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The Danger of Absolute Safety

Felicity Goodyear-Smith

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OUR children are our greatest investment, our hope for the future. The best thing we can do as a society is to nurture the well-being and the development of our children. We want the best for our children. We do not want them hurt or injured. With this in mind, social, educational and justice systems have progressively developed policies to protect children and prevent them coming to harm. Today there exist a wide range of agencies, facilities and resources whose primary function is to keep children safe.

The principal consideration of the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act is the welfare and interests of the child or young person. This Act states that children and young persons

must be protected from harm, their rights upheld and their welfare promoted. The Act specifies that where possible, the primary role in caring for and protecting children lies with the family, and only if they are at serious risk of harm should children be removed from their family. It defines child abuse

as the harming (whether physically, emotionally or sexually), ill-treatment, abuse, neglect or deprivation of children, and children are in need of care or protection if they are being, or are likely to be, seriously abused in any way.

New Zealand children are exposed to child protection and safety programmes from a very early age. There have been several education programmes designed for pre-school children. These all promote the belief that children have a right to absolute safety. The "Feeling Safe" handbook states "All children deserve to be safe and feel safe always". Another early child- ⇒ p3

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Parental Rights

It's my right as a parent to decide what is best for my child. After all, I'm a caring parent who dearly loves her children and would do only what is best for them.

Sounds reasonable? But what if I truly believe I should beat my child. People do. I may want to withhold a life-saving blood transfusion from them. Jehovah Witness parents believe this sincerely. Or I may decide that my child will be better off having quantum-boosted radio waves or happy thoughts beamed at his cancerous growth, rather than nasty chemotherapy.

After all, in commenting on just such a case, the Health and Disability Commissioner has said that parents have the right to choose what treatment is given to their child. I wonder if the commissioner will uphold the rights of people who believe their child's diabetes will be aided by prayer, rather than by insulin. Somehow I doubt it. Certainly the police aren't impressed by such arguments — they've arrested the parents of one boy who died when prayer failed to cure his cancer.

Yet, in the case of Liam Williams-Holloway, it seemed something was different. Certainly there seemed to be strong public support for a loving, well-intentioned family hounded into hiding by uncaring oncologists. At least this was how the case was presented, for the most part, by the media. I suspect that that had an effect on Robyn Stent's attitude and probably also on the uncharacteristic silence at the time from the Commissioner for Children.

One constant refrain was that the decision to stop chemotherapy was an informed one. I was therefore dismayed to see the family citing the book *Suppressed Inventions and other Discoveries*, as a reference. As its name suggests, this book deals with a vast range of conspiracy theories, from NASA's suppression of evidence for intelligent life on Mars through to the perpetual fruitless quest for free energy sources. It is the stuff of which fortunes are made by those prepared to rip off the vulnerable, and you can't get much more vulnerable than being the parent of a child diagnosed with cancer.

Of course you want your child to be cured. Of course watching them go through an intensive course of chemotherapy is hard. But that doesn't mean we should let our hopes get in the way of our critical faculties. Surely it becomes even more important then that you

question what is going on. By all means question what the medical establishment does and doesn't want to do.

But, and this is an important "but" that seems to have escaped the attention of the Health Commissioner and other commentators, you also have to question those claiming to have cures through alternative routes. Hold them up to the same scrutiny, demand the same level of evidence and challenge their claims equally enthusiastically.

I will be interested to see what happens when the inevitable outcome occurs and Liam dies. I suspect that public sympathy will be vast and so will the silence on the parents's culpability. After all, they were caring, well-meaning, well-informed white middle class people, not religious Islanders. I predict that the police will not darken their doorway...

Vicki Hyde

Vicki Hyde, Chair-entity

Erratum

The Income section of the 1998 accounts in NZ Skeptic 53 should have read:

Donations received	Note 2	505.00
Interest Received		1,249.28
Members' Subscriptions		8,772.53
Miscellaneous		10.00
Surplus from Conference		263.78
Total income		10,800.59

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hood resource designed to protect children from abuse ("Keeping Children Safe from Sexual Abuse") states "Children have a right to feel safe all the time!" The "Safe Before Five" resource gives a similar message.

The same message is taught in primary, intermediate and secondary schools. Material distributed to secondary school health educators states "Children have a right to feel safe". The National Protocol of the Ministry of Education, Early Childhood Education Services and NZCYPS states that all children have the right to have their needs met in a safe environment and "To ensure the safety of the child is paramount". The NZ Police programme "Keeping Ourselves Safe" is part of primary, intermediate and secondary school curricula.

Child protection policies predominantly deal with keeping children safe from adults. Safety means safe

from abuse. The units at primary school level do include personal safety education relating to physical dangers such as road safety. However, for older children, the units predominantly focus on safe practices when interacting with adults and ways to help children disclose abuse. Usually, the unsafe adults are men, who are presented as violent and sexually predaceous. Safety from adults is targeted under guise of generic safety, but generic safety is in fact a much broader and essentially a different issue.

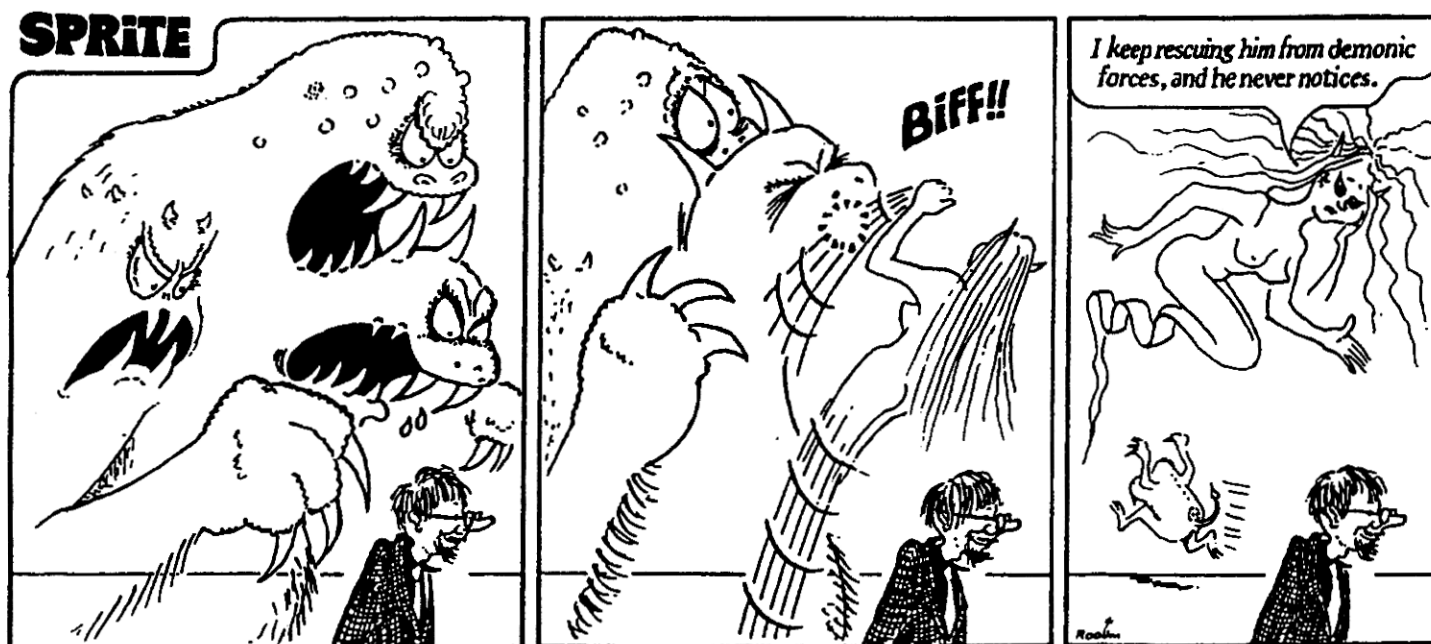
It can be argued that a policy of "absolute safety" has a price. No-one wants children to come to harm and we do need to educate children in personal safety skills. It is the role of parents and other adults involved in the upbringing of children to teach them ways to keep themselves safe, both from their physical environment — safety around the home, water and roads, how to

identify and avoid hazards (look before you cross the road; do not stick a paper clip into a power socket) — and, on rare occasions, from interactions with other people (child abuse).

I argue that a policy of absolute safety, of providing a completely risk-free environment, is neither feasible nor desirable. We should not set ourselves unattainable goals. Clearly, I am not advocating placing children in situations of unacceptable risk. Rather, I am suggesting teaching children how to assess risk, handle uncertainty and meet challenges. Such learning to cope will serve to reduce exposure to possible risks in the future.

Absolute safety is not attainable

We need to take into account the "benign indifference of the universe". No matter how much parents and other caregivers want to protect children, bad things will and do happen that are



Donald Rooum, *Skeptic* (UK)

totally beyond their control. Even if a child is raised in a protective environment like a hot-house flower (not allowed to ride bikes, climb trees, play sport or visit the homes of friends, for example), absolute safety cannot be guaranteed. The child might still suffer an accident or the consequence of an unpreventable adverse event, an "Act of God" such as an unforeseen environmental disaster.

Absolute safety is not desirable

The drive for absolute safety is due to adult fear. It is an imposing of these fears on children. This gives children an unrealistic expectation of the world, that they are entitled to be 100% "safe" at all times. Such a policy can lead to individuals who excessively avoid harm or who feel bitter, betrayed and victimised when adverse events do befall them.

Children need to learn about calculated risk-taking. We must temper education about safety with education about exploring possibilities and taking calculated risks. Parenting is about the gradual lessening of controls as children get older and more mature. Children need to learn the consequences of their actions. Childhood is a time of discovery through practice and experience.

Learning opportunities often occur when mistakes are made. Children need to learn the consequences of their actions. There is an adage "there are no mistakes, only lessons" or, as Edward Phelps put it, "The man who

makes no mistakes does not usually make anything".

We need to teach the skills of problem-solving and decision-making. To problem-solve, we must first identify the problem, then ascertain all our possible choices of response, and finally base our decision on an estimation of the relative good and bad consequences of each possible action.

There is a relationship between taking risks and experiencing stress. Hans Selye, the "father of stress", compares stress to food — we need some to live, but too much can be damaging. The complete absence of stress (like "absolute safety") is death. Our aim is not to avoid stress but to recognise our responses to it and manage our lives to cope with it. Our risk-taking should be calculated, not foolhardy. Children should be supported and challenged to take risks that are worth their while.

We want our children to be robust and hardy, capable of endurance and resilient — to be able to recover from adverse experiences. We want them to have a variety of problem solving skills, to be confident and able to think for themselves, and to develop into adults with a strong sense of physical competence. We want them to make good decisions and take responsibility for their own actions; to be able to work well with others, and to establish and maintain mature and satisfying interpersonal relationships.

Risk-taking has been shown to be positively related to creative ability and

to self-confidence. The specific importance of fostering risk-taking behaviours has been recognised in treatment programmes for emotionally disturbed and for mildly handicapped children. This is further illustrated by outdoor pursuit programmes such as Project K and Outward Bound, which offer children and young people the physical challenge and adventure of a "wilderness experience" aimed at improving their sense of self worth and purpose. Such programmes do not attempt to have "absolute safety".

Safety policies are gender-specific

In general, policies aim to keep women and children safe (from men). It is implied that men are prone to violence and sexual assault, from which women and children need protecting; that children are safe with women, unsafe with men.

The NZ Police "Keeping Ourselves Safe" secondary school resource for Forms 3 to 4 (13-14 year olds) contains four cartoons illustrating unsafe situations for adolescents. The first depicts a teenage girl being molested by her father or stepfather. The second shows a son being beaten by his father, the third a young girl being sexually attacked by her male boss, and finally, a party scene where the men are all drawn as lecherous and unpleasant, and a young woman is sexually attacked. All four show men as the offenders, the ones to be kept safe from. There are no positive images of men portrayed. While on their

own, each might be considered an unsafe situation for young people to watch out for, in combination the overall message is that the world is filled with violent and sexually aggressive men.

In reality, the vast majority of fathers and mothers love and care for their children and do not abuse or neglect them. The majority of non-sexual child maltreatment (physical and emotional abuse and neglect) is perpetrated by women. The majority of sexual abuse of children is by men, but sexual abuse is only about 10% of all child maltreatment. Fathers and mothers kill their children about equally. Children are at greatest risk of all forms of child abuse when raised by solo mothers, without input from fathers.

Safety in the Family Court

The New Zealand Family Court operates on a lower level of proof than Criminal Courts. The burden of proof relies on the "balance of probabilities" not "beyond reasonable doubt".

Family Courts are designed to operate on whatever is in the best interest of the child. Family Court judges often say that they will err on the side of "safety". The Family Court may deny parents access to a child on the grounds that there is a possibility that they may have maltreated child, or may do so in the future. Overwhelmingly, it is fathers whose access is limited or denied. Once an allegation has been made against a father, the Court must be "completely satisfied" there is no possible risk

before dismissing it. Fathers accusing mothers of maltreating the child risk reprimands from the court that such suggestions are stressful for the mother (the primary care-giver) and hence adversely affect her ability to parent. These actions (challenging the mother's parenting skills or mental status) may be viewed by the Court as harmful to the child.

Article 19 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child deals with measures to protect children from violence or mistreatment. According to this convention, parents have a right to ongoing contact with a child unless there is clear evidence that such contact will cause the child harm; also, children have right to a relationship with both parents unless there is clear evidence of harm to them. Denying this contact should only occur where there is proof of actual harm not just "risk" of harm.

The New Zealand Family Court goes far beyond this when it denies parents access to their children on the grounds that there is a risk a parent may have maltreated a child, or may do so in the future. Unless a risk can be completely dismissed, the court must take it into account. In many cases this does not adequately consider the potential harm to children of denying contact with their fathers, or having a child grow up believing that her father abused her when she was little. It is not recognising the right of children to have access to both parents.

Case story

This history is a composite of five cases I have been involved with, and I know of many other cases which share some of these aspects. All events described have occurred but combining several stories means the confidentiality demanded by the Family Courts is maintained.

Tony and Cathy met in the 1980s. She had a past history of psychiatric illness and was on long-term medication. For the first two to three years after their daughter Rebecca was born, things were reasonably OK. Tony was a journalist who often worked from home and he was involved in considerable care of Rebecca from her infancy. When the child was one, Cathy enrolled in a course in counselling.

Cathy stopped taking her medication. Problems started to develop in their relationship and when Rebecca was aged 3 1/2, she decided the marriage was over and asked Tony to move out. He went to stay with his brother and his wife. For the first month he would have Rebecca frequently, but he and Cathy were arguing a lot, although not fighting physically.

After one month Cathy refused to let Tony see Rebecca. He heard via friends that she had a new boyfriend (a fellow student from the course) and Rebecca was spending her days at the creche attached to the institute where she was studying. Tony filed for custody. Three weeks later he was arrested at work, charged with

indecent assault and rape of his daughter. Rebecca now was just four.

Cathy claimed Rebecca had said she had seen daddy's penis and "stuff" had come out and also that the penis had gone in (her) vagina. The child had three interviews with a psychologist. In the first and second interviews she said she had seen daddy's penis. At her third interview she said his penis had gone in her vagina, that it had felt yucky and had hurt. Tony explained to police that he and Cathy used withdrawal as contraception, and twice had caught Rebecca watching him and Cathy during sexual intercourse. Tony denied all sexual contact with his daughter but felt that she was describing what she had seen happen between her parents.

All access stopped. Rebecca began attending weekly sex abuse counselling. Fifteen months later the matter came to trial. Rebecca's interviews were shown to be deeply flawed and contaminating, with many leading questions. Medical evidence indicated that there could have been no penetration of Rebecca's vagina, and the jury acquitted Tony on all charges.

Tony returned to the Family Court to apply for access to his daughter. Nine months later there was a defended court hearing, effectively a re-trial. It was concluded that while the girl had not been raped, it could not be said categorically that she had never been abused, although there was no evidence that she had. The

judge said he had to err on the side of safety. While there was no evidence this had ever occurred in the past, it could not be proved that Rebecca would never be maltreated by her father in the future. The judge decided that both Rebecca and her mother would now be too distressed by unsupervised access.

By this stage, Rebecca was six and had undergone two years of counselling, funded by ACC. The judge ordered supervised access either at an approved centre or by using family members or friends for supervisors. The latter never occurred because Cathy would not approve anyone as a supervisor. The judge also ordered that Cathy attend counselling to help her understand why professionals might be saying that these allegations were not true and accept that her daughter may not have been abused. This requirement was never met.

One and a half years later, Tony is still limited to two hours weekly supervised access with his daughter, which costs him \$20 per session. He pays maintenance of over \$400 a month, and lives frugally to pay off \$108,000 legal costs.

Tony's contact with Rebecca is very restricted. At the access centre he attends, all communication between them is monitored. He is forbidden to ask her any questions at all, even of the most benign nature (for example, what she is learning about at school). He is not allowed to discuss their family with her. His only source of com-

munication with her mother is through the supervised access centre. He cannot ask Rebecca what she would like for her birthday. If she herself does mention something that she would like, he has to ask permission from her mother to give it to her. He has no ready access to her school reports nor her medical files should she be taken sick.

About once a month, Cathy fails to take Rebecca to the Centre. Tony has no redress for these breaches. Tony has to travel 35 km to the Centre, and traffic conditions make the time this takes variable. He recently arrived 10 minutes early; saw Cathy dropping off Rebecca; parked several cars away and once she had left, went to the gate. Rebecca ran to greet him. However the supervisor came, told him in front of his daughter that he had breached his contract by being early and that he forfeited the right for a visit that day. Frequently Cathy remains in the car-park and watches Tony and Rebecca during access visits. Despite this being a breach of the contract, Tony has no redress against this.

Tony has always adamantly denied any abuse or violence against either Cathy or Rebecca. He is supported by his family, who believe that the allegations were false and probably the product of Cathy's ongoing mental problems.

Cathy has isolated herself and her daughter from the rest of the extended family, so Rebecca has no contact with her paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

ins. Tony continues to abide by the restrictions even though they preclude having a relaxed and natural time with Rebecca, because he believes that even this limited contact with her father is better for her than no father at all.

Culture of fear

We now have a generation of men afraid to comfort and care for children in case their innocent actions are misconstrued. Fathers are afraid to bathe their children; grandfathers afraid to have grandchildren on their knees. Elderly men who would once have comforted a child crying on the street (maybe with a grazed knee) now cross the road to avoid getting involved. Male teachers are no longer able to give children a hug or put an arm around them when they are upset.

Separating a child from a loved parent on the basis of hearsay evidence of what might possibly (not probably) happen or have happened without corroborating evidence is foolish, and could well be harming the child needlessly.

There is no absolute knowledge and the concept of "absolute safety" is fatally flawed. Irreducible uncertainty leads to unavoidable error and results in inevitable injustice. Life cannot always be "fair". We can estimate the likelihood of exposure to mischance. However, we cannot read the future. The unpredictable can and will happen.

Paradoxically, the current culture of safety does not prepare children to live in a world where all actions may carry a degree of risk and

where uncertainty and incomplete knowledge means that consequences cannot be predicted with 100% surety. In our desire to keep children from harm, we need to be realistic about the possible dangers they face and the implications of policies designed to protect them. It is neither feasible nor desirable

to provide a completely risk-free environment for our children.

Felicity Goodyear-Smith is a research fellow at the Dept of Psychiatry and Behavioural Science, Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences, University of Auckland.

References available from the editor.

Not Eating May be Hazardous to Health

Jason Collie

SKEPTICS have put up \$100,000 in a bid to make a controversial Australian spiritualist eat her words over claims she does not need food.

The New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists has put up the purse as a reward to New Age teacher Jasmuheen, if she can go a month without eating, but there is a catch.

The group wants to keep her in a house for a month under the watchful eye of security guards. She would then have to run a kilometre to prove she was still healthy. Jasmuheen, aged 43, says she has not needed to eat for five years and is nourished by her internal power source. She is the author of a book, "Living On Light", and her teachings have been linked with three starvation deaths overseas. The humanists have offered to put up Jasmuheen in a house in sunny Nelson to give her a sporting chance to collect their \$100,000, said spokesman Bill Cooke. Members of their association do not believe in God or the supernatural.

"On the serious side, it has been reported three

people around the world died from having too uncritical an idea of following what is said in her book, while on the flippancy side we just don't believe it," said Mr Cooke. "If she can prove she can go without food for a month and live on the blue god of light or whatever it is, she deserves \$100,000."

He said the group was serious and had the money.

Jasmuheen — real name Ellen Greve — left Auckland yesterday after lecturing at a seminar, but was not available at her Brisbane home to comment on the group's offer. She had previously denied any responsibility for the deaths of women who were apparently following her teachings, saying they had not prepared properly for the 21-day no-eating programme. She said she drank tea and water and occasionally ate cake to be sociable if she was out. The author of 10 books, Jasmuheen said "breatharianism" is about spiritual enhancement, and the realisation people do not need to eat to survive is a byproduct of this.

From the New Zealand Herald Web site, 28 October 1999

Skepsis

FIRSTLY, I must commend the September 1999 Midland Renal Service Nephrology newsletter. It warned that anyone presenting with unexplained or worsening kidney disease should be questioned about their use of "natural" remedies.

Herbalists are at pains to point out that plants are good for you because they are "natural". However, many plants produce powerful poisons — often to defend themselves from being eaten!

The newsletter said the worldwide availability of "natural" remedies without rigorous safety checks places people at risk. The kidneys are vulnerable to natural poisons, as it's their job to remove them from the body. They quoted some examples:

❖ **Chinese Herb Nephropathy**

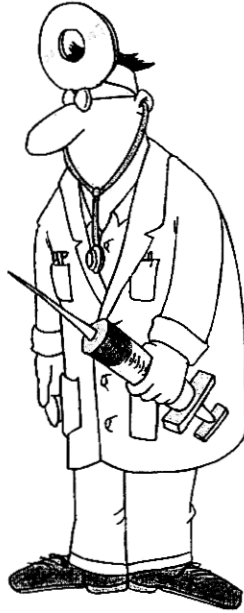
Over 100 women in Belgium using a slimming remedy containing anticholia fungi, developed life-threatening kidney disease, requiring transplant or dialysis treatment (*Am J Kid Disease* 1998 32 (3) i-ii, *Lancet* 1993 354 481-2).

❖ **Ephedrine Nephrolithiasis**

The Chinese herb Ma-huang from Ephedra species often lurks in food supplements and body building mixtures; and has caused deaths from cardiac effects. Regular use can cause kidney stones (*Am J Kid Disease* (1998) 32 153-9).

❖ **Potential Fatal Kidney Damage**

After mixed Chinese herbs (*Renal Failure* (1999) 21:(2) 227-30).



❖ **Hypokalaemic Alkylosis**

Which can lead to kidney failure, because of liquorice in several remedies for stomach problems. Other herbs damaging the kidneys include juniper, grindelia, aloli, ginseng and cat's claw. You have been warned!

Bring Back The Stake

The final year of the millennium was a successful one for alternative health (Liam is in Mexico as I write). Its protagonists world wide received more than twice the income of their evidence-based counterparts. Some signs are beginning to appear however, that the public's eagerness to choose magic over science may be on the wane. Ignorance is rarely overcome by logic or reason, but by that more persuasive force in human nature — dollars.

Alternative medicines' safety and efficacy, and their ease of marketing is being questioned. For example, cholestin, found in red yeast rice and used as a colouring and flavour for centuries, and which is presently marketed by Pharmenex as a cholesterol lowerer, is now under threat. The US FDA has concluded that it is an unapproved drug, not a dietary supplement. The case is still under litigation, but has huge implications for the alternative health industry who usually market their produce under the "food supplement" label.

Those who control the health industry are at least expecting their members (especially doctors) to be more accountable. "Prove it works before you ask us to fund it," they are saying.

GPs are being bullied into increasing their skills in prevention instead of handing out more pills. Time after time research is showing that not enough doctors believe in their ability to change patients' courses of self-destruction. Seventy per cent of illnesses need never occur, and if GPs were more aggressive in their efforts to get their patients to give up smoking and alcohol, reduce weight, increase exercise and eat healthy foods, then the health bill would be a tiny fraction of what it is.

Herbs, homeopathy, most "natural" remedies are merely cop-outs by people to avoid the honest self-responsibility health solutions. "Civilisation" has brought

with it a basic unfitness not seen in nature except in domestic animals. The fact that so many of us are alive is a tribute to the incredible powers of the human body to defeat the awful way we live. We wouldn't need all those expensive investigations and treatment however, if we got rid of our bad habits.

The courts and professional bodies will make a difference, as the manufacturers of alcohol and cigarettes will find out in the next decade, but we still need a change of direction, especially from our leaders. It is splendid to see more doctors who practise alternative health to the detriment of their training, getting their comeuppance these days. For instance, one such cowboy has just been successfully censured for failing to convince his patient of the power of prayer. He said he practised complementary medicine, which included traditional GP services, homeopathy, muscular and skeletal medicine and prayer.

The Health and Disability commissioner unsympathetically said that his attempt to use prayer as a form of treatment amounted to coercion. The patient, an atheist, didn't want it.

So my message for the coming decade, never mind the next millennium, is: Let's have no more truck with witch doctors.

Neil McKenzie is a skeptical GP.

Keith Robinson

A respected long-time member of Skeptics passed away at the Hampton Court Rest Home at Taradale, Napier, on 29 September last year.

Keith was born in Napier in 1922 and was at school when the big quake of 1931 struck. Among his souvenirs was the unused portion of the bus ticket his mother had given him with which to return home on that fateful day. Possibly then, at the age of eight, the shaking of physical foundations sowed seeds of doubt in his mind regarding the spiritual dogmas existing at the time. However, if anyone epitomised Voltaire's dictum, "I disagree with what you say, but would defend to the death your right to say it," it would be Keith. This was also emphasised by Wayne Church of the Hawkes Bay Freethinkers during his address at Keith's funeral at which Nick Pullar of Rationalists also gave a very fitting and moving tribute.

Keith served in Italy during the latter stages of World War II and developed an attraction for things Italian, be it art, music, history but above all, the engineering skills of the Italians. He was a founding member of the Hawkes Bay University of the Third Age and set up the Italian Language class for that group. Keith was a regular attendee at Skeptics conferences and when he travelled to them, a well-thumbed copy of the works of Robert Ingersoll always accompanied him and served as his lunch-stop reading on the way. Keith had also widely read the works of John M. Robertson, Joseph McCabe and Bertrand Russell.

A member of the NZ Rationalists, he served on their council from 1990 to 1994 and was made a Life Member in 1997.

Fittingly, acknowledging his affinity for things Italian and his feeling for the underdog, his casket was carried from the hall to the strains of the Slaves' Chorus from Verdi's opera "Nabucco".

Those who knew him will remember Keith as a philosopher, historian, social commentator but mainly as a good friend whose conversation and wit gave people in widely varying fields many enjoyable and rewarding hours.

Keith is survived by his son Chris in Melbourne and daughters Ann (Auckland) and Rosalie (Texas) and seven grandchildren.

Doug Taylor

Fasting claim fantasy, say nutritionists

EVENING POST 28 SEP 99

Nutritionists have dismissed as fantasy a spiritualist's claim she does not need to eat, and a follower has admitted eating again because she liked food too much.

Australian new age spiritualist Jasmuheen (real name Ellen Greve), who says she receives nutrition from an internal power source, has been lecturing in Auckland while prosecutors in Scotland probe links between her teachings and the bizarre death of a woman in the Highlands.

Two other women have died while following her 21-day programme. Today the New Zealand Nutrition Foundation warned people to be wary, especially those with eating disorders.

Jasmuheen, 43, said she drinks only tea and water, although admits to eating cake occasionally to be sociable.

However, her claims were rejected by the Nutrition Foundation's past chairman, Cliff Tasman-Jones.

"This is impossible," he said. "She could not live for five years."

"Everything in life must have energy put into it and she is getting it from some form. If she says she is having liquid, the possibility is that she is taking a liquid with calories in it."

Dr Tasman-Jones said he was concerned about the deaths of three of her followers and said anyone contemplat-

ing following Jasmuheen's teachings should be careful.

Beverley Flavin, 49, told yesterday how she had gone on a retreat to the South Island with seven others to follow Jasmuheen's programme of "living on light" for 21 days.

The group, camping on a farm, were not allowed to communicate with each other, she said. No one said they were hungry during the retreat.

She and a friend continued not eating afterwards but she admitted she began to eat again about a month later because she liked food, rather than needed it.

She now stops eating off and on and said the programme was about self-empowerment and exposing commonly held illusions.

"I discovered it was not my stomach which made me eat but my senses," Ms Flavin, who lost 3kg on the retreat, said. "I realised I did not need to eat, but I choose to eat. It was a shift in perception. I do not really talk about it, but there are plenty of people who were sceptical. I just tell them my experiences."

Jasmuheen denied any responsibility for the trio who died, saying they had not prepared for the programme. - NZPA

Liquids-only spiritualist spreading the word in NZ

EVENING POST 27 SEP 99

A spiritualist who claims she has not eaten for five years and whose teachings have been linked with the deaths of followers overseas is spreading the word in Auckland.

Jasmuheen - who says she lives on light and does not need food for nourishment - lectured in the city at the weekend as Scottish prosecutors questioned the role of her teachings in the death of a woman found on bleak moorland.

Living On Light, a book by the Brisbane-based New Age spiritualist, was found among the possessions of a 49-year-old Scots woman who died on moorland of hypothermia and dehydration, the Sunday Times of London reported.

The newspaper also reported the

deaths of two other women who were following the Brisbane-based spiritualist's programme of not eating for 21 days.

Jasmuheen, whose real name is Ellen Greve, said yesterday that she had not needed to eat for five years and received nourishment from her internal power source. She claimed the programme could solve world hunger.

Jasmuheen, 43, in Auckland for a conference called the International Gathering for Higher Consciousness, denied any responsibility for the deaths.

She said she had not told people to take up "living on light". If they did, they had to be well trained. She said she only drank liquids though admitted to occasionally eating to be sociable. - NZPA

Telepathy could be near - scientists say

DOMINION 15 SEP 99

LONDON

BRITISH scientists believe they are getting closer to completing a "telepathy chip" that will enable two people to communicate by thought alone.

If successful, emotions, pain, and movement impulses will be able to be communicated between two people with the chip implanted into their body.

Kevin Warwick, professor of cybernetics at Reading University, said he had volunteered to become the first human to test the chip, which he hopes will be implanted and wired to his nervous system within 18 months.

"I have a long-term goal to send communications between humans solely by thought," he told the British Association festival of science in Sheffield. "I believe it is only a matter of a few years away."

Professor Warwick said that once he had the chip embedded, one of his first tasks would be to write on a computer screen simply by writing in

Evidence for Noah's Flood

By IAN BRODIE

COMPELLING evidence that there was a Great Flood, as told in the Old Testament story of Noah's Ark, has been found far below the waters of the Black Sea by an American expedition.

Underwater surveyors led by Robert Ballard, the renowned oceanographer who found the Titanic, have discovered an ancient coastline at a depth of 137 metres.

"I am not sure whether it is Noah's flood or not Noah's flood, but I do buy that there was a flood," says David Mindell, one of the surveyors.

The Ballard team was working from a theory about the biblical flood of antiquity propounded by two marine geologists from Columbia University in New York, William Ryan and Walter Pittman, in their new book *Noah's Flood*.

As Dr Ballard explains: "During the last great Ice Age, glaciers advanced across the surface of the world. That lowered sea levels 120 metres. Then, 12,000 years ago at the end of the Ice Age, the glaciers began to retreat."

While the sea levels were lower, the Mediterranean was cut off from the Black Sea. Then water from the melting ice sheets raised the level of the Mediterranean while the Black Sea's level stayed the same. Dr Ballard continues: "Around 7600 years ago, guess what happens? The Mediterranean breaks through a natural dam at the Bosphorus and catastrophically floods the land surface. People living there are 120 metres below sea level and in trouble. They are facing a flood equal to 10,000 Niagara Falls."

This flood was on a far greater scale than the one described in Genesis, which speaks of it lasting for 40 days and 40 nights, covering every living thing on



Earth began, er than Ne animals c

In the each day metres of widening into what raising the The incom the fresh the bottom it into a s life. This an abyss, trapped v lost its oxy

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air with his finger. To achieve a 12-millimetre chip would be wanted in his arm, with a sensor clamped to a nerve, he said. To pass on the pain and movement multi picked up from the nerves to her chip-bearing person, both would be able to send and receive radio signals.

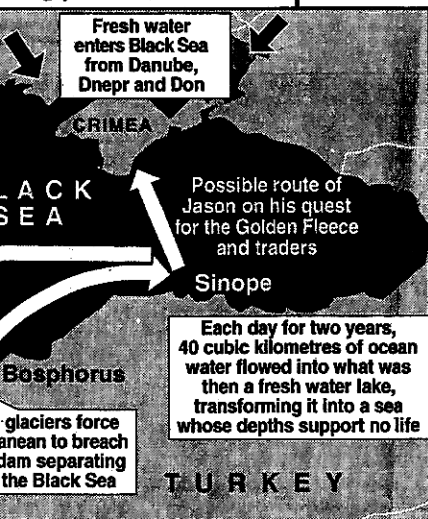
Professor Warwick is also hoping to be able to receive signals from a computer that could stimulate his muscles into making movements, and that the theory could provide a way for disabled people to learn from the computer.

Our guess is that if two people have the chip, one could feel the pain when the other person pricks his finger.

Professor Warwick made history last year by becoming the world's first cyborg, due to a microchip in his head that enabled him to open doors with a switch on lights automatically. —

und of the Flood

DOMINION 12 OCT 99



with seven metres of water oth-
er, his family and his pairs of
tried to safety on his ark.

new theory, it is believed that
for two years 40 cubic kilo-
metres of ocean water cut through the
Bosphorus channel as it flowed
into what was then a fresh-water lake,
rising by 15 centimetres a day.
The salt water, more dense than
fresh water it displaced, plunged to
the bottom of the lake bed, transforming
it into a sea of inert darkness, known as
anoxic, meaning that the
oxygen cannot circulate and has
been used up.

Conditions exist nowhere else in
the world, Dr Ballard told the *Washington*.

Dr Ballard told the *Washington*
Post that in this dead
sea, ships will be preserved in-

tact, possibly still with their
Bronze Age sails, and just wait-
ing for Dr Ballard and his team.

"I want to find the story of
Jason and the Argonauts and
their quest for the Golden
Fleece," he told the paper.

But his search for ancient
mariners may have to wait till
next year when Dr Ballard
wants to use the United States
Government's remotely operated
undersea exploration vehicle.

THE explorers say they are
convinced that there may be
many ships on the bottom be-
cause the Black Sea served as a
commercial waterway from An-
cient Greece to Byzantium and
the Ottoman Empire. The wa-

ters were known to be hazardous, accord-
ing to Roman historians. Dr Ballard says
the opportunities are dazzling for a com-
plete chronicle of the area's human his-
tory.

For his expedition, Dr Ballard has at-
tracted marine archaeologists who had
viewed him sceptically as a treasure
hunter, but who are now convinced that
his motives are primarily scientific. He
has not enriched himself by taking arte-
facts from the Titanic nor his other finds,
the liners *Lusitania* and *Andrea Doria*
plus the German battleship *Bismarck* and
the American carrier *Yorktown*.

Dr Ballard has participated in 120
deep-sea expeditions. This year he found
two Phoenician ships more than 3000
years old at 300 metres in the eastern
Mediterranean off the Israeli resort of
Ashkelon.

— *The Times*

Plasterer all white over ghost

EVENING POST 24 NOV 99

A Nelson plasterer is refusing to work
alone at Nelson College for Girls after
claiming he saw a ghost.

Steve Renwick, of Nelson Plaster
Board Stopping, said today he was work-
ing alone 11 days ago in the corridor
beside the school hall when something
caught his attention.

"I was plastering away when I kept
catching something out the corner of my
eye. I felt all cold and shivery and the
hairs on the back of my neck had started
to stand up.

"I turned around and saw a kid, about
14, just standing there with a really sad
look on her face. It scared the living day-
lights out of me. I don't know how long I
stared at her. Then I said, 'What do you
want?' and she disappeared."

He said the figure had long dark hair

and was wearing what looked like a long
white gown with a bow at the neck.

Principal Alison McAlpine said the
description resembled the old boarders'
Sunday uniform.

"A boarder did die here, between 1906
and 1926. There is record that the princi-
pal at the time had sat up all night nurs-
ing a boarder, who subsequently died."

Students of the school in the 1960s
also recalled experiencing the ghost.

"It was widely recognised that there
certainly was a ghost. She was friendly
and looked out for them."

The school was enjoying the experi-
ence and was holding a name-the-ghost
competition, she said. Mr Renwick said
he had to return to the school to finish
work but it wouldn't be alone. — NZPA

No doom, just gloom for Mir seer

An embarrassed Paco Rabanne has admitted his "huge blunder" in pre-
dicting the destruction of Paris by Mir space station on August 11. He
based his warning on Nostradamus. But after the solar eclipse that
day, with Paris unscathed, jeering crowds held a survivors' party.
Rabanne promised, if wrong, to stop his predictions forever but yester-
day said the French Prime Minister would never be President. — AP

EVENING POST 28 SEP 99

Aborigine spirits 'behind cow mystery'

DOMINION, 30 NOV 99

BRISBANE

COWS running erratically around paddocks on
Queensland's Granite Belt are not going mad but
are being spooked by three aboriginal spirits, ac-
cording to the latest theory on the mystery bovine
behaviour.

Dingoes, emus, earth tremors, lunar changes,
non-audible soundwaves and secret army exercises
are among theories put forward by baffled gra-
ziers since last Thursday when their cows started
stampeding to the western end of properties for no
apparent reason.

The weird phenomena, reported in the town-
ships of Chinchilla, Jandowie and Nanango, had
spread to include Mount Perry, hundreds of kilo-
metres away, one grazer said yesterday.

But Sunshine Coast clairvoyant Lyn Conway
believes three aboriginal spirits are behind the
stampedes. They were waving their arms around,
chasing and shouting at the animals, she said.

Ms Conway has offered to rid the graziers of the
spirits, who she says include a man in his 70s
dressed in a loincloth, a woman and another man.

"There is an old guy called Charlie and he's the
big chief of the tribe," Ms Conway said. "He has a
red bandanna, black curly hair and a loincloth."

Darling Downs' graziers Zora and John Poulsen
have 1000 head of cross-bred Hereford and Brah-
man cattle on their property, Wombalano, which
have been stampeding to the west every morning.

Mrs Poulsen said the cattle had settled down
during the weekend but were still showing signs of
distress and hiding out under trees.

"I don't think we need a clairvoyant. I'm afraid
I'm not into that sort of thing," she said.

"Besides, it is not just us, it is pretty wide-
spread." — AAP

Hotel staff in balancing act to give president suite dreams

By OSKAR ALLEY ^{DOMINION} 14 SEP 99

STAFF at Christchurch's Parkroyal hotel have been toiling around the clock to meet a raft of demands from the Chinese Apec delegation — to make the president's suite feng shui compliant.

Sources said an advance party acting for President Jiang Zemin had ordered a revamp of his \$1400-a-night suite, including replacing and repositioning the bed, and removing several big mirrors.

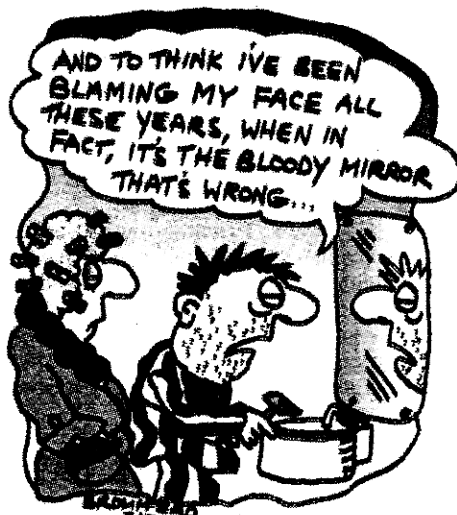
According to the 7000-year-old Chinese earth science, glare from mirrors is not considered balanced "chi" — the all-pervading life force that animates and flows within an environment.

Mr Jiang and his entourage are expected in Christchurch today.

Perplexed hotel staff, who asked if the mirrors could simply be covered, were told that this would be unsatisfactory and the "bolshy" delegation ordered them to unscrew several mirrors. Several paintings in corridors were also apparently deemed inappropriate and have been removed.

Police supervising tradesmen, "presumably to make sure they don't plant a bomb", were said to be bemused by the demands.

Parkroyal staff would not comment



yesterday, citing an Internal Affairs directive to not discuss Mr Jiang's arrangements.

It is understood the hotel can take one consolation from the feng shui furnishings — it means the Korean delegation has also agreed to stay in the suite after the Chinese leave.

Shark cartilage pills may inhibit tumour growth — study

^{DOMINION} 14 SEP 99

A GROWING belief that shark cartilage may slow the growth of cancerous tumours, is supported in a study in the latest *New Zealand Science Review*. But suggestions that the cartilage might be a cure for cancer, are a long way from being proved.

The study, by Wellington School of Medicine biochemist Paul Davis and

Industrial Research Institute scientist George Slim, grew out of observations that cancers are relatively rare in cartilage.

The observations led to the suggestion that cartilage could contain materials that were anti-tumour and, subsequently, to a popular belief that shark cartilage taken in pills would

protect the pill taker. Hundreds of New Zealanders are among a worldwide group of shark pill poppers.

In an examination of nine different brands of shark cartilage, Dr Davis and Dr Slim said that a similar cartilage dosage in rats produced inhibition from tumour growth ranging from 11 per cent to 55 per cent.

Through there are numerous reports of trials being undertaken to assess the effectiveness of shark cartilage as a treatment for human tumours, they say there have been very few published outcomes. Dr Davis and Dr Slim conclude that shark cartilage may inhibit the growth or spread of a tumour.

New medical centre

A purpose-built \$500,000 medical centre opens at Paraparaumu on Monday. There will be four full-time doctors, a practice manager, three nurses, a pharmacy, and specialists in physiotherapy, counselling, hypnotherapy, homoeopathy, podiatry and impotency. ^{EVENING POST} 2 OCT 99

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Australian fishermen film 'UFO'

^{DOMINION} 8 NOV 99
MELBOURNE

PROFESSIONAL fishermen said yesterday they had video footage showing a UFO sighting off the coast of northern New South Wales recently.

Tony Bell and six colleagues, of Eden, claim to have seen a dome-shaped object when they were about 11 kilometres off the coast near Coffs Harbour.

"This thing just appeared. It was about 30 to 40 metres up in the sky," Mr Bell said. The object had a bright orange, shiny appearance and seemed to keep coming closer to the two boats the group was using.

"It would move closer, then move south of us, then move closer again," Mr Bell said. One of the other fishermen was able to use a video camera and film the object.

"It was a flying ship for sure," he said. "You can see clearly from the video that it was some sort of machine."

Mr Bell is sending the video to the Melbourne-based National Space Centre. — AAP

Organic Means What?

Jim Ring

THE Swedish chemist Berzelius coined the term "organic" for substances that could only be made by living organisms and not synthesised by humans. His German friend Wöhler synthesised urea in 1828 proving Berzelius wrong: there was no such distinction. Another German chemist, Liebig, then used "organic" to mean carbon-compound chemistry, extending this to include the chemistry of living organisms and so beginning biochemistry.

Liebig started another new science: agricultural chemistry. He showed that plants extracted only simple chemicals from the soil and from these built complex substances. He advised farmers to return animal and plant waste to the soil (including human waste) but also to add simple chemicals as supplements.

Liebig disputed the theory that plants obtained their nutritional requirements from soil humus — a cornerstone of vitalist theory — and showed experimentally that this was not so. The vitalists, who later developed into the early "organic" movement, regarded Liebig as their arch-enemy, and being a naturally quarrelsome person he enjoyed this. They seized upon his errors; some of his artificial fertilisers were insufficiently soluble to be readily available to plants. Further, he was misled by work on peas and beans to believe that plants

can readily obtain nitrogen from air. No plant can do this but some (such as peas) have bacteria in root nodules, which can "fix" atmospheric nitrogen and make it available to the plant.

In my youth the organic movement still held to the doctrine of vitalism; that living things are completely different to those non-living and thus not subject to the laws of physics and chemistry. Those who demand that food be free of "chemicals" are rejecting science in this tradition.

Until recently, "organic" farming and gardening meant using no inorganic chemicals as fertilizer, only natural manures. It was simply opposition to the discoveries of Liebig and denial of an important part of science. The theory was silly but the practice less so; improving the soil structure with compost can improve yields. The addition of nitrogen containing fertilisers increases the rate of decomposition of humus. This can damage soil structure, as the organic movement claims, but organic urea does this as efficiently as inorganic ammonium compounds.

Today the organic movement concentrates on growing plants without using "artificial" chemicals, but their list of prohibitions is ad hoc. Derris and pyrethrum are "natural" and thus acceptable but other chemicals that have long been used seem accepted even if "artifi-

cial". Chemistry does not accept a distinction between "natural" and "artificial", so framing laws to ensure "organic" produce is according to label is extremely difficult.

Liebig's theory led to hydroponic growing. No soil, no humus, just a solution of inorganic chemicals as plant nutrients. Greenhouses sealed against pest entry do not require spraying (although outbreaks occur occasionally) so in the US, hydroponic produce is being sold as "organic". In New Zealand such produce does not meet the standard set by the organic product licensing agencies although it could be sold here (where anything goes) as "organic". However, if New Zealand-licensed "organic" crops are exported to the US, they will have to meet competition from hydroponically home-grown "organic" crops.

Derris is not very toxic to mammals but toxic to fish; run-off can badly effect aquatic environments. Pyrethrum is not very toxic to mammals or insects, although it has a spectacular quick-knock-down effect. Affected flies drop on their backs and flail helplessly with their wings, then recover. To increase toxicity a synergist is added but this is an irritant to many humans.

Synthetic relatives of pyrethrum were produced which need no irritating additives (low allergenic flyspray). They are no more toxic to humans but very toxic to in-

sects. As they are "not natural" they are unacceptable to the organic movement, yet natural pyrethrum with artificial synergist is acceptable. This makes little sense.

The organic remedies section in garden centres contains an odd assortment. Pyrethrum with added synergist is there, as is "garlic and pyrethrum" (which should be more acceptable to the purist). Most gardeners, like myself, prefer synthetic pyrethroids, no more toxic, more effective, and safe when used sensibly. *Bacillus thuringiensis* used to be there (it is still acceptable on commercial organic crops), but disappeared after claims of health problems following the spraying of suburban areas in Auckland to eliminate an introduced moth.

Some organic growers use copper compounds as fungicides (a chemist finds it ironic to see inorganic chemicals passing the "organic" test) and copper, though an essential part of our diet, is toxic at low concentrations. The safest form is copper oxychloride, but this is not acceptable to the licensing authorities. Instead, they permit Bordeaux Mixture (copper sulphate and lime), which was invented in the 19th century. Copper sulphate is such a common substance that it is not scheduled as a poison, yet its toxicity is so high that if taken orally it is lethal at a dose that would put it into this classification.

Practically all the chemicals used by home gardeners these days are so safe they are not classified as poisons, but fall into the less hazard-

ous category of "harmful substance". Copper oxychloride is less dangerous to the person applying the spray than Bordeaux mixture, and is less persistent as a spray residue, but as it is a 20th century invention it is not acceptable. This makes no sense at all.

Older gardeners will remember being asked to sign the Poisons Book after a purchase at a garden centre, but they could buy *really* dangerous chemicals: strychnine, paraquat, mercury chloride or lead arsenate. The substances sold today in garden centres are unlikely to be fatal even if used carelessly.

According to Green propaganda, fruit and vegetables we buy in supermarkets are "drenched with chemicals". Certainly they carry pesticide residues, but do these represent a danger? There is anger that the allowable quantity of Roundup (a trade name for glyphosate) residue has been increased for some food substances: "They are now allowed to put 400 times as much Roundup in our Canola oil." (I heard this on the radio from an outraged person.) But the allowable quantities are still minute and Roundup is not very toxic. The acute oral LD50 is 5400mg/kg for rats, which means that when a group of rats were each fed that amount about half of them died.

How they were got to consume so much defies imagination; it is equivalent to me drinking more than a litre of the concentrate — and remember, around half of them survived. A lot of the

substances we eat every day are much more toxic. When I was at school a fellow pupil tried to consume the contents of a salt cellar for a bet, and it very nearly killed him. Common salt is much more toxic than Roundup.

Researchers at Lund University in Sweden have linked Roundup to the increase in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (73% increase in the US since 1973). There is reasonable correlation; the use of Roundup has certainly increased in parallel, but consider all the other possibilities. Use of personal computers, digital wrist-watches, Japanese cars, and consumption of kiwifruit. Correlation does not equal cause.

The organic movement is less concerned with the acute effects of pesticides than their long-term effects when consumed at low levels. It is of course impossible to prove that there are no bad effects, but this is true of "organically grown" produce too. The distinction between "safe" and "toxic" is false. All chemicals are harmful if ingested in too great quantity (although it is impossible to ingest enough of some substances to reach the harmful threshold). Vitamins are highly toxic if taken in excess, and an excess is still a very small quantity. They are essential in our diet, but if a little is good then a lot is not better.

Jay D. Mann wrote an excellent article on toxins in food and their associated risks [NZ Skeptic, 19 March 1991]. He warned against demands for zero levels of residues on food, but that is just what is now being demanded. He also suggested

a sensible policy for assessing risk and pointed out that nothing is ever safe. Now we have demands that foods be proved safe: "No Genetically Engineered food until it is proved safe." This effectively demands the proof of a negative — that a product will never cause any human any harm — and it is impossible.

Many food plants have been produced by breeding cultivars lacking natural protective toxins. This makes them safe to eat but more vulnerable to pests. Modern plant breeders, finding many wild plants were pest-resistant, responded by producing cultivars that were so resistant to pests that spraying was unnecessary. This is fine for a crop like cotton, which is not eaten, but many such new pest-resistant cultivars of food plants proved too toxic for human consumption. Living organisms make some of the most toxic chemicals.

The New Zealand Health Department sets standards for the acceptable levels of toxins in or on food sold in New Zealand. In most cases there is an enormous safety margin, so that consuming produce with unacceptable toxin levels will generally be hazardous only if this is done regularly over a lengthy period. If toxic residues provided the degree of risk to young children that is carried by food with ordinary levels of salt or sugar, they would probably attract the attention of Holmes.

For food sold as "organic" in New Zealand there are no standards at all. But why should organic growers be more honest than those

dreadful multinationals? "New Scientist" reports that several examples of genetically engineered food were found when a range of produce was tested in a health food shop.

"Organic" food producers have organisations that will certify their produce is grown correctly. These are Bio-Gro NZ, and Demeter (the latter is part of the Rudolph Steiner biodynamics organisation). This mostly applies to food grown for export. A farm or orchard has to meet certain standards over a period of years before it gets certification. The producer then expects to obtain higher prices.

Bio-Gro states that it "inspects and verifies its licensees" but it does not claim to test for spray residues. Producers include Heinz Wattie Australasia, Talleys and McCain Foods. Some pretty big names there — even some multinationals! "Organic" produce is not just sold by the little people. Big business has sensed a commercial opportunity and is cashing in.

Bio-Gro NZ "makes allowances for growers during the often difficult transition from conventional to organic production". "Semi-green" produce commands a lesser premium than fully certified product. Again, Bio-Gro NZ is concerned only with the production methods, not with testing. This is not surprising given the dogma that treatment with some chemicals is safe, while treatment with others is hazardous; the distinction between such chemicals is ideological not scientific.

Organic production is incapable of feeding the present world population — a fact which is obvious in many highly populated countries (though not in New Zealand). And organic food is more expensive; poor people cannot afford it.

There is a lot of publicity claiming that "organically" produced food will be the mainstay of New Zealand's exports in the future. However, the purist European Greens are entirely opposed to international trade in food, whether or not it is grown organically. Those who have seen opposition to international trade expressed at APEC will not be altogether surprised.

Children in parts of rural England used to get time off school for spud-harvesting. A spinner turned the potatoes out of the ground, which were then picked up by hand and bagged. First, however, the field was sprayed with haulm-killer (an arsenic compound) to make the tops die down and facilitate the harvest. The residue was confined to potato skin and, as the English did not eat this, it did not seem to matter. Imagine my horror when going to Scotland as a child, I found I was expected to eat potato skin — I knew it was deadly poison! After a few years, the stupidity of allowing arsenic to accumulate in agricultural soils was realised and the practice stopped.

The Christchurch Botanical gardens stopped using Benlate because a worker's child had a birth defect and in America a group had successfully sued Du Pont after

children had been born with birth defects. This was an example of what Scientific American called "Junk Science in the American Courtroom" and the case was overturned on appeal. Actually, Benlate is a fungicide of such low acute toxicity that it has not been measured, because it proved impossible to feed enough to rats to kill 50% of them.

Bio-Gro NZ rules permit the application of limestone, gypsum and rock-phosphate as fertiliser (providing calcium, sulphur and phosphorus as plant nutrients), yet these were not classified "organic" by either Berzelius or Liebig and the early organic movement found them unacceptable. Liebig would have had a good laugh.

Bio-Gro are aware of the dangers in using compost as fertilizer and state that "plant material and animal waste from conventional sources must be hot composted". The (unstated) reason is that persistent pesticides go through animal intestines and compost heaps. However, hot composting does not remove them completely, though it may reduce the concentration, and there is no known danger to humans in eating produce grown in such compost.

Micro-organisms consuming nitrogen compounds produce heat in a compost heap. The easiest way to heat up a sluggish heap is to put a handful of urea pellets on top and water in (do try this at home, or rather in the garden). This is not acceptable to the organic movement if "artificial" urea is used, though animal urine is

allowed. But no heap is uniformly hot, it will always be sufficiently cool in places that even some weed seeds survive. The most persistent pesticide molecules are herbicides. Fortunately, most modern versions are not very toxic; the most toxic are cocktails which include long-used chemicals such as 2,4-D. If plants which have been sprayed are grazed or composted, the herbicide may have an effect on another generation of plants.

The "Tordon effect" occurs when horse manure is used as a fertilizer after the animal has grazed plants treated with the herbicide Tordon. The animal is unharmed, but serious damage can be caused to the manured crop. Hot composting (and nothing heats better than horse manure) may reduce but not eliminate this problem.

A Nelson commercial flower grower reported crop damage over three seasons. Eventually this was traced to use of pea straw as a mulch, the pea straw carrying residues at a very low level.

These examples might be thought to show the organic movement is correct, but they illustrate some dangers of using persistent pesticides and no harm has occurred to humans. They illustrate the fallacy of distinguishing between "natural" and "artificial".

DDT was a particularly persistent insecticide, which eventually broke down to harmful products. Organophosphate insecticides that rapidly broke down to harmless products replaced it. Early examples were

highly toxic to animals, but safer examples have been produced. The chemical industry has responded to pressure by producing safer pesticides but the organic movement has ignored this.

There is an alternative to "organic growing", one that is science-based rather than anti-science. This is Integrated Pest Management (IPM). The philosophy behind this is:

- ❖ to choose the best methods of pest control from the full range of available techniques.
- ❖ to minimise the amount of agrichemicals used (on economic grounds among others).
- ❖ to use non-persistent chemicals, and to avoid contamination of, soil, water and air.
- ❖ to avoid killing non-target organisms.
- ❖ to sell produce with a minimum of pesticide residues.

IPM monitoring systems show when pesticides are needed, rather than their being applied according to the calendar. In Nelson there is a mite-forecasting service which shows when build-up of this pest necessitates control measures. Biological control and pheromone traps are used when possible. Broad-spectrum pesticides are avoided, as these kill predators alongside the targets. Food produced in this way cannot be sold at a premium so it is no more expensive. Is it not a pity that sensible, science-based methods of food production are unlikely to inspire the support of a political party?

Jim Ring is a valued contributor to the NZ Skeptic.

Beer and Skittles

In which John Riddell continues his pub night discussions.

Chiropractic and the sin of Onan

If you are potentially defendable, and litigious, please do not read this. That said, I was at the pub yesterday and talking, as you do, about how the secularisation of Western society has made inevitable those mass killings by nutters, like those two computer nerds, you know, at that school, um, you know, the one before the last one. Anyway, none of us were designated drivers, so logic didn't have much to do with it, but someone mentioned superstitions and I foolishly used chiropractic as an example. Well, you'd think I'd just divorced his sister. "It's scientific", he said. "They do x-rays. It works."

I was now faced with a common problem for a skeptic. How to explain that it isn't, and it doesn't, and not appear like an arrogant closed-minded bigot. Simply saying "But it doesn't work." does not work. They know it works. They've been feeling sick, and come out feeling better. Never mind that pain is dependant on attitude. If your mother slaps your face and says she doesn't love you, it hurts a lot. But you will let a friend, pretending to be your mother, do it night after night in a local amateur theatre production.

And if you've had one too many beers to explain post hoc ergo propter hoc, you try an example.

Did you know that the sin of Onan (Genesis 38:9) was supposed to stunt your growth? It made you go blind. While Christianity held the hearts and minds of the people, it was regarded as a sin. You weren't even allowed to call it by its real name... Since Victorian times, attitudes to sex have changed. It is no longer regarded as a sin. We can call it its real name. Sometimes. We are talking about masturbation. We do still need a strong warning at the front of the article. The interesting thing is that now doctors tell us that sex is good for us. A regular sex life is strongly correlated with increased life expectancy. But our body chemistry does not care how many are in the bed. Could it be that masturbation is good for us?

If we look at life expectancy during Victorian times and compare them with today, we notice there has been a considerable change. People live longer now. Why? Is it because more people are doing it now?

People do feel better after visiting the chiropractor. Well, at least the people that didn't get killed by that neck twisting thing they do. But why do people feel better? There are many explanations. Only one of them is that the chiropractor accurately diagnosed and fixed the problem.

When you think about it, it's a lot like masturbation. It

hasn't been proven that it is good for you. That it makes you live longer. But maybe you should give it a try. Just in case. People say they feel better afterwards. But then again, some people say that it is bad for you.

There are in fact many reasons why people live longer now. I suspect none of these have anything to do with masturbation. The same applies to chiropractic.

It is not up to me to show that masturbation is good for you. I'm not claiming it is. And it's not my responsibility to show that chiropractic is bad for you. It's up to the chiropractors to show that it isn't.

Chiropractors make claims. They claim to be able to diagnose a number of diseases by analysis of the spine. These claims have not been validated scientifically. Chiropractors examining the same patient come up with widely differing diagnoses and suggested treatments. Try it yourself. If you go to a chiropractor, listen to what he says. Ask him which vertebrae are misaligned. Find out which have subluxations. Write it down, and the next time your back plays up, go to a different chiropractor. See if they give the same answers. Under controlled conditions, they don't.

I recently saw (on TV) a back-fixing guru with a whole string of real medical qualifications claiming that

the real cause of most back pain was attitude. Psychology. He thought that all you had to do was to take charge of your life and tell the pain where to get off.

Not long before that I had read a pamphlet by a medical insurance company. It said that too much rest was bad for backs, and getting active again was the best cure.

Now I have three possible explanations. Chiropractic, Attitude, and Activity (or lack of it). While the explanations are different, the treatments are effectively the same. All three "treatments" end up with the suf-

ferer being more active than before, and believing that their back pain is being reduced. All three "work". But the chiropractic option costs money.

So it is important to know if the chiropractic bit is the bit that works. Or if it is bad for you. Can they accurately diagnose stuff? Does all that scary bone wrenching with the nasty cracking sounds actually fix the problem? Or will it have long term harmful effects? Will it stunt your growth? Or do people feel better because a nice man tells you he can fix the problem, and so you become more active and the in-

creased activity is what really fixes you? We don't know, because the chiropractors haven't done the experiments. The experiments that have been done do not back up their claims. That's why chiropractic isn't part of conventional medicine. So until the results support the claims, when I get a bad back, I'll go to my doctor first. Make sure it isn't serious.

I think I can feel mine seizing up now. I better go do some work.

John Riddell is six foot two and his growth is not at all stunted.

Forum

Premonitions

As a born-again skeptic, I find it hard to write about an experience which challenges my entire values system; dead men don't talk, dreams and premonitions tell you nothing except, perhaps, something about your body chemistry, the whole body of scientific knowledge in all the different fields of hard science hangs together, so if crap like creationism and flat-Earth geography are true, then everything else we've discovered in the last 500 years must be wrong... Still, I must be brutally honest.

Skeptic editor Annette Taylor was offered a chopper ride today, and she had forebodings about it. I have ridden in helicopters many times without mishap, and I talked her into going, as it's

an exhilarating experience and quite safe.

Nevertheless, a few hours later I rang to confirm that she'd returned in one piece. Alas! Premonitions may well foretell the future. One of her fellow passengers was airsick. Reductionists and doubters like myself oversimplify this mysterious universe if we ignore them.

Well, I'm going to relax and read some New Ideas and That's Life I borrowed.

Pete Fowler

[Not only did Pete encourage me into a hair-raising, stomach churning chopper ride across Fiordland, more importantly he makes home-made chocolate croissants which he happily shares. It's good to see Tukatapere has its own skeptical population - Ed]

That Old-Time Religion

I didn't wish to begin a debate about the issues surrounding religion in the 16th and 17th-century, nor would I ever wish to stop anyone from taking an interest in history. All I wanted to do was to point out that history is an academic discipline the same as any other, and it is dangerous to make pronouncements of such a dogmatic nature in the subject in which one has not been trained.

Little in Jim Ring's reply to my letter persuades me that I am wrong. I still think that the comment about Archbishop Laud implies that he was executed for burning heretics, otherwise why say "while burning heretics was still a pious duty it could have unfortunate consequences, particularly for archbishops".

However, it is possible that in the area of toleration we are talking at cross-purposes. Toleration was strictly limited in its application in the 16th and most of the 17th century. Catholics for instance, were discriminated against for almost all of this time. Quakers and other minority religious sects were fiercely persecuted after the deposition of Charles 1.

But I would like to say that while I take a lay person's interest in evolution and have read some of the works produced for lay people, I would not dream of rising an article about evolution for the Skeptic without any reference to sources, or any qualification of my assertions.

The books that Ring has read are indeed by professional historians and probably a cut above my scientific reading in that they are not specifically produced for lay reader. However, to be perfectly blunt they, are both quite out of date. Trevor-Roper was not considered to be at the cutting edge of historical research when I was at school 35 years ago. History, like paleontology, does change in its interpretation with time and new scholarship. Perhaps I made the points in my first letter in too testy a fashion, in which case I apologize (I am known as a curmudgeon). Having said that I would maintain no matter what the subject one should be careful about what one says when one not trained in the discipline.

Bob Metcalfe

Medical Skepticism

Skepsis's last article on Menopause Madness [Skeptic 53] reminded me of my recent prescribing of progesterone cream for a well informed patient at her request. The good GP I am (I have faith, sometimes in evidence-based medicine!), I looked up the evidence on such creams and also perused the articles given to me by my patient. There was one randomised control trial review article by a gynaecologist plus a lot of very biomedical in vitro research which was of little use to me. Not much in the Cochrane database and a little on MEDLINE. One clinical trial of reasonable quality showed some results in terms of symptom improvement. Safety issues hadn't really been researched but then again wild yam cream must be natural and therefore OK huh?

Anyway I prescribed the cream after checking that at least it had been formulated with some attention to quality (i.e. not a Chinese formulated import). Thus both myself and my patient realised that we were trying a relatively unproven medication with probably a wide margin of safety.

This took me back to the problem in medicine in that too often we have used unproven therapy. On what high ground can we stand when we debunk "alternative" or "complementary" therapies? As an example, it has taken 20 years at least for the non-evidence-based unsubstantiated excesses of antibiotic prescribing in medicine, both hospital-based

and primary care, to finally be acknowledged by the slim majority of practitioners. As skeptics, we should ensure our own house is in order and close the gap between what we preach and what we do.

Thus, what do we do about that great realm of the unproven and unprovable (under current scientific methodology). We may recognise the deficiencies of current scientific methodology (Does a true skeptic accept qualitative research?) but that still leaves a great dearth of scientific knowledge in medicine, especially primary care.

Which brings me back to Neil McKenzie's comments on the Medical Council statement on alternative therapies. I believe that we need to focus on the processes of scientific inquiry in medicine both mainstream and alternative, not on debunking anything that we regard as "unscientific". Don't forget that in the early 1980s, medicine debunked chiropractors and osteopaths without being aware of the extensive scientific research in the US and Europe on manual therapies.

Anyway for some quite bed time reading, look up this Cochrane review:

"The Matter of Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health" Roberts L., Ahmed I., Hall S., Sargent C.

for some enlightening scientific enquiry and remember that important oxymoron: skeptics have faith in science.

Jim Vause

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