

Skeptic

a person in a state of terminal caution

Margaret Mahy

“Documentary” Gets Bent Spoon
Skeptical Teens
Newspaper Survey
Credence – Beyond Belief

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Modern Version
These modern versions of Marriage (left),

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Deadline for next issue:
January 10, 2005 (my birthday)

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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Getting a Word In

I'M ASHAMED to say we put up a fight. The head of the local community radio station wanted to know if we were interested in putting together a skeptic show. A skeptic of many years' standing himself, Phil Grey had taken on the job recently at Community Radio Hamilton and was wanting to get some balance into the airwaves.

We thought about our lives at present – running daughter to various activities, working, trying to pound an acre of garden into submission, cleaning up after the cat – all those little things that pass for existence these days. There was also the fear factor. A radio show? As in, public speaking? The thought was ghastly. After almost two decades in print media, the concept of having to think on one's feet for a radio show was daunting.

But Phil would not be put off. He was up to his ears in spiritual and alternative health shows, one could hear his teeth gnash over the emails he sent. And Lord knows there are countless subjects out there that one could poke a stick at. We've recorded four shows now, and, after a bit of skilful editing by Phil, they sound almost like real ones—and I'm sure

we'll improve. So for those who can pick it up, Through the Fog (an appropriate name we thought, given the Waikato climate) can be heard Fridays at 12.30pm on 1206AM.



SPOON BENDERS: Through the Fog presenters, from left, David Riddell, Phil Grey and Annette Taylor

David McLoughlin gave a presentation on how the media take a generally sympathetic view of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims. For those, like us, who couldn't get to Christchurch, his talk is reproduced in this issue (page 8).

A classic example was the winner of this year's Bent Spoon Award: Melanie Reid's 20/20 item on Taranaki medium Jeanette Wilson (see page 3). Wilson has continued to have a dream run in the media – chair-entity Vicki Hyde was asked to be on Newstalk ZB with Wilson recently, but in the end didn't even get a sound bite. More on that next issue.

We need more reporters who truly keep an open mind.

- www.communityradio.co.nz

Not Rare – Just Another Medium

Vicki Hyde

A new star on the psychic circuit impressed the makers of TV3's 20/20, but not the NZ Skeptics

A gushy piece of infotainment on what is claimed to be New Zealand's premier showcase for investigative reporting has won 20/20 the 2004 Bent Spoon Award. Melanie Reid's August 22 segment "Back from the Dead", profiling Taranaki medium Jeanette Wilson, was judged by the NZ Skeptics to be the year's most outstanding example of gullible or naive reporting in the paranormal or pseudoscience area.

We were looking forward to seeing a solid journalistic treatment of this growing industry, in much the same manner that 20/20 in the US exposed the dubious practices of medium James van Praagh. It was very disappointing to hear 20/20 describe similar techniques performed here in New Zealand as "astonishing".

20/20 asked me to comment on Wilson's performance, citing how impressed they had been with both Wilson's presentation – they said she looked just like Lady Di – and her accuracy – they said she was coming up with specific names and relationships.

What I saw was the same collection of staple techniques used throughout the industry and well-documented in many books such as Peter Huston's "Scams from the Great Beyond". One example is that of fishing for names, where the medium will ask a client if a common name, such as John, "has

any meaning for them". Asking leading questions designed to elicit information or agreement is a common tactic aimed at building confidence in the performer, and making it appear as if they are revealing hidden knowledge. Telling a middle-aged audience member that their parent or grandparent is watching over them is playing simple demographics, as it is more than likely that such people will have older relatives who have died.



Chair-entity Vicki Hyde: "It's not so much the testing as the marking that's important."

New Zealand Skeptics are always prepared to check such performers out, in case someone really is doing something astonishing, which would be very exciting, but that certainly wasn't the case here, despite 20/20's enthusiastic endorsement.

While 20/20 did include some footage of the critique in the first part of the programme, I was disappointed that the programme chose to focus extensively on one very emotional, but content-free reading in what they called a "test" of the medium's ability. Real tests of such skills have to be carefully planned to avoid naïve or misleading interpretations. It's not so much the testing as the marking that's important. Take away the histrionics and it was a very poor performance as far as a demonstration of mediumship goes.

Of course these very powerful images were selected by 20/20 precisely because they make great entertainment. They didn't screen very much of the unimpressive readings, the one where Wilson asked a lady twice if her father had died, the ones where she used the same names and stock phrases over and over again.

If, indeed, the medium had definitive proof of the after-life, this should have been world-shattering news. After all, with this sort of capability, it means there should be no unsolved murders, no missing children, no arguments over inheritance. There should be no innocent people in prison, no unidentified child molesters. The world would certainly be a better place, and that's something about which there could be no doubt.

The Media Creates a Miracle

The reading by Jeanette Wilson which featured most prominently on the 20/20 programme awarded the 2004 Bent Spoon (see page 3) was of a woman named Maria. It transpired after the reading that Maria's mother had, two years previously, haemorrhaged to death from a perforated duodenal ulcer. It was Maria who found her, and Maria interpreted Jeanette Wilson's very dramatic performance as relating to that event. But as can be seen from the following transcript, stripped of the histrionics, Wilson appeared to be talking about something quite different—the murder of two small boys.

Melanie Reid: We are running this mediumship reading unedited. It is intense. Some people may find it disturbing to watch.

Jeanette Wilson (JW) is handed a ring from Maria (M), to help establish a connection.

JW: Now I've got a lady coming in on your mum's side first, quite strongly. OK. I've also got a gentleman with her and I'm just trying to work out who's who. Alright.

M sits opposite, says nothing.

JW: The lady I've got on your mum's side of the family, she's coming through with a lot of affection to you, she's like, wanting to put her arms around you? It feels like she's being passed over several years now, somewhere between five and 10 years. Has your mum passed over first of all?

M: My mother?

JW: Yeah.

M: She has.

JW: Yes, and is it between five and 10 years ago?

M: No.

JW: OK, how long is it since she's passed?

M: Two years.

JW: OK, she feels as if she's been

there longer to me, OK?

M: That would be correct.

JW: Was she in a coma or something then?

M: No, but I understand what you say...

JW: OK.

M: About her feeling she was...

JW: Yeah because she's coming through as a spirit that's used to communicating. Alright. Now she's bringing with her a small boy. Do you understand who in the family that is?

M: Yeah I do.

JW: OK. And she's showing me lots and lots of tears about this young boy's passing because there was a tragedy...

M: Oh yeah...

JW: You'll see the hair's on my arm starting to go on end. But it was like that was something that shouldn't have happened... yeah...

M: Yes.

JW: I'm asking her... I've got the name John or Jonathon – does that make sense to you?

M: *(pause)* Um, not with my mother, but it makes sense of something else.

JW: Is it to do with the little boy?

M: Um, it would be another boy that I know...

JW: Yeah...

M: ...but not to do with my family.

JW: No.

M: That would...

JW: But a similar age, do you understand?

M: Yeah I do.

JW: Because I'm being shown a similar age and a similar situation that happened? Alright? Understand?

M: Mm.

JW: *(emotional)* Oh goodness, I've got blood on my hands. And I don't understand why I've got blood on my hands... do you understand?

M: Mm.

JW: I just want to really break down now and, uh, I've got a really really horrible feeling inside... um... *(pause)*

M: Quite a macabre feeling, I would say.

JW: The blood on the hands is symbolic, I feel that somebody had blood on their hands, does that make sense, it's not... this isn't like a natural passing? Somebody had blood on their hands and you'll see the hairs on my arm, if the cameras

can pick it up, but they're ab... We're in sunlight, it's warm. But I'm really... There's a lot of distress here, there's a lot of distress. Somebody was absolutely terrified? (*sobs*) ...absolutely terrified... (*cries*) and they weren't very old. Oh goodness, goodness, goodness... it's very very emotional for me, it's like why me? Why are you doing this to me? (*cries*) Why are you doing... I have to put the ring down sweetheart, it's too hard for me, it's too hard, it's too hard. Oh God, oh God... (*cries*)

M: Jeanette, Jeanette...

JW: It's alright, it's alright, it's alright, it's alright, they're alright now, they're alright now...

M: I know they're alright.

JW: ...they're alright now.

M: I know the feeling.

JW: Oh God – I need a tissue somebody, sorry, I've got a runny nose.

M: I can't believe you broke down and I didn't...

JW: God, I just want to hug you, I just want to hug you, can I give you a hug?

M: Mm you can.

JW: Oh my God, oh my God, sweetheart, oh, I'm so sorry (*cries*).

M: It's OK, I'm...

JW: Oh God. You know how to pick them, Melanie.

M: She knows nothing, no one know that story, only I and the police – and my mother – know.

Transcript by Annette Taylor and David Riddell

Five Tips for Assessing Mediums or Psychics

1. Don't judge them by their demeanour. The vast majority of people in this business are sincere, well-meaning individuals, and they are very hard to distinguish from the con artists. They might well be honest, but this doesn't mean they can do what they think they are doing.

2. Record, Rewind, Review. It's very easy to interpret something as far more accurate or amazing than it actually is (ie to remember more "hits" than "misses"). Record your interview and listen carefully to the actual words used, how much information is given to the psychic/medium, and how often they reflect that back in a positive way to make it sound as if they knew it all along. If you can, transcribe audio to paper, as this can make what is happening much more obvious.

3. Listen for open-ended questions or ones asking for agreement. These phrases are designed to encourage you to hunt for a connection, even highly obscure ones, and to respond positively. They are common throughout the industry (sometimes deliberately taught) as they boost the chances of a positive response and give the impression that the performer is doing well.

Example: asking (of a male subject) "I see a needle. [pause] Understand? [pause] Did your mother do embroidery?" After extended discussion, the subject's wife decided this referred to an aunt of hers who was diabetic!

4. Think about the statistics Many psychics/mediums use, deliberately or sub-consciously, basic statistics to improve their "hit" rate. People live similar lives and have many things in common. Listen for questions which make use of that and understand the likelihood of getting a positive response.

Example: "Is the name John familiar?" Many people know at least one John, and even apparently rare names can readily occur. You're likely to have 30-60 names in your extended family; add a partner's family, and friends and colleagues, and you've probably got over 100 names which have some meaning for you.

Example: "I see a father figure near you", usually accompanied by a pause so you can identify the "father figure". If you don't, the next question is usually "Has your father passed on?". This is almost always asked of an older person, so the odds are good that the father has. If not, the next question is usually "Has your grandfather passed on?"

5. Most of the information mediums provide is generalised and designed to be comforting, such as the deceased spirit wishing their relative/friend well, or forgiving them for not being present when they passed on (it's increasingly rare to be present with a parent or grandparent when they die). Look for information that is specific, unusual, detailed and, even then, be cautious, as the more unscrupulous people in this industry are not above researching their subjects (the UK psychic scene circulates a database which contains personal details of keen, rich clients!).

- Vicki Hyde

Skeptical Teenage Boys - hope for the future

One of our members (who was supposed to be teaching carbon chemistry at the time and wishes to remain nameless!) used Jeanette Wilson's TV performances as a resource for teaching critical thinking to her year ten class. The results were encouraging, and very educational.

An email from our illustrious chair-entity advised of an upcoming 20/20 piece on a medium, Jeanette Wilson. It also had a list of five tactics to watch for, and examples (see Five Tips, page 5). Despite some misgivings, I decided to mention the programme and some of the tips to my fourth form (year 10) science class. They are not a top academic class, but have always been keen to ask questions and accept answers with "I don't know" or "best evidence we have gives this model of what is happening". On the other hand, I've found boys of that age often believe in the ideas of Erich von Däniken (thankfully, that fad seems to be dying out), alien abduction, and assorted conspiracy theories, and if so, they love to argue just for the fun of arguing or being their normal, rebellious selves against anything seen as authority.

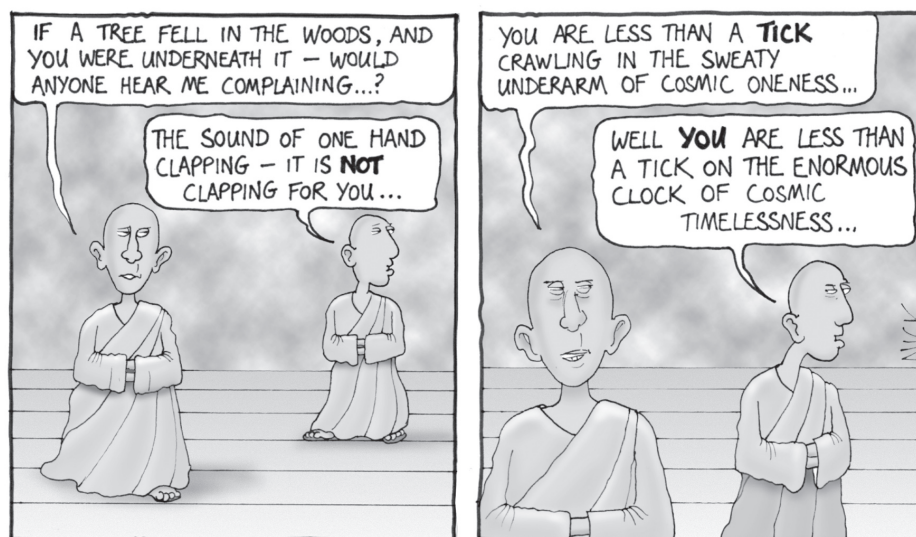
The class was told about the TV show and that I had a list from the Skeptics of tactics to watch for. They listened to my description of the money charged by psychic hotlines, the amount to be made in one night if a large auditorium in the US could be filled, and tactics from Vicki's tip sheet, then put up with some very bad acting out of some tactics. Their main response was to ask why we weren't making lots of money by running our own hotline! (A hint on fundraising?) And

would I tape the show for them (a good way to get out of class work for at least part of a period—boys are very pragmatic...).

Just by chance, I noticed a TV1 ad after the late news that night about a psychic being on the breakfast show on Friday and taking calls from the public, and slapped in a tape to try and get that, too. With big gaps for other things like cooking and Red Seal health products, it provided three unedited "readings" by Wilson.

Due to the vagaries of the old machine I have to use in my pre-fab lab at school, I started the tape at the second of the three readings, which backed straight onto the 20/20 clip I had promised to tape for them. I reminded my class of Vicki's tips, and also pointed out that certain age groups tend to have "most popular names", and some

names are always popular. (In the class, 19 out of 22 knew someone named Scott, a third could think of some friend or relative who could be associated with needles, or had an old watch from a relative at home, and half knew someone involved in a serious or fatal accident.) I also asked the boys to judge the age of the people phoning in by their name and voice before hearing Wilson's response, as this was what she would be doing. They picked Kylie as mid-30s and Suzanne as late 20s. I also asked the boys to tally the number of hits, misses, excuses, and pauses or delays. They were very enthusiastic to call out what they spotted, and on the two calls, came up with a total of four hits, 15 misses, three excuses, and one pause. A ripple of laughter followed the "Jack/sometimes called John or Jonathan" that Vicki had in her tip sheet (and



Zenemies

given to them before either programme had aired on TV), and burst out laughing when she tried exactly the same thing on 20/20, and also went through “Bill or William or maybe it’s a last name”. Similar hilarity and incredulity greeted the excuse of a “spirit brother” to excuse the miss on a guess at a dead sibling. As Wilson rapidly moved on to more fertile ground, one boy exclaimed “what happened to the baby?” which had suddenly disappeared from her reading. They also pointed out the excuse “check your family tree” when one name drew no response and later noticed that she used the same tactic when we eventually saw the 20/20 item. As Wilson fished for information about one senior citizen’s mother, a final derisive comment came from one boy who summed up their reaction - “Bet you couldn’t tell me what my mother looks like!” Of course, a very limited use of genetics would indicate his mother is blonde and blue-eyed... but he’ll learn more about that next year in science.

Based on their good observation on just a first viewing, I decided to continue the next period and see how much we could get through of the rest of the 20/20 item. Before we started, I briefly reminded them of Vicki’s tips, and said Vicki would like to have them see if they could spot how Wilson was operating. Instead of calling out when they spotted something, I gave out sheets of paper and asked for individual tallies or comments to be recorded, and for permission to use their responses and pass them on to Vicki and the Skeptics. Most agreed to this. We still did not get through the entire 20/20 item, even though I fast-forwarded through most of the “at home on the farm”

bio after a derisive comment greeted the idea that her husband had been drawn across the globe by a psychic pull to meet his ideal partner.

Most boys concentrated on comments rather than tallies, but one boy gave her eight hits, but also 13 misses, six excuses, and three pauses.

“Why ... would a spirit say to this lady, ‘My name is either Bill or William, possibly Will or Willy’?”

– Student

Some boys did not want their comments used, but made similar comments to a selection of comments from the other boys, which follows (sometimes with spelling or grammar corrected, but a copy of the originals will go to our chair-entity). Some boys made just a few comments, but two filled the page.

1. Asked lots of questions and made a lot of excuses.

2. Patterns repeating. Most old men have been to the war and so have their friends. And they would be hard of hearing because of gunfire. She picks obvious names and the most common. She changes the point a lot, changes the subject.

3. Use of common names making it obvious. Asking elderly people if their parents are dead. Obviously they would be. (We had mentioned this point the previous period when discussing the tip about things common to people or age groups.) BAD ACTING! Using the same names on each person. (Remember, the boys saw

two separate “performances” on two different stations, so had a better sample than some people in order to judge this.)

4. She isn’t telling them anything, she’s asking. A lot of grandparents been in war. Excuses about hard hearing. She asks obvious questions. Asks names then says it can be another.

5. These people have a few lucky stabs and then lead on from there. When they fail a few times, they start making up things and using excuses. She also questions and does not actually tell people what they want to hear. They make up a few common names from their parents and keep guessing.

6. What a nice trick! Wide range of questions. Anyone can do that with some skills. She’s nothing better than weather tellers. (A comment on the poor weather forecasting lately?!)

7. Isn’t it unlikely for an elderly person to be sick or unwell just before death? (I think he meant likely, or is being ironic). This lady is not telling people things, she is only asking. She asks for relations to the most common names possible. It’s all a bit suspicious how she happens to ask different age groups for information or names relating to their generation. How can people fall for this? Why ... would a spirit say to this lady, “My name is either Bill or William, possibly Will or Willy”? She uses humour to lighten up a situation and maybe change the subject. She happens to only feel disturbed when she is going off track, “I’m wrong, this is too much, I can’t go on.” (The class hasn’t yet seen the first TV1 interview where she ends up in tears again....) With the blood on the hands topic, the only thing

she said was something about blood on hands, the rest was informed to her. It is being made out like she guessed the whole situation photographically. The whole breaking down performance was a good trick. (I haven't had time to review this myself, but just on a once-over, Wilson was fishing for something since the "blood on the hands" can be taken so many ways symbolically—if someone causes, or can't prevent an accident, which she seemed to be fishing for with

her questions, but these seemed to be about a child's death.)

8. (ESOL student) I think she is a very bad faker. Her trick is used repeatedly and they're not even good trick. I think her trick work only because people want to believe, think that are not real because it help them. I believe medium isn't so bad if they don't ask for so much money. I think it okay to comfort other people and make them come to an understanding with their loved one. I

believe she is fake because if she is real then why didn't she always get it right. I am skeptic about the 20/20 trial. If she really saw did what on TV with the last person, I believe she is real, but I doubt that. You can see that she stumble on her "question" I mean what kind of medium ask not answer!!

And the final comment goes to Ben:

9. I think she would make a better career as an actor.

media

The Mesmerisation of the Media

Journalists in New Zealand generally show a lack of scepticism when dealing with issues of science and pseudoscience - except for mainstream medicine. This article is based on a presentation to the New Zealand Skeptics Conference, 11 September, 2004

David McLoughlin

EVERY day about a million people in New Zealand watch the television news. Just under two million read a newspaper. Hundreds of thousands more hear radio news bulletins. But how good is our news media?

On most levels, the public is reasonably well served. Most journalists do try to get the facts and present them fairly. But on issues such as medicine and scientific controversy, the media are not as rigorous as they could and should be.

This is probably partly because there are few, if any, journalists with medical qualifications and few with any scientific qualification. Most journalists have arts degrees, in subjects like English literature, usually with a journalism course added on.

Most journalists today are trained to have a healthy questioning attitude towards politicians, big business, experts of all kinds.

But when it comes to issues like alternative medicine, genetic modification, global warming or the supposed dangers of cellphone transmitters, there appears to be a great lack of scepticism.

It leads to cases where the media seriously misinforms the public, such as in 2000 when Television New Zealand and the New Zealand Herald were totally taken in by the promoters of the mussel extract Lyprinol, which racked up millions of dollars in sales when gullible journalists breathlessly announced it was a miracle cancer cure.

The media are also quite easily taken in by well-known people with

strong personalities and an anti-establishment bent.

Dr Neil Cherry from Lincoln university was one. He believed the electromagnetic energy from high tension power lines and microwave radiation from cellphones caused everything from brain tumours to premature births. He helped to fuel a panic in schools around the country, leading to mass protests about cellphone transmission towers. The media for the most part saw only the word "radiation" and ran dozens of stories that fanned the fears, many of them quoting Dr Cherry.

Another powerful personality who has mesmerised the media over the years is forensic scientist Jim Sprott, who became prominent in the 1970s during the campaign to free Arthur Alan Thomas, a

farmer falsely convicted of murder. Dr Sprott went on to promote the bizarre claims of chelation therapy before making his life's mission in the 1990s attempting to prove that cot death is caused by mysterious emissions from mattresses in babies' cots.

There was no reliable evidence that mattress gases cause cot death, but Dr Sprott has beaten much of the media into giving credence to his theories, to the extent he is regularly approached for comment on it. The manufacturers of plastic mattress wraps have been the main beneficiary.

The Bain Murder

Then there is Joe Karam, a former all black who has become obsessed with his belief that David Bain did not murder his family in Dunedin in 1994. So successful has Karam's campaign been that one opinion poll showed that 40 per cent of New Zealanders believed Bain was innocent while just 33 per cent thought him guilty. Fortunately we don't have justice by opinion poll in New Zealand because the scientific and forensic evidence of Bain's guilt is overwhelming. He left blood, fingerprints and other evidence all over the house and on his victims, but you don't hear much about that in the media.

The media also loves a conspiracy and if it has something controversial such as genetic modification in it, so much the better. During the 2002 election campaign, political activist Nicky Hagar accused the Government of covering up the accidental planting of genetically modified sweetcorn. The media went crazy on it and Hagar's allegations are credited with Labour losing significant voter

support. But there was no cover-up. Environment Minister Marion Hobbs had announced the accidental planting at a press conference the previous December.

The Liam Affair

A sad example of the media lacking scepticism was the case of little Liam Williams Holloway, who developed neuroblastoma, an aggressive childhood cancer that stands a good chance of being cured if treated early enough. He was given one course of chemotherapy

quantum booster getting rid of his cancer. Exasperated doctors said it was thanks to the initial chemo course, but nobody wanted to listen to them. Next, Liam's parents borrowed money and mortgaged their house and took him to Tijuana in Mexico, a city dotted with quack clinics established there to milk rich Americans wanting treatments banned in the US.

The Rainbow Clinic said its business went up many-fold thanks to the publicity about them treating



Just how good are our print media?

at Dunedin Hospital but his parents, who followed various New Age beliefs, withdrew him from treatment to seek alternative therapies.

His doctors went to court and got an order to have Liam treated. His parents went into hiding amid a media uproar that was massively in favour of the parents' right to choose alternative therapies over proven medicine. Holmes in particular was influential. The Holmes show visited the Rainbow Clinic in Rotorua where Liam was being treated with a magic box of wires called a quantum booster.

Liam was shown on TV lump-free. Holmes put that down to the

Liam. Their website even promoted the quantum booster with the line "as seen on Holmes." But when Holmes developed prostate cancer, he did not try his luck with the quantum booster or head for Tijuana. He went straight to a good oncologist.

At the same time Liam was dying, Tovia Laufau, a 13-year-old Samoan boy, was dying in South Auckland. Tovia had a cancerous growth on his knees that doctors said could be treated with some confidence. But his parents, like Liam's, did not believe in doctors. They didn't believe in quantum boosters either, but they did believe

Continued on page 12

Hope Springs Eternal for Arkeologists

A WHANGAREI computer programmer is spearheading an expedition to prove Noah's Ark exists, and that it lies about 2000 metres above sea level in Turkey (NZPA, 17 August). Ross Patterson is convinced that a mound of earth about 12km from Mt Ararat in Turkey contains the remains of the Ark, and says there is strong evidence that the events depicted in the Bible occurred. He had twice visited the site, almost 2000m above sea level and said a need to prove the theory and the associated religious implications had taken over his life.

Together with two other Northlanders, Geoff McColl and Des Palamountain, he is fundraising to revisit the site before the end of October, the end of the northern summer. The expedition hopes to add weight to earlier research by controversial American author, the late Ron Wyatt, who claimed to have identified petrified timber and rivets made of iron, as well as structures resembling bulkheads, by scanning with radar. Large stones found at nearby villages also resembled anchor stones, Mr Patterson said.

The mound also matched measurements of the ark described in the Bible and a drilling operation revealed animal hair deep inside the mound. The Turkish Government had since acknowledged the site, Mr Patterson said. "What we intend to do ... is to place a small camera into the hole to see if there are any man-made structures under there," he said.

Any evidence pointing to man-made structures beneath the surface would add credibility to Mr Wyatt's research, he said.

If the expedition did not shed any light on the subject then those on the team would be the first to accept it. "People can make up their own minds. The public are a jury. Our job is to present the evidence and the case. They make up their own minds. It's like in court; you have to prove things beyond reasonable doubt," Mr Patterson said. "We expect to find something but, if we don't find something, we have to be fair."

New Zealand Skeptics spokesman Denis Dutton was critical of the expedition. He said the great flood legend was older than the Old Testament itself. It went back to a pre-Homeric epic originating from the ancient civilisation of Mesopotamia. "It's a shame that people can't appreciate the rich literary and moral teachings of the Old Testament for that. Moral information, yes; literal history ... get a grip," he said.

Abduction Researcher Dies

John Mack, the Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry who conducted research on people who claimed to have been abducted by aliens, has died (Waikato Times, 2 October). He was struck and killed by an alleged drunk driver while attending a TE Lawrence Society symposium in Oxford, England. He was 74.

Dr Mack won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, and also wrote two books, *Abduction* (1994) and *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (1999) detailing his work with claimed alien abductees. He reported they came from all walks of life, generally had no evidence of mental illness, and often had a heightened sense of spirituality and environmentalism.

In 1994 the Harvard Medical School established a committee to review his clinical investigation and initiated proceedings to determine whether he should retain tenure. After the 14-month investigation the school "reaffirmed Dr Mack's academic freedom to study what he wishes".

Maori Spiritual Concerns Sink Inlet Proposal – or Do They?

It's always interesting to see media reports of events which have a personal connection. This writer had a small role in assembling and assessing some of the ecological evidence at the Environment Court hearing into the plan to put floodgates across the mouth of the Manukau Harbour's Pahurehure Inlet, and was somewhat surprised at the prominence given in newspaper articles to Maori spiritual concerns as a reason for the court's finding against the plan (NZ Herald, 29 July).

The proposal, which would have seen the inlet, near Papakura,

flooded for up to four days at a time for recreational purposes, was opposed by the Ngati Tamaoho Trust. Although concerns for the “wairua” of the inlet and wider harbour were a factor, the court found the plan’s long-term ecological effects had not been adequately addressed in the proposal. Changes to the inlet are being driven by siltation from terrestrially-derived sediments, and reducing water flows by closing off the inlet will only exacerbate this. There was also no mention in the newspaper report that it was Council, not Maori, who decided to pull out of mediation and take the case to the Environment Court. Another reminder, if one was needed, that media reports of anything need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Healing Tape Comes Unstuck

Darrell Stoddard, founder of the US-based Pain Research Institute, invited sufferers of severe knee pain to take part in a free double-blind placebo-controlled study at a Wellington hotel, which he hoped would show his knee treatment, Biotape, works (Dominion Post, 22 July).

Only 40 people were needed, many others were turned away. There was an excited buzz as knees were shaved by Mormon elders before they strapped on the black tape. When asked why Mormons were there, Mr Stoddard said they were helping him.

A sheet of Biotape strips, which costs about \$15, is described as a “space-age conductive mylar that connects the broken circuits that cause the pain.” Mr Stoddard said it worked on the chi or energy force.

Commerce Commission director

of fair trading Deborah Battell, however, said Mr Stoddard and American company Smart Inventions had been accused by the US Federal Trade Commission of making false or unsubstantiated claims that Biotape treated or cured severe pain.

Volunteers were told they would get the trial results in three days, but four days later they were still waiting (Dominion Post, 26 July).

“There was very little explanation but we were told we would be informed in three days’ time whether we had been given placebo or the tape,” said volunteer Peter Kidd. “The funny thing is one of knees with the tape on does seem to feel less painful. Though I suppose it could be psychological.”

Mr Stoddard said he could not provide the information until a “distinguished local doctor associated with the study” – former Cook Islands prime minister Sir Tom Davis – returned from Auckland.

Psychic Scam Given Short Shift

Dominion Post journalist Fran Tyler was unimpressed by “internationally renowned” psychic Maria Duval’s latest mailout (Dominion Post, 11 August). Ngaio woman Chrissy Bell was presumably one of thousands who received a letter from Ms Duval promising to make her rich beyond her wildest dreams – for just \$39.95 (plus \$10 postage and handling).

Out of all the billions of people on planet Earth, Ms Duval, who has given up a very lucrative career foretelling the future, had chosen Ms Bell for one final selfless act,

the letter said.

The letter did not point out that its author featured on such websites as Consumer Online’s scams page, and the NZ Consumer Affairs Ministry’s Scamwatch. And why did someone who claims to be the “only clairvoyant granted an audience by a representative of Pope John Paul II” choose Ms Bell?

“I did some research,” says the letter. “I faced thousands of cases. People working really hard to earn just enough to live on... I can tell you it wasn’t an easy decision. But it’s you I’ve chosen...”

That doesn’t explain how she got Ms Bell’s name, Fran Tyler comments. Perhaps it was in a vision.

Ms Bell said she was not tempted at all. “If she’s so good, why doesn’t she just do the [Lotto] numbers herself instead of sending out letters asking for money?”

The Dominion Post tried to contact Ms Duval to give her the opportunity to prove her psychic ability, but her Auckland address, listed as a suite in a building in Newmarket, turned out to be just a mail box. Should’ve had a Bravo Award, this one.

Door-knocking Ghost Closes College

A ghost who knocks on doors and leaves the scent of aftershave in corridors has forced a prestigious college for statisticians to close (Waikato Times, 27 September). Students of the Indian Statistical Institute said the ghost of a dead classmate had knocked on doors, jostled them on staircases and left traces of aftershave lotion and cigarette smoke. Students linked the aftershave aroma to a first-year student who died recently

Continued from page 9

in God. They refused medical treatment for Tovia, saying God would save him.

I compared Liam's case with Tovia's. There was no media outcry supporting Tovia's parents' rights to trust God to save him. My research showed there had been many court cases over the years where Jehovah's Witness parents had been forced by court orders to have their ill children given blood transfusions. I could find no media criticism of such actions, only criticisms of the parents.

The Bill of Rights Act gives an adult the freedom to choose not to receive medical attention, yet one case I found was of a mentally sound Jehovah's Witness woman who was bleeding to death after a home birth and had refused a blood transfusion, as was her legal right and her religious belief. She was arrested and taken to hospital by the police, where her life was saved by doctors forcibly giving her a transfusion.

I'm glad she did not die, but I couldn't help noticing there were no articles or newspaper editorials supporting the rights of adult Jehovah's Witnesses. The media comments were uniformly hostile.

I predicted that Liam's parents were unlikely to face any legal consequences of his death, but that Tovia's parents were likely to face charges, simply because one lot of parents espoused publicly acceptable New Age beliefs while the other espoused traditional religious faith. And, when Liam died, his parents were not even charged with ignoring the court order to have him treated. But Tovia's parents were charged with manslaughter, despite his doctors not even seeking a court

order to have him treated, saying they were too scared to do so after the uproar over Liam. While Tovia's parents were found not guilty of manslaughter, they were found guilty of failing to provide the necessities of life and given a 15-month suspended sentence.

I'm glad she did not die, but I couldn't help noticing there were no articles or newspaper editorials supporting the rights of adult Jehovah's Witnesses.

Deborah and Jan Moorehead, a Seventh Day Adventist couple, were not treated so lightly two years later, in 2002, when their baby Caleb, six months old, died of a simple vitamin B12 deficiency caused by being breastfed by his vegan mother. The Mooreheads were flayed mercilessly in the media. They were also charged with manslaughter. They were found guilty and jailed for five years by a judge who could barely conceal his contempt for them as he castigated them during sentencing.

I am not sympathising with Caleb's or Tovia's parents. Their children would still be alive if not for their parents' fanatical beliefs, but Liam would probably still be alive today too if not for *his* parents' fanatical beliefs. What I am questioning is the media double standard that treats New Age believers like Liam's parents with reverence while having harsh views towards people with strong religious beliefs.

Spotlight on Medicine

If you ask journalists why they are so sceptical of doctors and

medicine, many will say "Thalidomide" and "Cartwright Inquiry." Thalidomide was certainly a medical catastrophe but it was 40 years ago and it's never been repeated. But the Cartwright Inquiry, into the treatment of women with cervical cancer at National Women's Hospital, had an enormous impact on the medical profession, on public attitudes towards doctors, and on the media, with good cause.

It was the media that revealed the shameful activities of Professor Herb Green, who did not believe that pre-cancerous changes to the cervix led to cervical cancer, so he simply didn't treat them, just watched to see what developed, with the inevitable results.

The writers who exposed this "unfortunate experiment" in their Metro magazine article became national heroes—Sandra Coney and Philidda Bunkle. Judge Silvia Cartwright, who conducted the inquiry into the scandal, went on to become governor general. The fallout directly led to the great deal of scepticism about modern medicine that exists in the media to this day, and that is a good thing in most cases.

It led directly to the campaign by militant midwives to push doctors out of childbirth, a campaign promoted favourably by the media and which worked so well that today, hardly any doctors want anything to do with childbirth, dramatically reducing women's choices.

Most journalists now are women, including many editors and senior news executives. Most health reporters, in print and broadcasting, are women. The feminisation of the news media has been a good thing. When I started in 1977, women

journalists were largely confined to feature-writing or what was called the “women’s page”, while men, most of them chain-smoking, beer swilling sports fanatics, reported what they felt was the “real” news. Newsrooms are much better balanced than they were then.

From my observations, journalists in general, and women journalists in particular, appear to be favourably disposed to New Age trends, alternative therapies and the like. Like most other New Zealand women, the women who work in such large numbers in our newsrooms today are a product of the feminist revolution of the 1970s and were brought up with that journalistic phenomenon of which there is no male counterpart, the women’s magazines. Magazines like *Woman’s Day*, *New Idea*, *Woman’s Weekly*, *Dolly*, *Cosmo* and *Cleo* sell in huge numbers and are read by hundreds of thousands of women every week.

While they tend to be obsessed with celebrities and sex, they are also packed with columns by psychics, naturopaths, homeopaths and the like. A study in 2000 by Victoria University sociologist Allison Kirkman analysed women’s magazines for two years and concluded they abounded with information on alternative therapies like iridology and aromatherapy but had little advice from doctors, nurses or midwives.

Nothing’s changed. *Woman’s Day* has 850,000 readers a week and is the biggest selling title of all. One recent issue I studied had page after page of clairvoyants and astrologers and the like but nothing I could see by anyone with a medical

or scientific qualification. The “health page” had a reader’s question about cold sores, with the inquirer being told to treat them with fish, flax, spirulina, olive oil and shiitake mushrooms. It didn’t say whether you were meant to eat the stuff, or mash it all together and spread it on your cold sore.

Newspaper Survey

I reviewed articles published in 13 daily and weekly newspapers between 1 September 2003 and 31 August 2004 to see how sceptically they treated various issues of interest to Skeptics members. The papers included the *NZ Herald*, the *Waikato Times*, the *Dominion Post*, *The Press* and the *Sunday Star Times*.

I read articles on my chosen topics and classified them as either positive, where the subject was treated without scepticism or even glowingly; critical, where the subject was treated critically or even with hostility; or neutral, where the article simply cited a subject with neither positive nor negative comment.

| | % Positive | % Neutral | % Critical |
|--------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Acupuncture | 60 | 26 | 13 |
| Homeopathy | 69 | 25 | 6 |
| Iridology | 68 | 10 | 23 |
| Naturopathy | 63 | 12 | 25 |
| Feng Shui | 45 | 52 | 2 |
| Jeanette Wilson | 93 | 0 | 7 |
| Immunisation Awareness Society | 36 | 29 | 36 |

Table 1. Reporting of alternative health and paranormal issues in NZ newspapers

I didn’t even bother looking for critical articles on such subjects as chiropractic, which seems to be completely mainstream now, or astrology, as virtually every publication carries the stars if for no other reason than readers expect it.

Clear Results

The results were not good for either skeptics or an informed readership (Table 1). Critical or negative articles were in a notable minority, while many of the most critical articles I found were not by the papers’ journalists but by skeptics like Frank Haden and Bob Brockie.

The Immunisation Awareness Society is an influential organisation and often seems to be the first call by journalists seeking comment on any new vaccination campaign, despite most of its views being little more than junk science and nonsense. It didn’t have as many positive articles as other issues I studied and it had a higher share of critical ones, but it also had a lot of neutral articles.

Fortunately for our children’s health, the society is not as influential as it would like. Despite Radio New Zealand in particular giving strong coverage to its recent stand against the new meningococcal vaccine, parents rushed to have their children vaccinated.

Given that vaccine rates are as low as 70 per cent in New Zealand, I put that rush down to parents being convinced in favour of vaccination by heart-wrenching publicity about two seriously stricken children that came at the start of the campaign.

As a sceptical journalist, I don't think that publicity was a coincidence. It looked more like the health authorities manipulating the media to scare children into getting their children vaccinated. But that might be at least a more altruistic kind of media manipulation than that practised by the Greens, Greenpeace and many other opponents of modern science and medicine.

Feng shui was interesting. There were almost more articles mentioning feng shui than any of the other topics, but most were cases of the word simply being thrown in willy nilly for journalistic effect rather than the story being specifically about feng shui.

But Jeanette Wilson, the New Plymouth clairvoyant, gets just as good a run in our newspapers as she got on 20/20. But then, not only does she speak to the dead, she campaigns against genetically engineered food, a double plus for her with many journalists.

I conclude that, while the media are good at covering most issues and try their best, they're not good on many scientific issues, with stories on alternative medicine or environmental issues, and that things won't change fast anytime soon.

This is because newsrooms tend to be getting smaller with less experienced staff, the emphasis is increasingly on celebrity stories and crime, many newsrooms have limited resources, and the pay is not particularly good, usually less than that of a teacher with similar qualifications and experience. It means there will continue to be plenty of opportunities for bent spoon awards.

David McLoughlin is a Wellington journalist

Ancient Celtic New Zealand – More Reasons Not To Believe

IN connection with David Riddell's article about "Ancient Celtic New Zealand" (Skeptic, Winter 2004) your readers may be interested in my more detailed examination of the twaddle in Martin Doutré's book in two articles published in the Auckland Astronomical Society Journal last year.

In these I analysed the garbled astronomy and contrived mathematics with some rigour. I did my own survey of the Maunganui Bluff site on the ground, identifying clear examples of misrepresentation and deception, leaving me in no doubt that the Waitapu "stone observatory" and "survey network" are pure invention. More recently I have found other examples of deception on Doutré's website. No doubt this is not deliberate deception – I'm sure these people believe their own fabrications – but it is dangerous because many gullible people are sucked in by it.

This grossly misleading material is widely available in bookshops, libraries and websites, giving it an air of respectability. But there is no widely available corpus of published work to counter it. May I suggest that NZCSICOP find some way to commission investigators to research, publish and disseminate definitive books to expose and correct these deceptions case by case. We are dealing here with a growing trend. Crackpots are exploiting modern information and publishing technology, and freedom-of-speech principles, to spread fabrication posing as fact. We cherish freedom of speech ourselves, so we can't

suppress this material, and it won't go away if we ignore it. Our only option is to match it punch-for-punch.

My articles are:

An Ancient Megalithic Observatory Near Dargaville? I Don't Think So! AAS Journal, July 2003.

Secret Astronomical Number Codes? Bunkum! AAS Journal, August 2003.

These can be read at the Auckland Astronomical Society website (www.astronomy.org.nz). On the home page select Journal, then select the issue.

Bill Keir
Hokianga

Greenhouse Effect: What would it take?

In this magazine, and at conferences, a number of skeptics seem to have classified the belief in anthropogenic climate change as nonsense, together with spoon-bending and astrology. I wonder if the opposition to a radical new scientific idea is not just a symptom of conservatism – resistance to change – as demonstrated by the historical reluctance of scientists to accept other iconoclastic beliefs such as tectonic plate movement or quantum theory. If so, this is a desirable characteristic (in moderation), because science has progressed only by slow, cautious steps.

Regrettably, the debate has remained at the level of vikings and grapevines, rather than (say) discussion as to whether increasing

cloud cover constitutes a negative or a positive feedback loop. Remember that the theory of the enhanced Greenhouse Effect was well established long before any warming was actually observed (in the 1990s). I first became aware of it in 1970, but Sven Arrhenius published a paper on it back in 1896.

The letter is an open challenge to all Greenhouse skeptics, including Vincent Gray, Chris de Freitas, Owen McShane, Denis Dutton and Jim Ring. What empirical evidence would it require, over and above that which has been published in the first, second and third IPCC reports, for these people to publicly declare in these pages that they were wrong?

I assume that (being good scientists) skeptics would be quite willing to change their beliefs when confronted with compelling evidence. That being the case, there would be no loss of face if that eventuality should arise. What would it take?

Piers Maclaren

Moral Values

Vincent Gray asks which combination of moral values I support. My values are irrelevant to the topic of this discussion, which concerns the efforts by Bruce Taylor to find a consensus on environmental policy. Gray leaves us in little doubt as to his own values - like the Model T Ford, they come in one colour only! He doesn't believe in consensus; in fact he opposes any environmental policy other than the continuing insanity of placing scientific "progress" before any other consideration. I am, it seems, "one of the few people who

believes what comes out of the Pentagon". Well, not exactly. Others include the ex-CEO of the UK Met Office and the Chief scientist at the World Bank. The Pentagon warns of chaos as global warming continues. I am also "a sucker for disaster scenarios" because I quoted from a report in Nature which estimated that a quarter of all species will become extinct by 2050. His scorn is misplaced. I never suggested that global warming would be the sole cause of this. The shift in climate zones is too rapid for ecosystems to make corresponding shifts in location. He quotes from an unnamed reference which estimates three to five extinctions per year. This was indeed worth citing in more detail, since the best estimates of the "background" extinction rate are much higher than this!

His references to Darwinism and to evolution derive from Herbert Spencer's 19th century concept of Social Darwinism, which was an attempt to apply Darwinist ideas to politics. The fallacy is, of course, that "survival of the fittest" in a socioeconomic context has nothing to do with biological fitness. Over a century later, Gray perpetuates this fallacy. Like it or not, Homo

"sapiens" is part of nature, and not separate from it.

Finally, environmentalism does not "fundamentally oppose modern technology, such as GE and nuclear energy". It does, however, advise the proper use of the precautionary principle.

Alan P Ryan
Kaiapoi

Personal Restraint

It is good to see Forum getting letters but the tone of some recent ones is disturbing. It should be possible to challenge somebody's views without resorting to personal attack; a little more politeness would help. In the last issue Vincent Gray found it necessary to defend his moral values; this should not be necessary.

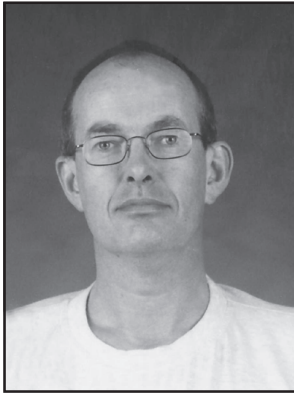
I am not asking for editorial censorship, just personal restraint. Argue the case, do not attack the person, such attacks are somewhat self defeating. I may well believe that my intellectual opponents are blithering idiots but saying so in print merely gets them sympathy.

Jim Ring
Nelson

Words of Wisdom from the front line of the War on Terror

"I was in the US last year, talking in various cities about the work I do. I would be challenged from the audience on why I didn't use Ayurvedic medicine or reflexology or some other form of alternative medicine. In some social contexts traditional or alternative medicine is appropriate. But the bottom line is that a fragmentation grenade doesn't give a rat's arse for alternative medicine."

Jonathan Kaplan, trauma surgeon who recently worked in Iraq, author of *The Dressing Station* (Picador): excerpt from interview in *New Scientist* 15 Nov 2003



Dioxin “Poisoning” or Hormesis in action?

IT will be interesting to see how the government handles the latest health scare which is being helped along by the usual sensationalist media reporting. How about this example: “The men who made the poisons that blighted a New Plymouth community...” (Sunday Star Times, 12 September 2004).

There are many dioxins and the most toxic is considered to be TCDD, a contaminant found during the manufacture of the herbicide 2,4,5-T but also occurring naturally as a result of combustion, forest fires and smoking. Dioxin has been isolated from soot in prehistoric caves. Dioxin is found in body fat (lipid) and has a half life of around 7-10 years, meaning that a total body load diminishes by half during each such interval. The national average body level of TCDD is 3.5 picograms per gram of lipid. A picogram is one trillionth of a gram (ie. 1×10^{-12} grams, or if you like a lot of noughts: 0.000000000001 g). The mean TCDD level in residents of Paritutu was 10.8 picograms per gram of lipid with a range of 1.3-33.3. To date, there is no evidence of increased disease rates in the studied population. To put it bluntly, the Paritutu residents have 3-10 times the infinitesimal amount found in the general population, still well within international limits. I

would like to see a similar study examining the levels of dioxin and mercury downwind from the local crematorium!

Hormesis is an effect where small doses of a toxic substance seem to promote health. A good example is alcohol, as was the Victorian habit of consuming small doses of arsenic and strychnine as a “tonic”. Rather than concentrating on looking at ill-health, researchers should be examining whether Paritutu residents are in fact healthier than most other New Zealanders.

Nevertheless, research will be ongoing and although not given to making predictions I offer the following observations:

1. Residents will claim that every possible health problem they have ever had was caused by dioxin exposure.
2. Residents will demand compensation in accordance with Welch’s Law (Claims expand to take up the amount of compensation available).
3. Scientific evidence will be distorted and misinterpreted to justify any possible viewpoint.
4. The “Greens” will claim that any amount of dioxin is “unsafe” and at some stage the phrase “cover-up” will be used.

A former manager of the Paritutu chemical plant is quoted as saying that he worked there for 30 years and is still in perfect health at 85 years of age. Hormesis in action surely?

More Healthy Additives?

Britain is in the grip of such a serious depression that prescriptions for the anti-depressant “Prozac” (fluoxetine) have risen from nine million to 24 million per year. I read this as I sipped my ale in the Pint and Prozac, a quaint canal-side pub which I discovered while on my recent overseas trip to research taro cultivation by the gay and lesbian community (funded by a Community Education Grant—thanks Steve!).

Prozac is finding its way into ground water and hence into supplies of drinking water.

It is clear that I have been on the right track in calling for Ritalin (methyphenidate—a stimulant) to be added to the water supply as a Public Health measure. This combination of stimulant and antidepressant will surely lead to a euphoric and happy population. I am however concerned about problems of dosage as the Authorities have claimed that the Prozac is so “watered down” that

it is unlikely to pose a health risk, except to those who believe in homeopathy.

Christchurch Press, 10 August

**Touting for Business-
“Chiropractic Kidz Week”**

What better way to build up business than to convince parents and children of the need for regular assessment and treatment of “sub-luxations”, the core tenet of chiropractic pseudoscience. It is a matter of concern that “chiropractic kidz week” is a nationwide programme aimed at those “parents or caregivers or the child themselves (who) are not aware of a spinal problem.”

The reason such people are “unaware” is because they do not have any such “spinal problem”, which exists only in the self-deluded imagination of the chiropractor. Chiropractors interpret minor postural variations as signs of “disease” and requiring treatment. I wonder if any chiropractor has ever diagnosed a “perfect spine” unless it was achieved at the expense of 60 “treatments”. It is a national disgrace that this pseudoscience is funded by ACC and chiropractors should not be allowed to either take or bill the Health Service for x-rays.

Please keep an eye out for this scam next year and if possible get as many members as possible to take their children for a free assessment and report back to me what happens. Some tape recordings would be useful. A woman recently wrote to the paper and took Frank Haden to task for criticising alternative medicine. She went on to claim that chiropractic manipulations had cured her of

migraine, cured her child’s squint and cured another child’s gait abnormality!

With such gullible beliefs out in the community it is no wonder that chiropractors continue to work their rich scams.

Blenheim Sun, 11 August
Letter to Editor, Sunday Star Times, 26 September

**And the password for the
NZ Skeptic website for
2004-2005 is:**

THINK

**Memorise it, then swallow
this magazine!**

Anyone for Tennis?

A millionaire property owner has been getting \$600 per week from ACC since 1974, despite earning \$2400 per week from his investment portfolio. In a bizarre example of Welch’s Law, his claim was accepted under medical misadventure for psychological damage caused by prescription medicines, in this case benzodiazepines (Valium). His disability is “psychological” and prevents him from working at all but readers will be thrilled to know that the poor fellow is able to play tennis three days a week and in his own words “it’s better to have a peaceful life”.

ACC have done a great service to tennis as the claimant is now in the top third of senior players in Auckland. Employers and taxpayers alike will be thrilled to know that their ACC levies are being put to such good use.

Sunday Star Times, 26 September

In Brief

- Despite local doctors showing sick notes like confetti, teachers at Hamilton’s Fraser High School failed in their bid for compensation from Maf for “illness” caused by the spray used to eradicate the Asian gypsy moth. Sorry people, no money for mass hysteria. Better to track down the millionaire’s doctor and go for PTSD caused by unruly pupils. (Dominion Post, 30 September)

- In France the Académie de Médecine has upset homeopaths by issuing a damning report challenging the continued funding of homeopathy through the national health service. (Dominion Post, 9 June).

- Acupuncture is ineffective for the treatment of tennis elbow. Hardly surprising given that “good evidence indicates that acupuncture does not work.” (Bandolier 126 Vol 11, Issue 8, www.bandolier.com).

- Remember the Aoraki Polytechnic and their stupid proposal to run a degree course in naturopathy? They are at it again. They got \$8165 community education funding for the New Zealand Council of Homeopaths’ Conference. (Sunday Star Times, 3 October).

- For most of October I will be touring northern India by motorcycle and I intend filming and recording as much as possible. I have been asked by Paul Trotman to find him a “nose kettle”. If you want to know what that is you will just have to come to next year’s conference!

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

Credence is Beyond Belief

Raymond Richards



THE Break Free tour will be coming soon to a city near you. The week-long tour of lectures and book selling will start in Christchurch at the end of November and proceed to Wellington, Taupo, Hamilton and Auckland. The person who will head the tour is Phillip Day, who supposedly is “an award-winning author, health researcher and world-class speaker.”

Day may be a good speaker. He certainly has had enough practice, since his tours regularly take him from his base in Britain to several countries. He has been in New Zealand before. Day also runs websites that sell books by himself and a few associates. But what awards he has won or research he has conducted is unclear. What he says is not worth hearing and often is dangerous.

Phillip Day says and writes a lot about many things. He leads Credence, which claims to be “an independent research organisation dedicated to reporting contentious issues that may harm the public. [Their] goal is to report properly annotated and verified information of tremendous benefit to humanity.”

Day also runs the Campaign for Truth in Medicine (CTM) and the Campaign for Truth in Europe

(CTE). He manages a website called Eclub to publicize these efforts.

Day’s CTE hates the European Union and denounces Britain’s “own conniving politicians” for permitting “the destruction of Britain by giving their consent to be ruled by an unelected, unaccountable European autocracy dominated by Germany and France.” The EU wants to hijack the success of British athletes, Day complains, by making them compete under the European flag at future Olympics. While such political views may be merely quirky, they offer a glimpse of a mindset gripped by conspiracies.

Day accuses the British government of conducting “a programme of coercion and terrorism against the British farming industry” because it slaughtered animals during the recent foot-and-mouth crisis. According to Day, the disease is no worse than a bad cold for an animal, is not caused by a virus, and can be cured by good housing, bedding and food. The reality of the so-called outbreak, he says, is the British government’s criminal and treasonous decision to rid an independent Britain of its livestock industry in order to promote a European federalist agenda.

Doctors top Phillip Day’s list of people who harm the public. He sees a “slaughter of the citizenry.” He quotes approvingly an alternative therapist who charges, “The most dangerous place on planet Earth is the hospital – next is the doctor’s office – followed closely by the dentist’s office.” Although he lacks a suitable qualification, Day knows better than doctors. His tour promises to show audiences how to “BREAK FREE from cancer, addiction, and depression.” Sadly, Day also quotes Dr Bill Reeder, an alternative therapist who offers questionable chelation therapy near Hamilton, who says he will be “directing all my cancer patients to your site.”

Perhaps the most dangerous misinformation Phillip Day spreads concerns cancer. He condemns prescription drugs, radiation and chemotherapy. He says mammographies do not detect cancer – they cause it. Police officers supposedly get testicular cancer by sitting in their squad cars with a speed gun in their lap. Day insists cancer is a deficiency disease. He recommends apricot seeds/laetrile/Amygdalin/vitamin B-17 as a cure for cancer, praising the work of Ernst Krebs. In fact, Krebs and laetrile long have been discredited. Ernst T Krebs, Jr never earned a graduate degree. Starting in the

1950s, he and his father sold quack “cures” for major diseases, especially cancer. Krebs spent time in jail. Laetrile, sometimes called amygdalin or vitamin B-17 (it is not a vitamin), has been rigorously tested in the US by the National Cancer Institute and the Food and Drug Administration. The tests showed it to be medically useless. It even contains cyanide and has killed people. It is now illegal to sell laetrile in the US. In the mind of Phillip Day, laetrile is outlawed only to protect “the multi-billion dollar, world-wide cancer industry.”

Day says there is no HIV virus—the “highly poisonous Aids medications” are part of a “calculated and inhumane population control agenda which has been sanctioned at the highest political levels.” He praises South African President Thabo Mbeki’s bizarre views on Aids, which have led the South African government to refuse medication to people with HIV. Tragically, the World Health Organisation says Aids is the biggest cause of death in South Africa.

Also dangerous is Phillip Day’s insistence that children do not need any vaccinations. Good food, water and love supposedly are sufficient.

Yes, the Break Free tour is coming to New Zealand. People who value evidence, critical thinking and reason may want to attend—to witness a bad example.

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

Loose Talk from an Old Smoothie

Bob Brockie samples a health food that saw the dinosaurs come and go

WE’VE all seen the claims—Spirulina! Nature’s Health Solution! The World’s Healthiest Superfood! Soulfood!

“Spirulina—the ancient blue-green micro-algae found growing in the lakes of Africa and Central and South America, derives its energy directly from the sun, contains 100 nutrients, is a rich source of iron, is extremely alkalising, energy-packed, supports the maintenance of the beneficial gut flora, is rich in antioxidants, contains 65% protein, etc.” Many firms claim that Spirulina “will reduce diabetes, cancer, hives, cataracts, wrinkles, anaemia, eczema, HIV, hypertension, detoxify the kidneys, help balance your RNA and DNA nucleic acids, and protect you against radiation.”

Small wonder that huge volumes of this cure-all are drunk or eaten daily. One US firm sells over \$50 million worth of Spirulina every year.

But most chemists and medicos think these claims are laughable.

“Found growing in the lakes of Africa and Central and South America?” Yes, this is true but Spirulina also grows in almost any stagnant fresh or brackish pool near you in New Zealand. Nevertheless, a lot of the Spirulina sold in New Zealand is produced in industrial vats in the US.

As for the nutritional claims—the same could be said about almost any green vegetable on Earth.

Spinach or broccoli also contain 100 nutrients, are a rich source of iron and vitamins, are extremely alkalising in the stomach, support the maintenance of the beneficial gut flora, and are rich in antioxidants. If you want protein it’s cheaper to eat an egg, which is 87% protein.

And what’s this? “Spirulina contains antioxidant ammunition in the form of the enzyme Superoxide dismutase!” Nobody can deny this but it’s a silly claim. Superoxide dismutase is the most abundant enzyme in the world. Every green plant is full of the stuff.

To be really pedantic, Spirulina is not an alga at all, it’s a bacterium. Ancient? Yes. Because Spirulina has a long fossil history it is often promoted as a “Dinosaur Drink”. “It must be good for you because it’s so old” but the promotion people got the date wrong. Spirulina was around 600 million years before dinosaurs trod the Earth. We should call it “The Proterozoic Drink”.

Raw Spirulina tastes vile, which is why Spirulina smoothies must be masked with pureed banana, kiwifruit and apricot. These additives provide more energy and vitamins than the Spirulina itself.

Who’s for a broccoli smoothie?

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