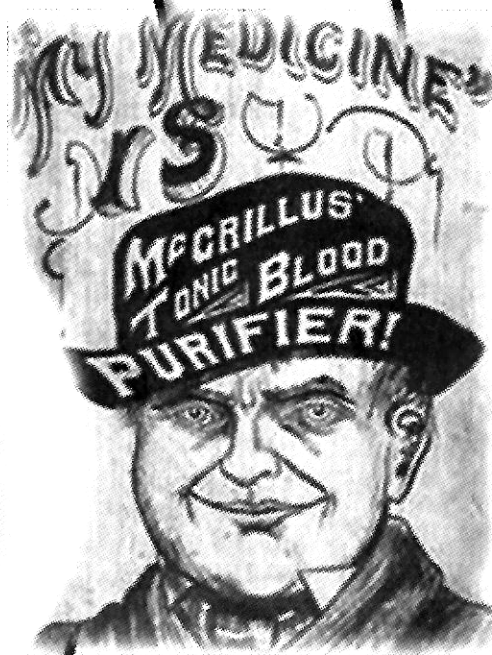


# new zealand Skeptic

number 62 - summer 2002

[www.skeptics.org.nz](http://www.skeptics.org.nz)



Mormonism and Academic Freedom

A Century of Skepticism

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## Contributions

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**Deadline for next issue: 10 April 2002**

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.

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# Justice Yet to be Done

**I**T WAS sad to see – two shelves of Lynley Hood's *A City Possessed*, heavily discounted at Whitcoulls.

Released only last October it hasn't taken long for the book to hit the bargain bin. Perhaps it will encourage more people to read it (I know of one person who's snapped up a copy), but what impact has Hood's meticulously researched examination of the Civic Creche fiasco had?

Justice minister Phil Goff continues to refuse to read the book, opening himself and the judicial system to ridicule in the process. I particularly liked the [www.menz.org.nz](http://www.menz.org.nz) website's take on it, which had Goff reverting to Dr Seuss: "I will not read that book by Hood, I will not, will not, say it's good. I will just say the courts are right, I do not want to see the light...I will not read it, so I say, I wish that book would go away. I will not read it, not a bit, In case I have to act on it."

Yet the issue won't go away. Goff says it's important that the judiciary is independent of interference and that the findings they come up with can't be overturned on a political whim – an important democratic principle. Yet it is clear that the judiciary has failed to do its job, and there are major systemic failures which need to be remedied.

Meanwhile the sex abuse industry grinds on, destroying more lives. The Dominion (December 4, 2001) reports that social welfare psychologist Prue Vincent was fined \$5000 and censured for botching a sex abuse investigation that left a man wrongly accused of molesting his young children. Vincent however, has been allowed to continue practising.

Her victim, the report said, spent \$82,000 proclaiming his innocence in five hearings. He has never been told what he was supposed to have done to his children and since that day ("...Father's Day. A bit poetic") has been shut out of their lives.

The sexual abuse counsellors continue to ply their trade under the cover of the Family Court, immune from public scrutiny. Felicity Goodyear Smith's critique of this court at the skeptics' conference in Auckland a few years back still stands. As long as it continues to operate in secrecy lives will continue to be wrecked.

*Annette*

# Mormonism and Academic Freedom

Raymond Richards

*When Raymond Richards included a lecture on the Mormon Church in his course on American history he ran foul of not only the Mormon community but also the University of Waikato hierarchy. He told his story at the NZ 2001 Skeptics' conference in Hamilton.*

**M**Y experience as a lecturer at the University of Waikato has shown that danger to academic freedom comes as much from inside the university as from outside. University management caved in to religious radicals.

Every year, I teach the history of the United States to scores of first-year students. The course includes a lecture on Mormonism, which is the most successful religion to start in the United States. The lecture is based on the research of the most respected historians in the field. (Bibliography available on request from editor.)

After I gave the lecture in August 1998, the university's Mediator, Bethea Weir, told me that a handful of my students were charging me with harassment. They were demanding an apology and equal time to present the Mormon view. She said she had been flooded with calls from Mormons in the community, outraged by reports of my lecture. Weir planned to process the students' charges of harassment.

This news came as a shock to me. I had heard that the Mediator at the University of Waikato entertained dozens of harassment cases each year. Still, I was surprised to find that a university would subject a lecturer to a threatening procedure for teaching what historians around the world have known for years. The charge could lead to my dismissal.

## No Controversy

To historians, there was nothing controversial about my lecture. They know the Mormon Church started as a scam. It was founded by Joseph Smith, who was born in 1805 and grew up in New York State in a poor family. Determined to make money and fascinated by mysticism, Joe made plans. At the age of 16, he said he had found a seer stone while digging a well. He claimed the stone gave him power to see buried treasure. Folk beliefs told of gold hidden by Indians and by Captain Kidd, the pirate. Some men claimed paranormal ability to find buried loot. Charming and smooth talking, Smith hired himself out as a gold digger. He

would put his magic stone in his hat and, holding the hat in front of him, seek to divine buried treasure. However, this venture led to his conviction for fraud in a New York court in 1826. It was the first of three criminal convictions he received during his life.

Smith thought of another idea to make money, using the same magic stone. Now past 20 years old, he claimed that angels had visited him since he was about 14. His story changed a few times, but he settled on a version that Mormons today call "the First Vision". He said an angel called Moroni had shown him where to dig up ancient, gold plates with hieroglyphics on them. Joe spread the news of this "golden Bible" — which would soon be for sale. He said the inscriptions were in "reformed Egyptian" (a language that never existed) that he could read, using special powers. Smith put his seer stone in his hat, held the hat to his face, and dictated the Book of Mormon. He first claimed the plates were hidden in the woods while he dictated, then he said the

angel had taken them back. Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830 and founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons. He copied symbols and rituals from the Freemasons, who also tell of golden plates hidden and discovered. The fraternity's influence is obvious in Mormon temples and ceremonies, and in the symbols on the special underwear that Mormons have on at all times.

The Book of Mormon is exactly what one would expect from farm boy Joe Smith. It shows a small vocabulary and is full of awkward prose and wooden characters. Mark Twain called it "chloroform in print." It contains 25,000 words copied from the King James Version of Bible, which was written centuries after the gold plates were supposedly inscribed!

The Book of Mormon contained little new. Smith copied ideas from folk tales and other writers. The book tells how, about 600 B.C., a lost tribe of Israel sailed from Arabia to America, which was the promised land. Once there, they split into two factions, the Nephites and the Lamanites. Nephites had white skin and were good but prone to the temptations that come with success. Lamanites had dark skin and were bad.

According to the Book of Mormon, these Jews founded a great civilization in North America, more than a thousand years before Columbus.

They built dozens of huge cities with millions of inhabitants.

They used steel – more than a thousand years before steel was invented. Elephants, lions, camels and horses co-existed with them in North America. As the story goes, Jesus visited America soon after he was crucified. He first established the Christian Church there.

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**They built dozens of huge cities with millions of inhabitants. They used steel — more than a thousand years before steel was invented. Elephants, lions, camels and horses co-existed with them in North America.**

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But, the Lamanites wiped out the Nephites in a great battle in today's New York State in AD 385. The Lamanites were the ancestors of the Indians. The belief that Indians were descended from a lost tribe of Israel was common in Smith's time. In fact, Indians are Mongoloid, from Asia; they are not Semitic. Neither are Maori descended from Jews, although the Mormon Church teaches that Polynesians are descended from Hagoth, a Nephite shipbuilder! Teachers have to correct this drivel.

During that climactic battle in A.D. 385, millions of people were slain. The true faith was lost. This history survived only because the prophet Mormon wrote it on golden plates and buried them until the angel Moroni revealed the plates to Joe Smith, 1400 years later, thus restoring the true church.

It is a romantic story, but no evidence for Book of Mormon

people or places has been found. The Book of Mormon tells of an imaginary world, like The Lord of the Rings. All religions have their myths, but the Mormon Church teaches this fiction as fact. That millions of people believe this hogwash is a black mark against our education system. Educators are not teaching sound methodology and critical thinking.

Each field of scholarship has its own pseudo-scholars. Geography has its flat-earthers. Biology has its creation scientists. Anthropology has chasers of surviving ape-men. Archaeology has believers in ancient astronauts. Medicine has homeopaths. Physics has inventors of perpetual motion machines. Psychology has phrenologists. Astronomy has astrologers.

History has holocaust deniers – and Mormons.

### **The Book of Abraham**

In 1835, Smith bought mummies and scrolls that had been looted from Egypt. No one in the United States could read hieroglyphics then, but Smith said he could — by inspiration from heaven. He said that one scroll was in the handwriting of Abraham of the Old Testament. From it, he produced the Book of Abraham. Unlike the golden plates, those scrolls still exist. Scholars today can read hieroglyphics, and they say the scrolls are 2000 years too young to have been written by Abraham and that Smith's "translation" is a fraud, nothing like the original scroll. He made it up!

Mormons still believe the Book of Abraham is inspired, and it contains striking teachings. It says God cursed Black people because in a previous existence they did not help Jesus in a fight against his brother, Lucifer.

The Book of Abraham also teaches a version of the doctrine of eternal progression, an idea known since mediaeval times. The doctrine teaches that the meaning of life is to strive toward becoming a god.

Mormons explain: "As man is, God once was; and as God is, man may become."

### **Eternal Enhancement**

Life on earth supposedly is but one phase in a process of our eternal enhancement. Everybody had a pre-existence as a spirit. The memory of that time is now veiled from us. Life on earth is a school to which God's children go to gain a body and to learn. The greater your progress on earth, the greater your glory in heaven as you advance toward becoming a god yourself, governing your own planets. Righteous Mormon men who have died are now living as gods on planets unknown to us. Earth's god lives in the heavens near a place called Kolob.

By the 1840s, Smith was showing signs of megalomania as he kept up his pose as a prophet. He set up a Council of Fifty to govern the world with him after the imminent return of Christ. Smith had himself crowned King on Earth. The Council also managed Smith's campaign for President of the United States.

Church members had already experienced violent

conflict with their neighbours, and now they fought among themselves. The bitterest controversy involved the doctrine of polygamy. For years, Smith and other Church leaders had been married to many women at the same time, while denying it. In 1843, Smith announced that polygamy was divinely sanctioned. He had about fifty wives. Some of his brides were married already, some were sisters, some were mother and daughter, and some were as young as 14 years. He proposed marriage to females as young as 12.

When an Illinois newspaper criticized Smith, he ordered its press smashed. He was arrested and jailed. A mob broke into the jail and shot Smith dead. He was 39.

After Smith's death, the Church split into many factions, with most members following Brigham Young to found Salt Lake City in Utah. In 1896, the U.S. Congress forced the Church to set aside polygamy so that Utah could join the United States as the 45th state. Some Mormon groups still practice polygamy. About two percent (40,000 people) of Utah's population live in polygamous families.

### **Struggle for Acceptance**

Since World War 2, the Church has tried hard to gain acceptance. It has stressed so-called family values. In 1995 the Church hired a public relations firm, which recommended that the Church stress the "Jesus Christ" part of its name, even though the Jesus of Mormonism bears little likeness to the Jesus of Christianity. Mormonism is a religion in its own right, as

different from Christianity as Christianity is from Islam.

Church leaders continually revise Mormon scriptures and doctrines in the effort to gain wider acceptance. For example, until 1978 the Church banned Black men from the priesthood, which falls to Mormon males at the age of 12 years. US President Jimmy Carter threatened to withdraw the church's tax-exempt status because of its racial discrimination. Within days, Church President Kimball announced a revelation from God, lifting the ban.

### **Racist Reputation**

The Book of Abraham still says Black people are cursed, and the Church still struggles with a reputation for racism. The Church has never disowned the idea that Black-skinned people are cursed.

The Church also has a reputation for sexism. Women are not allowed in the priesthood. The Church teaches that a woman's place is in the home, raising children. The Mormon Church has excommunicated supporters of equal rights for women.

The Church also has a reputation for hostility to intellectual inquiry, with a record of trying to silence people who disagree with it, such as myself. Mormon scholars are excommunicated, for destroying faith, if their research leads them to reveal information the Church does not like. Fawn Brodie was a Mormon and a historian who uncovered Smith's 1826 conviction. Michael Quinn was a Mormon and a historian who discovered that the early Church

included female priests. Both were excommunicated for their work. In 1998 the American Association of University Professors censured Brigham Young University in Utah for its violations of academic freedom. BYU's goal is to provide an education consistent with the Book of Mormon. Research is subordinate to revelation, since there can be no disagreement with God's university. BYU's philosophy, then, is hostile to the purpose of a university.

So, what started as a scam is now perhaps the fifth biggest church in the United States, surpassing the Presbyterians. The Mormons claim 10 million members worldwide, half of them outside the United States.

The annual income of the Church is \$US6 billion, making it bigger than Nike Corporation. Its success, however, is a monument to a fraud.

### List of Charges

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not like its history told. The university's mediator told me the complaining students had drawn up a list of charges. They claimed I had harassed them when I said the Book of Mormon is full of awkward prose and wooden characters, and when I said Joseph Smith was a megalomaniac.

I could not believe the university was considering disciplining me instead of telling the students they had no basis for

complaint. I waited for the mediator or university managers to dismiss the charges. I waited for the Vice-Chancellor, Bryan Gould, to stand by me. After a month of stress, with the threat of punishment still hanging over my head, I decided to go to the media, since sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Newspapers, radio and national television reported the conflict. I argued for scholarship and academic freedom, and Mormons as far away as Australia sent letters to the university and to newspapers, demanding my sacking. Threatening calls to the departmental secretary led to a security alert on campus. From university managers, however, came not a word.

Vice-Chancellor Bryan Gould did not speak up for his lecturer, for historical scholarship or for academic freedom. I wrote to Professor Gould, reminding him that I had every right to lecture as I had. His reply shocked me. He wrote that he would try to "provide some satisfaction to the complainants." The Vice-Chancellor, then, would seek to please a religious group at the expense of a historian.

Sure enough, the so-called mediator suddenly announced in a press release that the students had dropped their charges - but that Mormon representatives would be debating me in public! There had been no discussion with me about a debate, but this arrangement met the Mormons' demand for equal time. I was so angry at this imposition that I refused to go along with it. Weir

STRANGE MATTER  
 by nick d. kim  
 strange-matter.com

### THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT...





then released another press statement, attacking me for not agreeing to discuss matters, making me look bad. Reluctantly, I agreed to the debate, but only if security guards were present.

The evening was unpleasant for me. The Church stacked the lecture theatre with Mormons who hissed at me and called for my sacking. Speaking for the complaining students were the local Mormon bishop, Mike Roberts, and a Mormon student leader who had not been at the lecture. Roberts admitted he was not an expert in U.S. history, but told how he thought a lecture on the history of his Church should go. I had to sit in front of tiers of glaring faces while the student slandered me as incompetent and unprofessional. Neither she nor Roberts engaged with the historical information I gave.

The Vice-Chancellor's treatment of me had a chilling effect on free speech at the University of Waikato. Several colleagues told me they would drop controversial topics from their courses to avoid being charged with harassment.

These days, I try to reassure them. The experience of being charged with harassment led me to learn the law regarding free speech and academic freedom. I advise lecturers charged for what they teach: Don't negotiate, litigate! Lecturers who are disadvantaged by their employer for what they teach should sue under the 1990 New Zealand Bill of Rights Act, which guarantees freedom of expression, and the 1989 Education Act, which guarantees academic freedom for lecturers and students.

Bethea Weir has been

promoted. University managers are considering the disestablishment of the now vacant job of Mediator.

Historians and other scholars must be able to teach the results of research and thinking without being disadvantaged. The fact is that Joseph Smith was a swindler. There is no reason to believe angels led him to the Book of Mormon. The "history" of America taught by the Mormon Church is fiction. Seeking to satisfy Mormons who object to this information being taught is a mistake. Negotiating lecture content with interest groups is a threat to education. Fortunately, the law means there is no need for academics to pander to people who discount scholarship and the free exchange of ideas.

Dr Raymond Richards is a Senior Lecturer in History and American Studies at the University of Waikato.

## A CENTURY OF SKEPTICISM

Bernard Howard

WHEN I spoke at the conference two and a half years ago, argument was rife as to when the next millennium would begin. Now, there is no doubt we are well launched into the third thousand-year period since something important was supposed to have happened.

To understand what skeptics thought a thousand years ago is difficult; the state of skeptical thought a hundred years ago is more accessible. We can consider what progress, if

any, people like us have made in that time. My claim to cover this topic is based on my observation of the field during two-thirds of the period.

Some of my comparisons will reflect merely a change in taste or style, others the replacement of one superstition or fad by another. For example, then they had ectoplasm, now we have bent spoons; then table rapping, now psychokinesis. There is not time to look at every paranormal fad or

pseudoscientific belief, so I will pick just a few examples to consider.

To start at the depressing end, consider the increase in acceptance of astrology. My reading of early skeptical literature suggests that our comrades of one hundred years ago did not rate astrology among the prevalent intellectual weaknesses of the population, and even fifty years earlier, a commentator thought that astrology and other nonsenses

would die out once universal education was introduced. Even a cursory survey of the present position makes us far less optimistic, in spite of well over one hundred years of compulsory schooling.

"It is to be hoped that the day is not far distant when lawgivers will teach the people by some more direct means, and prevent the recurrence of delusions like these [haunted houses]... by securing to every child born within their dominions an education in accordance with the advancing state of civilisation... If ghosts and witches are not yet altogether exploded, it is the fault, not of the ignorant people, as of the law and the government that have neglected to enlighten them." C. Mackay, 1840s.

### **Astrology and Palmistry**

Rawcliffe, in the preface to his "Illusions and Delusions of the Occult of the Early 20th Century", wrote dismissively "No attempt has been made to enter into the question of such groundless occult practices as astrology, palmistry or similar naive forms of divination". Compare what a commentator of the present day wrote:- astrology is "The only "science" editors of British newspapers and television current affairs programmes seem to understand".

I now turn to the matter of health. Then, as now, dubious or fraudulent medical treatments were concerning those of a critical turn of mind. During the century the vast advances in understanding of how our bodies work have caused a shift in

emphasis; what have not changed are people's yearning for health coupled with widespread ignorance of how to achieve it, and the hijacking of new scientific discoveries by practitioners of pseudomedicine.

### **Medical Vibrations**

The discovery of radio waves, and the spread of broadcasting early last century, brought in their train a host of quacks trading on people's fascination with new but poorly understood science. Foremost among these in the USA was Adam Abrams, a genuine doctor with a medical degree from Heidelberg, no less. His theory was that each disease had its specific vibration frequency, and cure required treatment with waves of identical frequency. (Where have we heard that more recently?) Very conveniently for the therapist, presence of the actual sufferer where the gadgetry was located was unnecessary, a drop of blood, or even a signature, could serve just as easily! A commentator on Dr Abrams in the late 1950s thought that this therapy would by that time have been laughed out of existence, and his gadgets found rusting in American rubbish dumps. How wrong he was! In recent years we have seen the "Dermatron", a worthless gadget used by at least one medical person in New Zealand to 'diagnose' toxic conditions, and the equally useless "Quantum Booster" which so impressed us at our Conference two years ago.

Perhaps the only claim to progress we can make here is that the numbers of these devices are fewer than the thousands of those sold by Abrams and his imitators.

Apart from the increase in sophistication of the quackster's approach, I notice also a greatly reduced robustness in the attitude of authority. Perhaps because he was a "genuine" doctor, the Journal of the American Medical Association carried an obituary of the above-mentioned Dr Abrams in 1924. Far from acknowledging him as "one of their own", the obituarist described him as "the dean of all twentieth century charlatans", and the same association was equally damning of many other "healers". At that time also mail-order shopping was big business (who has not heard of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue?), so that prevention of passage of patent medicines, etc. through the mails could seriously dent the trade. In the USA such action was possible by virtue of a law against "using the mails to defraud". So a determined Post Office official, if he could persuade his Head Office to act, could put a stop to the patent medicine producers. Compared with these attitudes, authority today appears very feeble.

### **Enter Radioactivity**

To the list of pseudo-electromagnetic treatments used 100 years ago, in 1903 was added radioactive materials, with the award to Marie Curie of the Nobel Prize. Claims were soon made for the healing properties of "Radium Water". One such medicine, claimed to cure rheumatism and cancer, was "Waters of Life", from California. A large shipment was impounded by Federal agents on its way East, and was found to contain nothing but ordinary spring water (no radium, thankfully!). The decision to condemn this water



as “misbranded” was upheld by the courts. Compare this with the reaction of our own government to a similar case in New Zealand, the “Infinity Moods of Yellow Remember”. The Commerce Commission intends to take no action, and the Health Ministry feels powerless because “water is not a medicine”, and so the advertising of this stuff does not breach the Medicines Act. In this instance, we have clearly slipped backwards.

“Oxygen” has been a word to conjure with for almost two centuries after its role in our metabolism had been discovered. Its essential nature was widely recognised, and this attracted many fraudulent therapies. Such a one was the ‘Oxydonor’ in the USA. A disc fastened to the patient’s body led by a wire to a metal rod, hollow but sealed, immersed in a bowl of water; the rod caused oxygen to flow into the body, so healing whatever malady the patient had been convinced he or she was suffering from. An unsporting skeptic opened some of the metal rods; some were empty, some filled with carbon.

Now, we have ozone and hyperbaric oxygen therapies, and even polyatomic oxygen therapy. It is claimed that ozone inactivates HIV and cures AIDS, and the allegation that there is a conspiracy between the Food & Drug Administration and the drug companies to put the oxygen therapists out of business will be a familiar story to skeptics.

For about two centuries the world of pseudomedicine has flourished by the sale of “patent medicines”. This is an odd title; a “Patent” is granted by governments, a guarantee of exclusive rights in exchange for disclosure. These medicines, on the contrary, were prepared according to secret recipes, usually with a basis in herbs. Some patent medicines are directed universally, eg cures for “listlessness”, “sluggish liver”, etc., others were targeted to one sex, such as to “weak men” (we can guess what weakness was implied.). Or we can consider those referred to delicately as for “female complaints”, or even for “female irregularities” (and we can guess what those did). As usual, current science is used inappropriately in advertising these things. Then it was vague ideas about the liver, kidney or nerves, now we are bombarded by anxiety-causing tales of vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

The overriding concern of women today, according to the advertisers, is not irregularity, but shape. Here are a few headlines from the front covers of British

women’s magazines (Table 1).

Do not think that investigative journalism started with the Watergate men. Early in the last century SH Adams looked into the patent medicine racket in America, and his damning reports, published in Collier’s Magazine, caused such a stir the Food and Drugs Act was passed soon afterwards. The requirement to publish the ingredients exposed many of the dangers and hypocrisy of the patent medicines; the dangers could include high concentrations of opium (morphine), the hypocrisy was the presence of high concentrations of alcohol in medicines sold in “dry” districts, sometimes with the unknowing support of Temperance enthusiasts. Consider the analyses in Table 2 (next page).

Has the view of the psychic ability of animals changed in 100 years? Then, there were three widely reported examples, all from Germany! Clever Hans, the calculating horse, is probably best known, but there was also Muhamad, who could not only

<b>Healthy Eating. 12 Diet Myths (read this and shed lbs).</b>	
	English Woman’s Weekly, 24.8.01
<b>Slim and S milin g! Toge ther Danny and Jan lost 61/2 stone</b>	
	EWW, 7.8.01
<b>Last-minute Diet Plan. Lose pounds in no time at all!</b>	
	EWW, 14.8.01
<b>50 low-cal treats to help you slim.</b>	
	EWW, 28.8.01
<b>Low Cal Low Carb High Energy</b>	
	Good Housekeeping, 6.01

Table 1. Headlines from Women’s Magazines, 2001

do simple arithmetic, he could work out square roots, hold a conversation, and knew his master's telephone number.

Thirdly there was Lola, the super-intelligent dog, who held

animal to unconscious cues. Slightly different in recent times, is Sheldrake's dog, who "knew" when his mistress left her work, and went to wait at the door for her. A careful observation of the

animal revealed what Sheldrake had not troubled to find, that the dog was just restless, and went often to the door at times unrelated to what the absent lady was doing.

Some who are credited with the most astute intellects are

taken in by simple fraud; brains are not the same as sense. Then, the creator of the super-sleuth Sherlock Holmes took for real the pictures of fairies cut out of

a children's book. More recently, children were able to convince an eminent physicist that they were "Gellerian" spoon benders. On the whole, though, I think there is improvement in this area. I know of no present day equivalents of William Crookes and Oliver Lodge, both scientists of the highest eminence, but both deceived by mediums into belief in spiritualism.

### Conclusion

So we see that, though the detail has changed, credulity and gullibility have not diminished, despite the advances in education and knowledge which optimists predicted. New Zealand Skeptics is in no danger of running out of targets for our investigations. We need not disband and go home to put our feet up by the fire just yet.

Bernard Howard is a founding member of the NZ Skeptics

ALCOHOL CONTENT	%
Beer	5-6
White wine	13.5
Sherry	18.6
Whisky, Brandy	37.5
Hostetter's Bitters (A popular USA patent medicine)	47

Table 2. Alcohol content of a range of beverages

long conversations with his mistress by tapping her palm with his paw. All these, of course, are either entirely imaginary or the response of the

## Newsfront

*Compiled by Annette Taylor*

### Blairs 'rebirthed'

Tony Blair and Cherie took part in a 'rebirthing ritual' during a holiday in Mexico, says the Dominion (17 December). They were guided through the ritual while dipping in a Mayan steam bath. At least they were clean.

### Psychic fails (as do we all)

It must be said that mystic powers called in to help find missing Christchurch teenager Ellon Oved have been a flop. Psychic Kathy Bartlett joined the search effort near a lake, carrying

a board and examining the 'aura' of the area, the Dominion reports on December 5. However, the Eagle helicopter with heat-detecting equipment also failed to locate the 14 year old...

### Reptiles have all the fun

Forget Tiger Woods, several hundred people paid \$40 a head to attend a day-long session with visiting conspiracy theorist David Icke. He also gave an evening lecture at Victoria University, says the Sunday Star Times (November 4). A former British Green Party spokesman,

Icke has raised eyebrows a few times – in 1991 during a BBC interview he proclaimed himself the son of God. But wait, there's more. His theory has it that these reptilian shape shifters invaded Earth thousands of years ago, interbreeding with humans and forming a power elite. Explains a lot when you think about it.

### Yet more Yeti furballs

A group of British explorers claim to have found irrefutable proof of a 'yeti-like' creature on an Indonesian island. The Evening Post (31 October) says the team discovered a footprint

and hair samples of a primate which has long lived in the mythology of tribes-people in Western Sumatra. A cast of the footprint and strands of coarse hair are being sent to Oxford University and Australia's University of Canberra for verification. Haven't heard anything yet... The same team are off this year to the Gobi Desert in search of the Mongolian Death Worm – a metre-long snake which is reputed to kill a person with one look.

### Hairy stars

Reporter Mary Jane Boland and her 4-month-old puppy Max consulted pet astrologer Helen Hope in Australia, for the Evening Post (6 October). Hope has written two books about pet astrology – Starcats and Stardogs which were released here on September 27. No-one, the former New Zealander says, has declared her books rubbish and they are selling well in Australia and rights have just been sold to the US and Britain. She also works on people and countries and predicted that, because of the position of Uranus, things will improve for Air New Zealand. I'm sure the Government will be relieved to hear this. Over the last few months we were to have 'redefined' ourselves to the world as well. (That must have slipped past me.) So what came of the canine reading? Well, Max is a classic Gemini, is very intelligent but always in need of constructive discipline. And he's very special. I wonder what she'd say about my psychotic border collie.

### Team gets divine help

A struggling English soccer team turned to religion by asking the local bishop to carry out an exorcism at the club's grounds, says the Evening Post (9 November). The bishop performed the exorcism to remove all evil spirits from Oxford United's Kassam stadium. It seems that a band of gypsies were moved on from the site and may have cursed it. Since the exorcism, it is said the team's fortunes have improved, and they drew their most recent game.

### Nessie to star?

Fans of Nessie who hope to catch a glimpse of the legendary creature might now be in luck, says the Evening Post (3 November.) A moving webcam is now filming the murky depths of the Scottish Lake, 230m deep. Head of the project, Adrian

Shine, said the lake had more fresh water than the whole of England and Wales – "There is room for a few mysteries, although we're not expecting to bump into Nessie." The webcam joins two other cameras observing the exploration of Britain's biggest lake. Check it out: [www.visitlochness.org](http://www.visitlochness.org)

### But is it art?

Michael Jackson's good friend Uri Geller is upset at being censored – Sony Music removed religious words and symbols from a picture he drew for Jackson's new album. The words God, Jerusalem, USA and Angel 2000 were all removed. Geller drew the black and white illustration on a napkin in Jackson's hotel room. The picture features the heads of a man and woman, the pyramids, a UFO and symbols representing love, peace and hope. Maybe he should have stuck to spoons.

## Joint Meetings with Rationalists

Auckland members are organising a series of meetings to debate controversial issues, in conjunction with the Rationalists. The meetings will be held on Sunday evenings at 7 pm at Rationalist House, 64 Symonds Street, Auckland Central.

The first topic is GE foods to be held on 10th March. Dr William Rolleston and Ms Jeanette Fitzsimons are confirmed as speakers. The second topic will be immunisation. The speakers will be Dr Mike Godfrey (against immunisation) and Dr Nikky Turner, Director of IMAC (the National Immunisation Advisory Centre). Dates are not confirmed yet but will most likely be Sunday 21 April or Sunday 19 May).

For further details and updates email [skeptics@spis.co.nz](mailto:skeptics@spis.co.nz)

# Medical Evidence

*In the second of a two-part series, Jim Ring looks at what evidence means to different people*

SCIENTIFIC evidence is often difficult to interpret, in medicine in particular. 'An Unfortunate Experiment' was the title given to the treatment for some women after screening for cervical cancer. In this case science was considered by the legal profession and apparently found wanting. The doctor involved was castigated and publicly humiliated for experimenting on humans. But no real experiments were ever done; it appeared he did not understand scientific methodology. Neither did the journalists and legal people involved. The point is that no proper controls were used so it was very poor science.

Were the women disadvantaged? It is difficult to tell, but many were certainly outraged. It generally escaped notice that the surgeon was responding to public pressure for less radical surgery and that a group of patients involved seem to have had on average a slightly better outcome than the norm.

One of the most unfortunate ideas that came out of the long legal case was the emphasis on privacy for the individuals involved which implied their records should not be available for medical study. There is a difference between privacy and anonymity. It is very important to explain to those involved in medical procedures that for medicine to progress it is

essential to collect data. Women appeared on TV complaining bitterly that they had been used in an experiment without their consent. But all good medicine is experimental.

We are not much closer to determining whether mass screening for cervical cancer does improve the chances for the screened population and now we have another scandal in New Zealand. Public expectation of screening programs is far in excess of what they can deliver. Efforts to sue Dr Bottrill, and compensation claims from ACC, seem to imply that patients think a false negative reading is necessarily medical error. Women have appeared on TV claiming their lives have been devastated because they had a false negative. Surely this is wrong; they are rightly upset but this is because further tests show a medical problem. Of course some who died might have been saved if an early intervention had resulted from a correct positive reading; however this does not seem to be the main thrust of their complaint.

## **False Negatives vs False Positives**

It is possible to reduce the number of false negative readings at the expense of an increase in the number of false positives. This may seem desirable but there is a cost. In Britain large numbers of women in a screening

project reacted very badly to finding they might have a 'pre-malignant' condition. This included some members of the medical profession. There is a clear indication that patients were not well informed before screening.

Patients involved in any medical procedure are supposedly asked for their 'informed consent'. It seems now obvious that 'informed consent' is largely lacking during mass screening for both cervical and breast cancer. Several of those involved in the public hearing are surprised to find that screening is less than 100 per cent accurate. All mass screening procedures are likely to have a high error rate as they are designed to be rapid, cheap and simple; leading to more precise testing if there is a positive result. Is a large and expensive inquiry, using legal methods, a suitable way of investigating scientific questions?

Cervical cancer, unlike breast cancer, is strongly correlated with environmental factors. The former is very rare in the general population with a relatively high incidence in a certain sector. However it is politically incorrect to target the high-risk population for screening because the risk correlation is with such factors as poverty, poor hygiene and sexual promiscuity.

A recent case of a gynaecologist accused of misconduct raises some interesting issues. The unfortunate patient would seem to be outside the high-risk group for cervical cancer, thus an assumption may have been made that the correct diagnosis was very unlikely. But no physical vaginal examination was made. Feminist literature once strongly criticised the medical profession for over-use of this procedure, which one writer described as 'legalised rape'. It would be interesting to know the rate at which this procedure is used today compared with, say, 30 years ago. Is the medical profession responding to crusades in a way that disadvantages patients?

### Objections to trials

Medical ethicists - now a profession - have objected to various drug trials saying it is unethical to provide some patients with a placebo that will not improve their condition. This is in effect a claim to certain knowledge - that the drug being trialed is the ideal treatment. Patients receiving a placebo are not disadvantaged when the new drug may do more harm than good. We can sympathise with terminally ill patients who know that they will die in the absence of treatment and where anything seems a better bet than a placebo. But it is essential that drugs be properly tested before being used routinely.

Experiments have even been done in surgery. In 1959 patients were randomly assigned, but all prepared for surgery and the chest cavity opened. Only then did the surgeon open an envelope and

follow the instruction; either to perform the procedure or immediately close the chest. Although some ethicists have objected (one stated that such surgery would *never* take place in the UK), a double-blind study of brain surgery was recently done in the US. Not only did it pass an ethics committee but patients welcomed the chance to take part even though it involved drilling the skulls of both real and placebo patients. In this case there was considerable improvement in those under 60 who had the real operation.

This indicates people may be willing to give consent to risky experiments providing they are given good information.

Most evidence in medicine comes not from experiments but from epidemiology. This requires the collection of huge amounts of data and sometimes produces conflicting results. Two populations, which differ only in the factor under investigation, should be matched and this is difficult to achieve. Recently, in a world-wide study, doubt has been cast on the efficacy of breast-cancer screening. New analysis purports to show that when populations are matched correctly, the screened population has no better chance of survival than an unscreened population.

### Demands for safety

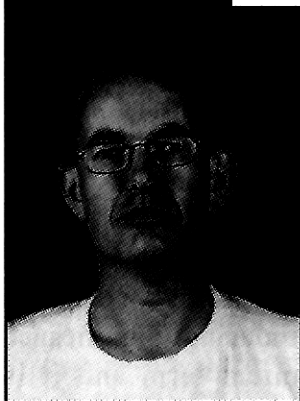
Some demand that all medical procedures should be 'safe', though curiously this is not required of alternative medicine. Suppose a new drug has fatal consequences for one patient in 100,000. It is quite likely that this will not be discovered during testing. Should such a tiny risk preclude the use of a drug that

gives significant benefits to the vast majority of patients? New medicines are introduced when they show a clear advantage over a placebo. When very large numbers are involved in a study it is possible for a drug to show a significant advantage, yet not be worth introducing. Significance is a technical term and it is possible to find an advantage of only 0.1% is 'significant', though it may not be worth taking such a product.

It was this confusion that bedevilled early experiments on ESP. Rhine in America and Soal in England recorded the success of subjects guessing unseen cards. The experimenters wrongly assumed controls were unnecessary; instead they compared guesses with a theoretical chance result. A few subjects scored correct guesses at slightly more than chance and because huge numbers of guesses were involved, statistical tests showed these results had 'significance'. That is, there was a huge probability that the guesses were not simply 'lucky'.

Enthusiasts then made the enormous leap to say that because the guesses were not due to chance they must be due to a previously undiscovered human faculty, extra-sensory perception or ESP. Disinterested observers, not just skeptics, should have concluded that other explanations, such as poor experimental design, badly recorded results, fatigue, or just plain cheating were more likely. A great deal of time, money and effort was spent pursuing this will-o'-the-wisp.

Jim Ring is a Nelson skeptic



# Get in Now While the Getting's Good

*John Welch finds that the sexual abuse industry rolls on unabated.*

## Sexual Abuse Rort

**A**CC (aka "Aggrieved Clamouring Claimants") has thrown the doors wide open for sexual abuse claimants. They have budgeted 60 million dollars for sufferers who can claim up to \$175,000 "without having to complain to the Police or name their abuser." Not surprisingly, a Christchurch Law Firm has shown commendable initiative in touting for business with a leaflet drop because "lawyers had a professional obligation to make the public aware of entitlements."

It is highly significant that a Christchurch firm has seen fit to profit from this ludicrous state of affairs. Proof of sexual abuse has never been required in Christchurch, the Salem of the South Pacific. Dozens of families pocketed tens of thousands of dollars for sexual abuse that never happened while dedicated and talented Christchurch Civic Creche workers had their lives ruined.

I am not sure that James Randi would approve of my challenge but here it is. I offer my endorsement of any claimant who is prepared to claim for 'ritual satanic alien abuse', especially if it occurs in a parallel universe.

Given the refusal of the Minister of Justice to read Lynley Hood's book on the Christchurch Civic Creche debacle, readers could be forgiven for thinking that he and key members of the legal profession currently inhabit a parallel universe.

Several years ago a man spent \$80,000 defending himself against charges of sexual abuse "remembered" by his two daughters. He was acquitted as he was able to prove that the alleged abuse not only did not happen but it was impossible for it to happen. A reporter reasonably asked the question of ACC whether the two daughters would have to repay their compensation. "Oh no," said the Spokesperson, "they are entitled to it for their suffering."

The budgeted sum of 60 million dollars will experience a blowout version of "Welch's Law" which states that claims expand to take up the amount of compensation available.

Marlborough Express 9 Jan 2002

## The Vigorex Products — Oat cuisine?

These are homeopathic extracts of 'avena sativa' and

contain nothing injurious to health. Readers familiar with homeopathic theory will know that such a product description is entirely true. Homeopathic preparations contain precisely nothing and placebo controlled trials of homeopathic preparations are in fact trials of one placebo versus another. This explains why placebo controlled trials of homeopathy will sometimes produce a result favouring the homeopathic wing of the trial. This led one wag to suggest that what was needed were "double-strength" placebos!

Vigorex is a product developed from oats. Readers will be interested in the admission that "skeptics have doubted the existence of an effective sex enhancer."

Reports indicated that "some fell (sic) an increase in energy within one or two hours and use it instead of coffee to get going in the morning...some say they start taking it on a Thursday or Friday in anticipation of a sexual weekend."

I decided to rise to the challenge, hopefully in every sense. After extensive product testing I have to say that my wife developed a headache which was



not relieved by another homeopathic preparation.

The Scots have eaten porridge for years so there may be more to this than meets the eye.

Pamphlet Supplied

### **Homeopathy useless against Malaria**

Because of conventional drug side effects, a woman decided to rely on homeopathic drugs for malaria protection whilst holidaying in Africa. These homeopathic products were made from "African swamp water containing impurities, algae and plants as well as mosquito slough, larvae and eggs." Following her return home she became very unwell and was admitted to an intensive care unit with multiple organ system failure due to malaria infection.

There will be no claim for medicolegal liability because "the manufacturer, who has performed no clinical trials on this drug, declines all responsibility regarding its use."

Homeopathic remedies should only be used for harmless self-limiting disorders that require no treatment, which is precisely what homeopathy is all about.

BMJ Vol 321 18 Nov 2000 p 1288

### **Kentucky Fried Medicine**

The NZ Health Authorities recently had to warn all doctors that two Chinese herbal medicine capsules contained the potent corticosteroid betamethasone. These were Cheng Kum and Shen Loon. The Ministry of Health had earlier removed

Cheng Kum from the market when it was shown to contain the antihistamine chlorpheniramine.

Since most Chinese herbal remedies are either useless or dangerous it is hardly surprising that they are incorporating effective Western drugs in a fraudulent attempt to demonstrate effectiveness. The same problem has occurred in the UK where random tests were still finding banned substances such as mercury, arsenic and steroids in traditional Chinese medicine. Some also contained parts from endangered animal species.

Why should we respect medieval beliefs that endanger the continued existence of magnificent animals such as tigers because superstition demands the use of their bones? The criminals responsible for these excesses should be ground up themselves and processed into traditional remedies, and in this spirit I have formed a company marketing a new herbal remedy for cats called Meow Zedung.

BMJ Vol 323 6 Oct 2001 p770;  
MEDSAFE 14 Dec 2001

### **Flux for Flux?**

While in Ireland recently I kept a watchful eye for useful material and was not disappointed by an article in the Irish Examiner of 14-11-01. A company managed to sell to over 485 schools, a \$70 magnetic clip designed to be attached to the underwear and claimed to "banish the misery of painful periods." The device is the size of a 10p piece and it is claimed "sends out a magnetic field which penetrates up to 7 inches into the body."

This device is a classic placebo and it is easy to see how successful it would be in a Priest-ridden country where the Catholic religion ensures young women are made to feel bad about their emerging sexuality.

The article goes on to make the following claim "...66 out of 100 painful period sufferers took significantly less medication when wearing the device during their periods." If these young women received sympathetic advice and explanation about their periods in a climate of healthy acceptance, there would be an equally impressive improvement.

I know of a much better market for this device. Some enterprising person should promote it for male impotence.

### **Fad Allergies**

Around 20 in 100 Britains believe they suffer from allergies and intolerance to dairy foods and wheat-based products. However, nutritional research reveals the true figure is less than 1 per 100.

This is an area rife with quacks conducting all sorts of unscientific tests and giving potentially dangerous advice. People are using food allergies and intolerance as an excuse for weight gain and niggling health problems such as every GP's fear-TATT (tired all the time) syndrome. The very idea that you can have a food allergy and gain weight is preposterous.

The Daily Telegraph 5 Nov 2001

John Welch is a doctor with the Royal New Zealand Air Force

# A Classic Updated

**The Psychology of the Psychic, 2nd edition, by David Marks. Prometheus Books. Reviewed by Bernard Howard.**

When David Marks and Richard Kammann published the first edition of this book in 1980, it rapidly became a standard source for all interested in psychic phenomena. It combined a thorough critical appraisal of paranormal claims with a study of the mind of the typical “believer”. Especially, it offered a comprehensive exposé of Uri Geller, based on close observation on many occasions. The authors were at that time in the psychology department of the University of Otago. Later, after the untimely death of Kammann, Marks was instrumental in launching New Zealand Skeptics, for which achievement he is our first, and so far only, Honorary Member.

Over a professional career spanning three decades Marks has contributed widely both to academic psychology and to practical topics such as the giving up of smoking. This is in addition to his long-time work on the paranormal, the subject of this book. Where many others who should have known better were persuaded, his persistence and patience exposed the emptiness of many claims. Now professor at the City University, London, he has revised and brought the book up to date. He writes persuasively of the “tingles” and “tangles” of parapsychology – “tingles” are those feelings we get when something apparently

paranormal suddenly confronts us, “tangles” are what parapsychologists get into when they try to study these phenomena in the controlled conditions of the laboratory.

Six chapters, five mostly unchanged from the first edition, deal exhaustively with Uri Geller. The sixth traces the ups and downs of his reputation since then. Two decades have done nothing to change the author’s opinion that Geller has no psychic power, but is an accomplished conjuror and showman. He wonders whether, some day, Geller may make a public admission of this, so lifting from his shoulders the albatross of “The Great Psychic Lie”.

Two chapters on remote viewing are reprinted from edition one, followed by three covering subsequent research in this area, including the “psychic spying” attempted during Cold War days. Again, conclusions are as before. A related topic, the Ganzfeld, has been held up for years as the best, and most convincing evidence, for ESP. Thorough investigations by Marks and others has “left this claim...in tatters”.

Chapters on “Psychic Staring” and “Psychic Pets” consider some of the ideas of Rupert Sheldrake, “this latter-day Dr Who”. Marks finds no validity in either.

So far, this accounts for two-thirds of the book, what so many believe about the paranormal, and why they shouldn’t. The rest attempts to answer the questions, why they believe, and why they are so resistant to acceptance of contrary evidence. The author looks at coincidences and oddmatches, self-perpetuating beliefs and superstition.

Like many who have spent years looking for well-authenticated paranormal events, Marks has changed during the time of his researches; starting as “part believer”, progressing through “skeptic” to “disbeliever”, but always “keeping the door open” for what might make him change his mind.

As well as two appendices and an index, the book has an extensive bibliography. Every skeptic should have a copy, and press non-skeptical friends to read it.

## Forum

### False Memory re Subs?

In the latest NZ Skeptic, beside the chair-entity’s report, there is a false history of subscriptions. From written records: the sub was \$10 for ’86 to ’88, then \$20 for ’89 to ’91 and

\$25 since. The new \$40 rate follows the third increase since starting. I would hate to think the Skeptics allow false statements to go uncorrected.

Al Dennard.

## Two views of the World Trade Centre Attack

1. From Editorial in 'Skeptical Inquirer' Jan/Feb, 2002.

Brian Farha, a professor of education at Oklahoma City University and member of CSICOP's astrology subcommittee, wrote to me to propose we run a Forum column with this introduction: "Following are detailed summaries of documented psychic predictions—to this author's knowledge—regarding the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on America." That would be followed by a blank page.

2. From the newsletter of the American Society for Psychical Research, Dec, 2001. Through our website, we have initiated a survey of precognitive experiences specifically related to the terrorist attack.

Submitted without comment by  
Bernard Howard

### More Brickbats for Glen Fiddich

Some years ago, returning from the Continent, the in-flight duty-free catalog offered Glen Fiddich and Glen Morangie. I ordered the Glen Morangie. It was bad enough to be told that they were out of stock, without being patronized by the salesgirl ("air-stewardess") insisting on showing me what a Glen Fiddich bottle looks like. Very nice, so could I have a Glen Fiddich bottle refilled with Glen Morangie whisky! As for Wilson's, (See Beer and Skittles, Issue 61) well I shan't be surprised if it doesn't taste as good as Glen Morangie,

but will be disappointed if it doesn't taste better than Glen Fiddich.

Kris Howard, Scotland

### Organic Figures

In Philippa Stevenson's note Report Debunks Organic Benefits (NZ Skeptic 61) she quotes from the NZ Herald that 10 million hectares in organic farming round the world yield \$50 billion worth of produce, or about \$5000 per hectare (NZ dairy farmers would expect to exceed this), while 44 million hectares in transgenic crops, mostly in the US, yield produce worth \$7.5 billion, or \$167 per hectare.

I would have expected that Philippa, or any other good skeptic, or the editor of NZ Skeptic, would have been skeptical about these figures and checked their credibility. Or are skeptics, so zealous not to be gulled by claims of the paranormal, quite gullible about claims of the normal?

Pat Palmer

Philippa Stevenson is a Herald reporter and not a member of the NZ Skeptics. The article was reprinted as it originally appeared in the NZ Herald. ed.

### Children and Quackery

Pippa MacKay's Bravo Award-winning item When Children are the Victims of Quackery made sad reading. Yet it is merely another reflection of a country that is losing its collective marbles. Volumes could be written about the reasons for this creeping looniness, but surely chapter one, volume one would have to be

'our politically correct times'.

An encounter recently with the mother of a 4 year old has put me in a pessimistic frame of mind. The mother is a registered nurse, ie a 'caregiver', the 4 year old is her son – a lively, articulate and energetic boy, filled with inquisitiveness, brimming with energy and apparently desperate to be at school learning about the world. The boy is such a handful that a child psychologist has diagnosed him as an ADHD patient and recommended Ritalin for him. The mother is tired, but doubtful regarding Ritalin, yet remains tempted by such a trite and convenient diagnosis. I am treating the mother, who coincidentally swears by arnica ointment and enjoys reading the Women's Weekly's clairvoyant's page.

It seems we are surrounded by the paradox of people who listen to the local clairvoyant with respect, and self-medicate with homeopathy yet have post-graduate education. Similarly I have spoken to anxious parents (and grandparents) about Ritalin, and heard enough to believe that Ritalin is being administered to children (almost always boys) who seem to be more energetic, more inquisitive and more assertive than their teachers or caregivers can deal with.

There can be nothing more horrific than child abuse, and God knows we have seen such abuse aplenty – but shouldn't we be directing the sceptical searchlight towards the institutionalised child abuse prescribed and condoned in the name of ADHD.

Mike Houlding



# The Myth of Common Sense

*John Riddell reckons he's a sensible bloke. But then, doesn't everybody?*

**A** WHILE ago I had to take my wife out for our anniversary, so while we were waiting for our burgers and fries I flicked through one of those out of date magazines they leave out. There was an article about keeping your kids safe while surfing the net. It made a few sensible suggestions and then it said something interesting. It said you should use "common sense".

Do you have common sense? If you don't, what use is this advice?

I know I have common sense. I'm sure you do too. As far as I can make out, everybody thinks they have common sense. Which is strange, because I know plenty of people who appear to have no common sense at all. Politicians for example.

Which means there is a bit of a problem. If everyone thinks they have common sense, and everyone thinks that some people don't, then there must be people who think they know what common sense is when in fact they do not.

Surely that cannot be. Because if that is true, then even though I know I have common sense, there may be people who think I do not.

That's a worry.

But what is common sense? Maybe I don't have common sense. Could it be that what I think is common sense is different from what you think is common sense?

Does that make sense?

If you look at the words, "common sense", the meaning seems simple enough. Common sense must be "sense" that is held in "common". That's a belief that is held by two or more people. The trouble with this is we use the phrase "common sense" to refer to something that is "obviously true". But it might not be obvious to me. Or it might not be true. What is obvious to me might not be obvious to you. And believing something to be true doesn't make it so.

If you and I believe the world is flat then it is "common sense" that the world is flat. Anyone who disagrees with us just doesn't have common sense.

"I believe it. My friends believe it. If you disagree with us you must be wrong."

This idea goes back a long way. In 325 AD, Constantine the Great gathered a council of

Bishops in Nicea. They were required to come up with a creed for Christianity. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth", etc. They called it the Nicene Creed. If you accepted the creed, you were an Orthodox Christian. Orthos is Greek for "right". Doxos means "opinion". If you believed what they did you were of the "right opinion". If you didn't you were a heretic, and we all know what to do with heretics.

We now have Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and for that matter, Ethiopian Orthodox. Each thinking that their version is the "right opinion."

The political version of the same thing is the "Right Thinking Person".

As in "The time has come for all right thinking people to come to the aid of the Party." It doesn't matter what your political leanings are. So long as you are in our political party, you must be a right thinking person. Not like those wrong thinking people in the other parties.

The phrases "Common Sense", "Orthodox", or "Right Thinking Person" are used as

substitutes for logic, or evidence. They are a type of Appeal to Authority. Usually, in an appeal to authority, you claim something must be true because someone important believes it.

“Sir Isaac Newton believed it and he was an intelligent person, therefore it must be true.” In reality, this is not necessarily true because even intelligent people believe things that are not true.

The common sense argument is an appeal to the authority of numbers. “It’s common sense. Lots of people believe this. Forty million idiots can’t be wrong.”

So when I read the article about safely surfing the net and they suggested using common sense, I had to stop and think.

Whose common sense was I supposed to use?

Everybody has a collection of experiences that they use to explain the world. Everyone’s experiences are different. These experiences create a person’s beliefs and therefore what they think is common sense. A computer geek may have the right sort of common sense to decide how to control what his kids are viewing. But I might not. And since no two people have identical beliefs, you cannot be sure if you have the same common sense as the author.

So the advice to use common sense is useless. The next time you are told to use common sense, be careful whose common sense you use.

## Treasurer’s Report For Year Ending December 2000

Once again the financial figures are presented in the format required by the Registrar of Incorporated Societies.

Some points of note are:

1. A comparison is shown between 1999 and 2000 figures.
  - The term deposit and interest received from it are included in this year’s figures in a slightly different form from the 1999 year.
  - Membership fees are down by about \$760 but this could well be because of an increase in members in the ‘unwaged’ category.
  - A loss was made on the 2000 conference.
2. The financial position of the Skeptics is sound and your committee continues to take a positive interest in your financial welfare.

**Ian Short**  
**Treasurer**

### STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2000

<b>INCOME:</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>1999</b>
Donations received	7.50	110.00
Interest received – cheque A/c	46.95	343.41
Interest received – term deposit	1299.55	0.00
Members’ subscription	8795.05	9555.98
Miscellaneous sales	25.00	311.20
Surplus from conference	0.00	828.74
<b>TOTAL INCOME:</b>	<b>10174.05</b>	<b>11149.33</b>
 <b>EXPENDITURE:</b>		
Audit fees	250.00	55.25
Clerical & secretarial expenses	269.87	2544.17
Cheque duty	0.00	1.50
Donations paid	0.00	20.00
Misc. photocopying, flyers etc.	158.20	381.79
Net conference expense	2888.98	0.00
News letter production	7175.79	7809.32
PO Box rental	120.00	115.00
Resident withholding tax on interest	506.82	
Transfer to term deposit	0.00	27000.00
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>11369.66</b>	<b>37927.03</b>
<b>Net surplus/(deficit):</b>	<b><u>(\$1,195.61)</u></b>	<b><u>\$26,777.70)</u></b>

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Free, low volume but highly thought-provoking (or possibly just provoking!) coverage of breaking news, meeting announcements, calls for action etc.

We don't want to bother you too much, so will not abuse the privilege, but even a low-volume list like this will give us the chance to keep in touch in between the issues of the NZ Skeptic and the conference.

It is a one-way list, from your chair-entity to you at large. You're welcome to respond, make suggestions for the committee to consider, forward any information you think might interest others.

Send an email to [skeptics@spis.co.nz](mailto:skeptics@spis.co.nz) saying "please add to list" in the subject line.

If you really don't want to hear from us, you can opt out any time by emailing us with "remove" in the subject line and we'll make the necessary changes.

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