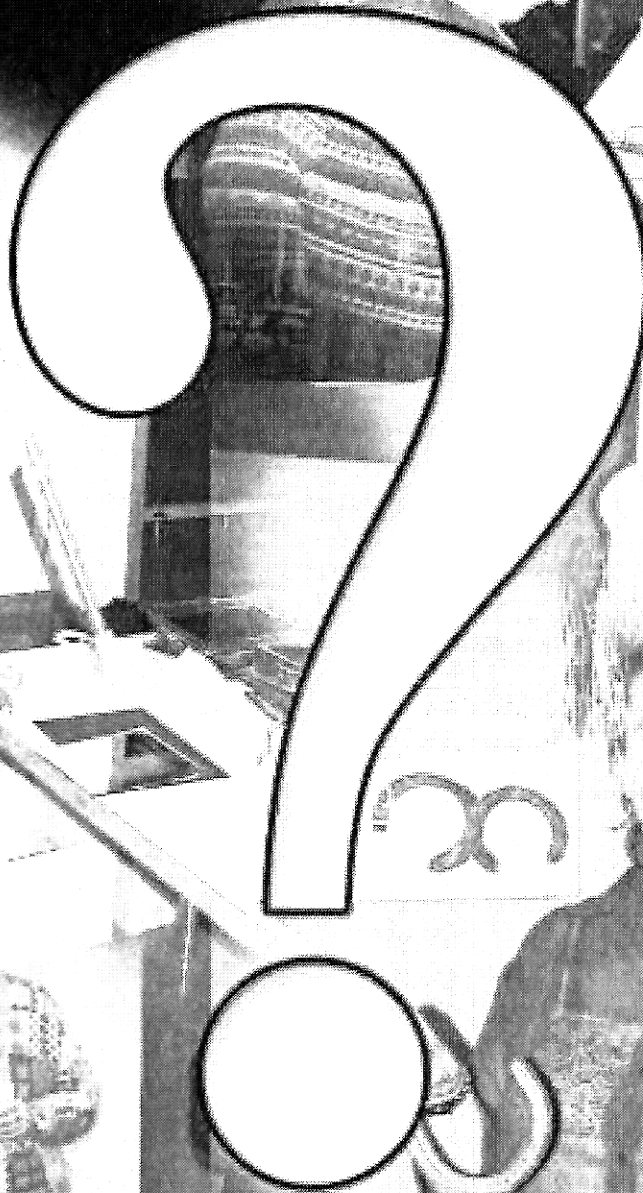


# new zealand Skeptic

number 65 - spring 2002

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**A City Still Possessed  
Skeptical Survey Results  
Possum Peppering  
Conference Reports**

How to Stop a Witch Hunt	3
Are we who we think we are?	8
Newsfront	10
Bent Spoon Award	13
Hokum Locum	18
Forum	20
Book Review	21
Chair-Entity's Report	22
Treasurer's Report	23

Front Cover: The Skeptics 2002 Conference opened with a Friday 13th Superstition Party.

Clockwise from top right:

☐ Peter Hogan from Melbourne contributes to New Zealand funds via the wishing well

☐ Superstition Party organiser Debbie Webb demonstrates the contradictory value of horseshoes

☐ Competition was keen to try and dowse which wine cask had the wine in it, with Warwick Don proving the eventual winner

☐ Chair-entity Vicki Hyde spent half the day breaking mirrors for the media, and conference attendees had a hundred mirrors to smash

## Contributions

Contributions are welcome and should be sent to:

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**Deadline for next issue: 10 January 2003**

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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Opinions expressed in the New Zealand Skeptic are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of NZSCICOP or its officers.

*Would love to have been there, but the koalas called from deepest darkest Australia. Since the conference was undoubtedly the most important thing to happen in New Zealand during the last three months I've decided to hand the editorial column over to Jim Allan. Take it away, Jim.*

# Good Company

**W**HAT name do you give to a quirky bunch of people who are scientifically literate, who question fads, and who want their beliefs to rest on evidence from the material world – the sort of evidence that does not require one to ignore or reject all the laws of physics and other knowledge we have and that we rely on daily when flying, taking antibiotics or using the computer?

The group's shortened name is the New Zealand Skeptics and in September in Christchurch they held their annual conference. What a delightful and idiosyncratic event this was, not least because there are so few lawyers in this group. I spend my professional life training would-be lawyers and writing articles for lawyers and other legal academics. You might think lawyers are instinctively sceptical. But actually, they're not. They're trained to take authorities—statutes, the decisions of judges—largely at face value. Yes, lawyers get very good at undermining certainty, at injecting doubt into the clearest of statutory provisions. But that is a different mindset than what one finds at the annual Skeptics conference.

This year, there was a host of interesting papers delivered. An academic from Canterbury University rubbished the trendy acceptance by some—under the false guise of being open-minded—of the possibility of psychic and paranormal knowledge. In fact, not one single police department in the US has found police psychics to be useful; only two or three out of nearly 500 National Enquirer predictions came true in the last dozen years or so; and not one single reproducible ESP phenomenon has ever been recorded, despite a huge reward being on offer to anyone who can demonstrate (that's the key word) such powers.

Not really a surprise though, once you realise that if it were true, you'd have to jettison or re-write all we know about the physical laws underlying our understanding of the universe, knowledge that has doubled life expectancy in the past century, led to untold material advances and helped lift huge numbers of people out of poverty. The same sort of mindset was brought to bear in papers on organics (vastly over-rated), herbal medicine (how do you spell "placebo"?), and "biodynamic" approaches to eradicating the painted apple moth, just to name three. But two of the talks at the conference cry out for special mention, and praise.

The first was a talk on the Liam Williams-Holloway case. This included the chance to see the Australian 60 Minutes segment which broadcasters here have refused to televise. The most memorable line from that segment came from one of the alternative medicine practitioners:

**Continued on page 11**

# How To Stop a Witch-Hunt

Lynley Hood

*This article is based on an address to the Skeptics Conference 2002. A condensed version has also been produced for the NZ Listener.*

I'VE JUST received my first bad review of *A City Possessed*. It was written by Val Sim, chief legal counsel for the Ministry of Justice, on the instructions of Phil Goff. When he released the review, Goff said he had read "significant parts" of *A City Possessed* and had found it well argued and researched, and quite compelling. 'Anyone who looked at the case, and the circumstances of the case, would not be objective if they did not feel unease about the atmosphere that existed and some aspects of the case,' he said. But he added that questions of guilt or innocence are not for authors or politicians to decide.

So it seemed ironic that, after giving Sim's review his blessing, Goff released long-suppressed documents about the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor. These showed that our politicians and their advisors minimised, discredited and ignored reports of gross civil rights violations because they didn't want to upset the Indonesian authorities.

'There are lessons to be learned from the Timor experience,' Goff said. Indeed there are - lessons about the damage that can be done to innocent people by politicians and bureaucrats who are more

interested in covering their own backs and not rocking the boat than in doing justice.

As Edmund Burke said: 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.' Anyone who has tried to make bureaucrats or politicians accountable will have heard the excuses. When the first excuse - 'there isn't a problem' - collapses under the weight of evidence, the second excuse - 'I had no idea there was a problem' - kicks in. According to historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, when real, this ignorance is more or less a matter of conscious and deliberate effort. As Albert Speer put it: 'Being in a position to know and nevertheless shunning knowledge creates direct responsibility for the consequences.'

In essence, Sim is saying that *A City Possessed* contains no new evidence that can justify reopening the Ellis case, and since a high court judge, two courts of appeal and a ministerial inquiry have endorsed the jury verdicts, that should be an end to the matter.

Prior to the publication of *A City Possessed* no outsider could effectively challenge that argument. But I'm astounded that Sim and

Goff think they can get away this self-serving obfuscation when thousands of New Zealanders have read my book. These readers know that I haven't just disagreed with the findings of a jury, a high court judge, two courts of appeal and a ministerial inquiry, I've demolished them. They know that the book isn't just about the guilt or innocence of Peter Ellis. They know that it identifies serious flaws in the justice system that need to be addressed. They know that the Court of Appeal's "new evidence" rule is a confidence trick invented by Their Honours to save themselves from ever having to admit that they've made a mistake. And readers of *A City Possessed* also know that our Minister of Justice does have the power to instruct the Governor General to pardon Peter Ellis and establish a commission of inquiry. So who are Sim and Goff fooling? Not the readers of my book.

In the 11 months since *A City Possessed* was published, legal authorities nationwide have said: Lynley Hood's got it right and the Government can't afford to ignore this book. So I have to conclude that Val Sim is wrong. There was a miscarriage of justice in the Civic Creche case, and my book has exposed problems in the

justice system that need to be addressed.

In the book, I argue that the Civic Creche case was one manifestation of an international phenomenon comparable to the great witch hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries. In the classical sense, a witch hunt is a combination of three separate, but related, phenomena: a moral panic, an epidemic of mass psychogenic illness, and an outbreak of scapegoating.

Earlier this year, a correspondent to the *Otago Daily Times* suggested that episodes of this sort are a force of nature, like a tidal wave or a hurricane. Everyone is a victim, nobody is to blame, and the only way to right the wrongs done to Peter Ellis is to compensate him from the Earthquake Commission.

That's actually not a bad idea, because while there are clearly wrongs to be righted, if we want to live in a society that values compassion, tolerance and forgiveness over vengeance and retribution, and if we want to avoid setting off another witch hunt, then demanding that heads roll will solve nothing.

In my view, there are no monsters in the Civic Creche story. I think the problems arose when the winds of panic swept through Christchurch and the moral compasses of ordinary, decent, well-intentioned people became so disoriented that they ended up doing harm when they thought they were doing good.

That said, one of the lessons of the great witch hunts is that we shouldn't under-estimate the power

of the authorities to inflame or dampen down these panics.

In Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 the governor brought that panic to an end by declaring spectral evidence inadmissible. Spectral

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**I don't pretend to have any answers. Indeed, one of the lessons of *A City Possessed* is – beware of people who claim to have the answers.**

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evidence is the dreams, visions and hallucinations of people who believe themselves to be bewitched. The fact that the governor's wife had just been accused probably helped focus his mind. And the community had been calling for an end to witch hunting for some time, so the governor's actions weren't all that remarkable.

James I of England is a more interesting case. Earlier, as James VI of Scotland, he was a rabid witch hunter. But in 1604 he moved to England and became a sceptic.

One of James I's most famous cases was that of 20-year-old Anne Gunther, who foamed at the mouth and vomited pins. After questioning her closely, the King concluded that Anne's real problem was a desperate need for love. So he gave her a dowry. Whereupon – according to the King's physician William Harvey – she married and found herself miraculously cured.

In 1634 William Harvey was sent by the King to examine seven Lancashire women accused of witchcraft by an 11-year-old boy. By the time Harvey arrived three of the women had died in their cells,

but the rest were acquitted when they were found to show no unambiguous signs of witchcraft. Later, the boy admitted that his father had put him up to it, and had told him they would make a lot of money.

Even in Continental Europe, where around 100,000 witches were executed in spasmodic bursts over a 200 year period, strong minded leaders could hold the panic in check.

Between 1673 and 1684, in the German town of Calw, 39 children accused 77 adults of witchcraft. But when the legal faculty at the University of Tübingen examined the evidence, they rejected the children's stories as fantasies, and condemned the irresponsible way in which the parents had questioned their children. The faculty also insisted that no witch be condemned without reliable evidence and due process. And so, in Calw, disaster was averted.

### Reality Checks

In 1610, Dr Alonzo Salazar, a judge of the Spanish Inquisition, spent eight months conducting reality checks on the confessions and accusations of witchcraft recorded during a panic in a Basque country. Salazar's assistants took the accusing children to the scene of the supposed witches' sabbat one by one, secretly, in daylight. They were asked where the devil had sat, where they had eaten and danced, how they had got in and out of their own homes, whether they had travelled alone or in groups, whether they had heard clocks or bells and 'any other circumstances which might serve to clarify the problem.' (I've spelt out



these details because, unlike Dr Salazar, Sir Thomas Eichelbaum did not do reality checks on the children's evidence during his inquiry into the Ellis case.)

Salazar found that the children contradicted themselves and each other. He reported that there was not to be found 'a single proof nor even the slightest indication from which to infer that one act of witchcraft had actually taken place'.

Salazar's colleagues regarded his findings as convincing proof of the unreliability of witch accusations and witch confessions. At that point, the Spanish people did not stop believing in witches, but prosecutors—having realised that they could not distinguish between true and false allegations, and that false allegations were destroying the social fabric—became very wary of prosecuting them.

Witch suspects were still prosecuted when there was reliable evidence that real people had committed real crimes (and they did find the occasional crone who really had poisoned her neighbours' well, or committed some other offence commonly regarded as the work of a witch). But Salazar's reality checks brought witch executions in Spain to a complete halt 80 years before the panic burnt itself out throughout the rest of Europe.

### Lessons to be Learned

What can we learn from all this? I don't pretend to have any answers. Indeed, one of the lessons of *A City Possessed* is – beware of people who claim to have the answers.

Nonetheless, I think it's important to challenge the

pessimists who say: 'Nothing will be done about the creche case because it's *too hard*. The ripples spread too wide. Too many influential people will have their careers and reputations called into question.'

In my view, we can deal with it, and we must deal with it – not only for the sake of the past, but also for the sake of the future. Ten years on from the Civic Creche case, the sex abuse hysteria that drove it continues unabated, and the damage that hysteria is causing to the fabric of New Zealand society cannot be ignored.

Currently, children as young as ten are being labelled 'sexual predators'. Prurient computer technicians are determining what responsible adults should be allowed to see, read and hear. Respected school teachers—who have been abusing nobody but themselves—have had their careers and reputations destroyed. A one-legged 60-year-old has lost his international sporting career over a bit of tomfoolery that harmed no one. The explosion of historic allegations against Catholic priests escalates daily. In my view, we're as much at risk today of having our lives, our families and our communities ripped apart by false allegations of sexual abuse as the people of Christchurch were in 1992.

### Overseas Experience

Overseas countries are also dealing with these panics. Earlier this year retired Canadian Judge Frederick Kaufman presented his long-awaited report into the epidemic of historic allegations of abuse in Nova Scotia youth institutions.

That scandal began in the early '90s, when a paedophile who had worked for the province in the '70s was convicted. Two more abusers turned up. Fearing a deluge of lawsuits, the Government hired a respected former judge to assess how deep the rot went.

The judge identified 89 cases of possible abuse that had occurred 20 to 40 years earlier. None of the claims were tested by the usual rules of evidence. But the Government concluded it was in deep trouble, and the justice minister made his pitch.

All survivors would be compensated according to the severity of their abuse. To ensure speedy justice, no one would have to prove a thing. He might as well have hung out a sign saying: Get Free Money Here.

When the 89 claims swelled to 500, the Government simply increased the compensation fund. And as the claims escalated, so did the hysteria. People who had devoted their lives to the care of troubled and needy children were pilloried by the media. Juvenile delinquents were recast as tragic choirboys. No one checked old medical records, or interviewed former employees. The Government did not want to "revictimize the victims."

In the end, \$30 million was paid out to just over 1200 claimants. Legal fees, counselling, and criminal investigations brought the cost to more than \$60 million.

But Judge Kaufman found that, by 2002, it was impossible to know how much abuse there really was. The real victims (and he didn't doubt there were some) had been discredited along with the fakes.

Meanwhile, in Britain, a select committee inquiry is under way into the police practice of "trawling". Trawling involves police officers contacting former residents of children's homes and asking them if they were abused, or if they witnessed incidents of abuse, and informing them of the availability of financial compensation. The inquiry was prompted by a concern that a whole new genre of miscarriages of justice may have arisen from this practice.

Also in Britain, in a case with remarkable similarities to the Civic Creche, two former child care workers were recently awarded maximum libel damages of £200,000 each. The judge found no basis for allegations that the pair were part of a paedophile ring that was exploiting children for pornographic purposes. He ruled that those responsible for spreading the allegations had ignored the principles of natural justice, and had included claims which they must have known were untrue, and

which could not be explained on the basis of incompetence or carelessness.

### Criminalising and Scapegoating

There are lessons from all this that we ignore at our peril. They relate to the harm being inflicted on society by current campaigns to protect children from vaguely defined sexual dangers by criminalising and scapegoating a wide range of people and behaviours.

These campaigns ignore the realities of childhood and adolescent sexuality. They distract us from serious problems related to the health, education and welfare of children. They put a destructive barrier between all adults and all children. They erode essential freedoms for us all. But the hysteria surrounding the issue is so pervasive that anyone who suggests more thoughtful discussion risks being branded a child abuser. In my

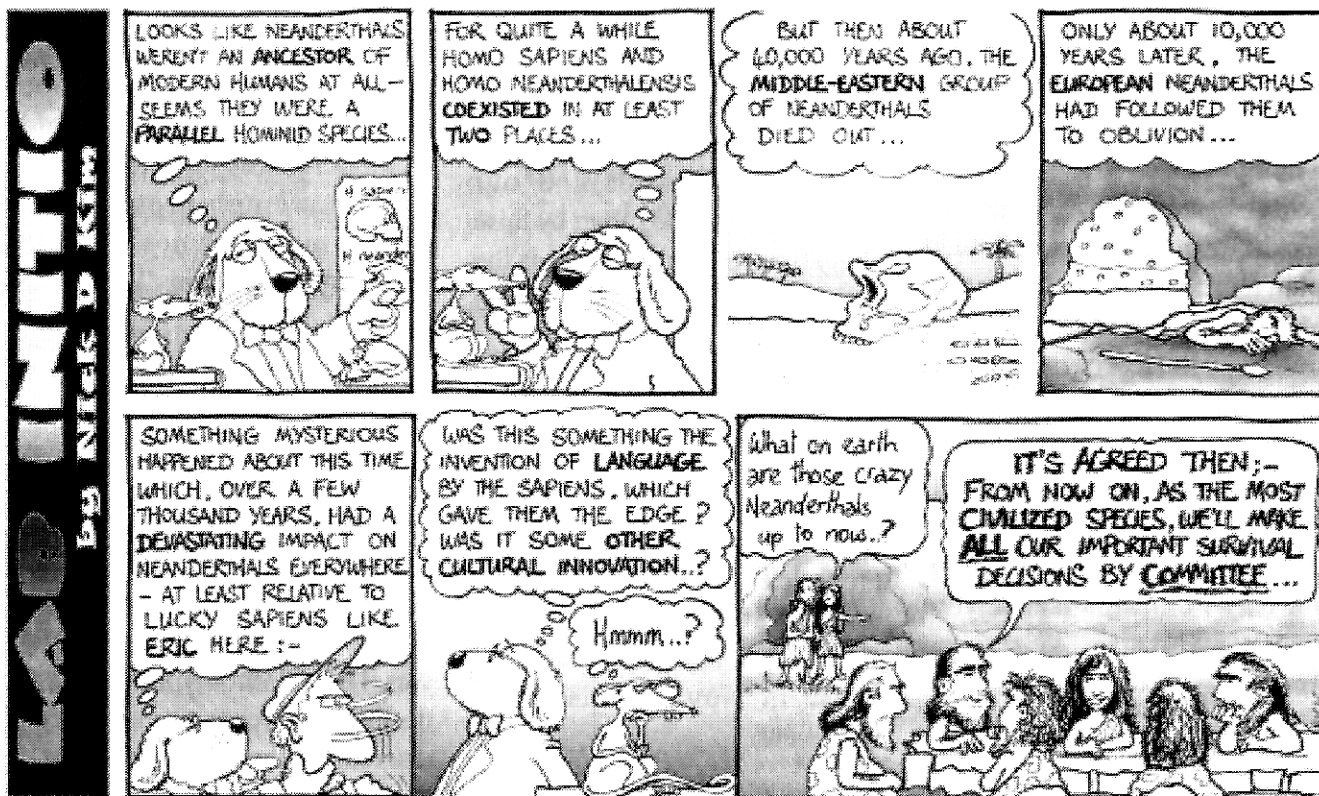
view, we must insist on a more sensible and compassionate approach. So what's to be done?

Well – laws and procedures can be changed. It happens all the time. All that's needed is moral courage and political will. Where is Dr Salazar when we need him?

Given the will to do so, ACC could abandon its counselling guidelines that are known to induce false memories of abuse, and it could treat sex abuse fraud as seriously as it treats other sorts of fraud.

Given the will to do so, CYFS could admit that its interviewers can't distinguish between true and false allegations of sexual abuse.

Given the will to do so, Parliament could change the laws that make it easy to convict on unreliable evidence of sexual abuse, and courts could insist on reliable evidence, no matter how great the clamour for a conviction.



Given the will to do so, the Court of Appeal could correct its own mistakes.

But these changes won't repair the damage done by the Civic Creche case. I think what's needed there is a royal commission headed by a robust overseas judge.

Of course we shouldn't expect too much of such a commission. It won't fix everything. But it will enable everyone involved to have their say. It'll help the truth to come out. It'll bring a degree of accountability. It'll highlight the policies, procedures and laws that need to change.

In my view, a royal commission on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission model is the way to go. This would offer amnesty to those whose conduct is called into question in exchange for a full, truthful account of their roles in the case, while those whose rights have been violated would be offered the chance to be heard, and to hear the truth come out, as an alternative to expensive and divisive show trials and administrative purges, and endlessly escalating compensation claims.

### Scandals

In the course of researching *A City Possessed* I uncovered many scandals. The biggest scandal was the discovery that, since the mid-'80s, New Zealanders have been calling for a commission of inquiry into the ways in which sexual abuse allegations are handled in this country, but successive governments have simply buried the problem. Since *A City Possessed* was published the clamour for an inquiry has reached a crescendo. But still the

Government doesn't want to know.

So where do we go from here?

Twenty years ago, I did an interview in the US. This was when Ronald Reagan was President, and the fall of the Berlin Wall was still seven years away.

My interview was with suburban grandmother Molly Rush. Molly belonged to a group that had entered a nuclear weapons plant and damaged the nosecones of two warheads. At the time of my interview she had spent 11 weeks in jail and was out on bail awaiting appeal.

By temperament I'm slow to take sides on any issue, but I knew where I stood on the arms race. I asked Molly what her group had done, and why they had done it. I asked her what they had hoped to achieve, and whether they had achieved it. And I told her about a demonstration I had attended.

I said: 'One of my feelings was that in no way did anything that was said or done influence any of the dignitaries at that meeting. They were so sealed off by the police and the secret service.'

I think the philosophy she conveyed in her reply can be applied to everything we do. She said:

"It's important to counter that feeling of helplessness or hopelessness that can lead to violence or apathy. A couple of things need to be said; one is that when you participate in a public protest to assume that you're immediately going to change those people whose whole lives are so committed to these policies is unrealistic. What you're trying to do is galvanise public opinion."

Peace demonstrations, large and small, have served to create a climate of public opinion that has finally made politicians address this issue. We need to take heart from that.

But beyond that you have to deal with the whole issue of effectiveness and pragmatism. I'm a pragmatic organiser at heart but what I've learnt in the past few years is that one can't necessarily predict the results of one's actions. Some of the most profound changes have come about in situations that seemed exceedingly hopeless and exceedingly unaffected by what you're doing.

I'm instructed by the example of a young priest who climbed the fence of a nuclear weapons plant. He received no media attention and spent more than six months in jail with no apparent result. He was visited in prison by Bishop Mathieson who has since become an outspoken opponent of the arms race. Bishop Mathieson has said publicly that his meeting with the young priest in jail was part of the process that led to his conversion. Yet if that priest had climbed the fence thinking - "I'm doing this to convert Bishop Mathieson" - that would have been absurd.

So we're not talking about acting to achieve specific goals, what we're talking about is trying to hang on to a vision, and to live out our lives in a way that contains truth, and to have faith in the power of truth in the Gandhian sense - faith that the power of truth can overcome wrong.

Lynley Hood is the author of *A City Possessed* and winner of the 2002 Montana Book Award

# Are we who we think we are?

*Skeptics – always in two minds about something...*

**Vicki Hyde**

**Y**OU MAY recall I mentioned in the last issue of the NZ Skeptic that we were surveying members to see if we were all still on roughly the same wavelength. We were spurred on to do this by the 4<sup>th</sup> World Skeptics Conference which saw long-time CSICOP leader Paul Kurtz call for Skeptics to take on religion, economics and politics as well as ghosts, UFOs, aliens, iridologists and the like.

It's a big issue in the US, where they seem to feel under siege by the forces of religion and where a number of the Centres for Inquiry have been established in conjunction with the Humanist movement.

In discussing the issue with my Australian confreres, I felt, as did they, that our antipodean organisations had a different view as to what our core ideas should be, and it didn't include assuming that all our members were Humanist Democrats! However, like any Skeptic worth his or her salt, I was prepared to change my mind should I be shown to be out of step with everyone else, hence the survey.

The results are now in (my thanks to the 15% of you who responded via post and online), and provide some food for thought.

As you will all have seen in our fine print and elsewhere, you officially belong to the New Zealand Committee for Scientific

Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (NZCSICOP) Inc. The name is something of an historical accident, modelled as we were on the US-based CSICOP from whence all things sprang.

And, as noted in our Constitution, our aim is to examine critically the paranormal (e.g. psychic phenomena) and pseudoscience (eg astrology, creation science).

In more recent years, we have become known informally as the New Zealand Skeptics. While it's a lot easier to say on radio and takes up less column-inches in the newspaper, it does mean that we are often assumed to be sceptical about all things, including general religious beliefs, political movements and economic predictions.

This has meant that, on occasion, we have been castigated by various outsiders for not getting stuck into anything and everything.

So where do we sit? I suspect in the classic fence-sitters' position, somewhere in between the two...

## **How Do We Define Who We Are?**

Traditionally we have tended to regard our focus as being defined by those areas in which scientifically testable claims are made or where empirically-based evidence is presented.

Thus we don't target, say, Christian beliefs per se, except where you have people who claim they have discovered a piece of the Ark (let's test it!) or who assert that the Earth really is only 6000 years old (where's the evidence?). Beliefs are perfectly valid in a church setting, but if you want to bring them into a science classroom, then you have to meet the sort of standards and criteria demanded of any legitimate science.

This can mean that from time to time, we are sceptical of claims which appear to be legitimate, accepted science. It is through questioning both received and revealed wisdom that we learn more about our world. And it does mean that we have to be prepared to change our minds in the light of convincing evidence.

This distinction we have made between the world of belief and the world of evidence is one which appears to have strong support. Of the survey respondents, just about all of you are happy with this distinction, with virtually everyone giving it a 1 or 2, "strongly agree" rating.

In the initial years of the Society, much of the focus was on the spoon-benders and mind-readers that were the popular New Age figures of the day. While we still search for any signs that they really do have special powers, over



the past ten years or so NZCSICOP has tended to focus on those areas with the greatest potential for harm either for individuals or for society. This has certainly informed your committee's discussions regarding Bent Spoon Award nominations and areas where we have made public comment.

Thus we have typically said that we're not out to castigate Granny for reading the tea leaves, but we are concerned where people are exploited by those asserting some form of objective, testable reality to dubious practices or claims. Where the potential for harm exists – whether physical, mental, emotional, moral or economic – the Skeptics have considered it unethical not to challenge such claims.

It looks like this stance has been reflected in some of the survey results relating to what you perceive as our core areas of interest, which led to what some might see as surprising results.

Two strong basic aspects of critical thinking were regarded as highly important – academic freedom and misuse of statistics.

### **The First Circle of Skepticism**

The topical areas of core interest were identified as:

alternative medicine  
creation science/intelligent design  
repressed/false memory  
global warming research  
GE/GM issues

This represents an interesting mix of the “easy” skeptical subjects and ones which are likely to include a broad range of opinions and hence be more problematic.

As your chair-entity, I am relatively sanguine about commenting on claims made by alternative practitioners – one can test many of the claims they make, cite sound research and generally put such areas through the rigor of the scientific process to see what comes out the other side.

Creation science, and its more recent evolution into intelligent design, has been a topic with us from the first. Again, it's an area which makes readily testable assertions, and where the errors and manipulations of its proponents can be easily identified. This is not to say that it is a simple thing to deal with!

The latter three in that list, to some extent, represent topical concerns, and ones which can be particularly contentious. One respondent referred to them as “dangerous, expensive themes”. I am hoping that we have seen the peak in enthusiasm for repressed memory – it certainly caused a great deal of damage to a large number of individuals and families when at its height – but I think that sufficient skepticism and the weight of evidence against it may well see it relegated to the role of psychological fad.

Global warming and GE/GM issues are much more likely to stay with us as we work through the complexities of the science involved, and the even greater complexities of how we as individuals and as members of a broader society deal with these things. I know that our membership has a diverse range of views in this area – after all we count Green members, organic farmers, ecologists, RMA consultants and a whole host of people in our midst.

As topics, global warming and GE/GM fall well outside the realm of the paranormal, but there is more than enough room for debating the evidence from either end of the environmental and political spectrum and anywhere between! Personally, I don't think this area is one where the ultimate decisions are necessarily going to be based on the science involved or the evidence presented. As a consequence, in my official capacity, I prefer, as our primer suggests, to “maintain a position of uncertainty where there is insufficient or ambiguous evidence”.

(And if you want to write and tell me I'm a wishy-washy fence-sitter, or convince me you know what's going to happen with global warming or GE/GM, or provide me with material you think would help inform me, you're welcome to do so. What I'd really like to hear, though, is how you think this relates to NZCSICOP and its aims.)

### **The Second Circle of Skepticism**

This is the one which intrigued me, containing as it does many of the traditional areas of skeptical interest. It wasn't until I worked my way through all the comments that I felt I saw the reasoning behind why such topics as astrology, ghosts, psychic phenomena and UFOs/aliens were regarded as second-tier interests.

Many of you said you considered these topics to be “dead issues”, easy targets, to be past the point where anyone takes them seriously anymore. The relatively low impact these topics have on society at large, and the unlikelihood of personal harm

**Continued on page 12**

## Biokinetic Horror Show

A HAMILTON doctor is facing two charges of professional misconduct and one of disgraceful conduct after one of his patients was left looking "like something out of a horror movie". The Marlborough Express (August 21) reports Yvonne Short had gone to Dr Richard Gorringer in 1998 looking for a cure for her skin problems.

She told a disciplinary tribunal in Hamilton Dr Gorringer promised to cure her within 12 weeks, but she ended up worse off.

"My hands were also swollen and painful... I would wake up in the morning and there would be skin on the bed and on the floor," she said.

In her opening address, director of proceedings Morag McDowell told the tribunal Dr Gorringer's alternative practice was not an issue. Instead, the prosecution was concerned with his diagnostic technique.

The next day (NZ Herald, September 22) Dr Gorringer demonstrated this technique, known as Peak Muscle Resistance Testing. Using a fake patient, he showed how the patient placed his or her hand or arm on a square aluminium plate, which was part of a wired circuit.

In the other hand, the patient holds an aluminium rod, and touches dozens of small vials filled with various body tissues, chemicals, toxins and pathogens. If the patient's arm flexes when they touch

a certain toxin or body tissue vial, that shows what is wrong and where the problem lies.

Using this technique, Dr Gorringer diagnosed Yvonne Short as suffering from paraquat poisoning.

Expert witness Dr Richard Doehring told the tribunal the technique was not reliable, adding that muscle testing was without objective validation and confirms what the practitioner expects it to confirm.

He criticised as unethical Dr Gorringer's practice of selling remedies from his own clinic and described his alternative practice as "cruelly exploitative, if not outright fraudulent."

### Hotline to Heaven

Bolivian visionary, evangelist and stigmatist Katya Rivas flew into Wellington briefly, and relayed a message from Jesus especially for the people of New Zealand. Since being visited by the Blessed Mother in 1993, Katya has reported numerous miracles. She has even converted sceptics to Catholicism - Aussie investigative journalist Mike Willessee interviewed her in 1999 for a Fox TV documentary and the former sceptic converted. It was he who invited her to Sydney, to help launch a new video he made on the miracle of the Eucharist. Contact magazine (September 5) had this as its lead article, spurring an unprecedented five copies submitted to Newsfront from members. Christ's message, by the way: "We are already in a new

country, a country which is ready to receive my mercy through love. Trust, it is important that you speak to the people and save souls that are precious to me. Happy are those who are docile to my voice and invitations."

Letters to the editor resulted, essentially saying "Stigmata, potata!" - one pointed out that CSICOP'S Joe Nickell looked into the alleged stigmatisation and found they could not be authenticated. The show was so bad it even won Farce of the Week (see [www.randi.org/jr/7-30-199.htm](http://www.randi.org/jr/7-30-199.htm)). Another said "A lot of Mike Willessee's very sane friends and colleagues are deeply concerned about his health..."

### Something to cry over

While on such things, the NZ Herald (September 23) reports the weeping virgin of Rockingham appears to have joined the long list of fakes that have plagued Christendom since splinters of the "true cross" carved out a market in the Middle Ages. (I wish I'd written that introduction -ed.) After examination, a secret cavity was found in the fibreglass statue which has enthralled thousands of the faithful at the industrial suburb south of Perth since rose-scented "tears" appeared in March. Following a pattern on the internet describing how to "amaze your friends and bring peasants to your door" the unknown creator reportedly put an oil-filled cavity in its head. It was then sold as a souvenir in Thailand eight years ago. Such are miracles.

## Bad Vibes, Man

A Whakatane woman fears plans to build a periodic detention centre next to her shop will wreak havoc on her business, the Dominion Post (26 July) reports.

"I sell crystals, can you imagine the negative energy that will come from over there," said Gerry Tobin, who plies her trade next to the proposed Commerce St site.

On the other hand, we wonder whether the positive vibrations from her wares will have a beneficial effect on the prisoners?

## It's your hair they're after

Consumer Affairs Ministry senior adviser Pamela Rogers is one person keeping tabs on scams (Dominion Post, September 11 – yes, there were other news items that day). She says the "ickiest" one she's seen was from clairvoyant Liv Hansen who would map out your financial future in return for \$30 and a clipping of your hair.

Similar scams included Master Charli Chan's amazing golden dragon egg and Maria

Duval's cardboard talisman, priced between \$50 and \$80.

Variations on the Nigerian scam (see p. 12) include pleas from Zimbabwean "Edward Mulete" to help disperse his murdered farmer father's \$46 million estate, and a man claiming to be the late King of Nepal's lawyer looking to offload \$67 million squirreled away by the king's son and killer, Prince Dipendra.

The ministry has also seen a recent upsurge in "El Gordo" lottery scams, in which people are sent a letter or e-mail saying they had won money in a lottery, but needed to send a cheque or provide credit card details to pay \$50 to claim their prize. Ms Rogers said people still sent money despite knowing they had not entered such lotteries.

## Sceptic sees stars

Independent film-maker Bart Sibril surprised Buzz Aldrin, one of the first astronauts to walk on the moon – and saw stars for his efforts. The man—described as a "sceptic"—maintains the moon landings were faked in the Nevada

desert. He was with a Japanese film team and ambushed the astronaut outside a Beverly Hills hotel, reports The Press (September 21). "I walked up to him on the sidewalk and put a Bible up to him and asked him to swear on the Bible that he actually walked on the moon," said Sibril, who has confronted Aldrin twice before. "He refused to do it, so I told him he was a thief to take money for giving an interview on something he didn't do. That's when he hit me ..."

## Looking For Love

Keiko, the whale from Free Willy, has told an "animal interpreter" that he is lonely and looking for love. He also has an itchy back. Astrid Moe, who claims to have had a "lengthy telepathic dialogue" with Keiko, says the whale is looking for his other half and that he feels stuck between two worlds, reports the Star-Times (September 15). "He told me that his back was very itchy and that was when I saw an emitting device near his dorsal fin. That's probably what he was talking about." Rocket science.

## editorial

## Continued from page 2

"All we care about is the wealth of our patients—I mean health." That whole sorry and saddening episode casts a cloud over a good many people, and leads me to wonder why the parents of Liam have not been charged with a criminal offence.

Finally, I must mention the talk given at the conference by Lynley Hood, author of the prize-winning book *A City Possessed: The Christchurch Civic Creche Case*. If

anyone out there thinks Peter Ellis should have been convicted, or still thinks he is undeserving of a pardon, that person should read this book. (See this month's lead article—ed.)

I'd like to see a Commission of Inquiry headed by a tough-minded overseas judge—maybe the English judge who, in the height of a similar hysteria over there, acquitted two similarly placed crèche workers who have just won a big defamation case.

But if you think that's likely to happen here in New Zealand, if you think the vested interests might break ranks, you need a good dose of scepticism.

James Allan,  
Faculty of Law,  
University of Otago.

**Continued from page 9**  
arising from them may well have played a part in their lesser rating. As one respondent put it:

“I used to be interested in paranormal phenomena, but I now think pseudo- and anti-science pose greater threats to our future, and that is where my interests now lie.”

Of course, one cannot be too complacent. We have seen deaths arise from UFO cults, and we know that thousands of dollars are taken in by psychic hotlines every month in this country. A salutary point to note is that while these results were being collated – and “scams and cons” graded into this section – the Press was giving lead coverage to a local businessman who had sent around \$1 million to Nigeria in the hope of gaining untold millions in return...

Three other topics hit this second circle: counselling, organic/biodynamic agriculture and food scares.

### The Outer Circle

It didn't particularly surprise me to find meditation and economic predictions fall into the outer circle of skeptical interests. There are aspects of the meditation industry that may well attract our attention, and we'd all probably be sceptical of economic predictions regardless of whether we are members of NZSCICOP or not! But in general, they are not prime targets.

The one which did interest me was that of religious beliefs/faiths, as the responses to this one tended to be highly polarised, with scores of one or ten, with very few in between. Of those who did see it

as a core interest, a number mentioned that belief systems are important in pushing people to promulgate misinformation, and so were therefore fair game. It should be noted that the respondents who graded religious beliefs with a one (core interest), tended to grade everything as a core interest.

However, the final results were unambiguous in putting

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**“I used to be interested in paranormal phenomena, but I now think pseudo- and anti-science pose greater threats to our future, and that is where my interests now lie.”**

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religion per se outside our main brief. There are organisations which exist for those who want to directly challenge religions of whatever stripe, and many Skeptics have also been members of the Rationalists, Humanists, Atheist Society, Secular Students Club and the like. From the early-morning discussions I have had at various conferences, NZSCICOP members have as great a variety of religious/spiritual beliefs as they do political. I think that we are the stronger for that.

### Predicting the Future for NZSCICOP

I think that our future is a fairly clear one, and one which ideally will have us all contributing in whatever fashion we can. We are planning some practical activities as a result of this survey.

We'll be putting more resources online for people to have easy access to things like

information flyers and useful databases (and we'll be using some of that material in the NZ Skeptic for those of you without internet access).

We're planning a competition for teachers, which will help us to establish and develop practical resources for the teaching of critical thinking across a range of levels in the education system.

We're looking for more ways to be proactive in our approach, as many of you mentioned that as an important point to consider. Increasing contacts with like-minded organisations overseas will help in that regard, providing information and opportunities. Darwin Day, on February 12, provides one chance for us to take part in international celebrations of science, humanity and thought (see [www.darwinday.org](http://www.darwinday.org) for more information).

We know what we need to do. We need to:

- ☐ communicate the importance of asking questions and looking for evidence
- ☐ encourage more critical thinking in our media and our youth
- ☐ keep a sense of humour and an open mind

Vicki Hyde is chair-entity of the New Zealand Skeptics



## Jeanette Fitzsimons wins Skeptics 2002 Bent Spoon Award

*This is the press release (slightly edited) which announced this year's Bent Spoon Winner. Most of the reports used only a small proportion, and included a quote from Ms Fitzsimons saying that the Skeptics could "do whatever they like with their silly bent spoon".*

**S**UPPORTING the concept of "etheralised Cosmic-Astral influences" as a means of ridding New Zealand of possums has won Jeanette Fitzsimons the 2002 Bent Spoon Award from the New Zealand Skeptics. The annual award spotlights the dangers of gullibility or a lack of critical thought.

"In an area as vital to New Zealand's ecological preservation as pest control, it is imperative to ensure that publicly funded control techniques are demonstrably effective," says Skeptics head Vicki Hyde. "That's why it was so disappointing to see support from the Greens for biodynamic possum peppering as a valid approach to this problem. Our environment needs champions who can separate wishful thinking from reality – if we could wish possums out of this country, they'd be gone overnight!"

Hyde said she was even more disappointed to find out later that Fitzsimons knew of the scientific testing possum peppering had undergone ten years ago. The tests had clearly demonstrated that biodynamic claims of being able to provide a potent repellent were false.

In peppering, the bodies of unwanted organisms are burnt at a certain time in the lunar cycle. The ashy remains are then watered down to produce a spray said to repel, some claim sterilise, the pest concerned. The dilution is to the point where no actual substance remains other than water, which is

where the "vital life-force" and "planetary influences" of biodynamics' "spiritual science" are said to take over.

A decade ago, the Forest Research Institute was the first organisation in the world to test these claims scientifically and in "a reasonably rigorous fashion", according to Hyde who studied them at the time. They involved the Biodynamic Farming & Gardening Association, a biodynamic farmer and a homeopathic company, and proponents predicted that the "possums would not go near the treated areas and they would probably be desperate to get out of the cages". In fact, the possums showed no discernible reaction to the spray.

Hyde says that the Skeptics support the examination of such proposals in case there is some undiscovered, effective strategy that has not been identified, but says that "peppering has already been closely examined and found wanting."

Hyde is concerned that ten years on, peppering is still being proposed as a means of pest control, in Auckland with regard to painted apple moth and with the Green support for its use against possums.

"We'd hate to see public time and money spent on this when it has the potential to delay or dilute real, demonstrably effective approaches to such crucial areas as pest control. We can't afford to do that

when we've got possums chomping through tonnes of native forest every night and killing endangered hatchlings."

The Skeptics conference, which opened in Christchurch on Friday the 13th of September included a presentation on the biosecurity hazards associated with this form of alternative agriculture.

The conference also saw the presentation of the society's Bravo Awards, honouring intelligent reporting and critical thinking.

"We were pleased to see Mark Chrysell of the Assignment team actually walk into the forests allegedly silenced by 1080-based pest control and listen to the sounds of our recovering birdlife. His 'Hello Possums' documentary was a well-balanced piece which allowed both sides of the 1080 debate a chance to make their points."

The Skeptics have also applauded:

□ Lynley Hood, author of "A City Possessed"

"There is no question that sexual abuse of children occurs, but the Christchurch Civic Creche case has always raised big question marks for those familiar with the social context and the similar cases overseas which preceded it. Lynley's work has served to help clarify what makes this case so different from the unquestioned abuse cases that are found all-too-often in our court pages."

□ Noel O'Hare, Listener Health columnist

O'Hare has been a previous Bravo Award winner, and his work cited in this year's award includes the columns Silent Spring Fever (January 19, 2002) and Get Your Snake Oil here (August 17, 2002)/

"Health columnists can be very influential, so it is good to see that Noel continues to present a level-headed view in this important area."

□ Diana Wichtel, New Zealand Herald

Wichtel was nominated for her hard-hitting article A Monstrous, Lethal Arrogance (June 15), which described the death of Caleb Moorhead as the result of a "severe intelligence deficiency" on the part of his parents. Moorhead was the child who died as a result of his parents' extreme form of dietary restrictions followed as part of their religious beliefs.

"We were interested to see her comment 'No beliefs, religious or other, should be tolerated if they deny any child adequate medical care', and wish this statement had been made clearly through the media some years earlier with regard to the Liam Williams-Holloway case and others."

□ Joe Bennett, Press columnist

"We all need a little humour in our lives, and Joe Bennett's pieces have often taken a good-natured look at the foibles of Mankind's beliefs in odd notions. He can be scathing and make you smile at the same time, which is an admirable characteristic."

## Biodynamic Background

In her response to the award, Ms Fitzsimons said that the tests by FRI had been poorly designed and proven nothing. She also claimed that she had not advocated peppering, although the original television item showed her saying that she thought it was worth testing (which suggested that she did not know that it had already been tested).

*Here are copies of the emails exchanged at the time of the broadcast earlier this year.*

**Vicki Hyde to Jeanette Fitzsimons, 29 March 2002**

Greetings,

I was startled by your comment on television last night re the lack of scientific testing of possum peppering and how this might be a good approach to possum control for New Zealand — I guess you are not aware that possum peppering *has* been tested independently and scientifically in the past and found not to work.

So in the interests of ensuring that you have some background in this area — a vital one for New Zealand's ecology after all — I thought I'd drop you a line so that next time it comes up (as it does every couple of years), you might have a better understanding of the issue.

The Forest Research Institute back in 1991 tested this thoroughly when this approach was proposed for possum control on Rangitoto Island. If I recall correctly, they were given around \$40,000 to undertake a full set of tests courtesy of the Animal Health Board.

The tests involved the assistance of the Biodynamic

Farming and Gardening Association, but clearly demonstrated that the peppering solution was no more effective than using plain water. In my role as editor of the NZ Science Monthly at the time, I actually critiqued the FRI methodology, and they were honest and careful enough to repeat their tests more rigorously, with the same non-results, sadly.

I say sadly, because possums are one of the most dangerous threats to our native flora and fauna (humanity being the greatest, of course). It would have been *wonderful* to have had an effective, safe, cheap means of possum removal or sterilisation, but this was not the case with peppering.

I appreciate that there are many people who claim to have seen peppering work, but their "tests" usually end up being very informal ones, often anecdotal (a friend of a friend said it worked on his property). As far as I am aware, there hasn't been anything in any peer-reviewed literature since Eason and Hickling did their work for FRI.

There are many people with vested interests in peppering, whether emotional (as is the case of many of the well-intentioned people using it) or commercial (as with companies supplying biodynamic solutions and services). And it sounds like an easy, no-risk fix, which is why I guess it appeals.

It is all too easy to find people who can make a claim, often sincerely, but that doesn't make them right. After all, millions of people once believed that the Earth was flat! That's why it is so important to do the tests in as independent and objective a fashion as possible and, ideally,

independently repeating “successes” so that we don’t end up fooled by our own errors and illusions. This is the foundation of science, and it serves as a form of consumer protection for the many ideas that are mooted.

I was very pleased to see you mention the importance of doing this but, as noted, surprised that you weren’t aware of the fact that it has been done once already at least. Certainly one might wish for more testing to be absolutely, positively sure, but I’m sure you appreciate the difficulty of getting public funds to repeat results which show that something *doesn’t* work! And that’s quite apart from the issue of what sort of mechanism would permit the highly diluted ash of an animal scaring or sterilising another animal...

Because of my science connections, not least with heading the Skeptics, I served on Landcare Research’s Possum Bioethics Committee for eight years until it was disbanded. I served alongside representatives from Forest and Bird, the RNZSPCA, tangata whenua, Federated Farmers (and indeed argued strongly for the involvement of environmental groups with the committee).

We all agreed that we wanted to get rid of possums as quickly and effectively (and humanely) as we could. We all recognised that there are very few easy answers in life, particularly when dealing with the full ramifications of pest control in a complex ecological system. That said, we do hold out hopes for some of the approaches being developed, though I suspect that debate will continue as to the right way to go about this.

But the important thing we have to concentrate on is that the possum control approach we choose is one which works — not one we believe will help. Environmental funding in this country is, regrettably, woefully underfunded, so it is vital that we spend those funds on approaches which work and which can be demonstrated to work.

Possum peppering has been demonstrated NOT to work, not at all — about the only way you could deter possums with it is to have a vast amount of the peppering solution (ie water) in a firehose and spray individual possums until they fall off a cliff into the sea! (Not that I am suggesting that that is an effective — or humane — way of dealing with 70 million of the pests... :-)

It is important that we look at the real merits of each case — and peppering doesn’t have any. 1080 has some merits, with obvious concerns which need addressing, but I think on the whole it is better than doing nothing. I fervently hope the new biologically-based approaches will be much better, though there will be issues to address regarding the involvement of genetic manipulation.

I do hope that you appreciate that any comments re peppering were certainly not off-the-cuff or knee-jerk ones made by those with no understanding of the situation or appreciation of the urgent need to protect our flora and fauna from the ravages of this, and other, introduced pests. As you’d know, it can be hard, in many cases, to get the full details across in the sound-bites which media afford us....

Best regards,  
Vicki Hyde

**Jeanette Fitzsimons to Vicki Hyde, 2 April 2002**

Dear Vicki

Thank you for your message. I am, of course, well aware of the FRI trials. They treated it as a poison and placed it on plastic out of contact with the soil. I’m still puzzled as to why the BD Association went along with this.

When testing the efficacy of something where you don’t understand the mechanism you are working with it is easy to set up a trial that will have no effect. I don’t blame FRI for this - they had little to go on. Most chemical poisons would not work if applied in the wrong way or at the wrong time or in the wrong dilution.

However, it was not in any way a conclusive test. Also, the monitoring was very short term. The fact is a number of farmers are using the technique for weeds, insects and possums and finding some effect. Practising farmers don’t keep doing things that don’t work. The issue is rather just what mechanism are we working with here and how can it be best enhanced and can it be used on a large scale.

The \$40,000 spent by FRI is tiny compared with nine years on GE carrots and still nothing to show for it.

What I would like to see is a trial where those who have worked with the method for a decade or more design the experiment and sceptical scientists monitor the results - but over a long enough time to show delayed effects. Not a lot to ask.

If we refused to use technologies where we don’t

understand exactly what is going on we'd still be without electricity and anaesthetics - or so my physicist and chemist friends tell me.

**Graham Hickling to Jeanette Fitzsimons, cc Vicki Hyde 15 April 2002**

Dear Jeanette

I am one of the researchers who undertook the FRI "Possum peppering" trial in the early '90s. Vicki Hyde and I have been discussing the media coverage of this topic and she has now passed on to me your recent email. I would like to respond briefly to several of the points you made to her.

1) *I am, of course, well aware of the FRI trials. They treated it as a poison and placed it on plastic out of contact with the soil.*

We were testing for repellent effects. Toxicity effects weren't being claimed by the biodynamic growers - they believed the "pepper" would be an effective repellent.

There were three trials undertaken - the third of which ran for several weeks under field conditions. In the third trial the pepper was applied directly to the ground, with NO contact with plastic.

The other two trials did involve plastic. As you will be aware, the trials were designed in consultation with senior members of the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association. They never expressed any concern with that aspect of the study when it was being designed. Nor was this issue ever mentioned by those who were advocating that Doc use the

technique as an alternative to poison on Rangitoto Island. This highlights the difficulty of designing a trial that addresses all possible future criticisms of it.

[extra comment from Vicki: the painted apple moth biodynamic proponents wanted to put their preparation inside a PVC pipe so it could radiate its repelling energy field — lots of plastic there!]

2) *The fact is a number of farmers are using the technique for weeds, insects and possums and finding some effect.*

They certainly believe it has an effect. Unfortunately, I am not aware of anyone that has yet demonstrated the effect in a manner that would be robust to the same type of scepticism that you are directing at our trial. I would be as happy as anyone to see such a demonstration.

3) *The \$40,000 spent by FRI is tiny ...what I would like to see is a trial where those who have worked with the method for a decade or more design the experiment and sceptical scientists monitor the results - but over a long enough time to show delayed effects. Not a lot to ask.*

A longer term trial would certainly address some of the criticisms of our trial, but would inevitably be expensive. Our pilot trial was funded by the levies that cattle farmers pay when their cattle are sold (ie, Animal Health Board funding). If there had been ANY evidence of a peppering effect, our recommendation would have been to investigate further with longer, more extensive trials.

However, since we found NO sign of an effect we felt it

inappropriate to recommend that the taxpayer or farming community pay for further expensive work. Rather, we felt a more appropriate course of action would be for the proponents of peppering to fund further trial work to demonstrate the effect(s) they claim for the method.

4) *If we refused to use technologies where we don't understand exactly what is going on we'd still be without electricity and anaesthetics - or so my physicist and chemist friends tell me.*

This issue of "what's the mechanism?" is very much a red herring. If the pepper repels possums - or sterilises them, or whatever - then that EFFECT should be readily measurable. (If the effect is only a subtle one then it won't be of much practical use for pest control...).

If someone runs a valid trial that produces convincing evidence for a useful peppering effect then I can assure you that this will spur researchers on to try and figure out the underlying mechanism. (This is what happened with GE research...puzzling effects were evident from early trials, which prompted many subsequent research projects to gradually unravel and develop an understanding of the genetic mechanisms).

Unfortunately, researchers and funding agencies have NOT yet seen convincing evidence that a peppering effect exists. It is therefore unsurprising that they are not currently putting any further effort or funds into researching the mechanisms of how it might work.

If I can be of any assistance to you on this or related matters at



a later date please contact me - pest management in New Zealand is a vexing issue that we must all struggle with and I certainly agree that wherever possible we must seek to reduce the application of toxins in the fight against possums.

Yours sincerely,

Graham Hickling

Senior lecturer in Wildlife Management, Lincoln University

### Green Around the Gills

*Within 12 minutes of the press release being sent out to the email alert list, Vicki Hyde had a response from a senior office-holder in the Green Party expressing concern about the award, but acknowledging that it was deserved! These are his comments on how he saw the debate from within the Green Party.*

The subject of possum peppering came up on the Green Party internet "Green Views" list. I was critical of the speech made by leader Jeanette Fitzsimons to the Institute of Engineers suggesting that "alternative forms" of dealing with possums were available, including "possum peppering" which needed more testing to prove its effectiveness.

I stated that there had been testing of this "remedy" some time ago, but it had been found to be ineffective and had to be regarded as more a belief than a science. I was attacked by Meriel Watts (Soil and Health) who demanded that I produce the research results or tell her where she could find them. I was unable to, but later understand that Jeanette Fitzsimons knew what

they were all about all along, and had been in contact with Vicki Hyde about them.

On at least two occasions I asked Jeanette (through the list) to respond to the criticisms about her speech and/or provide more information to ordinary members of the Green Party through the list. There was no response whatsoever from Jeanette Fitzsimons. Some members posted details of very critical newspaper editorials — one in the Auckland Herald which was critical about the "occult" view of people in the Green Party (as represented by their apparent belief in possum peppering). They made a comparison to Waikato water having magical Maori qualities and that it shouldn't be piped to Auckland, in the same breath as the apparent green belief in possum peppering. Another editorial was in, I think, a New Plymouth paper.

Another member gave details about a website that paraded new age stuff, even astrology, and offered to take people's possum skins, incinerate them, and post the ashes back to them for a fee of \$350. Also the site revealed that the theory of possum peppering was devised by Rudolph Steiner in 1923 but that it had never entered the practical realm as a remedy in subsequent years, because people found that it didn't work.

Some members became quite passionate about defending the practice and in the event, tempers flared and a couple of apologies were issued. Certainly, there was a large amount of polarisation on this issue.

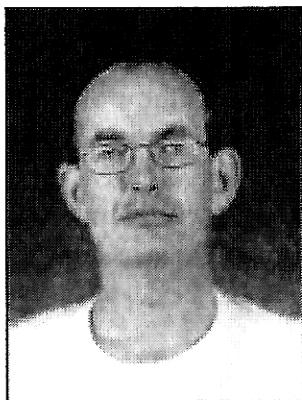
My opinion was, having talked to a number of other people about it, that "belief" in this sort of occult practice was not confined to

the Green Party but had adherents in equal proportion to sensible people in most of the political parties. Who can forget the United Future MP who said that Mother Mary protected Wellington churches from earthquake damage and deaths and that they didn't need insuring?

I had a number of supporters in my stance against possum peppering on the Green Views list, but my main disappointment lay with Jeanette Fitzsimons herself, who found herself unable or unwilling to address the criticism of members over this matter. Also I was disappointed at the reaction of Meriel Watts whose refusal to debate the issue resulted in the inference of her support for possum peppering\*, and cast some doubt at the veracity of the worthy things she stands for - including alternatives to pesticide and herbicide treatment, and her worthy support for organic farming (which does have a sound scientific basis), and her anti GE/GM stance.

I have to say that there are many Green Party members who are respected scientists in their own right and do not have any truck with new age stuff and possum peppering in particular.

(\*Meriel Watts was involved in the proposal to use peppering to eradicate the painted apple moth in Auckland, so her support of peppering does not need to be inferred...)



## Yet Another Alternative to Evidence Based Medicine

### Eloquence based medicine

**T**HE YEAR round suntan, carnation in the button hole, silk tie, Armani suit and tongue should all be equally smooth. Sartorial elegance and verbal eloquence are powerful substitutes for evidence.

New Zealand Medical Journal Vol 113  
No 1122 p479

### Acupuncture Flunks

A comprehensive literature search has concluded that there is no strong evidence for the effectiveness of acupuncture in treating and rehabilitating musculoskeletal injuries when compared to other forms of treatment. This is similar to the conclusion of Ernst & White, who reviewed 600 references and concluded, "the only compelling evidence is that acupuncture is efficacious for the treatment of backache, nausea and dental pain." (Acupuncture: a scientific appraisal, Ed. Ernst & White, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999)

The National Council Against health Fraud (NCAHF) concluded

in 1997 that "acupuncture is mostly a powerful placebo and/or a psychological aid for use in managing behavioural disorders."

I intend writing to David Rankin at ACC Healthwise, to ask him how they will justify continuing to pay for unproven treatments such as acupuncture.

ACC News August 2002 Issue 48  
NCAHF Newsletter Vol 20, No. 6

### Water births have no proven benefit

Considering man's status as a terrestrial mammal, the pre-occupation with water births has appeared on the scene like some kind of antediluvian regression. It seems like the more advances are made by medical science, the more people want to revert to medieval superstition or New Age silliness.

There have been few trials of water births but plenty of reports of near-drownings of newborn infants. Many years ago I was invited to attend one such birth, but my attendance was cut short when I asked if I could bring my dive gear and speargun. Those slippery newborns can be elusive! Seriously though, what's next? Water births attended by orcas and dolphins at Napier's Marineland? Hmmmm, could be a great new tourist attraction. A clever dolphin could soon be trained to flick the newborn infant up out of the water and into the arms of the waiting midwife. There has to be an idea there for some tasteless new TV program.

Marlborough Express 12/8/02

### Oxygen Therapy

As we all know, oxygen is essential for life. If something's

good for us it stands to reason that a lot more must be even better. This is the rationale for extra vitamins, food supplements and so on. Oxygen clinics are an excellent scam because if properly run there is an unlimited crowd of gullible customers. All you need is some convenient threat, for example air pollution, and you have a perfectly reasonable excuse to remedy that problem by offering people oxygen in pleasant and soothing surroundings. A clinic based in Calcutta offers twenty minutes of oxygen via nasal prongs "where customers can sink back into soft leather chairs, inhale oxygen flavoured with various scents and be lulled by soothing music." There's only one small problem. Our haemoglobin, the oxygen carrying pigment in the blood, is about 98% saturated with oxygen at the earth's surface. Inhaling extra oxygen does not improve this saturation at all. In fact, I would bet anything you like that if the oxygen was substituted for clean air the subjects would feel just as refreshed and still cheerfully pay their 175 rupees. This is a classic placebo scam. Someone should start a similar clinic in Auckland aimed at the same sort of people who buy energy drinks. As WC Fields was fond of saying – never give a sucker an even break!

### Fibromyalgia

Imagine a doctor's surgery. A patient complains of tender areas everywhere. This is what I call "und here" after the German syndrome of the same name. The patient has pain here, und here und here. The doctor examines the patient and finds that they are indeed tender in the areas where they say they are tender! This

ridiculous folie-a-deux has been sturdily defended by a few remaining rheumatologists. It has taken a judge to rule “evidence of physical symptoms is not evidence of physical injury” and “is not compensable by ACC”.

Fibromyalgia (aka “fibrositis”) is a typical psychosomatic complaint where vague malaise and non-specific aches and pains get endorsed by a group of specialists. Skeptics noted that four fifths of patients were women and it is now recognized that the syndrome is indistinguishable from chronic fatigue syndrome. (Shorter Pg313)

ACC News September 2002 Issue 49  
From Paralysis to Fatigue, Edward Shorter, 1992 The Free Press

### Get an Educayshun??

Until I looked at the site [www.massagecollege.co.nz](http://www.massagecollege.co.nz) I had no idea that ridiculous pseudoscience such as holistic pulsing and polarity therapy could be studied and rewarded by NZQA recognition. It gets worse. Student subsidies are available from Winz. I have written to both Winz and the NZQA asking how taxpayer funds can be wasted in this manner. Watch this space.

### The Wisest Fool in New Zealand?

A GP colleague forwarded me a portion of letterhead from a doctor who practises chelation therapy as well as using Electro acupuncture of Voll. I have discussed this latter quackery before. It is an evolution of the “black box” and its use by registered medical practitioners should occasion a referral to the

Medical Practitioners Disciplinary Committee. When I read the list of qualifications held by this doctor I was reminded of the famous description of James I of England as “the wisest fool in Christendom.”

Here is the list – the meaning of most is obvious: B.Med Sc. MBChB. Dip Bus Admin. MRNZCGP, ANZIM, BSc, Dip Obst., MRACGP, MSc, FAMS, BA, Dip AvMed, MRSNZ.

### The Diary of Inspector Melas

*I cannot reveal how this diary excerpt came into my possession but it gives an insight into police methods in relation to the Christchurch Civic Crèche case. I reproduce it verbatim. The original has been placed with my lawyer.*

**Monday** That damned book has won a Montana award! Called a meeting to discuss how to counter these attacks on our integrity. Det. Dixon suggested contacting the Counsellor who has been seeing B. and making good progress with regression therapy. ACC have agreed to pay for a further 1500 counselling sessions. (1703 for the mother – she’s making good progress).

**Tuesday** Wonderful news. B. has recovered more memories. The tunnels. I knew they existed! Material very detailed – dates, times etc. Regular underground trips involving other Crèche children in the company of known Christchurch Satanists and pornographers. Contacted Karen who confirmed that these are absolutely classical descriptions of

systematic child abuse. Ordered Det. Green to obtain ground-penetrating radar.

**Wednesday** Phoned by some loony in Fendalton who claimed his dog was psychic and could help our investigations. Told him we don’t use that sort of unscientific rubbish. 1430: Green phoned. Promising radar returns from under the Civic crèche. The tunnel complex!!! Decide to hold press conference after we have the evidence. Told them we were on the verge of a breakthrough. Great excitement.

**Thursday** Meet on site with excavation team. B. present with whanau. (All our supporters.) B. has apparently remembered “dancing, poos, clowns and somebody called Lara Croft”. (NB. not one of the original accused) Probably need Karen to interpret that when we interview the suspects again and lay charges. Det. Green offered to let me break into the tunnel. Most unfortunate – hit the main sewer. Bugger. Green apologetic. Told him to sort out the mess. B. very upset and will probably need more therapy. Went home and changed uniform. Cancelled press conference.

**Friday** Depressing day. On the phone mostly sorting out the repair of the sewer. Called up to see the Boss – he was not happy at all. No more tunnel searches. Found two copies of the book in a second-hand shop on my way home and burnt them. Cheered up a bit. Rem – must follow up the Lara Croft lead on Monday (and clowns).

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

## Skeptics in the Greenhouse

I attended the recent Christchurch Conference and greatly enjoyed the excellent standard of presentation and discussion. One small item, however, left me wondering about the organisation that I had recently joined: the inclusion of global warming research in the list of core topics alongside biodynamic agriculture, alternative medicine and UFOs.

Global warming research is mainstream science. Many hundreds of ordinary scientists from dozens of countries have (with great difficulty!) reached a "consensus". As a first step, I recommend the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) publication "Climate Change 2001 – Synthesis Report" published by Cambridge University Press. It is 400 pages long and is not easy reading, but what can you expect in a summary compiled by a large and diverse committee of technocrats?

A number of "Greenhouse Skeptics" vigorously oppose the findings of the IPCC. This is right and proper – science has always progressed by robust debate. These people – particularly those who have read the literature and can argue on the basis of evidence – are a distinct minority worldwide, but this does not necessarily mean they are wrong. They could be more perceptive than most, and history may prove them right. Alternatively, they could be misinformed or even eccentric. Many people react against any new idea that challenges their worldview. Many argue that there is an IPCC or environmentalist conspiracy.

The processes of science, through normal debate in the scientific media, will clarify the situation in the fullness of time. Is it the task of the Skeptics to wade into the fray? I have been disturbed by statements from well-known Skeptics, indicating that they have not read the mainstream Greenhouse literature, but are familiar with the "alternative" literature. This reminds me of people who are conversant with organic farming or homeopathy, but who are totally ignorant of conventional agriculture or medicine.

My message to Skeptics? Don't pick a fight with *bona fide* scientists who are working on global warming, merely because some nutty environmentalists have sided with them. Be sceptical, by all means, but include the "Greenhouse Skeptics" in your scepticism. If you are interested enough in this topic to want to include it as a core area of activity, for Galileo's sake find out more about it so you can form a balanced viewpoint.

Piers Maclaren

## Alternative Veterinary Medicine

*Some recent correspondence on the Skeptics' committee mailing list led to John Welch writing to the Veterinary Council of New Zealand. This is their response.*

Dear Dr Welch

You asked how the Veterinary Council deals with alternative animal medicine.

The council has established a Code of Professional Conduct that

sets the principles of expertise, performance, behaviour, integrity and accountability expected of competent and reasonable veterinarians in New Zealand. Section 6.8 of this code refers to Alternative/complementary medicine and methods. I quote:

Alternative or complementary therapies do not usually have the weight of scientific proof of their efficacy and therefore the use of these products and/or services must be considered a discretionary use. A veterinarian using an alternative or complementary therapy must do so in accordance with the NZVA Code of Practice for the Discretionary Use of Human and Veterinary Medicines by Registered Veterinarians.

In the event that alternative/complementary methods of diagnosis or treatment are requested by a client or are proposed by a veterinarian, the veterinarian must give a full explanation to the client, so that the client can make an informed decision. At all times the welfare of the animal is of paramount consideration."

As in the US there are a number of veterinarians in New Zealand who are interested in alternative animal therapies. You may wish to contact the Holistic Veterinary Society, which is a special interest branch of the NZ Veterinary Association. The president of the Holistic Veterinary Society is Viv Harris, Tasman Street Veterinary Clinic, 23 Tasman St, Wellington. I know there has been healthy debate occurring amongst members of the NZ Veterinary Association. I have forwarded your letter to its CEO, Murray Gibb, and he may respond to you. There are also NZQA