Pescod, biologist and librarian at the Linnean Society of London, says the cases invariably involve a careless cigarette and a human wearing flammable clothing.

One photo showing only a pair of legs left in a chair, from which advocates argued that the rest of the skeleton had mysteriously burned, was taken after scientists had removed the rest of the bones for investigation.

A group of United States scientists went a step further,

for a BBC television programme, conducting an experiment in which they torched a dead pig wrapped in blankets and doused in petrol to prove that a carcass can sustain an intense fire for long periods.

They believed that they had proved the so-called "wick effect", in which the person's clothes catch fire accidentally and act like a candle wick, heating the body to temperatures where fat melts, and feeding the fire for hours.

Within two minutes, the petrol poured over the pig had burned off, but the fire continued to burn.

Three hours later, the fire was still burning, and temperatures of more than 800 degrees celsius were measured.

After five hours, the classic signs of spontaneous human combustion began to emerge: the bones began to turn to ash, while the rest of the room was relatively untouched.

Dr Chen says the experiment proves

Crystals harnessed for healing

NELSON MAIL 22 SEP 98

Spinning a lead crystal in his hand, Ron Wilson walks around palamino nare Plain Jane, and diagnoses a kidney stone, a sinus problem, a blocked ear and a blockage to the heart.

He travels around the South Island using natural healing techniques like crystals on both animals and people, as well as manipulation and massage on animals.

The beautiful Plain Jane had been stiff in one hindquarter for some time and had begun to buck when ridden.

Her owner, Lorna Waide, decided to try Mr Wilson's unconventional remedies.

The mare stood quietly as Mr Wilson moved along her chakra, or energy, points to relax her, before suddenly manipulating her neck with a crack, then manipulated each joint.

In seven years he has only been kicked twice by horses as he manipulated their leg joints in sometimes violent jerks.

Once the manipulation was finished, it was time for the lead crystal to spin as he moved around Plain Jane.

When the crystal stopped, it indicated a problem, and Mr Wilson reacted with a spasm himself as it was "healed".

Next, it was a crystal wand with an amethyst at one end, an obsidian at the other, and 30 smaller crystals in the middle with copper wrapped around the outside.

Mr Wilson's theory is that the copper conducts the special energies of the crystals to the patient.

"I'm acting as a medium and it goes

through me into the horse," he said.

"Crystals activate blockages by increasing the flow of energies as they go through the body."

Whenever the crystals found a "titchy" spot, the animal usually moved in response as it felt the effect, he said.

Mr Wilson has been using crystals since numerology suggested he would be capable of using them for healing. After that came practice and increasing confidence in his work.

He said out of all the niggling problems that the crystals showed up in Plain Jane, her biggest problem was the kidney stones, which he hoped he had solved with the crystals.

The Nelson Mail will follow up Mr Wilson's work on Plain Jane to review its success.

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that fat is a fuel, "But everyone knows that anyway".

He says what it did not, and could not, show was how a body caught fire without a source of ignition.

"The pig experiment is very subjective. Fires need fuel, a source of ignition and oxygen.

"In this experiment, all the materials were there. In spontaneous human combustion, most people are mystified by the fact that they didn't know what caused it."

DR CHEN first became interested in human combustion as an engineering student completing a PhD at Canterbury University in the late 1980s, when he was shown a book about cases.

The gruesome images infiltrated his dreams at night and fuelled his curiosity in the fiery phenomenon.

Now the only "mystery" for Dr Chen is what the reports of alleged cases omit, like what the so-called victims were doing before or during the blaze. Usually there is a chemical, rather than paranormal, explanation, he says.

For example, the person may have consumed or smothered themselves in large quantities of alcohol or some other fuel.

"If you drink a lot of alcohol or, say, petrol, the channels and pipelines in your body will be full of combustible gas. A flick of a lighter, say if the person smokes, could cause fire."

Take the case of Gerda Heiser, a 28-year-old German tourist who was sunning herself on a beach in the Caribbean when

she reportedly burst into flames and burned to a crisp.

Dr Chen says it is possible that the suntan lotion she doused herself in had a high alcohol content and acted as fuel once she was on fire.

That still does not explain the source of ignition, but Dr Chen says children's experiments using a magnifying glass show that it is possible to concentrate the sun's rays to cause fire.

Just as mysterious is the case of a fire-and-brimstone preacher, Franz Lueger, who, according to Austrian news reports, exploded in flames after warning followers that they were heading for the blazing inferno of hell.

The reports said that though the evangelist was consumed by the intense fire-storm, the Bible he clutched in his hand was not harmed.

"Again he could have done something to himself involving chemicals on the inside or externally.

"Just because there seems to be no cause doesn't mean there isn't one," says Dr Chen.

But in a third case, the cause is more obvious. In 1996, an elderly man was apparently "consumed" along with his mattress.

An oxygen canister by his bed was switched on, and the man was a heavy smoker and drinker. There is evidence

that he lit a cigarette, which Dr Chen says would burn furiously in oxygen.

The Fire Service has no recorded cases of spontaneous human combustion in New Zealand.

Dave Noble, regional fire investigator in Auckland, has investigated more than 500 fires and does not know of any.

"The closest I've come to a case that looked like one was a woman who fell over a heater. The heater was plugged in and it was on," he says.

"Personally, I don't think it [spontaneous human combustion] can possibly happen."

He says the latest literature from the International Association of Arson Investigators in the United States also refutes the phenomenon.

Denis Dutton, a Canterbury University philosopher and Skeptics Society spokesman, says our language is littered with fiery metaphors about passion and anger — having "a soul on fire" or "being hot about a colour".

"It's just a fantasy leap from that normal language to the idea that the human body itself could catch on fire," he says.

"It seems to have an intuitive plausibility. Something weird, uncanny and grisly is always going to have an attraction for people, and that's how stories like this get started."

A fire-and-brimstone preacher reportedly exploded in flames after telling followers they were heading for the inferno

WESTERN NEWS

By JED BAKER

11 SEP 93

Using people's past memories to convict criminals should be done with great care, says a Northland psychology professor.

Dr Maryanne Garry believes there is little evidence to support recovered memory syndrome, whereby people recall suppressed events.

These could include abusive situations and have been used to convict people for serious crimes.

She gave an address on "when memory messes up" to the Sceptics Society conference in August.

Dr Garry says such situations are "dangerous".

"There is a difference between not thinking about something that is painful versus the claim there is a part of the brain to shove things into."

She says the notion of presumed innocence, integral to the justice system, can be affected by such recollections.

"Why would a person lie about something

so powerful?"

While agreeing that people do retain clear memories of some events many years in the past, she believes there are many factors which can distort memory.

"People can happen to believe it because they have talked about it to some trusted authority person.

"Or if you read a book saying 'if you have problems forming relationships the chances are you have been sexually abused', you are likely to go away and think about it."

Dr Garry says the university has undertaken research experiments with students on whether certain events took place in childhood.

"I will ask students what kind of events are particularly common in childhood, specifically breaking a window with your hand and having to go to the hospital."

After a few weeks, students who previously knew that such an event did not take place, became less certain.

Dr Garry says her particular concern is for those who have genuinely been abused.

DOMINION 15 OCTOBER 93

ATLANTA

MORE than 100,000 pilgrims massed on a farm in Georgia yesterday to clutch rosaries, sing and scan the skies for heavenly signs while listening to what they believed was a final message from the Virgin Mary.

Nancy Fowler, a 47-year-old former nurse, slipped into what some doctors have described as a state near coma as the faithful waited.

In a halting voice sent through loudspeakers she repeated what she

said was the last of seven years of messages to the public she has received from Mary, believed by Christians to be the mother of Jesus.

"My dear children, I have come to be with you today as your loving mother to instruct you. Children, please live your life in full union with God. It is most pleasing to God when you imitate him," she said.

The annual event, which is not sanctioned by the Catholic hierarchy, drew 30,000 last year. — Reuter

sier provides proof ope's 'miracles'

16 DEC 93 LONDON

R of "miracles" performed by the Pope is being proved by the Vatican to prove proof needed to name him a saint, it was revealed yesterday.

Almost certain that Paul II will be proclaimed a saint after he is canonized, the *Express* on Sunday said it must be proved that he has performed miracles in his lifetime.

The newspaper claimed it was told by a Vatican insider that the log contained cases. In one case mentioned by the *Express*, it said to have cured a French boy from leukaemia.

Mrs Feliciano's mother was quoted saying: "Doc-

tors used chemotherapy but when it was time to leave the hospital they didn't want to answer our question, 'Will he live?' I was desperate."

Mrs Feliciano and her husband Antonio went to see the Pope at St Peter's in Italy.

"When the Pope was close I picked up Paolo," Mr Feliciano said. "Dora was close to fainting but she managed to say: 'Holy Father, our son is very sick', then she broke down. The Pope asked me questions about Paolo and took my son's hand. Paolo was smiling then he suddenly became serious and gazed at the Pope.

"The moment was intense. Then the Pope said: 'He is cured'."

In a few weeks Paolo was cured. He is now 24. — AAP

Skepsis

Neil McKenzie

Soft Targets

Like Noel O'Hare, I attended the September Skeptics' conference. Noel, winner of an NZ Skeptics Bravo Award "for critical analysis and common sense for his health column throughout 1997", had a gripe (Shadow Of Doubt, *Listener*, 19 September 1998). He accused us of favouring "soft targets — psychics, New Age fads, alternative medicine, astrology." "Poking fun at Creationists or crystal healers," he wrote, "may produce a

warm glow of superiority — but doesn't change much."

More important issues we avoid, he said, were economic theory and political ideology. He said that research shows the widely supported doctrine of competition, which underpins our economic (and education) system, almost never works. Good on him! He's obviously a healthy sceptic. But a true sceptic must produce proof that theories he or she is discrediting are incorrect. This is practically

impossible with subjects like economy, politics, philosophy and even writing, which he later suggested we should be examining.

So rather than "favouring soft targets", we're taking apart the obviously fraudulent, such as magicians, faith healers, clairvoyants, chelationists, herbalists and some doctors, judges, news reporters, scientists, pharmacists, nutritionalists and broadcasters, when they dishonestly fleece the naive. And these are hardly "soft

Secret investigation of UFO revealed

EVENING POST 3 OCT 98

By TOM CARDY

A book on New Zealand UFO sightings reveals that the Air Force, police and other agencies secretly shared information about a UFO scare off the Kaikoura coast in 1978.

The NZ Files, by Upper Hutt writer Peter Hassall, covers sightings of unidentified flying objects in New Zealand since the 1880s, along with claims of alien abductions.

The book includes a Ministry of Defence report about sightings of bright white lights off the Kaikoura coast in 1978 and 1979. The lights were seen in December 1978 by two air freight pilots, and in January 1979, Australian and New Zealand television news teams filmed the lights.

The report, held at National Archives in Wellington, was not to be released until 2004. However Mr Hassall said after an Official Information Act request to view it, the Ministry allowed him to reproduce the entire report



Peter Hassall

in his book.

He said the report explained that the official line at the time was that the Air Force, police, the Carter Observatory in Wellington and other agencies were not co-operating in investigating the sightings.

But Mr Hassall said the report detailed several meetings of the agencies.

"They discuss how to deal with problem of reports and they all agree to co-operate and investigate secretly, but not tell the public they were exchanging information," he said. "Secretly they were trying to figure it out. No one wanted to deal with the problem of UFO reporting. They didn't know what to do about them, partly through a lack of resources to

adequately investigate them."

The report concluded that the Kaikoura UFOs were Venus or reflections from squid boat, train and car lights — the same explanation given publicly by scientists in 1979.

Mr Hassall said the report was a white-wash. "Venus had not risen [over the horizon] when some of the sightings were made," he said.

"No one knows for sure what the Kaikoura sightings were. It could have been an unusual natural phenomenon ... They [the Ministry] just made a complete shambles of the whole affair."

Mr Hassall also viewed Ministry reports on other sightings, detailed in the book.

He said he remained "a fair minded sceptic" over whether even one was an alien spacecraft. Of the 4000 reported sightings since 1880, he believed only five percent could not be explained. The NZ Files, from Bateman Publishing, will be released on October 19.

Millennium crystal plan aims for peace

Press, 22 Dec 98

A Christchurch group in a joint venture with a Moriori iwi plans to sell more than 730,000 quartz crystals for \$US20 (NZ\$38) each in a year 2000 initiative.

The Chatham Islands' Te Iwi Moriori Trust Board and five Christchurch businessmen plan to sell up to 730,500 crystals on the Internet, and to ask buyers to join in a mass prayer for world peace on February 29, 2000. The crystals could gross almost \$28 million if all sell.

The crystals, the number of which

represents the number of days of the first two millennia, will be purified under a waterfall for two days before being buried for nine months. They will be dug up early on January 1, 2000 to capture the first light of the year and become part of a ceremony renewing a 500-year-old Moriori peace covenant.

After the ceremony, crystals will be sent to people who have reserved them. On leap day, 2000, the owners will be encouraged to unveil the crystal and recite a prayer (karakia).

Crystal Vision co-director Steve Ardagh said he and his partners had initially talked about using a much smaller number of crystals, but had seen bigger potential in the venture after talking with Te Iwi Moriori Trust about its special peace vision.

Iwi trust board spokesman Maui Solomon said the initiative was a great way to send out the Moriori message of peace.

The profits will be shared by the businessmen and the trust board, which plans to build a new marae.

targets". Many behave like wounded bulls when they are rumbled.

Lastly, Noel O'Hare asked why skeptics have been silent about the Teletubbies. I'll tell him why. They're there! Their existence is fact. You may not like them, but you have to accept their being. Ours is to expose the adulterated, not shout the bleedin' obvious.

Poor Marketing

I sat next to Bob Jones at the conference and found him an outrageous fellow. He then disappointed me, with his speech, when he demonstrated a total and complete misunderstanding of skeptics. He equated us with religious bigots and flat Earthlings. So he's no different to the public at large. However, he certainly re-enforced my belief that we do not communicate too well. "You need to be more assertive," he kept shouting. He's right of course — although this attitude didn't get him too far in politics.

It's not our name that needs changing, but our image.

Prize Quack

My award this issue goes to Dr John Briffa, who has a regular column in the *British Daily Mail*. He has just devoted over half his page in that influential journal (21 September 1998) to a woman who cured her rheumatism with a magnetic bracelet. No other explanations were forthcoming from him. No scientific examination or discussion of the natural history of disease, placebo effect, spontaneous remission, medical trials etc. He summed up by quoting the

lady, "It may not work for everyone, but I urge people to give it a try."

Noel O'Hare and Bob Jones regard sceptics as not only lacking influence but also importance. But this one unethical doctor demonstrates just how crucial our role is. His "expert" advice, avidly scooped up by hundreds of thousands of sufferers, is probably causing unbelievable disappointment and suffering. He does it for two reasons. Money and status. Without sceptics, Dr Briffa and his like breed and grow unchecked, like an epidemic of diarrhoea. And if sceptics don't stop 'em, who will?



Another doctor with questionable motives, Dr John Hedley, writes in *Pharmac's* just-released 1998 annual review that the wave of enthusiasm for evidence-based medicine "has a backwash in which the latest published data can put blinkers on doctors' judgement".

Pharmac, a tax-funded organisation designed to save millions, has this year put

enormous pressure on both doctors and patients to change to medicines produced by drug companies with whom they have struck a financial deal. By withdrawing their financial subsidy they place doctors in the almost impossible position of having to ask patients to change from their well tolerated and curative drugs, on to those with less scientifically established safety, efficiency or reasonable side-effect profile.

Dr Hedley says that just because one brand of medicine is cheaper, it doesn't mean that it lacks similar effects to the drug that it is replacing. This is misleading, because doctors are not only being forced to change the brand, but also the type of drug. Anyone can see where this is leading. The profession and their patients are submitting to enforced second-rate medicine. The trouble is that the changes often end up costing the taxpayer more, as the mistakes for trying out unproven cost-cutting methods are uncovered by subsequent management regimes.

The most likely positive spin-off from the present health changes, however, will be that evidence-based medicine will be the only treatment funded by health departments of the future. This will force my alternative colleagues into honest employment, or unfunded magic.

Dr Neil McKenzie is a Tauranga GP.

Psychics Off-target Again

- ❖ Rats carrying the deadly bubonic plague will overrun Los Angeles, sparking mass evacuations
- ❖ Patsy Ramsey will confess that she and her husband killed JonBenet Ramsey
- ❖ Bill Cosby will quit show business and become a born-again preacher

Psychic predictions for 1999?

Nope.

Those are some of the events that were supposed to have come true during 1998, according to Gene Emery, a science and medical writer and contributor to *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine, who has released his annual look at how the psychics fared over the past year.

Emery, who has been logging predictions since 1979 to see if the world's top prognosticators can live up to their claims of being able to forecast the future, said his list for 1998 shows that, "once again, when it comes to forecasting major, unexpected events, the best psychics have as much clairvoyance as Forest Gump on a bad day."

Although the Zippergate scandal was clearly the big story of 1998, none of the psychics made any allusions to it in the forecasts he collected a year ago.

"Psychic Sylvia Browne, a frequent guest on the syndicated *Montel Williams Show*, predicted that 'Bill Clinton will be exonerated in the Paula Jones case.' In fact, Jones got a big settlement, and it was Clinton's deposi-

tion in the Jones case that let to the impeachment effort," Emery said.

Astrologer Athena Starwoman, quoted a year ago in the supermarket tabloid *Star*, said in her 1998 forecasts that Frank Sinatra's "cards show him still to have plenty of zing left in his zodiac." Instead, Sinatra died.

"It was the same in 1997, when the psychics were predicting all kinds of things for Princess Diana, except her death," said Emery. (For example, the late Jeane Dixon had said 1998 would be the year "Queen Diana will be embroiled in a royal scandal.")

According to the psychics in the supermarket tabloids, 1998 was also supposed to be the year that:

- ❖ Oprah Winfrey bought CBS and made it "the first major network to turn its back on TV violence."
- ❖ Elizabeth Taylor married Burt Reynolds.
- ❖ Eddie Murphy ballooned to 300 pounds.
- ❖ Kathie Lee Gifford ended up straitjacketed and in a mental institution after her morning show was cancelled.
- ❖ Laws would be passed requiring kittens and cats to be destroyed after scientists discovered that they are responsible for a mysterious virus that blinds thousands of people in the US.
- ❖ Night-time joggers and cyclists began taking a drink that makes their

skin glow bright green in the dark.

- ❖ Fidel Castro moved to Beverly Hills following the overthrow of his government
- ❖ Rising insurance costs [forced] the NFL to eliminate tackle football in favour of two-handed touch.

Emery encourages people to collect their own forecasts for the coming year, pick out the ones that predict truly unexpected events, and wait a year to see for themselves if psychic powers are a lot of hype.

If you look closely at the forecasts, he says, it's amazing how wishy-washy some of them turn out to be, allowing psychics to claim success no matter what happens.

"Many predict things that are already obvious at the beginning of the year, such as media hype over El Nino, skirmishes with Iraq, or Microsoft getting into trouble over its monopolistic practices. Or they forecast things that are bound to happen, such as the stock market going up and down, or erosion on the East Coast."

With the year 2000 approaching, the hunger for predictions about the next millennium is likely to grow, Emery predicts. "Consumers should realise that if they're paying a psychic to give them special insight, they're probably wasting their money."

The Good Oil on Divining

Dr Feike de Bock

James Randi has demonstrated that a water diviner has a 94% chance of success in finding water for the simple reason that 94% of the land surface has fresh water immediately below its surface. The diviner is likely to fail miserably when he/she is asked to find a dry spot. The notion that water flows in rivers underground is only true for some exceptional places, usually associated with limestone deposits. Normally, water is trapped in microscopic pores and only moves a few centimetres to a few hundred metres per year. Similar misconceptions and statistics are seen in oil divining.

Catchment organisations are offered the services of diviners, and so are oil companies. Letters and maps are submitted showing in bright colours the location of oil fields varying in size from pin point to "company-making" giant accumulations.

Most diviners make a clear distinction between oil, gas and water, but demonstrate the lack of even the most elementary knowledge of underground hydrocarbon accumulation. They go to great lengths, and sometimes to great expense, to dowse for the black gold. Some wave their specially designed intricate divining device over a map in the comfort of their house, other rent planes and fly over the target area.

The contraptions used vary from the standard forked hazel or double steel wire to pieces of wood with

mysterious bottles and springs dangling from it.

Usually there are only the two extremes of diviners: those who project oil to flow in rivers circumscribing the entire globe and those who find little isolated pools measuring only a couple of metres wide and long.

The first category of diviners is convinced that rivers of oil, for example originating in Alaska, find their way across the Pacific, traversing Indonesia and Australia to enter New Zealand just south (luckily) of the Waitomo caves. (Black water rafting would have had a different meaning.) The diviner continues on to explain that by drilling into these rivers, the production of hydrocarbons acts as a pressure relief valve, preventing the explosion of entire townships or volcanoes located on top of these volatile rivers.

The other category of diviners arrive at the gate of a drilling site and point to a spot ten meters away from the rig where the oil should be found. Explaining that the deviated well already has its bit probing the layers 800 metres away from the site does not deter the diviner in the least.

How often are they right and is there any history of a company successfully employing a diviner? The answer is simple: the diviner states "Yes, all companies have found their major finds on indication of a diviner"

and all companies state "We have never used a diviner".

The diviner claims a success rate of 80% to 90%, which indeed is correct. However, a similar reason for the success rate of water divining applies in oil prediction. On average, every one out of ten exploration wells proves to be a commercial success. By predicting that the well is not going to be commercial, the diviner has a 90% chance of success. It escapes the diviner that virtually every well encounters *some* hydrocarbons. Often a hydrocarbon flow to the surface is even established, but further testing concludes that no commercial quantities can be produced. Such a well is generally plugged and abandoned as a "dry" well, which is an oilfield term and does not mean no hydrocarbons were encountered. Most diviners cannot distinguish between commercial or non-commercial wells for the simple reason that they lack the understanding of basic economics.

Still, the diviners represent a group of charming but deluded people, who have a genuine interest in the success of the company. We therefore respond politely to their letters, and as a geologist I keep an eye out for the one diviner who can really do it, so I can destroy any evidence and keep my job.

Feike de Bock is a petroleum geologist experienced in dealing with oil diviners.

A Brief History of Skepticism

Jim Ring

Around 300BCE there started a school of Greek philosophy called Skepticism. It continued for centuries, but was more like dogmatic doubt than the modern version. Bertrand Russell put their creed as "Nobody knows, and nobody *can* know". They may simply have a bad press. Carneades, one-time head of the skeptical academy, was accused of denying the possibility of all knowledge. In fact he seems to have denied the possibility of certain knowledge, a very different thing.

Religious skepticism started before that. One of the earliest quotations that has survived was by Protagoras, born about 500 BCE:

As to the gods, I know not whether they exist or not, for the obstacles to knowledge are many, both in the difficulty of the question and the shortness of human life.

The historian Robin Briggs places the origins of modern skepticism in the scientific and intellectual revolutions, which culminated in the enlightenment. He sees it as a reaction to the witch craze that swept through Europe during the Renaissance. It seems ironic to place the origins of skepticism in the period when persecution of witches was at its height, but nevertheless some of the earliest expressions of a modern skeptical attitude come from investigations into witchcraft.

In 1588 the Bishop of Angers tested a girl, Martha Brossier, who acted as though possessed by devils. He had two bowls of water brought in, but led her to believe that the one containing ordinary spring water contained holy water and vice versa. When presented with holy water the devils possessing the girl were calm, but when presented with spring water they threw her into convulsions.

John Webster (1677) in *The Displaying of Supposed Witchcraft* wrote:

There is no greater folly than to be very inquisitive and laborious to find out the causes of such phenomenon as never had any existence, and therefore men ought to be cautious and to be fully assured of the truth of the effect before they adventure to explicate the cause.

(Quoted by John Passmore.) If only the purveyors of modern pseudoscience would take that advice.

Karen Armstrong in *A History of God* refers to a "classic" French book, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* by Lucien Febvre. This apparently states that vernacular French lacked words for "absolute", "relative", "causality". In consequence, she claims, a skeptical attitude was not possible. However the example of Michel Montaigne (1533-1592) casts doubt on this. Montaigne denied that anything could be known with

certainly — a thoroughly modern idea. "It seems to be setting too high a value upon our opinions, to roast people alive for them." When Montaigne wrote this, his church denied that religious teaching was "mere opinion".

Yet skeptical ideas predate all this by at least a century. Nicholas of Cusa (1400-1464), a scholar and German churchman, was a cardinal and the church librarian at Rome. Using critical methods to examine church documents, he showed that many of the treasures in the library were forgeries. Nicholas initially attacked the *Decretals of Isidore*, a mass of documents, supposedly dating from apostolic times to about the 8th century. Many of these justified church policy and doctrine. Internal inconsistency and contradiction coupled with absurd anachronism was his method.

Nicholas of Cusa should be a hero for skeptics. He had no doubts about the central doctrines of Christianity; he merely wanted to clear away the dross. But in doing so he unleashed a new weapon that had a devastating effect. He seems to have been the first to subject sacred writing to scrutiny, but others adopting his methods exposed many of the greatest treasures of the Catholic Church as forgeries.

Lorenzo Valla (1405-1459) took up the new weapon with enthusiasm. He proved

the Apostles Creed was written centuries after the last apostle died and the Donations of Constantine was a forgery. This was a sort of will showing that when the Emperor Constantine moved his capital to the East, he had given the Western Roman Empire to the Pope. Voltaire called the Donations, "the boldest and most magnificent forgery which deceived the world for centuries". The Church fought back by declaring Valla a heretic, but Alfonso of Naples, his patron, protected him. He also benefited in that the ruling pontiff was more interested in scholarship than religion.

Just why the 15th century should have produced this revolution in thought is not clear, but a necessary step had occurred two centuries earlier. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) introduced Aristotelian philosophy into Christianity, and with it a "new" definition of truth.

Christian truth had been taken from the bible. For example, 1 John 2.22. "Who is the liar? Who but he that denies Jesus is the Christ?" Or 1 Timothy 1.10 which defines liars as those, "whose behaviour flouts the wholesome teaching which confirms with the gospel". Or John 14.6, where Jesus says "I am the truth." This last is a "category mistake"; a person, human or divine does not belong to a class of entities that can be described as "truth".

Many people today regard Aristotelian truth as common sense, but religious fundamentalists use a different definition. Following a

debate with a visiting American creationist, I suggested that he must have known that some of the things he had been saying in public were untrue. He responded by quoting 1 John 2.22, or in other words "Anything I say is true, anything you say is untrue". This illustrates why such debates are remarkably sterile.

Aristotle held that truth involves correspondence with the facts. Thus, "snow is white" is true if, and only if, snow is white. This may sound obvious, but until this idea had taken hold it was not possible for Nicholas and Valla to question the authenticity of church documents. Such documents were accepted as true simply because they supported church doctrine.

The English Royal Society grew out of a group that met for discussion of various topics including religion, but when the Society gained its Royal charter a rule was instituted that religious matters were not to be discussed at meetings. Instead, they would concentrate on Natural Philosophy, that is science, and they adopted a motto, *Nullius in verba*. This can be translated variously, but the flavour of the original is maintained by *Nothing on authority*. In other words, it did not matter what the Church, or the Bible, or Aristotle said, the truth was to be determined by investigation into nature, and it was not to be rejected if it disagreed with those authorities.

The Royal Society held its annual general meeting on the day of St. Andrew. According to John Aubrey

(1626-1697), Sir William Petty (a member and a friend of Aubrey) suggested that St Thomas's day was more suitable. Doubting Thomas was the appropriate patron for a society with the motto *There is Nothing in Words* (Aubrey's translation). For the church, faith was a virtue; in a scientist it is a vice if it intrudes into the investigation.

There was still danger in expressing such ideas. Aubrey also tells that the Anglican bishops at this time wanted to burn Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher, at the stake for his heretical views. However, they lacked the power. A quarter of a century earlier, parliament had impeached and beheaded an Archbishop of Canterbury who had too much persecuting zeal. That executed archbishop, Laud, was the last ever to burn a heretic in England. While burning heretics was still a pious duty, it could have unfortunate consequences, particularly for archbishops.

Skepticism and an objective definition of truth were essential for the rise of science, but a third factor was also important: toleration. Free and open (often vigorous; the letters of Isaac Newton are sometimes vitriolic) debate was essential. These factors do not explain the rise of science, but surely they were necessary for its development.

Jim Ring has a wide-ranging interest in Skeptical topics.

Skeptics' Videotape Library Catalogue

For some years the Skeptics have had a collection of videotapes available for members to borrow. These are on topics thought to be of interest to skeptics, including firewalking, spontaneous human combustion (unrelated to firewalking!), homeopathy, UFOs, alien abduction, etc. and have been sourced mainly from material broadcast in New Zealand.

The quality of the tapes varies, as the librarian lives on the Coromandel Peninsula where reception can be difficult at times, but all are watchable. A complete listing of titles available can be found on our Web site, but the following are amongst the most interesting titles in the librarian's opinion:

"A Case of Spontaneous Human Combustion" QED BBC 1989 30 minutes

An excellent BBC programme starting with descriptions of actual cases of seemingly inexplicable consumption by fire of several human bodies.

***The Man Who Walks on Fire* BBC 1985 40 minutes**

A classic documentary for fire walking skeptics...follows a class led by British firewalker/martial artist/hypnotherapist Hugh Bromiley as he prepares them for a walk across 4m and 8m firepits.

"ESP" We're Only Human TVNZ 1987 30 minutes

Brian Johnstone presents an interesting series of ESP

tricks performed by Dr David Zimbardo visiting New Zealand on a "psychic mission".

"Spiritual Healing" Foreign Correspondent TVNZ 1992 15 minutes

A brief but interesting and relatively balanced look at the healing scene in the UK.

"The Greenhouse Conspiracy" Equinox CH.4 UK 1990 60 minutes

This interesting programme takes a sceptical look at the current predictions of global warming and concludes that the evidence is not as sound as we have been led to believe.

"Miracle Cure" 48 Hours CBS 1992 60 minutes

An interesting look at those who believe in miracles and miracle cures, mainly in the USA.

"The Green Buster" 60 Minutes TVNZ 1993 60 minutes

A long overdue sceptical look at the Greenpeace cult and its worldwide anti-whaling campaign over the years.

"Homeopathy — Medicine or Magic?" QED BBC TV 1990 30 minutes

A very interesting look at the state of homeopathy in the UK in the '90s including its use by some "conventional" doctors and vets.

"Miraculous Healing" The Body in Question BBC 1978 60 minutes

One part of the superb series presented by Dr Jonathan Miller in the best BBC tradition.

James Randi NZCSICOP 90 minutes

American skeptic and professional magician James Randi giving his most amusing presentation at the 1993 Christchurch Skeptics Conference.

Ordering Instructions

All tapes are freely available for lending to interested paid up members in PAL VHS format. Please contact the tape librarian:

Alastair Brickell, RD2,
Kuaotunu, Whitianga
Tel/Fax: 07-866-5343

The loan of the tapes is free of charge. However, the NZCSICOP does not provide funds for the operation of this service so any small donation is gratefully received to cover costs of postage, tape and mailer carton purchase, photocopying, etc. In the past members have often donated about \$5 per order but stamps, blank tapes, etc. would also be appreciated instead.

Overseas skeptics may be able to borrow these tapes but a charge will probably be levied to cover the cost of making a duplicate tape. Phone or fax (+64-7-866-5343) for further information.