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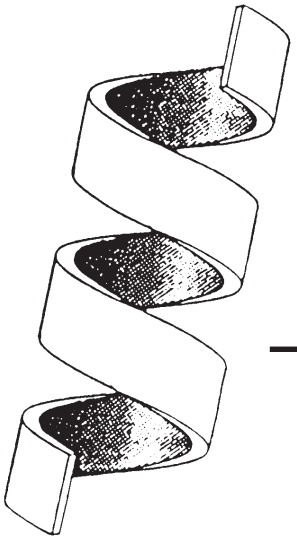

NEW ZEALAND SKEPTIC

Winter 2001 – NUMBER 60

A Skeptic at the Video Shop

© Nintendo

Is there anything on television worth watching? Maybe.

Vicki Hyde

WHO HAS the most dangerous job in prime-time TV and at the movies? Police officers? Soldiers? Private detectives? None of the above, according to one survey of occupational groups in entertainment – it's scientists who are mad, bad and dangerous to know.

In a survey taken in 1987, broadcast critic George Gerbner found some disturbing tendencies in our on-screen scientists. At that time, ten per cent of scientists featured in prime-time television entertainment got killed and five per cent killed someone. Take horror films, and scientists are second only to psychotics as the primary troublemakers, and apparently cause more problems than zombies, werewolves and mummies combined.

I'm concerned with the image of scientists here because they are usually the only ones who show any glimmer of critical thinking, however misguided.

For the last fifty years or so it has been the role of the skeptic and the scientist to act as the fall guys. They're the ones who are too busy scoffing to notice the werewolf creeping up on them, the alien aiming a death ray, the dinosaur in the rear vision mirror. And it's their hubris which tends to cause disaster to befall their companions, if not imperil life on Earth itself.

CONTENTS

Placebos All in Researchers' Minds?

THE placebo effect has long been of interest to skeptics for its presumed role in alternative medicine. The Skeptics' Dictionary (www.skepdic.com) has a lengthy entry, describing a placebo as an inert substance, or "fake" surgery or therapy, used as a control in an experiment or given to a patient for its probable beneficial effect. It goes on to add the effect has at least three components.

The first is psychological, due either to a real effect caused by belief, or to a subjective delusion - "if I believe the pill will help, then it will help." Alternatively, the effect may be largely illusory - an illness or injury will often get better by itself, whether it is treated or not.

As a third alternative, the process of treatment, involving attention, care, and affection may itself trigger physical reactions in the body which promote healing, regardless of the nature of the treatment.

The second alternative has received a boost from a study published in May in the New England Journal of Medicine. Danish researchers Asbjorn Hrobjartsson and Peter C. Gotzsche performed a meta-study of 114 studies in which the experimental design included a genuine treatment, a placebo, and no treatment at all. In these studies, they found a slight effect of placebos on subjective outcomes, such as pain, reported by patients, but no significant effect on binary outcomes. Even the slightly positive subjective outcome result could be a reporting effect - patients want to please the doctor, so say they feel slightly better.

Reaction to the report has been mixed. Some researchers have said it confirms what they'd suspected all along, there is no placebo effect, it's an illusion due to the simple fact that people often get better without treatment. Others argue that the metanalysis used is inappropriate for such a disparate group of studies. But however it turns out in the end, the affair raises some interesting points. One is the origin of the oft-repeated claim that, on average, a placebo effect will help 35% of patients. This has attained almost the status of an urban legend, but Hrobjartson eventually tracked its origin to a single 1955 paper in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Its author, Boston anaesthesiologist Henry Beecher, based his claim on a review of 12 studies, and, like other articles read by Hrobjartsson, it did not distinguish between the placebo effect and the natural course of the disease.

It's hard to accept there is nothing to the placebo effect at all. There are reports of people developing addictions to placebos, or demonstrating adverse side effects, and trials showing patients with placebos do better than others simply left on waiting lists. But it's a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. If we are going to assert that an alternative health treatment is "just a placebo", we need to be careful about what we mean by that. Does it mean the patient is experiencing a subjective delusion, or genuine healing through care and support, or simply going through the natural course of an illness? The Danish study won't be the last word on this subject, but it has very nicely focused an issue which has had some very fuzzy edges.

Contributions

Contributions are welcome and should be sent to:

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RD1, Hamilton
Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

Deadline for next issue: 10 October 2001

Letters for the Forum may be edited as space requires - up to 250 words is preferred. Please indicate the publication and date of all clippings for the Newsfront.

Material supplied by email or IBM-compatible disk is appreciated.

The plotlines have followed the same formula since the 1950s:

Take one scientist with an obsession.

Add some radiation, lightning, spare body parts or somesuch and you've got a monstrous menacing creation.

Said creation escapes or goes out of control, often with the assistance, unwitting or otherwise of the deformed or aged assistant.

Enter the potential victims, usually children – or a young couple, if you need a love interest. They often try to warn people about the threat, setting up the skeptical unbeliever for body snatching, disembowelment or demon possession.

But eventually these innocents save the day, often with the assistance of the local police, military, villagers with burning torches etc.

The Good Old Days

At least during the 50s, when mad scientists were busy unleashing all manner of Things, blobs, giant tarantulas, flying piranhas, killer tomatoes and other horrors on the planet, there were some good scientists who were able to figure out ways of dealing with the critters.

These days scientists can't even do that. Instead they're usually presented as either incompetent fall guys who have to be outwitted by benign laypeople, or evil amoralists willing to do anything in the name of science.

I'm not sure whether I feel reassured or not by the latest take on Frankenstein. Speaking of his recent movie version, Kenneth Branagh said that he wanted Victor Frankenstein to be seen, "not as a mad scientist but as a dangerously sane one".

But perhaps we're being too precious. After all, to paraphrase Michael Crichton, everyone gets short shrift in the movies – politicians are invariably corrupt, businessmen are crooks, lawyers are unscrupulous. It's part of telling a story – you have to have heroes and villains, and most general-release movies demand simple plots and cardboard characterisation.

Part of the problem is that skepticism can get in the way of a good story. Who wants to hear about an old house that isn't haunted? Or a dinosaur park where they design decent containment systems?

Part of the problem is that skepticism can get in the way of a good story. Who wants to hear about an old house that isn't haunted (see page 18)? Or a dinosaur park where they design decent containment systems? Where's the entertainment in that?

Yet all is not lost. There have been some wonderful moments of film footage which could be considered dear to a skeptical heart.

Cold reading is an important skill for any self-respecting psychic – using those valuable clues of context, body language and the general similarity of people to reflect back to them their hopes and fears.

The classic "Wizard of Oz" has a great example of this, and one of my favourites as it doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going on when Dorothy is running away from home and meets the fortune-telling professor. In case his quick glance at her suitcase is too subtle, he goes on to rifle her basket in a well-intentioned search for clues that he can turn into a psychic reading which will turn Dorothy's footsteps home.

A more sophisticated version can be seen in the fun Steve Martin film "Leap of Faith". Here he plays Jonas Nightingale, the head of a travelling preacher show, complete with convoy, choir and all the razamatazz of the circus.

It opens with him doing a cold reading on a cop who has stopped his convoy for speeding, picking up on all sorts of clues to get out of a ticket. There's nothing subtle about this – just before he gets off the bus, where his crew are laying bets on his ability, one of the newcomers asks plaintively "what's a cold reading?".

Nightingale goes on later to wow the locals of a small town with his miraculous abilities to know their troubles, utilising old-fashioned eavesdropping and the technological support of a good database and radio communications. It's a great movie based in part on the real-life cons run by US preachers like Peter Popoff.

Human nature

Of course it seems to be a part of human nature to want to believe, and that's what these sorts of preachers, psychics and snake-oil salesmen take advantage of. Disney's "Pete's Dragon" has a great demonstration of where the desire to believe overpowers initial

skepticism, helped along with a little show biz, as the good people of Passamaquoddy are convinced to forget their bad experiences in the past with two dubious characters and sign up for their latest nostrums.

I can reveal that the snake oil salesmen come to a bad end, albeit a comic one (this is Disney after all).

Ironically, in looking for positive images of skepticism, the bulk of the ones I have come across have been in children's programmes.

Scooby DooWhere Are You?

Many of us have grown up with the derring-do of Scooby Doo, but I hadn't thought hard about the storylines in this long-running cartoon series until a couple of years ago. The storyline is fairly constant – some kind of ghost or werewolf or Bigfoot or other paranormal phenomenon scares the Scooby Doo team until at the last it's revealed to be a hoax.

I do wonder if they hadn't a closet skeptic in the scriptwriting department. Sadly, the thing which jogged my memory of this was a cri de coeur from a poor skeptic, Tim Madigan, who wailed that the most recent movie had sold out.

"No longer do the intrepid investigators prove that the paranormal is all a ruse. In their latest incarnation, Daphne is now a TV reporter for an Entertainment Tonight-type show. She goes to New Orleans to look into reported hauntings, bringing her old friends along. She and the other members are once again beset by a ghost of a pirate, as well as assorted zombies, werewolves and vampires. But this time, when Fred and Velma present possible rational explanations for the weird events, they are poohpoohed by Daphne, who goes so far as to tell Fred "you're not a skeptic, you're in denial."

As Tim goes on to say, "it's all such a sad betrayal of the original show's glorious skeptical tradition."

Perhaps there's hope in other cartoon shows – my kids are addicted to the "Magic Schoolbus" series, which focuses on teaching science. I think they killed two birds with one stone in a recent show covering the concepts of buoyancy and pressure, while revealing the media-inspired hoax behind a would-be Loch Ness monster.

Another nice thing about the Magic Schoolbus is that each episode ends with kids critically questioning what's shown – the Magic School bus can't really grow fins and go under water – and the show producers explaining where they have taken liberties and why.

Larry Zimmerman, an anthropology lecturer at the University of Iowa, gets his students to think critically about documentaries like "In Search of Ancient Astronauts" and "The Mysterious Origins of Man" to critically examine how evidence is presented and what techniques are used to try and make cult archaeology and creationism credible.

Handy Questions

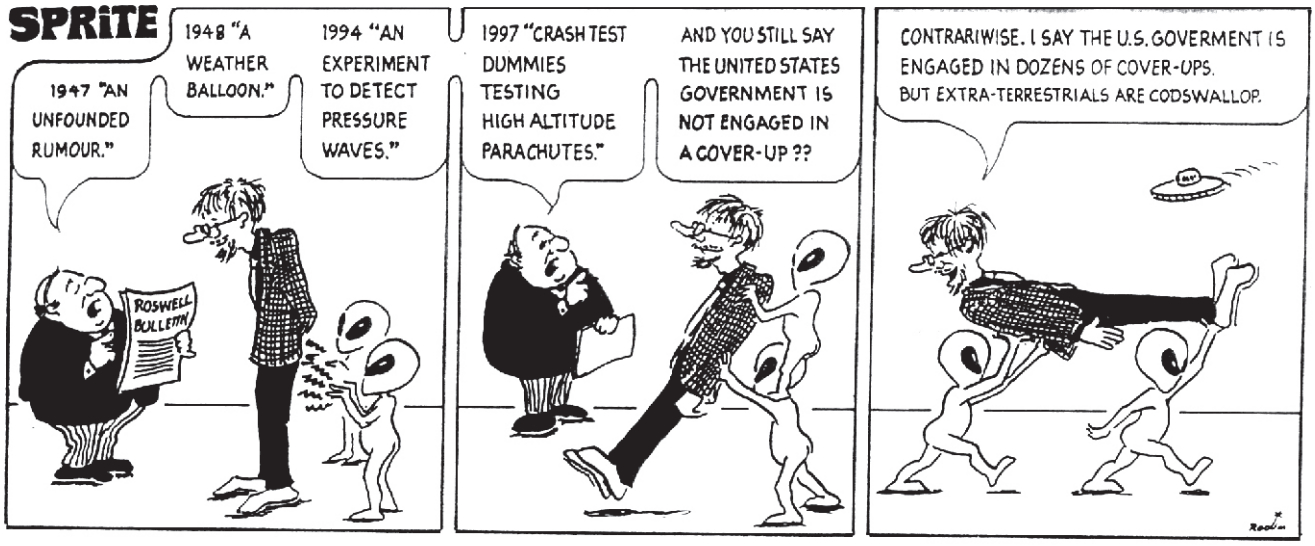
The questions are handy ones to bear in mind should you find your nearest and dearest riveted by the wisdom of that famous Old Testament researcher Charlton Heston. Things like:

Why do you suppose that certain sites or evidence always seems to show up in these videos?

What clues are there that some of the segments are used out of context?

How is the choice of narrator used to boost the credibility of the video?

You don't have to be a Stage One anthropology student to get



something out of a discussion along these lines. I've had similar conversations with my eight and 6-year-old about things they see on TV.

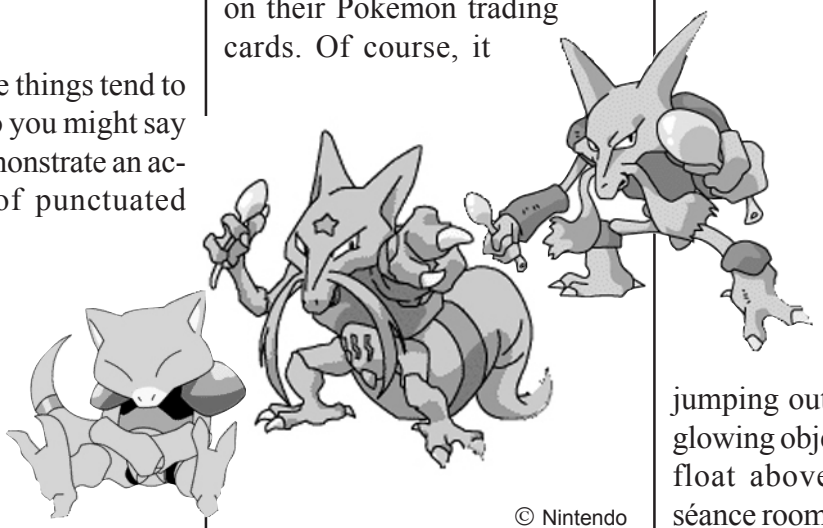
Of course, it does help to know what they are viewing.

A popular phenomenon of recent years has been Pokemon, some 150 horribly over-commercialised little creatures brought to your television screens courtesy of Japanese game company Nintendo.

For those of you who have had to endure seeing your children or grandchildren addicted to collecting Pokemon games, trading cards, models, t-shirts and all the other paraphernalia of fandom, I can now reveal that all has not necessarily been in vain.

One of the premises of the Pokemon world is that these cute wee things evolve. They adapt to their environment, with the fittest surviving and dominant traits coming to the fore. It's not strictly Darwinian but there's enough evolution there to offend Southern Baptists and Saudi Arabian muftis alike, both of whom have censured the programme for introducing the word "evolution" to 5-year-olds.

In this day and age things tend to move very fast, so you might say that Pokemon demonstrate an accelerated form of punctuated equilibrium at an individual level. That is, each individual Pokemon evolves into a different form.



© Nintendo

One such Pokemon is called Abra. The Pokemon website notes that though it is psychic, it lacks any useful abilities except for the ability to teleport out of trouble.

Now bearing in mind that this Pokemon is called Abra, would anyone care to hazard a guess what the evolved form might be? Kadabra – right!

Again, according to the stilted English on the website, Kadabra "doesn't have a powerful body, but relies on a strong mind to win. It can send out waves of mental energy that cause headaches at close range."

In addition to a mental attack, this Pokemon sports a rather surprising weapon. Not exactly an M16, but something no self-respecting psychic Pokemon would be seen without, it appears….Yes, it carries a bent spoon…

When Kadabra evolves into yet another higher life form, his weaponry increases, and he becomes known as Alakazam…

Now you mightn't take this very seriously, but Uri Geller has been spitting tacks over this utensil-wielding creature and has filed suit against Nintendo for $100 million. Apparently when he visited Japan he was mobbed by people wanting his autograph on their Pokemon trading cards. Of course, it didn't help that in Japan, Kadabra is known as Un Geller…

"Nintendo turned me into an evil, occult Pokemon character," Geller complained. "Nintendo stole my identity by using my name and my signature image of a bent spoon."

My heart bleeds…It was quite interesting seeing the response of the Pokemon fans to this news. Many of them had never heard of Geller – hardly surprising as the bulk of fans are under 15, but the chat rooms and news announcements variously described Geller as:

a "self-proclaimed psychic and magician",

an "internationally renowned con artist"

and an "all-around creepy guy"

One particularly perceptive and indignant young fan remarked "if Geller really is psychic, how come he didn't know there was a Pokemon based on him out already before he saw the card?"

I sometimes wonder if our so-called innocent credulous children are actually the most skeptical of us all, and that we lose this as we get older. Maybe there's something in the hormones which confers an evolutionary advantage to gullibility.

In "Secrets of the Super Psychics", skeptical researchers Dr Richard Wiseman has a group of adults jumping out of their seats when glowing objects start to move and float above a table in a dark séance room. What they can't see (and we can, thanks to the right film) is that these things are being moved by the alleged psychic

and an assistant, cloaked by the darkness.

Although programmes like "Secrets of the Super Psychics" are far outnumbered by the plethora of "unsolved mysteries" efforts, I think that few people will forget Richard Wiseman's séance set-up once seen, and they may well be more critical if ever encountering that particular scam in the future.

At least I'd like to think that.

We've argued for many years back and forth about whether something as straightforward as violence on television actually affects people. How are we to determine the far more tricky question of television's role in producing a gullible society?

It may not come as a complete surprise that there appears to be a correlation between television viewing and levels of credulity. Those addicted to "Oprah", "The X Files", reality television and other areas considered entertaining viewing are more likely than infrequent viewers to hold negative views on science and positive ones towards the paranormal or pseudoscience.

They're more likely to believe in astrology and think it scientific; more likely to think science dangerous; more likely to consider scientists as odd and peculiar.

This is not a simple expression of education levels, age, gender or any of the other factors likely to influence attitudes, as the study which produced these findings took those into account and still demonstrated that TV fans think scientists are mad, bad and dangerous to know.

Communications professor William Evans has argued that increasingly, film and television entertainment portrays science as useless in solving problems. It is seen as a handicap to use reason and to think skeptically.

Skepticism is all too-often used as a synonym for closed-mindedness. Take Agent Scully in "The X Files" – any self-respecting skeptical scientist confronted with quite that much unequivocal evidence for paranormal events would just *have* to stop and wonder. If I was her, I'd be off to get James Randi's one-million-dollar prize like a shot.

One could argue that there isn't necessarily a direct causal relationship between what is shown on the screen and the poor image of skepticism and of science, but I think it's safe to say that television and film provide a welcoming environment for the paranormal and pseudo-science. It gets far more sympathetic coverage, with little in the way of challenge, than that of science in general.

We had a psychic story in the Christchurch Press a few weeks ago. A psychic in Ashburton had managed to find not one, but two missing dogs. The first, lost on a farm, was predicted to be found somewhere near water; the second, apparently lost on a hiking trail, was divined as likely to be found near a tree. And you know what? He was right! Astonishing stuff.

This was considered sufficiently newsworthy to be given two columns and a photo in the Press; TVNZ went one better and sent a film crew down to Ashburton and then out to see me. All I can say is it must have been a very slow news day…see film at 10…

My thanks to Graham Hill and Alastair Brickell for their information, suggestions and videos.

Some Videos of Note

Leap of Faith

The Magic Schoolbus

Pete's Dragon

Scooby Doo

Secrets of the Super Psychics

Wizard of Oz

Interesting Articles

Science and Reason in Film and Television

William Evans, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Jan/Feb 1996

http://www.csicop.org/si/9601/media.html

Screening DNA Exploring the Cinema-Genetics Interface
Stephen Nottingham, 1999

http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/Stephen_Nottingham/DNAIntro.htm

The X-Files: Entertainment, Science and Skepticism
Fredric L. Rice

http://www.skeptictank.org/xfiles.htm

Lost Tribes, Sunken Continents and Ancient Astronauts: "Cult" Archaeology & Creationism Anthropology Seminar
Larry Zimmerman, University of Iowa

http://www.uiowa.edu/~anthro/webcourse/lost/videos.html

False Claims Thrive on Internet

The Misinformation Age has arrived at last

HOW many times in the last month were you conned or approached by a con? Maybe this con took the form of a weight loss product described in an ad in the newspaper. Perhaps it was a too-good-to-be-true TV infomercial that claimed to be backed by science. Or maybe it was a testimonial from a friend.

Even if you didn't take the bait, it seems that the more often you hear or see something that isn't true, the more likely you are to believe it eventually. This is especially so when claims are partial truths couched in scientific jargon.

The Internet is loaded with this type of misinformation. In just a matter of days, contemporary urban legends and outright hoaxes are broadcast all over the world.

These legends are part of a type of folklore that claims to be true. They may be harmless, containing stories that describe humorous scenarios, but many report terrifying happenings.

Many of these hoaxes are broadcast over email among friends and acquaintances. They frequently have a sinister or threatening side to them. You want to pass on this information to those you care about. Of course, these things always happened to someone other than the concerned friend passing it along.

Food is the topic of many hoaxes. Here are a few we've come across the last month:

"Costa Rica bananas have been infected with a flesh-eating bacteria. The FDA has been reluctant to issue a country-wide warning because of fear of a nationwide panic."

This is completely untrue as is indicated on the Center for Disease Control Web site: www.cdc.gov/ncidod/banana.htm.

"Aspartame is the cause of lupus, multiple sclerosis, memory loss, Desert Storm health problems, and obesity."

These claims, said to have been presented at a Conference of the American College of Physicians are untrue. There are hundreds of websites on this topic, making it nearly impossible to discern fact from fiction. The most reliable source we could find was Arnold Dias, a respected investigative reporter who actually contacted all of the claimed sources (www.abcnews.com).

"The Mayo Clinic has a weight reducing diet that has been formulated to alter your metabolism so that you literally burn fat. You can lose 20 pounds of fat in two weeks."

Untrue. The fact that there is no Mayo Clinic Diet is indicated on the Mayo Clinic Web site at www.mayohealth.org/mayo/9806/htm/mayodiet.htm.

This legend has been around for decades. The most common version is a very low calorie diet which contains lots of grapefruit, eggs, meat, fish, chicken, spinach, tomatoes, celery and carrots. You will lose weight quickly but most of it is water and muscle, not fat.

Today, we encounter tremendous amounts of information. Because of the difficulty in discerning fact from fiction among the info-overload, there is a strong human tendency to just believe what sounds good.

The next time that you think you're not being given the straight scoop or maybe just want some entertainment, check out www.urbanlegends.about.com, a website dedicated to clearing up hoaxes.

Existence of ESP confirmed

It's often claimed either that science doesn't have the tools to identify ESP, or that scientists have a prejudice against the whole idea. But American researchers have recently confirmed that certain individuals are indeed able to detect an energy field given off by living creatures in the absence of any other sensory cues. The only thing is, those individuals are young paddlefish.

This large, shark-like species lives in the muddy waters of the Mississippi, filtering plankton from the water with its gills. Young paddlefish use sensory organs on the sword-like "paddle" which extends in front of the mouth to detect prey animals (mostly small crustaceans) individually by the electric fields they produce. Some marine sharks, and the duck-billed platypus, have similar abilities. Still no sign that *Homo sapiens* can work this particular trick, however.

New Scientist, 7 April

Book Reviews

C: Because Cowards get Cancer too, by John Diamond, Random House, 1998. Reviewed by Bernard Howard.

So John Diamond is dead; at age 47 killed by his tongue cancer. He may not be well known in New Zealand, but was a popular newspaper columnist and broadcaster in Britain. Soon after developing cancer in 1997 he used his weekly columns in the Times and the Daily Telegraph to report the course of his disease. This book, written after he had endured some terrible experiences, appeared when he was still unsure whether he was "cured". Of the many books I have reviewed, this is the first to bring tears to my eyes.

Of special interest to Skeptics is that, to put it mildly, he was critical of "alternative" therapies. "....where I stand on alternative medicine is roughly where the Pope stands on getting drunk on the communion wine and pulling a couple of nuns." Because of his public position, his candour on this brought in many letters of advice and abuse. He was particularly enraged by those which told him to take "a positive attitude", or to "take control of his illness".

The trouble started with a lump. No need to worry, said the doctors, you have a 92% chance it's harmless. Unfortunately, Diamond was of the other 8%. The lump became a tumour; no need to worry, said the doctors again, radiotherapy will give you an x% chance of a cure. Again unfortunately, Diamond was of the (100-x)%. And so, to the surgery, described in almost unbearable detail. Because of the effect of the surgery on his speech and ability to swallow, this man, who previously had spent much of his working day in a broadcasting studio or on the telephone, was reduced, in his words, to "a honking, dribbling fool". A dreadful fate.

Despite the fact that conventional medicine did not, in the long run, save him, Diamond never accepted that alternative treatments would serve him better. Although he earlier admitted that, in extremis, he might visit "that well of alternative solace", there is no sign that he ever wavered in his opposition to those he called "scatterers of pixie dust".

Diamond's writing is full of insights expressed with wit. What text-book could explain for the general reader the difference between cancer cells and normal cells as pithily as this:- "A cancer cell is the one that never grows up....[it] bears all the nastier traits of reckless youth...[a member] of some wacky religious cult obsessed with immortality." And metastasis: ".. spreading the good word round the body...to share the secret of eternal cellular life with other cells." These apparently lighthearted words were written by the "honking, dribbling fool".

He disliked the warlike metaphors used in discussing disease; "battle" and "brave" he avoided in his writing, claiming that this stigmatised those who succumbed to the disease as cowards or losers.

The Canterbury Public Library has five copies of this book, and I have had to join a longish queue of borrowers. It is gratifying that the author's views and experiences are being widely read; I hope readers are as impressed as I, and accept the message. No doubt some of us who hold "alternative medicine" in derision will also die of cancer. Let us look to John Diamond as our inspiration when courage and steadfastness may falter.

TELLING LIES FOR FATHER MOON

With acknowledgement to Ian Plimer

Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth? Why Much of What We Teach About Evolution is Wrong, by Jonathan Wells.

This is an important book. Look out for it, for example, in places where young minds could be influenced, such as high school libraries, or other places where creationists might care to spend US$27.95. The text may be unremarkable, the usual misquotations, selective omission, distortions, etc. The important thing is the credentials of the author; surely the holder of a doctorate in biology from one of the USA's finest universities cannot be wrong?

However, there is more to Dr Wells than his biography in the book tells. Thanks to some astute websearching on the part of the biologist who reviewed it for Nature, we are now aware of the following:

1. Wells has been a member of the Unification Church (the Moonies) for upward of 25 years.

2. He was chosen by the founder of the church, Sun Myung Moon, to study for a Ph.D., in preparation for his life's work, destroying Darwinism.

3. He appears to have gone through the entire post-graduate programme of course work and a substantial research project without his teachers or supervisor knowing of his beliefs and intentions.

Distasteful though it may seem, it could be possible for a student to go through an undergraduate course, passing examinations on existing knowledge without accepting its validity. The situation is greatly different when tackling a research project for a post-graduate qualification. Those of us who have been through this academic mill know the dedication required, not only of time, but of the mind, to the search for new knowledge. I find it hard to credit that one could do research in developmental biology, as Wells did, while believing that growth of a life is something quite different.

But perhaps one should not be surprised. With the example of Australian geologist Dr Andrew Snelling before us, who believes the Earth is billions of years old when writing for geological journals, but only a few thousand when concocting creationist literature, the capacity of creationists for deception or self-deception seems limitless.

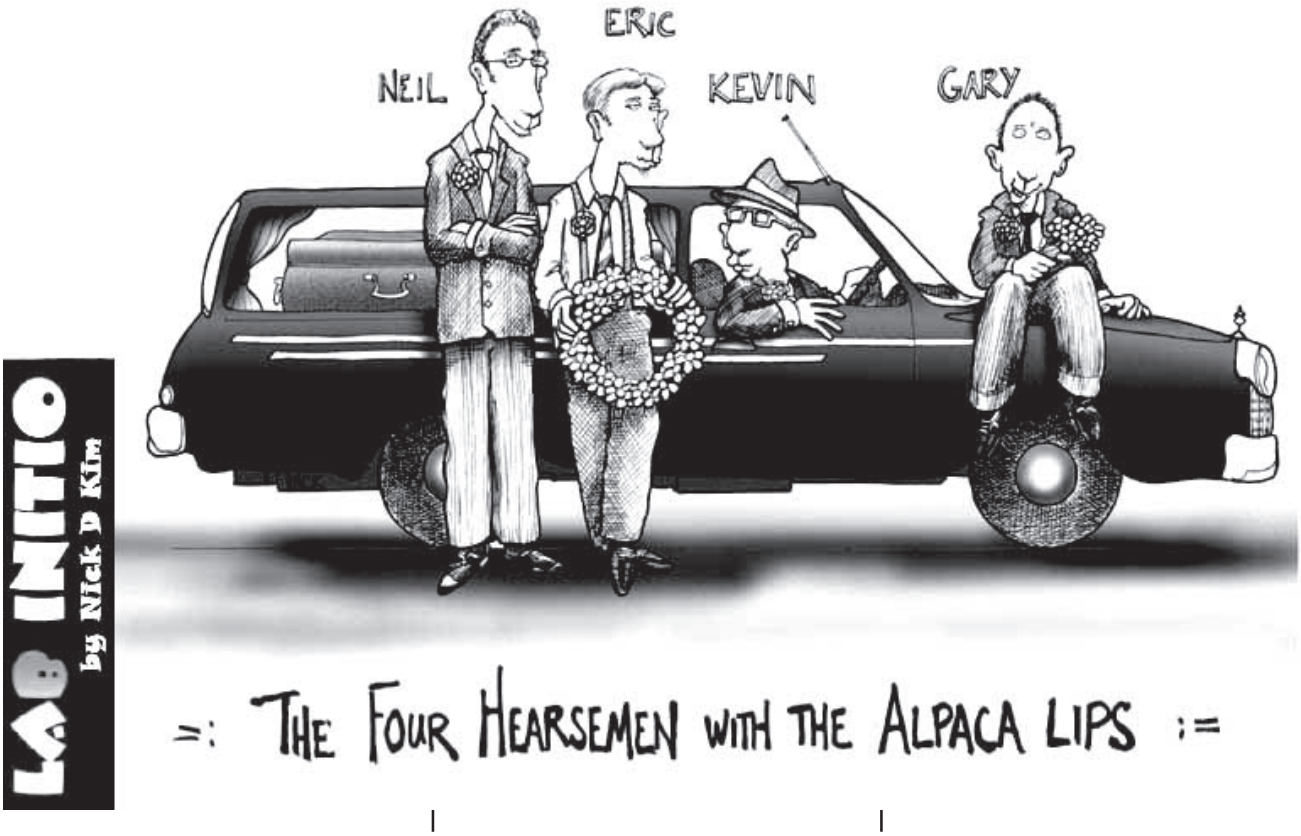
In preparing this note, I am indebted to Dr J. Coyne, University of Chicago, for his excellent review in Nature, and for subsequent correspondence.

Bernard Howard

First Fee Rise in NZCSICOP History?

In 15 years of operation, we've kept the NZCSICOP membership fees at the same level. However costs have risen since 1987 (you can't be skeptical about that!) and that and our new Web initiative means that the committee will be recommending the AGM accepts a modest subscription increase for 2002.

The standard individual membership for 2002 is proposed to be $35, with the unwaged/retired membership at $20. We believe that this is still very reasonable, and hope that you will all continue your support for the society.



NEWSFRONT

David Riddell

If I Could Talk to the Dead Animals

PET psychic Carol Schultz of Chicago has been gaining a lot of international attention, with identical reports featured in June editions of the Cairns Post and Evening Post. Journalist Marilynn Marchione seems to have written the piece with eyebrows permanently raised, as Schultz talks of her ability to speak with dogs, cats and horses, even if they're dead. She even reads cats' paws! Yes, it's true!

The article goes on to tell of a dog trapped in a cat's body – it didn't help that he was named Duke. Schultz also helps people get in touch with their departed loved ones – one woman who had had two dogs die recently wanted to know why they needed to leave her.

Consultations cost $35 for an email consultation, $50 by phone, or $75 plus travel for a personal visit. That's US dollars.

Evening Post, 16 June, Cairns Post, 5 June

Seagull healed

Not to be outdone by the Americans, New Zealand also has its resident pet psychics. Paul and Victoria Woodward of Upper Moutere charge only $15 a session to lay hands on an animal and unblock its energy channels, which is a lot more reasonable. Victoria Woodward says animals seem to know the healing could help them.

"I've even treated a seagull, I didn't touch him, but he got close enough for the treatment to work and simply flew off when he'd had enough."

How she knew the bird was ill (or male), or had been healed, she didn't say.

Nelson Mail, 8 May

Open wide, please

The British Dental Journal reports that an acupuncture needle, inserted into an anti-gagging point on the ear is just the thing to overcome fear-induced nausea during a visit to the dentist. Some patients are so apprehensive, according to Dr Janice Fiske of the Guy's, King's and St Thomas' Dental Institute, they develop a gagging reflex, which causes their jaws to clench. The needles were tried on 10 subjects, and it worked every time. Without the needles, six could only bear to open their mouths after sedation. Now if they could just come up with something to deal with a fear of needles...

Evening Post, 14 June

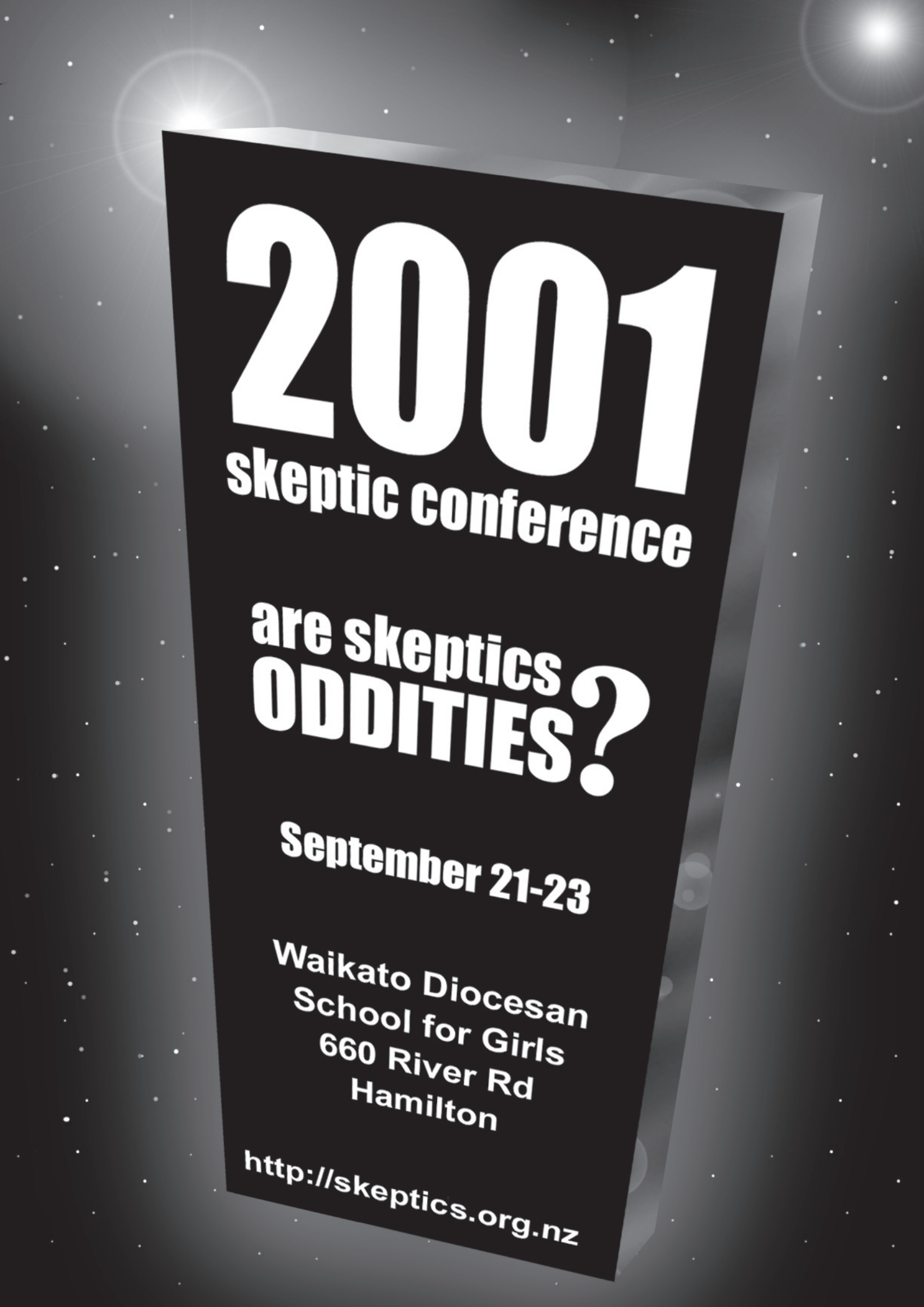
Aromatherapy all in the mind

The placebo effect (see page 2) was in the news again with a report on a team of German and Austrian scientists, who found that oils used in aromatherapy improve mental ability – but only if you believe they do. The team, led by Josef Ilmberger of the Ludwig-Maximilians University, Munich, sprinkled water onto surgical masks worn by volunteers, then tested their reaction times. Essential oils used to promote alertness, such as peppermint, jasmine and ylang-ylang, were then sprayed on the masks of some of the volunteers, while others had water, and reaction times were again tested. No difference was found in reactions in subjects treated with oil or water, suggesting the oils do not have a direct influence on the brain when inhaled. However, when asked to rate how stimulating, strong or pleasant they found each liquid, those subjects who gave high ratings showed small improvements in their reaction times. Ilmberger concluded the effects of essential oils on basic forms of attentional behaviour were mainly psychological.

Dominion, Evening Post, 20 April

Exorcism goes awry

One of the grislier news items of recent times concerned the death of 37-year-old Joanna Lee in December. Pastor Luke Lee was committed to trial for Ms Lee's manslaughter in June after allegedly strangling her during an exorcism. Neighbours heard screams and chanting prayers from the Auckland house, but didn't think anything of it, as such noises were common. Six days after the exorcism, police found Ms Lee's fly-blown body, still lying in bed while members of Pastor Lee's Lord of All church prayed over her, occasionally wiping her body with alcohol to keep the smell at bay. Lee told police she had been sick and was sleeping.


2001
skeptic conference
are skeptics
ODDITIES?
September 21-23
Waikato Diocesan
School for Girls
660 River Rd
Hamilton
http://skeptics.org.nz

This page is intentionally left blank so you can rip out the poster to send to friends, family or colleagues whom you think should know about the conference, or so you can pin it on the work/faculty/centre/school noticeboard, or to remind you of a great conference you're going to miss (better luck next year...)

2001 Skeptics Conference
Registration Form

Name/s (for nametag):_____
Postal Address: _____
_____
Tel:_____ Email:_____

☐ I'd like my receipt mailed as confirmation of enrolment OR
☐ I'm happy to collect my receipt on the day (pick one)

Conference Fee (Full / unwaged) _____ @ $50/25 = _____
(Single-day registrations ($20) are available from the registration desk on the day - Fri 7:00 pm, Sat 8:00 am, Sun 8:00 am)

Conference Dinner (Sat September 22nd) _____ @ $25.00 = _____

Lunch
Sat September 22nd _____ @ $10.00 = _____

Vegetarian food or other (state):_____
Please book meals by September 5th!

Accommodation
Waikato Diocesan School for Girls, 660 River Road, Hamilton
Please book by September 5th
Friday night/Saturday breakfast
_____@ $18 dormitory bunkroom = _____
_____@ $28 twin share = _____
_____@ $35 single room = _____

Saturday night/Sunday breakfast
_____@ $18 dormitory bunkroom = _____
_____@ $28 twin share = _____
_____@ $35 single room = _____

GRAND TOTAL:_____

Cheques are payable to "**NZ Skeptics**".
Print this form and mail to:

NZ Skeptics Conference,
c/- Martin Wallace,
9A Sandwich Rd,
St Andrews,
Hamilton

with your fee.

For late registrations, e-mail: Martin Wallace - wallaces@wave.co.nz
NZ Skeptics Website: http://www.skeptics.org.nz

This page is intentionally left blank so you can cut out the form and send it in RIGHT AWAY!

"We are innocent. God knows. If we pray, Joanna will come back. God knows," Lee said.

Church members said in written statements that Lee regularly performed exorcisms on them, one noting that for a small man he used a lot of force. Most of his 30-strong congregation was gathered from Queen St on Friday nights, though many who did join quickly became disturbed by Lee's aggressive behaviour and left again. Joanna Lee, who had arrived from Korea six weeks previously, was described by church members as "a very smiley person".

Dominion, 12 June

"Yeti" hair passes genetic test

British scientists on the trail of the yeti have found some of the best evidence yet of the existence of the mythical Himalayan creature - a sample of hair that has proved impossible to identify.

The hair was gathered from a tree in eastern Bhutan, and matches no known animal, raising the strong possibility that it was from an unknown species.

An "official yeti hunter" led the expedition, working on the documentary series To the Ends of the Earth, to an area where he was convinced an animal was at large, and collected the hair from a hollow in a cedar tree.

Bryan Sykes, professor of human genetics at the Oxford Institute of Molecular Medicine said the hair wasn't human or bear, or anything else they'd been able to identify.

"It's a mystery and I never thought this would end in a mystery. We have never encountered DNA that we couldn't recognise before."

Of course, it may not have come from a large hairy primate. Wonder if they compared it with Fiordland moose hair?

Dominion, 3 April

FORUM

More Brocken sightings

I enjoyed Jim Ring's "the Spectre of Kahurangi" (Autumn 2001). In Kahurangi National Park there is a bridge called "Brocken Bridge", quite close to Ghost Creek. Could this be an indication of supernatural forces emanating from this enchanting region?

As a NZFS park ranger there for two years, I discovered a more prosaic explanation, at least for the bridge. It seems that someone stampeded a herd of cattle on to the old bridge during a flood, and the cattle – and bridge – were lost in the floodwaters. The name then became "Broken Bridge". We Forest Service staff were not renowned for our literary skills, and various track junctions started sprouting signs saying "Brocken Bridge".

Rather disappointing, really.

Piers Maclaren

Homoeopathy test?

As a result of an accident on State Highway One recently a quantity of rat poison was tipped into the sea near Kaikoura. At first sight this seemed to me to be Mother Nature setting up a large-scale test of homoeopathy. My reasoning was as follows: we have a poison diluted with an enormous volume of water (tides are strong and the sea very deep off the Kaikoura coast), and we have succussion (see the surf breaking over the rocks). The rat poison, brodifacoum, like the better known warfarin, is an anti-coagulant, causing death by extensive bleeding. So, by homoeopathic principles, a very high dilution should have the opposite effect, causing strokes and heart failure among the seals, dolphins and whales, brought on by clottability of their blood.

I could see that measuring this effect could be difficult, but I persisted with my calculations. Sadly, I abandoned the project, chiefly because the concentration of rat poison in the sea turned out to be far too high. The amount of material dumped in the sea, 18 tonnes, was quite large, and even allowing for only a low proportion of active ingredient in the bait, and assuming it to have been instantly and uniformly dispersed in deep water of some thousands of square kilometres in area, the final concentration was in the order of one molecule of poison in ten litres of sea. This is, of course, far too high for homoeopathic

Forum Continued on page 12

Legal Evidence

Jim Ring

Skepticism is very much concerned with assessing the quality of evidence in support of a particular claim. But evidence means different things to different people. In the first of a two-part series, Jim Ring examines the legal profession's view of the matter.

OUR knowledge of the world is never certain, so what should count as evidence that a claim is true? For many people trained in science the legal system contains some very strange anomalies. Material can be accepted as evidence in court even though it would be given no weight at all in a scientific context.

People are sometimes imprisoned because juries are prepared to accept the unsupported word of witnesses. David Dougherty was in jail three years for raping a young neighbour. She said he had done so. No other evidence pointed to a conviction; tests on DNA were inconclusive. Later, better tests indicated that the girl had had sex with a man other than Dougherty.

Peter Ellis (the Christchurch crèche case) was jailed because some small children told the court he had done dreadful things. The same children told questioners that some women had done dreadful things, but they were not believed. They also told stories about Ellis that could not possibly be true and these were edited out of the story put to the jury.

In science experiments a control is a most important feature. Unfortunately controls are generally ruled inadmissible by judges. In the Ellis case there was an excellent control for the children's credibility. How reliable were the children's stories about the women, and how reliable were their stories about Satanism and black magic?

Eyewitness accounts are given great weight in our justice system; yet in the US it has been estimated that mistaken eyewitness evidence is responsible for about 80 per cent of the wrongful convictions that occur. The trial of Scott Watson (Marlborough Sounds New Year murders) was unusual in that eyewitness evidence was treated in a different manner. The prosecution held that part of the evidence of one of their own witnesses was in error. He had a distinct memory of a two-masted yacht; the prosecution argued that he must have seen one with a single mast. In future will eyewitness evidence be treated as less conclusive?

In New Zealand a cell-mate can claim to have received a confession of guilt from a person awaiting trial. That such an anecdote can be accepted as evidence in court would be beyond belief – except it happens!

It was reported last year in the UK that a judge instructed a jury not to bother about statistics and just to use their common sense (let us hope this report was inaccurate). But common sense is not a reliable guide in complex matters. Science and statistics often produce results that are quite counter-intuitive.

A conviction is only supposed to take place when evidence is beyond all reasonable doubt. In New Zealand people are sometimes convicted in spite of reasonable doubt.

FORUM

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work, where concentrations of one molecule in a volume equal to that of the Earth are normal. Regretfully, I shall not be issuing an invitation to marine mammals to volunteer for a study of the after-effects of this accident.

Bernard Howard

Sensitive Issues

In the last issue of the Skeptic (Autumn 2001), I quoted the reaction of the Commissioner for Children, Roger McClay, to the news of Liam Williams-Holloway's death:

"Whether a different course of action would have been better, there's not much point in worrying about it now."

That response troubled me as it seemed so out of character, so I rang the office and asked Mr McClay about it. It seems that news of Liam's death was sprung on Mr McClay while he was at a conference and he was asked to comment on the spot. The news upset him but he didn't think it appropriate to take the family to task at that time, and this was the result.

The question now is, having had time to think about the implications of the whole saga, what will the office's/commissioner's response be next time?

We'll get a chance to find out at this year's conference when an advocate from the Office will be speaking, so come to Hamilton with your own questions!

Vicki Hyde

Rebirth of Quackery

G B Shaw once said that the only difference between animals and humans was that humans like taking pills. It's clear things haven't changed since his time when you visit a library and see the number of books on how to be healthy.

Many quack medicine producers have made their money here out of our gullibles and have moved on. Bowel cleansers, hair restorers, nail hardeners, bust developers and fat loss treatments to name a few.

As one example, Black strap molasses's only virtue was that due to insoluble matter it acted as a bowel irritant with laxative results. Now if you have a lot of molasses left over from sugar refining, use it to make rum or stock lick and get rid of the rest as a good health supplement.

When deer lose their antlers in the wild they recycle them, but when farmed the antler is a dangerous weapon so they are removed at the velvet stage. Now because the Chinese have used them for medicine for thousands

Continued on page 15

2001: Are Skeptics Oddities?

WE truly don't know - but suggest you get yourself along to this year's annual Skeptics' Conference and find out.

To be held in Hamilton, this year's conference promises to be bigger, brighter and better than ever before! (Honest! Trust us.)

The conference committee have worked hard to bring together a great line-up of speakers and topics, including:

When worlds collide – science meets commerce
Treating Mr Ed – animals and the New Age
Sai Baba – when gurus go bad
Informed Consent – dangerous doctors and desperate parents
... but wait, there's more.

The ever-popular Bent Spoon and Bravo Awards (nominations are still open) and Saturday night conference dinner will be followed by **Who wants to be a millionaire skeptic**? A quiz designed to truly sort out the skeptics from the sheep. Put together a team of four, and fame and fortune could be yours (well, a small amount of fame anyway).

Venue: Waikato Diocesan School for Girls - the school lies just 3km from the centre of Hamilton, along the banks of the Waikato river. The boarding accommodation is in five individual houses, ranging from back-packer style to more up market. Set in seven hectares of attractive grounds with beautiful old trees and gardens.

Timetable

Friday: Registration and social get-together

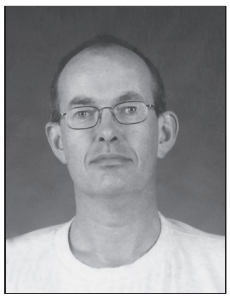
Saturday: Papers, conference dinner, quiz

Sunday: Papers, AGM

See enclosed sheet for more information, costs and registration form, email number8@ihug.co.nz or check out the website at http://skeptics.org.nz

Register NOW! Right NOW! This very minute.

Chocolate fish for the first registration.



HOKUM LOCUM

John Welch

Re-birthing Finale

A COLORADO colour therapist was jailed for 16 years after being found guilty of causing the death of a 16 year old girl. It must have been quite traumatic for the jury who watched a videotape of the session "in which the girl begged for air and screamed that she was dying".

What we need in New Zealand are equally tough laws that protect children from acts of omission, particularly where children are denied safe and effective medical treatment in favour of ludicrous quackery.

Dominion June 20th
Hokum Locum #59

Weight-loss scam

The diet business is worth a lot of money and the latest scam has been to persuade people to part with up to $300 for a three month supply of plasters containing a seaweed extract guaranteed to "lose between two and four kilograms a week".

This degree of weight loss is not only unsafe but extremely unlikely as there is no possible mechanism for it.

I have been on a self-imposed diet which involves modest restriction of food intake and a modest increase in exercise and I have lost 7 Kg over a four month period. This is within dietitian's guidelines that recommend no more than 500g weight loss per week. It has been easy and not involved spending any money.

It appears that all I need is a beard, a website and a catchy title for my diet (suggestions please) and hordes of gullible New Zealanders will pay me vast sums of money. The secret is to give no guarantees and avoid breaches of Consumer laws.

Dog-boy?

An enduring urban myth has been tales of children being raised by animals. The latest such story by credulous journalists appeared in the Dominion 20 June 2001.

The 10 year old was alleged to have lived in a cave with wild dogs and suckled from one of the females. However, a Police spokesperson put an appropriate spoke in this suggestion by stating "we can't tell whether he had been suckled or not."

This story will now enter popular mythology along with all the other stories that have been repeated since the days of Romulus and Remus, two Roman orphans who were fed by flying pigs.

True lies

This is the title of an article appearing in New Scientist 7 April 2001. Experimental Psychologists found that 30% of a group of children recalled "uncomfortable touching" episodes which had not happened to them but were mentioned in a story scenario. Their recall accuracy was even worse when they were asked questions that required a yes/no answer.

This was the problem in the Christchurch Civic Creche case where faulty interviewing techniques were used by people (the new witchfinders) who had a particular belief structure and looked for evidence to prove their loony theories (aided by a loony complainant). In the process they ruined the lives of a group of children and their caregivers, and contrived to send Peter Ellis to prison. The Judicial review was laughable but carried out with the same careful examination of evidence as would have been accorded a claim of alien abduction.

The Australasian Journal of Integrative Medicine

I have forwarded my copy of Vol. 1 No. 1 to the Editor. It could become a valuable archival item in our reference collection.

I am not going to bother analyzing the content but one thing that bothers me is the array of recognized training for pseudo-scientific rubbish. Various Medical Colleges award re-accreditation points for courses on homeopathy, acupuncture and

herbal medicine. It seems that as long as a training process has been set up it doesn't matter about the content. Skeptics have already successfully attacked a proposal in NZ for a BSc in Naturopathy.

The overall method of practising alternative medicine is to spend about an hour with patients taking a detailed history which in itself is a form of psychotherapy and engenders a very powerful placebo effect. You then throw in a gimmick such as herbs, acupuncture, or homeopathy to add the "magic" which produces a grateful patient who "feels" better.

When skeptical investigators test all of these things by controlling for the placebo effect, they find no change in objective measurements of health parameters.

More on Buteyko Breathing technique (BBT)

This is a belief that asthma can be treated by deliberate shallow breathing which raises carbon dioxide levels in the lung. The respiratory rate is closely controlled by CO_2 levels. When you hold your breath, CO_2 levels rise and eventually you are forced to take a breath. If you deliberately over-breathe then CO_2 is "blown off" and this causes people to feel dizzy and peculiar (hyperventilation).

Professor Buteyko believes that the fundamental cause of asthma is hyperventilation and his method is aimed at getting patients to deliberately *hypo*ventilate. Several studies have been done and one would obviously expect to find raised levels of CO_2 in people practising BBT. There was none.

Patients practising BBT felt better but there was no change in their use of asthma medication.

BBT produces a classic placebo effect which is what one would expect since the cause of asthma is known to be inflammatory changes in the airways of the lung.

Advertisements

I thought it would be interesting to review what's on offer from the Sunday News on July 1st.

"Stop snoring or your money back"....not a good claim to make when it's very hard to see how a "natural blend of enzymes and herbs" can possibly stop snoring. This preparation is marketed as "Dr Harris Snore Tablets". Shouldn't that be "anti-snore?"

Clive Clinics have been around for decades and their itinerant trichologists are promising assistance through hair analysis which "can indicate vitamin, mineral or toxic problems..." It is claimed that "your parents are the reason for your baldness" but there may be "treatments that block the genetic messages..."

The words and language in this advertisement illustrate how the promoters incorporate scientific advances into their sales pitch. The before and after photographs are great and I recommend readers check out the website <www.cliveclinics.com>

Dr Archer's FATBUSTERS is a good example of the classic weight loss promotion. Using a new dietary supplement "more than 25 000 Nz'ers have lost weight!" The pills "soak up fat from food and stop fat being absorbed into the body...Just eat your usual meals". This is an irresistible formula for the obese – an eating cure! Although there are two 'before' photographs of "Tania" and "Mike" there are no 'after' pictures. Could this mean that the product failed to work? Curious readers should call 0800-78-2000 to find out.

Continued from page 13

of years there is money to be made out of this by-product.

Bee keepers and retired politicians are extolling the benefits of pollen, bee venom and propolis. Their claims for vitamin, mineral and amino acid content are way over the top. All the bee venom rubs which claim to be the panacea of all our skeletal and muscular remedies have added counter irritants which give the impression that this wonder of bee venom is being absorbed, which fortunately it is not. Finally, we come to propolis, bee glue, a dark brown resinous substance collected by the bee from trees. This phenolic resin is used to seal the hive and retain warmth, the antispetic properties of the resin will have some effect in keeping the bacterial integrity of the hive intact.

These are but a few of the nonsense claims to which we could add, electrical devices, magnets, emu oil, homeopathics and a plethora of herbals. If proof of efficacy could be established then such items would be added to the orthodox medicinal armoury. Meanwhile remember "ashes to ashes and dust to dust, if the liquor don't get you the free radicals must."

Alan Pickmere
retired pharmacist

Salting Away the Profits

Jim Ring

The marketing of sodium chloride should be taken with a pinch of salt

SODIUM chloride is a very simple chemical and cannot decay. Excess is harmful though it is an essential part of our diet. These days many people seem to believe that some forms are better than others.

Years ago an idea developed that all white foods were bad: bread, sugar, milk, salt. Similarly it was held that all refined substances were bad: (because they were unnatural), while food additives were worse (though of course diet supplements do not count).

Table salt is white, it is refined, anti-caking agent is added to prevent clogging in damp weather, and a tiny amount of potassium or sodium iodide is added for health reasons. Thus it offends against a host of popular prejudices.

Many people's diet is short of the essential element iodine, which is added to salt to prevent deficiency. In particular, without sufficient iodine, children's brains will not develop properly and they suffer a form of mental retardation called 'cretinism'. It has been claimed that non-iodised salt is better for preserving food (though I know of no scientific justification for this), so this is available in bulk packs.

In most countries salt is obtained from underground deposits, either by mining or by dissolving it in water. It is not generally extracted from seawater because this is so dilute that huge amounts of energy are needed to evaporate such large quantities of water. A dry climate at low latitudes allows solar energy to be used, but large areas are needed so land needs to be cheap.

These requirements are marginally met at Grassmere in the Awatere valley, Marlborough, where evaporation exceeds precipitation in nine months of the average year. A long-established solar salt industry is a prominent feature, visible to travellers between Picton and Christchurch. However the suitable area is limited and New Zealand has always imported salt.

The decreased use of iodised salt in our diet is to be deplored.

Solar salt is of sufficient purity for most purposes but not all. Vacuum salt is more highly refined and is produced both at Grassmere and Mt Maunganui; the latter uses imported salt as feedstock.

A fad starting in Europe held that sea salt was healthier than other kinds, being 'more natural', and it was believed this came as large crystals. Fashionable restaurants provided salt grinders, which held large crystals of sodium chloride, rather than the old dispensers of fine crystals in a shaker. One advantage of sea salt, it was argued, was that it was 'more salty' and therefore healthier because less would be needed.

It is possible that relatively large crystal fragments have a more vigorous assault on the palate, however most salt is added in cooking, and in solution all salt is equally 'salty'. Salt ions have no memory so do not know what size crystal they inhabited.

The underground deposits in Europe are remains of dried-up seas, so all their salt is 'sea salt'; while in NZ the cheapest form of table salt is locally produced, and made directly from sea water. Furthermore it is not really 'highly refined'.

It may be of concern that some parents refuse to use iodised salt, and so expose their children to a risk of iodine deficiency. It is claimed that in New Zealand, iodine intake has been dropping for twenty years. In the 1990s intakes twice fell below internationally recommended levels (NM 17th May Report quoting Elizabeth Aitken in NZ Dietetic Association Journal).The decreased use of iodised salt in our diet is to be deplored.

On Sale Now

I had a look at what is available in Nelson and the results were quite interesting.

The cheapest salt available was Skellerup Marlborough in bulk packs at $0.80 per kg. It could be bought either iodised or non-iodised. Prices for similar quality in other brands ranged up to $1.00.

Salt in dispensers was naturally dearer because of the packaging; the price range was $2.10 - $3.60 per kg.

The dearest salt was Maldon Sea Salt from Essex, England, declared to be 'Unrefined and Natural'. Various NZ writers on health and food have touted this as a superior product. It needs to be good, as the price was $38.75 per kg.

Other imported products were:

Celtic Sea Salt produced in Brittany and packaged by Lotus in Australia priced at $13.46 per kg. This claimed to be 'Hand harvested and Unbleached' (whatever that means). It consisted of large brownish crystals and was very sticky. The pack carried an analysis showing it to be only 83% sodium chloride with 7% water. Other elements (found in seawater) amounted to around 3% so what else the stuff contained we do not know.

Also available was Lotus Australian Sea Salt. This was only available as a fine grade; but a relative bargain at only $2.50 per kg.

Some small New Zealand firms were selling salt.

Solar Sea Salt was from Kaiora Organics, Napier and certified by Bio-Gro (organic salt is a splendid idea). These large crystals at $8.81 per kg were 'unrefined, unwashed'.

A Nelson firm provided 'Safe Earth Unprocessed Sea Salt, "The way Nature created it" Not altered, Not refined, No additives, Natural Minerals retained. Bio-Gro certificate currently being sought'.

They have a leaflet that is a mixture of good sense and outrageous claims. Stating that salt cannot be organic, but also; 'unprocessed sea salt is a natural antihistamine'. In a health shop it was $18.00 per kg for both large crystals and normal grade. At a supermarket it was $15.88 per kg; still hardly a bargain.

Presumably for legal reasons the pamphlet refers to an overseas website rather than making direct claims – nevertheless under 'Prevention and Cure' it manages to refer to most human diseases except cancer, including such refractory problems as 'Altzheimer, Multiple sclerosis, and Insulin Independent Diabetes' (sic).

It also includes the delightful thought; 'Without sufficient water to wet all parts equally, some parts of the body will not receive the vital elements that water supplies'.

Bargain price

Large crystals of Empire Rock Salt by Hansells NZ were at a bargain price ($1.25) in one supermarket. Apart from the claim 'no additives', there was no further information. Without labelling on the packet, this was of dubious legality.

The large companies are also in on the act and their products labelled 'Sea Salt' are much cheaper than those sold by the small companies; though more expensive than their own sea salt without the label. This is a truly wonderful way of adding value.

Saxa and Cerebos have fine 'Sea Salt', not iodised but with added anti-cake which sells at a range of $1.20 - $1.55 per kg depending on the supermarket. This is generally around 20-35c more than their similar (possibly identical) product not labelled 'Sea Salt'.

But in one Supermarket I found Cerebos Sea Salt as large crystals at $1.20 per kg. It is more expensive to produce large crystals so this is very reasonable. It makes 'Maldon Sea Salt', essentially the same product but 3000% dearer, look rather overpriced.

NZ Skeptics Online: http://skeptics.org.nz

Ever had someone ask you for information on, say, homeopathy or the Kaikoura UFOs and spent ages trying to track down an article in the New Zealand Skeptic?
Help is at hand with the newsletter now online and searchable. Some of the material will be available for the public to see, but members can access all the last decade's worth of back issues using the password RANDI. (This password is valid until the end of 2001; make sure you rejoin to get the password for 2002!)
Also available at the site are links to other sites of interest, information on lecture tours or other newsworthy items, and information on resources the NZ Skeptics can provide.

http://skeptics.org.nz Password: RANDI

BEER AND SKITTLES

Ghosts, Mediums and the Argument from Omniscience.

In which John Riddell reminisces about happy childhood days and reflects on the stories we tell to grown-ups

WHEN I was just a young skeptic our family used to go to big Christmas family get-togethers at my great aunt's homestead. There were always lots of fun things for kids to do. There was a swimming pool with water the colour of rotting leaves and a ghost room upstairs in the house. When we thought the grown ups weren't looking, we would sneak upstairs for a peek into the room. The door was nailed closed, but the big kids knew how to bend the nail back and open the door just a bit. Every year a new group of 8-year-olds would try to scare the bewhatsits out of the 5-year-olds with tales of the ghost. There were also stories that the last kids to enter the room had not left alive through the door. Of course, this was because the room had no floorboards and they had slipped off the rafters and fallen through the ceiling to the dining room below.

I don't remember if we believed the story of the ghost, but I do remember not wanting to slip and put a hole in the dining room ceiling. Since then the house has become an historic place and been done up to cater for wedding receptions and garden parties. The "Ghost Room" has had new floorboards installed and the nail has been replaced with a doorknob. But the stories of the ghost still continue. One of the uncles takes groups of visitors through and keeps them entertained with rumours of the ghost.

The story started as a way of keeping children from going into a dangerous room, and has continued as a means of entertaining the tourists, but with plenty of drunken wedding guests passing through, it won't be long before we have a sighting.

There are people who believe in ghosts. Life after death and all that.

There was a scientist in the paper the other day who thought he had found evidence for life after death. He interviewed a lot of people who had nearly died on the operating table. According to doctors trying to save their lives, these people had no detectable brain function at some point.

The scientist found that they had memories that he thought were of that time when they had no detectable brain function. A lot like the fourth form.

It would be very cool if there really was good evidence of a warm and fuzzy place after death, but unhappily, this guy hasn't found it. There are some other explanations. It might be the doctors had more important things to worry about than making sure the patient had absolutely no brain function. So maybe the brains hadn't really stopped. Or it could be the memories of a bright light and feelings of happiness were manufactured either before or after the no-brainer. The patients didn't die, so we don't really know.

The world's leading authority on Near Death Experience(NDE) is Susan Blackmore. For more info about NDE. see http://www.arthurchappell.clara.net/ndes.htm I thought it was interesting that "Children who have almost died don't see dead friends and relatives on the other side, but live ones. They haven't lived long enough to know too many people who have died."

However, before we give up on life everlasting, there are also mediums. They think they talk to people who really are dead. There was a bloke on Discovery Channel who sat in the middle of a circle of people and gave them messages from their dearly departed. But the messages were not very impressive.

I mean if he said something like "Now Susan, I have a message from your mother Sarah-May. She says don't have an affair with Billy-Bob coz he has a social disease, and if ya do, that no-good husband of yours will find out and then there'll be trouble."

If that was the sort of message from the other side even I might get interested. Assuming of course that Billy-Bob really did have the disease, but nobody else knew. Instead of providing information that nobody in the room could know without checking, the medium always comes up with something the client/audience already knows. He says "I'm getting something about Susan." Anyone in the audience who is called Susan, or who knows a dead Susan automatically assumes he is talking to them. " How did he know that?" Well he didn't. You told him. The medium proceeds by throwing out a word or phrase and seeing if someone picks up on it. The medium creates an illusion that he is telling the client things that only the client could know. In fact, the client tells the medium, not the other way around.

It just isn't good evidence. But the client thinks it is good evidence.

They use what is usually called the "Argument from Ignorance". It goes like this. "I don't know how he could possibly know that. There couldn't be a natural explanation. It has to be supernatural."

The ignorance of how "it" happened is used as evidence. I prefer to call this the "Argument from Omniscience" which goes like this.

"I am infinitely intelligent and I know everything and if I can't think how this could have occurred naturally, then the explanation must be supernatural." Now this would be a good argument if the speaker really was infinitely wise and all knowing. Unfortunately I don't know anyone who is. Even so, this argument is used to explain belief in ghosts, Creationism and lots of other subjects that interest Skeptics. In the case of the medium, the client thinks "I can't figure out how he did it, so he must be psychic."

The same applies to people who think they see a ghost. "I know everything, and I can't figure out what it was if it wasn't a ghost." People don't normally say the bit about knowing everything. They assume it though.

The scientist who thinks that memories of a Near Death Experience (NDE) are good evidence for the afterlife is no different.

Sometimes it is better to just say, "I don't know."

Belief in the Paranormal on the Increase among Americans

THE Gallup Organization released the results of its new poll on paranormal beliefs in June, which indicate increases in the percentage of Americans who believe in communication with the dead, ESP, ghosts, psychic healing and extraterrestrial visitation (see www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010608.asp).

"This latest Gallup Poll is disturbing," says Paul Kurtz, chairman of The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), "because it shows an increase in superstition in the US – particularly in regard to communicating with the dead, haunted houses, ghosts, and psychic healing."

According to the study, the most notable increases between 1990 and 2001 are beliefs in psychic or spiritual healing (up eight per cent to 54 percent); haunted houses (up 13 per cent to 42 per cent); communication with the dead (up 10 per cent to 28 per cent); and witches (up 12 per cent to 26 per cent).

Kurtz blames the media for increased credulity. "These results may be traced directly to the mass media, especially sensationalized TV shows, films, and the tabloid press and publishers. It's regrettable that Americans show lower scores in scientific literacy among their young people in comparison with other democratic societies. The poll also points to the urgent need, we submit, for teaching critical thinking in schools and colleges. That should have a high national priority." The National Science Board's 2000 Science & Engineering Indicators survey found an abysmally low understanding of the scientific method and general science knowledge among Americans (see http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind00/frames.htm).

CSICOP Senior Research Fellow Joe Nickell feels that the poll asks the wrong questions. "The poll asks people whether they believe in a phenomenon, which amounts to asking them whether they want to believe. They're polling the heart, not the head. If respondents had also been asked whether they have experienced these phenomena themselves, or whether they thought there was good scientific evidence supporting these beliefs, I suspect those scores would have been much lower."

CSICOP Press Release

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