Skeptic
a person who looks for the simplest explanation first, but is willing to consider other possibnlities in the light of unambigous evidence

New Zealand's Ancient Celts

A Skeptical Response

Therapeutic Touch Trial

Conference Update

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content

Contributions

Contributions are welcome and should be sent to:

Annette Taylor
122 Woodlands Rd
RD1 Hamilton
Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

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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.

editorial

Get Your Facts Straight

A COUPLE of months ago we were visiting my brother, and got talking about a friend of his, who had enrolled in a counselling course. It turned out that the course had come to be dominated by some rather staunch Maori elements, and my brother's friend, as one of only two non-Maori on the course, was embroiled in a dispute in which racial lines were very clearly drawn. But he was confident he had ammunition which would knock the course leaders off their perch, in the form of a book, Ancient Celtic New Zealand (see Feature Article). This purported to show that Europeans had in fact colonised this country thousands of years ago, and had established a thriving neolithic culture, until they were displaced by Maori early in the last millennium.

Whatever position one takes on New Zealand's so-called race debate, it is essential it is based on sound history. There is of course room for disagreement on the interpretation of events, and the weight that should be accorded to each, which is why the debate exists at all. But claims of ancient Celts in New Zealand fly in the face of almost two centuries of scholarship, and can only confuse the issue. Yet such beliefs appear to be quite widespread; there is currently a variation on this theme being championed in the Letters page of one of Hamilton's weekly newspapers.

A similar situation applies in the arguments surrounding immunisation, which have flared up again in the wake of the meningococcal vaccination programme. Though it probably puts me in a minority among Skeptics, I have to admit to reservations about vaccinating very young children against a whole host of diseases, while acknowledging vaccination does have a valuable role to play in disease prevention. This is not the place to go into my reasons, but they have very little to do with the arguments promoted by the anti-immunisation lobby, who generally show a very poor understanding of science. Some still cling to the ideas of Antoine Béchamp, a contemporary of Pasteur, who believed the basic unit of life was something called a microzyma. All living cells are associations of microzymas, he said, and they remain imperishable after the death of the organism; disease is due to imbalances in the vital forces of the host, while the bacteria we mistakenly believe to be pathogenic have been formed by microzymas to rebuild dead or diseased tissue. Again, there can be no reasonable debate if one side remains stuck in the 19th century.

Almost time for the conference again. Hopefully by now you'll have received your registration form in the mail; if not, there's another form with this issue, and the latest information on what looks a very interesting and enjoyable line-up of speakers and events.

The Lost Tribe of Surveyors

David Riddell

Did the ancestors of the Celts sail to New Zealand and establish a network of megalithic survey points and astronomical sight lines? Some think so

THE prehistory of New Zealand is generally thought to be fairly simple. Permanent colonisation from Polynesia began around 7-800 years ago, with a European presence here from the late 18th century. It's possible that some Polynesians arrived earlier – though still controversial, some carbon dates for kiore (Polynesian rat) bones appear to show this species has been in the country for 2000 years, and it could not have dispersed here without human assistance. There is no evidence that any early human visitors established permanent settlements, however. The Kaharoa ash shower, which blanketed much of the central North Island, can be reliably dated to 700 years BP, and to date not a single archaeological site has been unequivocally located below this layer. Pollen records indicate that widespread changes in the vegetation, generally believed to be human-induced, began about this time, as did a wave of animal extinctions which continues to the present day.

There are persistent claims, however, of more ancient colonists, who have supposedly come from much further afield. These have included the Phoenicians (Invent Your Own History of New Zealand, Skeptic 68), the Chinese (Book Review: 1421, Skeptic 67), and the mysterious, though apparently non-Polynesian, progenitors of the Waitaha people (A New Age Myth: The Kaimanawa Wall, Skeptic 41). Among the more active of the alternative archaeology enthusiasts in this country are those promoting an early Celtic (or more precisely if somewhat confusingly, "pre-Celtic") presence in New Zealand, stretching back perhaps 5000 years. They have a website (**www.celticnz.co.nz**), largely written and administered by Californian-born and New Zealand-educated Martin Doutré, who is also the author of a hefty book, Ancient Celtic New Zealand, available through the site.

The Celtic New Zealand adherents assert that before their utter annihilation at the hands of invading Maori there was an earlier, neolithic culture, who left abundant evidence of their presence in the form of standing stones, cairns, earth "tors" and other features which occur throughout the country. The Kaimanawa Wall is taken to be one such feature, but to date most of the group's attention has been focused on the area around Maunganui Bluff and the Waitapu Valley, on the west coast of Northland, near the Waipoua Forest. The countryside in the area is strewn with rocks, which seem unremarkable at first glance, but Doutré and his associates show considerable willingness to look deeper. The stones may be lying in disarray now, they argue, but that is because Maori and other latecomers have toppled what were once standing stones set up in very precise alignments, and farmers have moved and piled the rocks to facilitate farming operations. By taking a wide view of the entire region, they claim it is possible to see that these rocks are part of an elaborate network of survey points and astronomical sight lines. However government-funded archaeologists, in thrall to a Waitangi Tribunal-dominated elite, have turned a blind eye to the whole affair.

The Real Thing: When neolithic engineers have been around, it's usually fairly obvious

As one example of these alignments (the site supplies many), a giant equilateral triangle is depicted, "positively marked" into the landscape of the Waitapu Valley region (Figure 1). The vertices of the triangle are at features named the "southern hubstone", a "purpose built tor mound", and a conspicuous buttress of rock high up on Puketapu Hill. Each side of this triangle, as measured by Global Positioning System (GPS), is supposed to be

11,520 feet in length. This is highly significant, they say, as 11,520 feet is precisely 80% of a "Geomancer's mile", or 14,400 feet, allegedly a measurement used copiously in ancient Britain. Those familiar with numerology will not be surprised to learn that the Great Pyramid of Egypt has a basal area of 20 times 11,520 feet, and that 11.52 minutes must be deducted from 365.25-days in order to fully correct the solar cycle duration to the Mayan/Aztec calendar number of 365.2420-days. Most readers of this magazine will probably know how easy it is to find these types of correspondences.

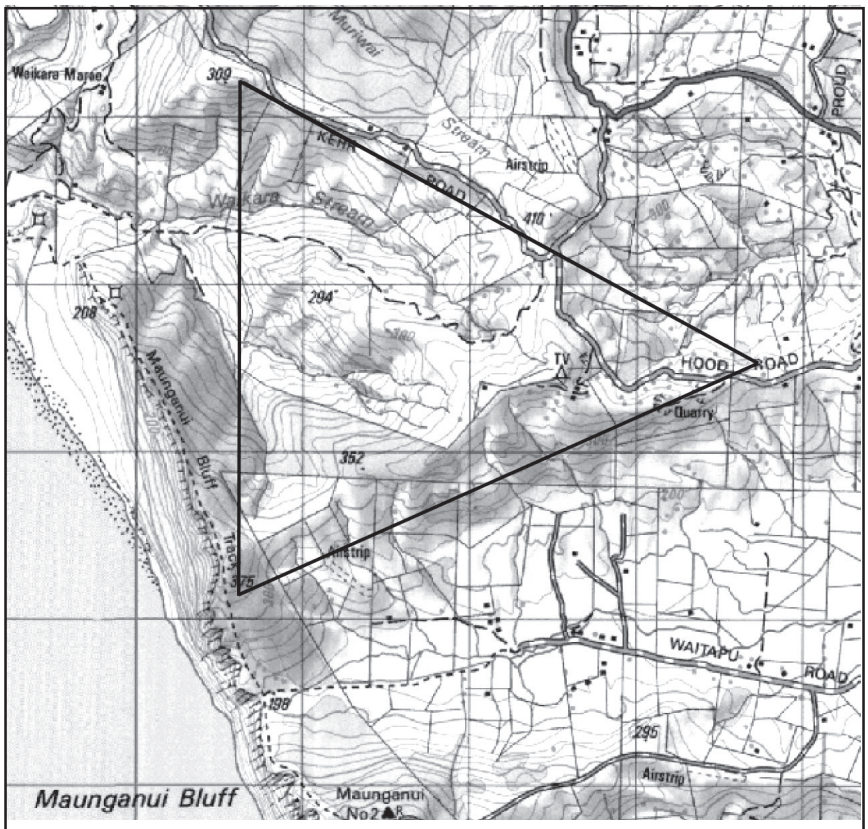


Figure 1. The "equilateral triangle" at Maunganui Bluff

So how well recognised is this unit, the Geomancer's mile? A quick Google search turned up precisely two pages which use the term—both of them on the Celtic New Zealand site. Yahoo! did slightly better, locating another site, www.gnostics.com, which uses the term, although according to them a Geomancer's mile was 57,600 feet. In any event, careful measurement of the distances between the three apices of the triangle shows that it isn't equilateral at all. Two of the sides may be quite close to the figure of 11,520 feet (identifying the locations precisely from the map provided is impossible), but the third is well short - about 10,165 feet.

Even if the triangle had been equilateral, a photo further down the web page makes it clear how such superficially dramatic figures can be concocted. The southern hubstone, it turns out, is one of many rocks in a boulder field extending over a considerable area atop the cliffs north of Maunganui Bluff. It's not even particularly large—substantially smaller than the "important sight over stone" sitting next to it, for example. Other rocks in the vicinity, which range in size from over six feet down to six inches (these apparently small stones are embedded firmly and are presumably much larger) align with other features in the landscape. The hubstone is identified solely on the strength of its numerologically significant distance from some other distant feature. If some other distance had been chosen, a different rock in the boulder field would have become the hubstone.

And what of the other features? There is a photo of the "purpose built tor mound", which to the untrained eye could easily be mistaken for a small hill in a paddock. This is the problem with the sites identified by Celtic New Zealand; neolithic sites in Europe are clearly artificial; these are not. If you want to see a purpose-built earth mound, go to Silbury Hill, near Avebury; there's no mistaking its artificial origin. This "tor", and the other "tors" photographed by Doutré in the Maunganui Bluff area look like any small hill or grassy knoll (what is it with conspiracy theorists and grassy knolls?) anywhere in the country. The word "tor", by the way, usually refers to a natural, steep and rocky hill, not an artificial earth mound.


Silbury Hill: The mother of all purpose-built earth mounds

The third corner of the triangle is similarly problematic: "a conspicuous buttress of rock situated high up on Puketapu Hill". Why not the summit of the hill itself? It's easy to go around identifying the

points in a complex landscape, selecting some as significant, and passing by others. (Though of course the summit of the hill has other features which make it significant.)

The Overland Alignment Complex

The Maunganui site is, supposedly, part of a network of survey points and astronomical observatories which is probably nationwide. The Celtic New Zealand site identifies Maunganui as part of a "huge overland alignment complex" which takes in selected mountain summits scattered around Northland (Figure 2). Why, they ask, did the makers of this sequence design it to duplicate the star pattern of the Hyades Cluster in Taurus? Well, the short answer is, they didn't, even assuming that "they" ever existed. The locations that supposedly make up the complex have only the vaguest correlation with star patterns in the Hyades (Figure 3). The similarity can be enhanced by drawing lines between the points, and by selectively omitting stars from the patterns drawn, but apparent similarities can be produced in this way from any two sets of random dots.

Figure 2. Join the Dots: The Overland Alignment Complex in Northland

A similar process of join-the-dots has been used to produce the "Waitapu Standing Stone Observatory" out of yet another boulder field. The observatory is centred on a "hubstone", from which a number of significant alignments and measurements can be obtained. Again, the site is supposed to have been badly damaged following the Maori conquest, but it is still possible to work out where the stones once stood before they were toppled. One, for example, must originally have been 24.8832 feet east of the hubstone. Its position coded the circumference of the Earth, which is 24,883.2 miles. How the neolithic engineers positioned and measured the distances between their large, lumpy rocks to the nearest micrometre is not explained. Other stones "code" such significant numbers as various dimensions of the Great Pyramid, the lunar nutation cycle (an 18-year oscillation of the moon's axis), the equatorial circumference of the Earth, and the internal circuit of the Sarsen Circle at Stonehenge.

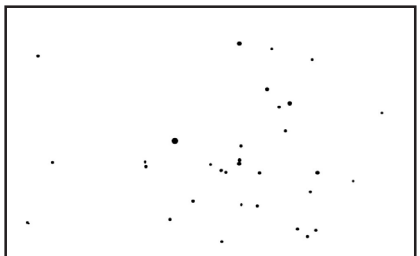


Figure 3. Spot the Difference: The Hyades Cluster (stars visible to naked eye)

Again, this is classic numerology. And unlike genuine neolithic observatories, this one mostly doesn't seem to measure anything useful. It's primarily supposed to be a huge mnemonic device for coding a whole bunch of cosmically significant numbers. Couldn't such a wise and sophisticated society simply have written these numbers down somewhere?

The Waipoua Stone City

Close by Maunganui Bluff, in the Waipoua Forest, are a number of stone walls, which are clearly artificial. Celtic New Zealand logic about stone structures is curious, to say the least. They begin with the assertion that Maori did not build in stone. Therefore, they conclude, any rock structure in this country could not have been built by Maori, and must have been the work of some other ethnic group. It is true that Maori generally preferred to build with wood and other plant materials, but I've personally seen a small, simple rock wall, very similar to those in Waipoua, at an unmistakeably Maori site. The Waipoua walls, it has to be said, are very crudely built of unshaped, unmortared stones, mostly less than a metre high—items that a couple of unskilled workers could put up in an afternoon.

Also present in Waipoua are hundreds of enigmatic rock piles, dubbed "beehive houses". These are alleged to be comparable to the megalithic dome dwellings of Britain and Europe, destroyed by Maori who arrived long after they were built. But there is no evidence that they were dwellings of any kind. Particularly significant is the absence of any of the debris generally associated with human occupation. If there were hundreds of people living here over a period of perhaps thousands of years, where are their discarded tools, shards of pottery, personal ornaments, religious artifacts? The only artifacts from Waipoua that the Celtic New Zealand website can show are a

couple of very crude, but distinctly Maori-looking adzes.

Comparison with a genuine 5000-year-old neolithic site, Skara Brae in the Orkneys, is instructive. The layout of the dome dwellings here is unmistakeable, as is the presence of many beautifully preserved artifacts, including pottery, jewellery and tools. The Waipoua Forest site is utterly different. (Ironically, Skara Brae has also attracted the attention of alternative archaeologists, who regard it as an Egyptian outpost! – see **www.geocities.com/futhark_runes/SkaraBrae_AncientEgyptianSettlement.html**). Far more likely that the Waipoua stone features are either natural, or produced by Maori within the last few centuries. The walls may mark the boundaries of garden plots, while the rock piles may have been cleared from areas to be planted.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the Celtic New Zealand scenario is that so much alleged evidence for it is tied up with the supposed surveying network. Apart from this, the "pre-Celts" seem to have left little trace of themselves. It's as if our entire civilisation had vanished and left nothing but trig stations, survey pegs, the Linz offices, and a few astronomical observatories. If there really had been a vibrant, mathematically sophisticated population living here for 4000 years, there would be more evidence of their former presence. And would they have been so easily vanquished by a few boatloads of Maori?

The Maori connection is revealing. The Celtic New Zealand home page asserts: "Politics and the agenda's [sic] of racial groupings have no place here. We simply wish to uncover the truth as it relates to the distant past and in doing so know better the land which is our home in the present." Yet the first four items on their Articles page are links to the Treaty of Waitangi site, to an item on an alternative early draft of the Treaty, an account of "Waitangi Tribunal and Government terrorism against a NZ farming family"—the Titfords of Maunganui Bluff, and a link to the One New Zealand Foundation website. There most definitely does appear to be an agenda here, and in these times of heightened racial tension it is a potentially destructive one. New Zealanders of non-Maori ancestry do not require a 5000-year heritage to establish their connection to this country. Which is just as well, because New Zealand's Celtic prehistory is quite plainly a fantasy.

David Riddell is a Waikato ecological consultant.

Meanwhile, Some Miles Away at a Real Neolithic Site...

There were more than 20,000 pilgrims packed around ancient Stonehenge for the 2004 summer solstice. Among them were witches, druids, new age healers… and Hamilton journalist ***Russell Joyce****. He reports from the scene.*

"Two young fairies run round the outside, round the outside," sing two young women, with wreaths in their hair and beer cans in their hands. They disappear into the darkness, trying to make it around Stonehenge in the few minutes remaining before solstice sunrise.

Nearby a low rumble starts up from a pair of didgeridoos, while a makeshift band gets the crowd joining in with "what we need is a great big melting pot".

The air is thick with the aroma of marijuana, but the police and security guards keep a low-key presence. Many of those in the crowd are stoned, drunk, wrapped in blankets in the chill predawn, but everyone is mellow.

As I stand taking in the scene, an inebriated reveller falls heavily against my teenage son, bounces off me and staggers upright again. "Thanks for helping me stay up," he grins, before staggering off into the night.

The stone circle, normally roped off by the English Heritage organisation which maintains the world heritage site, has today been specially opened to the public for the 2004 summer solstice. But the crowd inside the standing stones is packed so tight there is no way we are going to get right inside, so we wander around the perimeter, taking in the scene.

There, in front of the stones, is a middle-aged woman in a white robe, leaves in her hair, staff in her hand, waiting for the sun's first rays to touch her. Another magic-lover takes a more modern approach—winding blinking Christmas lights around the end of a staff and holding it aloft.

They are unlikely to be interested in hearing that Druidism has very tenuous links with the site, which archaeologists estimate was built about 5000 years ago. It was probably abandoned centuries before the first Druids held their rituals—and even then they

preferred to practise their religion in natural springs or groves, rather than in man-made structures.

No, historical debates are far from the minds of today's revellers, who have gathered to greet the midsummer sunrise. Everywhere there are dreadlocks, ponchos and crystals. Druids and witches (it is hard to tell the difference) mingle with the hippies, while amateur photographers jostle with the Press for the best positions before the sun comes up.

Some see the sunrise much earlier, by scrambling up on to

stones in the inner circle. But they are prepared to share their advantage, taking snapshots on cameras handed up from the crowd below. Eventually, the sun creeps high enough out of the mist for everyone to see and there is a moment's appreciative silence before the drums start up again.

Between the drum-beats, I can hear a mildly irritating rattling noise on my left. Ah, it's a didgeridoo man, now murmuring what sounds like a Native American chant while shaking a maraca. Talk about mixing your spiritual symbolism. This guy has it all covered.

A Skeptical Response

*Occasionally, the NZ Skeptics receive correspondence from members of the general public. Recently, Chair-entity **Vicki Hyde** took the time to reply to one of these. Portions of the original letter are indented.*

Dear Margaret

Thank you for your comments, though it's sad to see that you believe the general stereotype of skeptic:

> The mere term 'skeptic' is enough to conjure (oops, not a word skeptics like, I'm sure) up an image of a cynical, dogmatic person, afraid to step outside the realms of their small, unenlightened world.

"Conjure" would actually be a very suitable term used in skeptical circles, as we have many magicians as members, as well as teachers, homemakers, researchers, a broad sweep of humanity. There are very few who fit the stereotype you have assumed, as about the only thing we have in common is the desire to actually step outside the realm and find out what makes us what we are, what encourages us to think how we do and to respond the way we do to the world around us.

About the only type of person we don't have in the skeptical ranks are fundamentalist dogmatics, as they are taught to never question authority, and skeptics, by their very nature always ask questions and, in many cases, accept that there are some things we will never have the answers for.

> I imagine that Rande, who was featured on a programme about homoeopathy on TV1 last night is typical of the average "skeptic" who desperately goes around trying to "debunk" anything that is not "clinically proven in a scientifically controlled experiment".

No, not debunking, but investigating — most of us don't like the term "debunk", as it implies a biased viewpoint to start with, but the media does persist in using it.

We always try to investigate with an open mind and with the knowledge that everyone is fallible, we are all able to be fooled or biased. And that when extraordinary claims are made, it should involve an extraordinary level of proof.

Randi was asked in because magicians have a very clear professional understanding of how people can be mistaken or hoodwinked, whether intentionally or accidentally.

Scientists, however, work in an environment of collegial honesty, which makes them more vulnerable, in some respects, to deception or assumptions. That's one of the reasons why science encourages investigation, repeated observation, independent corroboration and all the other aspects that help us to differentiate between what we *think* we know and what we know,

to try to eliminate our own biases, prejudices and assumptions in learning about the world.

> I wonder if you skeptics ever experience a 'hunch' or a 'gut feeling' or, dare I say it, intuition ... I imagine not—I mean, how can you prove it?

Yes we do. I had a long interview with a reporter this year about the nature of intuition. Sadly the editor wanted to hear only about "just so" intuition anecdotes, rather than the interesting story of why humans feel so strongly about intuition, how it has proven useful to us and why we have such difficulty remembering when it *doesn't* work.

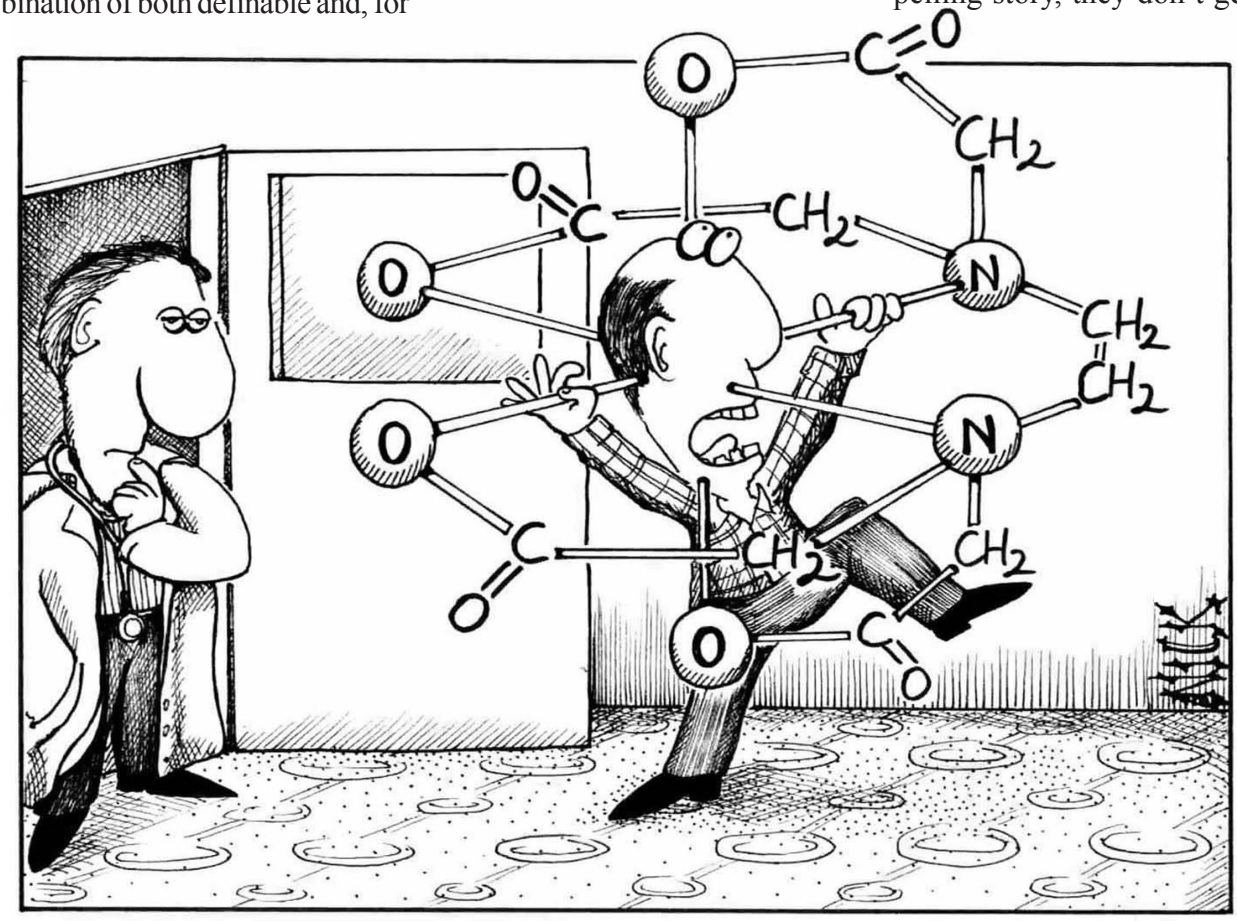
I think that intuition is the capacity for apparently making reasonably accurate predictions about the near future based on a combination of both definable and, for the most part, indefinable factors. We've all experienced those times when we "just know" something and, when we're proved right, that's an immensely powerful reinforcing factor for a belief in intuition or psychic abilities or whatever you think such an experience is based upon.

Humans are, after all, a pattern-seeking animal—we look for patterns in the stars and try and find meaning in them; we analyse our dreams; we try and find cause-and-effect in all manner of connections.

What we humans *don't* do, is readily recall the experiences which provide counter-examples to the belief in causal relationships or intuition. We don't bother thinking "gee, I felt something bad was going to happen today and nothing did!" Instead we look for confirmation of our beliefs—"gee I felt something bad was going to happen today, and look, a week later, I had a car crash!"

However, in our enthusiasm to over-simplify and gain control over our destiny, we have often taken such things too far—that star up there makes the Nile flood (bzzt, wrong!); bleeding a patient will rebalance their humours (bzzt, wrong!); that person is inferior to me because they are a different gender/race/religion/skin colour (bzzt, very wrong!).

There are hundreds and hundreds of people whose flashes of intuition or desperate hopes or even sheer bloody hard work, did not succeed, but you don't hear about them, they don't have the compelling story, they don't get the



When Chelation Therapy goes wrong.

column-centimetres in the glossy magazines.

Which demonstrates another key psychological point—one strong personal example will *always* far outweigh collective experience and general statistics.

As in, "my child got a bad reaction to immunisation which means yours will too" generates a much more powerful response in parents than millions and millions of non-affected children in some faceless study. And you see that in operation on Holmes every time the immunisation debate heats up...

I have had, on at least four occasions over the past 20 years, very strong feelings that my father had died or something had happened to him. Once I even rang him in the middle of the night from Japan, where I was living, just to check that he was OK, the feeling was so strong. I was wrong all four times. And the week he did die, I had no inkling at all, much to my sorrow.

I once had an incredibly vivid dream that my second son Perry fell off a bridge into a fast-flowing river. Very, *very* vivid dream—wind blowing, sharp streetlight shining on the water, his face disappearing beneath the muddy swirls, a terrible gut-churning wrench. Still makes me shudder even six years later. But he was just a toddler in my dream and he's well past that now, at nine years old. And no, he's never fallen off a bridge.

Now I am very conscious of the importance of counter-examples, so I have made a point of remembering those times when I have had strong feelings or dreams that haven't panned out so I can say honestly that we do have such feelings *and sometimes they are wrong*.

But if my father had had problems within a week or so of any of those times I had worried about him, I could easily claim it as "proof" that intuition works...

One strong personal example will *always* far outweigh collective experience and general statistics

Part of it comes down to an understanding of the statistics of coincidence. If I had continued to have dire warnings of my Dad's imminent demise, then odds-on I would have had one some time close to the point he did die.

> Thank goodness the majority of the world is comprised of thinking, feeling, spiritual beings who are intelligent and open minded enough to realise that life is comprised of such complex, multi faceted components which make up our universe and which no scientist or skeptic could possibly begin to understand or prove in a laboratory.

I'd agree with you with the first part—skeptics are incurable optimists and we'd love to believe that the majority of the world is comprised as you describe. It may be that you are confusing skepticism with scientism; the latter is the dogmatic view that science explains everything. Ironically enough, very few real scientists subscribe to it, although the stereotypes assume that they do...

As regards the second assertion, I don't think any scientist or skeptic worth their salt would suggest that all things are explicable or provable in a lab. We recognise the need for humility in the face of the universe's complexity, but we also appreciate that some of the complexity can be known better and appreciated in all its glory, if we but ask questions.

As a medievalist, I know that the stars were once regarded (at least in the Judaeo-Christian West) as bright points of light fixed in an immoveable globe of crystal. As a keen amateur astronomer, I know that the universe is much more complicated than that. I would say that the later knowledge is no less beautiful, fascinating and uplifting than the former view, and all the more powerful for being based in reality and shared with millions of others regardless of their culture or world view.

> I see you skeptics are making submissions regarding complementary health in New Zealand. Don't waste your time...Natural medicine is the fastest-growing industry in the world and will continue to be ...

Yes, we know it is very popular, which is why it is important to be sure that it is both safe and effective — we can ask no less of anything which we use as medicines, regardless of whether it is herbal or industrial in origin. Anything less is not only potentially dangerous but also ethically unacceptable.

We don't allow used-car salesmen to make unsubstatiated claims about their vehicles or sell unroadworthy ones (or if they do, we prosecute them). Our health, and the health of our children deserves no less scrutiny.

We recognise that medically useful things have come from chance

Continued on page 16

Compiled by Annette Taylor

Astrology Romps into the Bedroom

IT HAD to happen, I guess. A new book, Sextrology: The Astrology of Sex and the Sexes, written by New York astrologers Stella Starsky and (wince) Quinn Cox gets a fair amount of column inches in the Dominion Post (July 8.)

Seems that the creative couple, Starksky and Cox, have been churning out this stuff for at least 20 years. Their theory, briefly, is that women and men in the same sign can be totally opposite. It means there are 24 signs of the zodiac, not 12. Two for the price of one, as it were.

The book, by all accounts, is a bit racey and fairly explicit in its use of language. Male Capricorns may have a predilection for schoolgirls and spanking; Cancerian females are fans of sex clubs and sado-masochism. Makes the mind boggle but what a good marketing idea. It's kinky, it's naughty, it will sell well, especially when reported on by writers who conclude there's something to it all. "...there are pages of analysis of ... personality and attitudes to relationships that I found at times to be spookily accurate." Except for the bits that say she's supposed to be into sex clubs, S&M, swinging and sub-mission fantasies.

Hm. I wonder what Starsky and Cox have to say about female Capricorns...

Walk on the Wild Side

Such pondering aside, it was with a pang of sadness that we learned that some people had to be treated for burns after a fire walking in Dunedin (Dominion Post, July 12.)

The event was run by the New Zealand International Science Festival as a fund raiser for St John and was a bid to create a world record. About 450 people walked through a 3.5m hot charcoal pit, and of those, 28 were treated for burns, 11 of them in hospital. The fire walking raised about $1000 for St John but the organisation spent more than that treating patients.

The festival director said they certainly didn't want to cause any pain for people and they probably wouldn't knowingly get into it again. Which is a shame, because as we skeptics know, such events are a good way to highlight some basic science. Maybe it was just a case of too many feet—28 out of 450 is, after all, only a little more than 6% requiring treatment.

As for whether or not a record was set, it's too early to tell. Let's cross our fingers...

Bacteria Beware – Science to the Rescue!

Christmas is coming up and this writer is holding out for a Twinbird Ion desk lamp. It emits ionised air towards one's brain, which makes one brainier. Bring it on, I say.

The ion desk lamp is just one item on sale in Japan, where a health neurosis is reportedly sweeping the country (Dominion Post, June 15.) It appears negatively-charged air particles can produce an endless range of potential health benefits, from cleaning the air to stimulating the brain. Devious devices include Bio Shoes which pump ionised air into shoes overnight to sanitise them, and the Plasmacluster Ion Fridge, which smothers viruses and bacteria with both negative and positive ions. The Photo Ion Blaster will not only render your face clean and bacteria-free, it will also eliminate wrinkles. Everything from pens to doorknobs are marketed with anti-bacterial films and one firm stocks more than 20 different models of washing machine that destroy bacteria by negatively charging a load of washing. A lovely quote: "I'm not even sure what exactly this minus ion technology does, but I feel that I have a duty to buy it."

Restaurant Didn't Have a Ghost of a Chance

The collapse of Suzanne Paul's Maori village venture is no surprise to one Auckland woman, who says the Northcote site is haunted and cursed (Herald, July 17).

Strange things have happened at Fisherman's Wharf, says former owner, Barbara Doyle. Mrs Doyle, who used to run murder mystery weekends at the Brian Boru in Thames, says she had tried to run a restaurant on the site in 2000, but went bankrupt.

She says while she found it hard to believe in ghosts, she felt she should have called in a ghostbuster. On one occasion she saw a man throw himself to his death off a

nearby cliff: the venue was cursed, she believed.

Her daughter says she felt spirits inside the building when she lived there for six months, and later heard about a young man who'd hanged himself there.

Ngati Whatua kaumatua Grant Hawke said its original inhabitants, Ngati Tai, endured severe casualties through raids by Ngati Poa and Ngati Whatua.

One of the liquidators said ghost stories were new to him, and that while he'd heard a few creaks, they were possibly the air-conditioning.

And Neville Waldren, of the Restaurant Assocation, said it was a magic spot, but a bit off the beaten track, which contributed to its failure.

Cynthia Margaret Shakespeare, 1940-2004

On Saturday, July 10, Cynthia Shakespeare died in a car accident on the way to a tramping trip. With her death we have lost a wonderfully enthusiastic and energetic member of the Skeptics.

She explained that she attended the skeptics conferences because it was almost the only place where she could meet interesting people with the same sensible and rational approach to life that she had. I don't think she missed many conferences.

As a founding member of the Wellington Skeptics she helped organise the early meetings in Wellington and also a number of the Wellington skeptics conferences. She booked the locations for the conference, and coordinated the different activities such as the conference dinner. And, in particular, she enjoyed acting as hostess, giving a warm welcome to those attending.

I don't think I know anyone who had so much energy. She was always active, never stood still. She went on courses, joined groups, was a long-time member of the NZ Family Planning association where she was a counsellor, and she worked as a volunteer in schools.

She was interested in all sports and ensured that during the summer she swam every day in the harbour (yes, even in Wellington), she played tennis at the local club, and, in the winter, went tramping every weekend. Often when she went on long trips she would sleep in a little tent rather than go to an expensive motel. Latterly, her main interest was her family; three married children and now a number of grandchildren, the latest born only a month or so ago. As grandmothers do, she helped out and visited whenever she could.

But it was her fascination with people that I will remember most. She would introduce herself to anyone and before long become bosom friends, always remembering their name, their occupation, and be able to discuss their children. This was particularly evident at the conferences where she was quickly able to make new members feel at home.

We will miss Cynthia whenever we meet as Skeptics.

Prof G A (Tony) Vignaux
Mathematical and Computing Sciences,
Victoria University

Time Running Out for Psychic Forecasters

The Ashburton Guardian's Matt Smith had a mid-year look at some psychic predictions recently (July 22).

Ashburton psychic Barry Newman predicted Don Brash would be ousted from the National Party leadership by Gerry Brownlee, which is looking unlikely. He also said a world leader would be toppled or slain and armies would march—such as happened to Saddam Hussein.

In cricket, Newman predicted that Jeff Wilson would appear for the Black Caps this year, which he hasn't yet. Someone in a glass cage would die, with many to cry was another claim, but nothing seems to have come of this one yet, either.

Patricia McLaine claimed Howard Dean would be the Democratic candidate for the US presidency. John Kerry is now confirmed in that role. She also predicted surprise weddings among celebrities – and Britney Spears did marry a childhood friend in early January, so she got one right, Smith says. He adds that McLaine also said space debris would become a major nightmare. "And although it wasn't quite to that level, a meteorite blasted through an Auckland home last month, generating major interest from astronomy fans worldwide." Stretching it a bit, I think.

Moral Values

I am finding it difficult to respond to Alan P Ryan's diatribe (Skeptic Autumn 2004) as it borders on the incoherent and self-contradictory. I wonder if it will help if I summarise my views on moral values, about which he seems confused.

Moral values vary between individuals, groups, societies, nations, and time periods. They consist of a complex mixture of conventional wisdom, prejudice, religious dogma, superstition and fantasy, plus a dose of community spirit, experience, facts, evidence, common sense, and scientific and technical knowledge. The question is, which particular combination does Mr Ryan support, and what proportion of it emphasises the earlier items?

Genocide, murder of unbelievers, opponents and minorities; discrimination against women, homosexuals and "inferior" races, and slavery exploitation and oppression of the weak figured large in the "moral values" of many of our ancestors, and these precepts are unfortunately still widespread. They were often successful, on a Darwinian basis, in securing survival of dominant groups or nations.

If we wish to promote world peace, human rights, freedom of thought and expression, democratic institutions and equality before the law, we have to state our views plainly, and we have to give reasons why such values are consistent with human survival and progress.

Science and technology have a major influence on moral values. Copernicus, Newton and Darwin caused profound changes in moral behaviour, as did the factory system, electricity, the motor car, the computer and the contraceptive pill.

Attempts are made to impose, or promote moral values. Those emanating from ancient books, such as the Bible, or the Koran, are not always as rigid as they pretend to be. Christians no longer burn heretics or witches, although some feel justified in assassinating legally authorised abortion doctors. Most Muslims disapprove of stoning rape victims or cutting off the hands of thieves. Gandhi was killed because he advocated tolerance for Muslims and the abolition of Hindu castes. Skeptics and atheists have a responsibility to promote humanist values, free from ancient dogma.

There is one unfailing recipe for extinction: a resistance to change. This principle can be found as a factor in the downfall of all the great empires of the past. It is perhaps a matter of faith in the future, that if we are to survive we must find means of preventing wars and other violent behaviour, encourage individual and social development, freedom of conscience and criticism, and the embracing of new ideas and technology.

Mr Ryan is a sucker for disaster scenarios. The "Species Extinction" scam was based on the absurd assumption that climate is the only influence on biological success. Estimates of "extinctions" are notoriously unreliable. A recent estimate I have seen has been unable to justify more than three to five per year. Also, Ryan must be one of the few people who can believe what comes out of the Pentagon.

Vincent Gray
Wellington

nde

My Near Death Experience?

Bernard Howard

IT BEGAN like any other Saturday morning, out of bed even later than on weekdays, a leisurely breakfast, dismembering the 10 sections of the Press, and settling to a good long read. It was then that the pain began, and intensified until something had to be done. No time to send for homoeopathic medicines, no time to summon the healing hands of a Therapeutic Touch practitioner. No! Into an ambulance and delivery into the hands of the conventional medics at Christchurch Hospital.

It is well known that doctors in general are closed-minded, arrogant, mendacious and venal; nurses have acquired pretensions to professionalism, forgetting their proper duties of pillow smoothing and bedpan emptying. So the outlook was rather grim as I was wheeled into the A&E department. My fears were confirmed when none of these so-called experts looked at my irises, tickled the soles of my feet, or swung a crystal pendulum over me in making a diagnosis.

Rather, I was exposed to the fancy toys these people like to play with, x-ray and CT scan machines. And so the mechanical process ground on: sedation, urinary catheter, anaesthesia, the surgeon's knife, and a hazy coming to.

It is well known to us Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) enthusiasts that, even more than usually, the convalescent body needs an extensive supply of dietary supplements, vitamins, minerals, and lots of medicines from Nature's pharmacopoeia. I was offered none of these energy-giving materials and immunity boosters: just plenty of ordinary, well-cooked food. In spite of this deprivation, my body managed somehow to recover, and I was allowed to escape from the clutches of conventional medicine.

But, I hear you ask, what about the Near Death Experience (NDE)? Well, that villainous anaesthetist so adjusted his taps and valves that my brain never got anywhere near the tunnel and the brightness, so I was denied this life-enhancing experience. Spoilsport!

perpetual motion

The Holcomb Hallucination

Kerry Wood

Dr Robert R Holcomb was in Wellington in January to announce a technological breakthrough. Before an audience of New Zealand government, business and environmental leaders, he announced for the first time a revolutionary new technology, Electron Stream Carbon Dioxide Reduction (ESCO2R), commonly called the Carbon Dioxide Converter, that goes to the heart of the global warming problem. The converter is patented.

"The unique technology of the Carbon Dioxide Converter permanently splits the molecular structure of carbon dioxide into its basic elements—carbon and oxygen," said Dr Holcomb.

Nobody seems to have noticed in all the excitement that coal is mostly carbon, so if Holcomb is right we can produce unlimited power forever by recycling the same bucket of coal. But then if he is right, why should he trouble to come to Wellington to make such an earth-shattering announcement? And who looked after his day job – he is a paediatric neurologist – while he was away?

This is a no brainer—scientists have known for 180 years that such "perpetual motion" tricks are impossible. It is like the Irish lady who cycled to church every Sunday and returned by a different route: "It's downhill both ways."

However, there is a device that does everything Dr Holcomb claims, except that the carbon it produces is mixed up with other combustible material. Like Dr Holcomb's process it absorbs energy, but it uses low-grade energy from the environment and does not have to burn coal. It is a bit slow but it does at least obey the laws of physics. It is called a tree.

divining

Divining an opportunity for Methven

John Keast

Few events have so captured the local imagination as the search for a thermal bore near Methven. Word of the search spread after a drilling rig appeared in a paddock. Nothing unusual in rigs—they dot Mid-Canterbury in the eternal quest for reliable sources of irrigation water. This rig, though, was not after cold water, but hot.

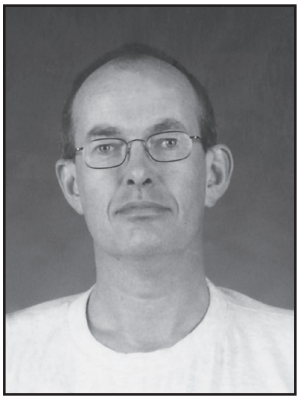
Those involved believe that if a hot bore is struck, it will do Methven no end of good. The town is already a key player in Mid-Canterbury's tourism industry. Not too much imagination is needed to contemplate the uses, if found, for thermal water. It would undoubtedly lead to spas and exponential growth.

There are, of course, a few sceptics, but Peter Donald is not one of them. He is a water diviner with many years of experience. Now he has turned his attention to the thermal water he and others are pretty sure is there.

Denis Dutton, spokesman for New Zealand Skeptics, has this take on divining: "Most water diviners are utterly sincere, and they usually have a good strike rate because there is so much water scattered about." But he said he would like to see a New Zealand diviner who could show with certainty where there was no water.

Everyone in Mid-Canterbury has an opinion on the likelihood of finding underground hot water. But successful or otherwise, no one will be able to say Peter Donald did not give it his best shot.

Originally published in the Press, June 19



Vitamin B12-the new placebo?

A DRUG company has been perplexed at a shortage of Vitamin B12 created by a surge in use. A spokesman for the company said "doctors had so far failed to come up with a convincing explanation" and "Vitamin B12 was also used to treat chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and as a vitamin booster."

It is clear from these comments that Vitamin B12 is being used as a placebo as there is no evidence at all that it is of any benefit in the treatment of CFS. In the course of my employment as a locum I have seen plenty of evidence that a lot of doctors are administering Vitamin B12 when there is no scientific indication. The deliberate use of placebos in this manner shows a complete lack of understanding of the consultation dynamic, a failure to understand the nature of the placebo effect, and a superficial grasp of basic science. If these doctors allowed patients sufficient time, listened and acknowledged their concerns in an empathetic manner, there would be no need for placebo injections.

Placebo vitamins can be dangerous. A three-year-old child choked to death after inhaling an animal-shaped vitamin C and echinacea tablet. A pathologist was of the opinion that "the tablet was too large for a child of three to be able to swallow". Nowhere in the article was there any comment or criticism of the dietary supplement industry which promotes these totally unnecessary products.

Dominion Post June 25, 2004
Dominion Post May 26, 2003

Hey Noni Noni?

There is indeed "much ado about nothing" over Noni juice. It comes from a Polynesian plant and is widely touted as a cure-all for everything and anything, a sure sign of a quack remedy. A recent review (Bandolier 122) found no evidence that it is effective for any medical condition and commented: "Diluted noni juice does funny things to cells in test tubes, but then so might diluted orange juice."

A Google search found over 600 websites complete with a medical PhD endorsement and the usual pseudoscientific language and testimonials.

Breast Implants—a silly con?

Welch's law has struck again as claimants prepare to take their share of a US$2.35 billion fund set up by Dow Corning Corp in response to thousands of silicon breast implant liability lawsuits. This is despite the fact that a number of studies have conclusively proved that the claims of silicon-related illness were a delusion. These lawsuits caused a major upheaval in the American justice system and a review of the definition of an expert witness. Legal process was suborned by "expert" witnesses who managed to convince the courts that claimants should be rewarded and in today's culture of complaint, it pays to attribute your "illness" to someone with deep pockets. The US insurance industry often influences the outcome of these cases as it is frequently cheaper to settle than to fight a long and expensive legal battle.

Abuse Claims

Medical practices are constantly changing but this has not stopped litigants from seeking to apply today's standards in order to prove abuse and mistreatment in the past, in some cases going back several decades. An article in the Dominion Post (June 17, 2004) reports "invasive internal examinations" by a health camp doctor around 1983. An Act NZ MP has accused the doctor of committing and misdiagnosing sexual abuse.

At this time there were many erroneous beliefs about the examination of children and the signs that might be present indicating sexual abuse. It was believed, for example, that "reflex anal dilatation" was an indicator that abuse had taken place. Many children were taken from their families, and parents, normally the male, were

accused of sexual abuse. It is now known that such simplistic forensic tests were flawed and we all know what happened when similar deluded ideas were applied to the behaviour of children at the Christchurch Civic Creche.

Hangover Cure

The product RU-21 contains dextrose and ascorbic acid and the makers claim that it prevents the build up of acetaldehyde which causes the hangover. Dr Mike MacAvoy of ALAC is quoted as describing the product as "ridiculous". There is an associated claim that the pill was developed by the KGB so its spies would not suffer hangovers after drinking sessions. There is no scientific evidence that such a product will have any effect at all on the metabolism of alcohol.

This is the perfect product for silly binge-drinking yuppies (RU-stupid?), the same sort of people who buy energy drinks. These products are placebos and with proper marketing will prove hugely successful and make some people very rich.

Sunday Star Times June 13, 2004

Benefit Fraud

Many political commentators have noted the tendency of the latest budget to create a new class of beneficiaries. The Labour Government (aka the Nanny state) knows what's best for us and will not be satisfied until we are all receiving some kind of targeted benefit. This mentality is behind the large increases in people on invalid (IB) and sickness benefits (SB). WINZ figures show that those receiving the IB rose from 45,519 to 71,394 over a seven-year period while the SB rose from 34,044 to 41,948. I have said before that the reason so many people receive these benefits is because they can!

A Christchurch GP has finally made a stand and refused to assess casual patients being referred from a neighbouring Work and Income Office. I support him as there are too many "rubber stamp GPs" signing these applications and there is no audit process at all. I have challenged various ministers about these abuses and they fall back on the same tired arguments that only doctors can assess work capacity. It is also remarkable how many career criminals appear in the courts described as either invalid or sickness beneficiaries.

The latest scam that I heard about is university students who want to have a holiday so they get their student health office to endorse them as being "stressed" or "depressed". I recently did a locum on the West Coast and met plenty of people who met the criteria of "benefit bludgers". One young man proudly told me that he had saved enough money from whitebaiting to pay for a new car. He was on a sickness benefit for "stress".

In a truly amazing development, the same Christchurch GP is now the subject of a complaint by aggrieved beneficiaries!

Christchurch Press June 14, 2004

Taking the P*ss?

In a letter to the editor, a correspondent claimed that there were definite health benefits from drinking a daily glass of your own urine. I had a look on the internet and found a staggering 365,000 links to some truly disgusting websites. Deciding that NZ'ers couldn't be that daft I narrowed the search to "NZ"and got 2000 hits and found none that directly referred to drinking urine. This could be a good test for the next conference—make a 30C dilution of urine and see if anyone is prepared to drink this homeopathic preparation.

John Welch lives in Picton and is a retired RNZAF medical officer.

Acupuncturist Charms the Worms

A London-based New Zealander has been named "World Champion Worm Charmer" after a competition in Devon. Garry Trainer, from Auckland, won the award by convincing 51 worms to come to the surface of a metre-square section of a field in 15 minutes. The Harley Street osteopath and acupuncturist entered the competition at Awton at the last minute.

He said: "People were trying all sorts of things, like using watering cans to replicate the sound of rain or connecting their mobile phones to a computer to send vibrations into the ground." He said he used his acupuncture needles and a secret elixir.

Christchurch Press

Continued from page 9

discoveries, which is why it is important to keep an open mind. What we need to do is ensure that any practice or product we use is safer and more effective than whatever we currently have. That's the gist of our Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) submission—have you read it? (You can see it online at the Skeptics website, as we believe in open, transparent communication.)

> Oh by the way, did you know that 80% of pharmaceutical drugs have no proven efficacy.

I'm not sure where your figure comes from, but certainly there is far too much useage and far too little scientific underpinning for many widely used products. That awareness has led the push for re-examining what drugs we use, how effective they are and whether there are better alternatives.

That's why you'll find skeptical groups as equally vocal about the over-prescribing of antibiotics as they are cautious about the claims for mega-vitamin dosages.

It's why we often point out that a good two-thirds (if not more) of what ails us will get better within three days, regardless of whether you visit a GP or a homeopath.

It's why we support evidence-based medicine which looks at safety and efficacy issues, critically examing our own assumptions about long-held medical beliefs. We know, for example, by looking at the evidence, that earache in children is best left alone and monitored, rather than treated with antibiotics. We know, by looking at the evidence, that episiotomies for childbirth aren't warranted in the vast majority of cases, and have been pleased to see their use drop significantly.

We wouldn't know these things if we didn't stop to ask questions, to assess the evidence. And, if we are going to hand over our money or our lives to any kind of medical practitioner, surely it makes sense to ensure that they know what they are doing?

> ...and that 13,000 New Zealanders a year die from the side effects of medically prescribed drugs. Now that is a worry and something you skeptics would be far better off being skeptical about...

That's an *astonishing* figure if you stop to think about it (which, after all, is all that skeptics ask people to do...). Where does it come from?

Lessee, that's half of *all* deaths in New Zealand annually (I'm using the figures from the 1995 NZ Yearbook, which is the most recent one I have to hand, but I don't think the figures have changed that much; it cites 26,437 deaths in total).

I guess if you assume that *everyone* who has cancer or heart disease or cerebrovascular disease died purely as a result of their medication (which assumes they were on medication in the first place), then you'd get somewhere near the figure you quote. But I don't really think that that is a valid assumption, do you?

Given the type of disease and the likely demographics, then it wouldn't be unsurprising to have a large number on medication, but the mere fact of that would not be enough to warrant the assertion that it was the drugs wot did it! While we can be critical about regulatory systems, medical practice, the public health system etc, a death rate of that size solely attributable to side effects from medicine would be Big News.

I don't think that the aspirin my Dad was taking for his heart disease killed him, for example—he died because his heart finally stopped working. And, in fact, I believe that it may well have given him an additional 15 years he would not have had otherwise (the time between his first heart attack and his final), given the evidence for aspirin's use in heart problems.

We can only find out whether there is a causal relationship between things by examining case after case after case, hence the importance of evidence and record keeping.

We'd encourage CAM practitioners to be involved in this (and some of the best are), not only to help their clients but also to help a better understanding of health issues and responses themselves.

My apologies for the length of this response, Margaret, but the issues you raise are not simple ones, and there are no simple answers. I hope you've taken the time to read this far—it's a sad irony that we often find it's those who are involved in alternative viewpoints who are not willing to hear other views or reconsider their beliefs. I guess that's the nature of humanity, but one always lives in the hope of encouraging others to think more deeply—that's what the NZ Skeptics are all about.

Sincerely

Vicki Hyde
Chair-entity

‘I Feel Sorry For Him’

A French test of a therapeutic touch practitioner generates sympathy, but no positive results

Bernard Howard

WE HAVE recently received a message from OZ. Not transtasman Big Brother, but the cousins in France. OZ stands for Observatoire Zététique, a group of skeptical investigators (Zetetic is much the same as skeptic, as every Victorian schoolboy knew. The Greeks had not just one word for it, but two).

The message is an English translation of their report on a test of a Therapeutic Touch (TT) practitioner. This person, referred to as “Mr Z” had approached OZ with some keenness to be tested, and many discussions took place, not only on a detailed protocol for the tests, but about Mr Z’s philosophy and approach to his vocation.

OZ summarise Mr Z’s practice thus:

> “[It] depends largely on subjective validation parameters: the [energy] is sensed either around the area affected by a given pathology or in the vicinity of the source of the problem. For example, ankle pathology can be the cause of muscular tension in the neck; thus the signal might be perceived either in the ankle or the neck area. This complicates any attempt to identify the signal by comparison to objective means of observation (eg scanners, x-rays, MRI and so forth). The same is true of treatments carried out by means of ‘magnetic passes’; the area to be treated cannot be determined by reference either to the affected area or to the area deemed to be the cause of the pathology. Moreover, a validation based on the sensations of patients would be lengthy and difficult to implement, and would not furnish a satisfactory solution to the problem of observation according to objective parameters.”

After long consultation two tests were set up. In the first, preliminary test, Mr Z determined for each investigator from which part of the body he detected the strongest signal. He was then blindfolded, and he examined each in random order. Result, two successes out of nine attempts: failure.

For the second and definitive test, Mr Z chose the skeptic whose “body energy” he found to be the strongest. This was a female member of the investigating group. The two members with the weakest “energies” assisted Mr Z. A screen was set up across a doorway between two rooms, with Mr Z and his assistants on one side, and the other investigators and the subject on the other. In several dummy runs Mr Z claimed to feel the “energy” through the screen when the subject was present, so a series of 100 tests, with 50 “positives” (subject behind screen), and 50 “negatives” (subject not behind screen). Mr Z expressed himself satisfied with the test, and was keen to have the results published. Of 100 tries, two were discarded because, by reason of misunderstanding of signals, the subject’s position did not match that indicated by the previously randomly selected positives and negatives. For statistical significance, 98 tries require 64 correct answers. Unfortunately for Mr Z, he achieved only 55. These unsurprising results confirms previous findings and our expectations from our present knowledge of the physical world. What did surprise me was the great empathy between the skeptics and Mr Z. Their report shows almost great disappointment that he failed. Is this the stuff skeptics are supposed to be made of?

The title of this article is quoted by the investigators as the comment by the president of OZ when the news was reported to him.

Bernard Howard is emeritus professor of biochemistry from Lincoln University.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

Raymond Richards

THE Enlightenment – a period of intellectual progress in Europe and North America during the eighteenth century – saw superstition, dogma and ignorance lose ground to reason, science and freedom of inquiry. Enlightenment thinkers questioned received ideas and used rational methods to explore new possibilities in many fields. Despite persecution by government and church, the enormous increase in the publication of newspapers and books spread ideas widely. The result was an outpouring of knowledge and understanding about the way the world works. Western civilisation's high standard of living and openness today stem from the Enlightenment.

In the last 30 years, however, a fashion called "postmodernism" has challenged all claims to knowledge, including the work of scientists. Postmodernism is a general term for various theories, including post-structuralism and deconstructionism. They have their origin in modern German philosophy (eg Nietzsche) and in the adaptation of this philosophy by various French intellectuals (eg Foucault). This assortment of theories has had little impact in philosophy or science departments, but some academics in humanities and social sciences faculties have seized on it, leading to an ongoing decline in these faculties. Usually they are scholars who are critical of the western world; often they are very concerned about imperialism, racism or sexism. Some are former Marxists who have been forced by world events to abandon that discredited philosophy. Many post-modernists distrust science because it is central to the Western world's success.

Postmodernism starts from reasonable premises: individuals perceive the world differently, and their opinions can be influenced by their backgrounds. Radical postmodernists, however, push their doubts about objectivity to absurd extremes. The race, class, gender and other attributes of individuals, including scientists, supposedly determine their understanding of the world. Anyone's beliefs about the world are as valid as anyone else's. There are no facts, only interpretations. All so-called evidence is in the nature of a text to be read in the light of the presenter's class, race and other attributes. In May I attended an international conference where a scholar presented a paper in which she stated as a given that there are ways of knowing other than the rational and used the word "rational" as a term of abuse! Radical postmodernists say that all claims to knowledge are attempts to usurp power. The scientific method and empiricism supposedly are approaches that elites insist upon in order to strengthen their own standing.

These supposed insights are often expressed in obscure prose, riddled with jargon. Terms such as "episteme", "dominant discourse", "cultural paradigm" and "intellectual hegemony" sit alongside common words that are placed inside quotation marks in order to subvert their meaning. The result can be incomprehensible. An article published recently in the journal Rethinking History is full of sentences such as:

> This definition of a 'secondary break' can clearly be seen to relate to the articulative function of the micro-period, in that the description of it as 'secondary' situates it in a subsidiary relationship to the episteme and suggests that it articulates varying possibilities on the surface without representing a break or rupture in relation to the larger episteme.

I have suffered through academic seminars that were full of such gibberish. I am sure no listener understood them. Out of politeness or timidity, however, no one stood up and said the paper did not make sense—that the emperor had no clothes.

Alan D Sokal, who is a physicist at New York University, was troubled by the decline in intellectual rigour in the humanities. In order to test academic standards, he submitted a nonsensical article to a leading journal of cultural studies. He made the article sound sophisticated and flattered the editors'

prejudices. Thus, Sokal opened by scorning "the dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook":

> that there exists an external world, whose properties … are encoded in 'eternal' physical laws; and that human beings can obtain reliable, albeit imperfect and tentative, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the 'objective' procedures and epistemological strictures prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method.

The rest of the article was riddled with incoherent references to various philosophers and scientific terms, used nonsensically. The spoof ended by stating that post-modern science has abolished the concept of reality, which "is at bottom a social and linguistic construct."

The distinguished editors of Social Text published the paper, Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity, in their Spring/Summer 1996 issue.

Many scholars agree with Perez Zagorin, writing in the journal History and Theory (1999) that postmodernism "is not a tenable set of theories." The sloppy thinking and prejudice behind postmodernism need to be exposed. There is a real world, we can learn about it by using evidence and logic, and no amount of pretentious prose can avoid these obvious truths. It is amazing that we have to state the obvious, but such is the state of education in corners of today's universities.

Dr Raymond Richards is a senior lecturer in History and American Studies at Waikato University. He can be reached at ray@waikato.ac.nz

The Prehistoric Boy Racer Gene

***Bob Brockie** thinks he can explain why the Skeptic editor gets woken up at 2am every Saturday morning*

DOCTORS have a name for impulsive, over-energetic, risky, unpredictable, posturing, defiant behaviour – they call it ADHD (attention deficit hyperactive disorder) and it affects mainly boys.

About 12 years ago geneticists discovered a gene which "contributes" to this naughty behaviour. Nearly half the impulsive naughty boys in the US have this so-called "7R" gene.

Geneticists know that this gene is very ancient and think we may have inherited it from apes. The risk-taking behaviour may have helped prehistoric hunter-gatherers to survive, but once people settled down and became farmers, the impulsive behaviour became inappropriate and socially disruptive.

Paradoxically, the gene has become commoner in some parts of the world over the last 10,000 years. Now a Dr Chen leads a team of Californian geneticists who suggest this is because risk-taking people left their ancestral Africa and China to migrate long distances, taking their overdrive genes and unpredictable behaviour with them. Dr Chen sampled 39 communities round the world and finds that the risk-takers have migrated to the ends of the Earth where their 7R genes now concentrate.

His team found that nearly all the Yanomamo men up the Amazon and those ferocious guys in New Guinea have the gene. These blokes live in a state of local aggressive anarchy, spend all day adorning themselves and posturing, sharpening their elaborate weapons, and eating and sleeping separately from their hard-working women.

By contrast, Dr Chen's team found the risk-taking gene was rare or totally absent among Kalahari bushmen and Chinese farmers. These long-settled men live peaceably, don't make fancy weaponry or show off. They help rear their children and share everything with their wives. No wonder the Yanomamo are known as "The Fierce People" and the bushmen as "The Gentle People". Europeans and other Africans fall somewhere in between these extremes.

And what about us? Whether Polynesian or Pakeha, we New Zealanders are all descended from long distance risk-taking migrants. If Dr Chen's theory is right, our boys should be awash with the 7R gene.

My impression is that we have plenty of defiant, risk-taking, hyperactive boys. Just what we need to play rugby. And what about our boy racers, all those kids sent home from school for disruptive behaviour, and our 12,000 kids on Ritalin, the drug used to treat the condition?

Enough of this armchair theorising. Some geneticist will have to go out and survey our youths' 7R genes. Our boy racer genes.

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What Will You be Doing on September 11 this Year?

Once again, the NZ Skeptics are holding their annual conference, and this year it's in the Garden City of Christchurch, September 10-12.

A host of fascinating speakers and events have been arranged, details (and registration form) inside!