The worst speculative Sceptic ever I knew,
was a much better Man than the best
superstitious Devotee & Bigot.
David Hume

Snake Oil

Darwin Day

Bombardier Beetles

Mexican Cancer Clinics

new zealand Skeptic

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content

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editorial

And I didn't even wish upon a star

I HAD a dream. One of those ones which are slightly alarming in that they come true. In my dream a friend happily announced she was pregnant and when I chanced to bump into her the next day, she told me – excitedly – the good news.

Ah, thought I. That's funny, I just dreamt she was gravid and now she is. I told her I knew already, and related my snippet of dream. I think she was impressed.

A few days later her good man rang up and we chatted away for a while, then he expressed mild amazement over my incredible abilities to see into the future.

"So you must be having to reassess your sceptical position on this one then Annette?" he asked.

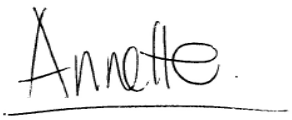
I thought for a bit and told him no, not at all. We humans are talented at spotting connections or patterns, even where no causal link exists. Of all the dreams I've had, this is the first one to come true, that I know of. And only one bit of it – I didn't, for instance, tell my friends that seconds after relating their news in my dream, they both turned into penguins and waddled off to get ice cream. That bit didn't come true. We are, I said, selective in what we choose to focus on and record only the hits, or bits of them. The misses go right out the window.

That I should dream my friend was pregnant is not at all surprising. I knew she was keen on the idea of another child, my mind whipped this up with a penguin or two and the timing was spot on. What is more, out of the three years I've known her, she has already been pregnant for a quarter of that time, with her first child. So the idea of her being pregnant is hardly a strange one.

I've long been aware that people have what they regard as prophetic dreams, and have never considered that they required a supernatural explanation. There's no reason for me to change my view just because I've experienced the phenomenon myself.

I probably should have mentioned William of Occam and his razor. Or how, when you hear hoof beats in the night, don't think zebras, instead wonder – with some justification – what that cat is bringing in to the house now.

Anyway, it's late and I need to turn in. To sleep, perchance to dream, possibly of winning Lotto numbers or, more likely, of penguins.



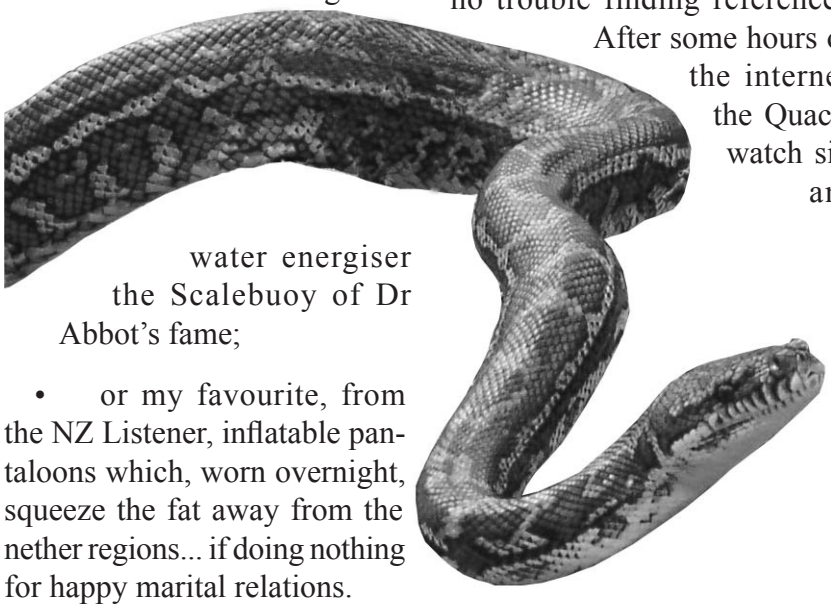
Snake Oil: a brief history of alternative medicine

Early in 2005 Professor Kaye Ibbertson, the relentless grand vizier of the Marion Davis Library and Museum, asked ***David Cole*** *to offer the Medical Historical Society some comments about the history of unorthodox medicine. He was in the process of assembling several convincing excuses, when Ibbertson turned off his hearing aid and any excuses were set aside. This article is based on the talk which resulted.*

SNAKE Oil started out as a quasi-respectable arthritis relieving liniment, widely used in the 1880s in the US. Since then it has morphed into a derisory term implying dishonesty, deception and shady dealing.

The nature of this topic leads one into the exotic 'before and after' coloured photos, to testimonials of spectacular positivity, and striking diagrams of the marvellous devices that quacks are prone to use. For example:

- the Grand Celestial Bed hired out for a night at 500 guinease, "In which children of most perfect beauty would be begotten";
- hot air tobacco enemas utilising bellows;
- our own home-grown water energiser the Scalebuoy of Dr Abbot's fame;
- or my favourite, from the NZ Listener, inflatable pantaloons which, worn overnight, squeeze the fat away from the nether regions... if doing nothing for happy marital relations.



But in the interests of conciseness we cannot pause in that fruitful orchard. Due to the vagaries of Gondwanaland, and without any help from St Patrick, this country is mercifully free of snakes and even an up-market Chinese herbalist in Auckland, despite hundreds of bottles of 'natural' remedies displayed, had never heard of snake oil. But in Asia snakes, if not ground up for a powder to relieve male deficiencies and other ailments, are frequently eaten. David Lange in his autobiography noted that, at a banquet in Beijing in his honour, snakes were brought in alive, beheaded, skinned and cooked in front of him. Whether it did him any good he did not say.

But back to the ubiquitous world of quackery. There was no trouble finding references. After some hours on the internet, the Quackwatch site and perusal of some of those entrancing books from the Marion Davis Library, I got quite enthralled and wondered why I had not been more tolerant of our unorthodox brethren.

So, to take things a little more seriously, it might be interesting to pause and look at the rather unlikely historical association between medicine and snakes, and start with the ancient snakes or serpents.

In the Beginning

The resident serpent in the garden of Eden, was, to quote Genesis 3, "more subtle than any wild creature". As a thoracic surgeon I was delighted to think a serpent witnessed the first recorded rib removal with an excellent therapeutic result. As we know, the serpent persuaded Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, but this snake-trick angered the Lord who delivered the verdict to the serpent – "on your belly you shall crawl" and "dust you shall eat". By implication the snake lost his legs but do we know how many were there originally?

A bit later when the Israelites were in the wilderness, Moses got very worried about many deaths from snake bites. The Lord told him to erect a fiery bronze serpent on a pole and

I quote from Numbers 21: "everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So here is the first evidence of any association with healing even if it was a bronze snake.

A few years later the ship on which St Paul was travelling was wrecked on Malta. He survived a bite from a viper which crawled out of a bunch of twigs he had gathered for a fire. He too must have had some divine immunity, or perhaps it was adrenaline or cortisone or endorphins or anti-oxidants, boosting his immunity. I don't think he had access to Echinacea.

We need to turn to the Greek myths to uncover a more likely connection.

Aesclepius was the Greek God of medicine who had a rather complicated start to life as son of Apollo and a nymph Coronis. This poor lady was dealt with rather harshly by her sister-in-law and Aesclepius was delivered by what came to be called post-mortem Caesarian section.

For 1700 years the art of medicine was based on the legends of Aesclepius but they also tell of his coming to a sticky end when Zeus organised a personal thunderbolt for him. It appears that Hades in his underworld was complaining that the healer was doing so well that there were not enough people dying and entering his domain.

The Aesclepian temples, including the one that Hippocrates ran on the island of Cos, all featured snakes who apparently were part of the therapy, representing their ability to shed their old skin and become young and healthy again. People would sleep the night in the temple among these non-venomous snakes and presumably felt much better for the experience.

It is no surprise that, when it comes to marketing, tigers are more attractive than snakes who, come to think of it, are not equipped to suffer from arthritic limb joints.

So a snake entwined on a staff (the latter an authority emblem) became the medical symbol, representing strength and solidarity and the unwavering ethics of medicine, later to be formalised by Hippocrates.

Some medical organisations use the two snakes around a staff, but for purists this is wrong; they say the two snake version is a separate symbol, the Caduceus, representing Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and is seen to denote communication.

There is a little discrepancy here, for the US Medical Corps badges mistakenly uses the double snakes as does – shock horror – the Auckland Medical History Society.

Despite the Bible and the Greeks and all this symbolism, the truth is that in recent time snakes have never had a good name as suggested by 'snake in the grass' or 'viper in the nest' and we are lucky to avoid them in this country – but metaphor of their oil continues.

King of the Rattlesnakes

Among the cornucopia of secret remedies with animal overtones, Snake oil came to prominence in the earth 19th century as one of the plethora of remedies offered in the American travelling medicine shows.

Snake oil had an extensive and compelling pedigree:

- Greek medicine;
- Chinese herbal tradition which later was introduced to the US by coolies recruited to build the railroads;
- Native Americans were said to use it – linking it with indigenous people

This animal extract, mostly confined to the US, was peddled as a liniment, emollient, balm or embrocation (marvellous words, better than 'ointment.') It was particularly effective, so the salesmen proclaimed, for arthritis and indeed any chronic pain.

The leading hawker was a medicine man, Clark Stanley, of Rhode Island; he became known as the Rattlesnake King. At a medicine show, Stanley would kill rattlesnakes on his mobile stage in full view of the audience. He then boiled the snakes to make a liniment from the tallow. It was sold on the spot.

What was in it? In 1989 when a modern Chinese version was analysed 75% was a harmless oily 'carrier' and 25% various substances including camphor, menthol, clove oil and an Omega 3 substance, so it was not entirely

without merit – as many of the other scams were.

In the 19th century, before radio/TV and, in particular, the introduction of the US Food and Medicines Act of 1906, the travelling medicine show was at its heyday. Many health peddlers would amalgamate to form a show with colourful banners, brass bands, dancing girls – as well as employees planted in the audience to give flowery testimonies about the efficacy of the remedy. Before the purchases could be tested these hucksters wisely and hastily moved on.

Tiger Balm

Now a striking thing about these remedies is that many were often associated with a wild animal, perhaps to give power and vitality to the nostrum. So snake oil is joined by Tiger Balm, bear bile (gathered from surgical fistulas), shark fin and not to forget Lion Beer and Leopard Lager.

Tiger Balm is an intriguing example as it survives to this day and is sold in 80 countries. At my pharmacy I paid $11 for a tiny bottle which, to quote the label, was "originally developed to provide relief for a Chinese emperor". In 1926 a father and two sons brought the remedy down from China to Singapore. They did a spectacular marketing exercise; many of you will have visited Singapore's Tiger Balm gardens or seen their sponsorship of environmental issues and educational scholarships.

When analysed it has mint, cinnamon, cloves, menthol and camphor and no animal products! The use of the word balm did no harm.

When I consulted Google I found 1.5 million sites for Tiger Balm but 3.9 million for snake oil, now an obsolete substance. The explanation was that in the arcane world of computers where encryption is needed for secrecy, the term snake oil merchants is used to describe shonky software hawkers who peddle fake programmes designed to secure data. And there must be a lot of them!

Which brings us to a conclusion that snake oil, a very similar health remedy to Tiger Balm, had its day, and was overcome by competitors using happier names. It is no surprise that, when it comes to marketing, tigers are more attractive than snakes who, come to think of it, are not equipped to suffer from arthritic limb joints.

But the word snake oil survived and metamorphosed into a generic catch-phrase for dishonest and misleading statements made by charlatans – and not just in the medical field. During last year's election someone called Winston Peters a snake oil salesman, which seems a bit harsh, but, given his style, it must have been tempting to his opponents. He certainly didn't deserve another election comment about his 'reptilian smile.'

Snake oil salesmen

Google is a wonderful friend for those bereft of ideas. So, among the references, I found a promising item – 'snake oil salesmen' but this turned out to be a pop band in New York.

Some famous names came up: William Rockefeller sold cancer elixirs in the late '80s. He was also a ventriloquist and hypnotist, using these skills at the medicine fairs to attract customers. His son, and later millionaire, John D Rockefeller wisely chose to market fuel oil, leaving snake oil to his father.

True itinerant salesmen were at their most numerous in the US in the early and mid 19th century. The American Medical Association was very active in Quack Busting and had a department fully occupied in exposing medical scams. Their spokesman Maurice Fishbein (editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association) led the charges but overdid the rhetoric and Hoxsey of cancer fame, won a case against him. Damages were assessed at one dollar...

The secret ingredient

Woman quacks were rather fewer but another famous remedy illustrates the factors that ensured success. Lydia Pankhouse's Vegetable Compound, while stressing the vegetable aspect, contained over 15% alcohol, which was not revealed until the 1906 Food & Drug Act required labelling. Much of her success was achieved by concentrating on disorders of females and it was touted as a "sure cure for prolapsed uterus" and all matters connected with the "monthly travail". She also wrote a Guide to Women which in the 1920s had a print run of 11 million per year. Surprisingly 22 years after her death 'she' was still replying to letters about women's health.

But there were plenty of examples of gifted conmen like the charismatic religious preacher at the medicine show supported

by seven daughters whose combined hair length was 37 feet. Not unexpectedly he offered a cure-all for hair loss, but after a spirited address to the public also sold copies of his sermons for two cents.

It brings to mind a genuine example of a cunning salesman avoiding the requirements of the Food and Drugs Act by a carefully worded negative 'promo' on the bottle of hair restorer: "Do not rub this lotion on any area you do not want hair to grow".

Dental extractions were also part of the travelling show. In France a 'Doctor' Fallet had a mobile dental surgery shaped like a tooth. He offered total extractions and, it is said, was so fast he kept one tooth in the air all the time.

It is all very well to mock the medicine shows and the wily salesmen, but they did not have much real competition from the regular doctors whose therapeutic range was still quite limited in the 19th century.

But by the 20th century it might have been expected that quacks would diminish as scientific medicine spread its wings. As we all know this was not the case.

Back to the present

Even in the 21st century New Zealanders continue to be caught up in scams, for example, quacks targeting obesity.

In Auckland the Zenith Corporation offered a 'body enhancer' which would burn up the fat and detoxify the liver. In two years they sold $2 million at $90 per bottle. They were one of the few to be successfully prosecuted under the Food and Drugs Act. Quite recently a 'fat melt away' concoction called Celluslim was described by a NZ judge as a dead loss; he imposed an $80,000 fine.

Consumer magazine (July 05) reported that Grander Living Water would install a flow through water energiser (not just a filter) for the whole house, which could cost from $1692 to $12,000 (NZ Skeptic, No 71). When tested for Consumer, analytical chemists could detect no change in the water. It sold here for 10 years. The Commerce Commission convicted the sellers on nine charges.

A trip around your pharmacy will remind you that the art of selling nostrums is still buoyant. The euphonic Evening Primrose extract is a favourite, second only to the recently demoted (yet again) Echinacea.

Animal liquids?

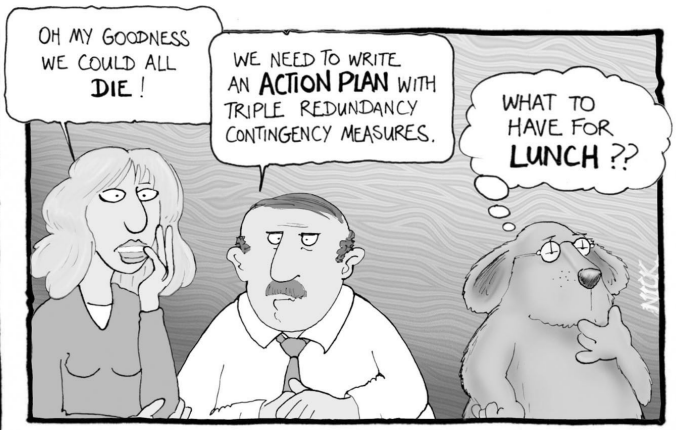
On a matter of animal products a colleague's sharp eyes caught a paragraph in a recent New Scientist journal. In the Healthy Living section of Tesco, Britain's largest supermarket chain, US company Wild Earth Animal Essences is selling animal 'liquids'. This included bear liquid as well as cheetah, beaver, butterfly and the inevitable snake liquid. Lest you start to wonder how destroying these animals can be tolerated in modern times, their website reveals that no animal parts are used, not even the strange reproductive ones Chinese men seem to prefer. Their essences are 'vibrational imprints' with the energy of the particular animal. The mind boggles at the process of imprinting in which the salesman places a bowl of pure

P

Plandemic, n.

An uncontrolled outbreak of planning triggered by identification of plausible new ways to die.

Main symptoms: desire to hold press-conferences, followed by either mass inoculation or compulsive stockpiling.



The best way to avoid being embroiled in a plandemic is to stand aside and graciously permit more worried people to do the work.

stream water in the centre of a clearing in the Virginia wilderness and walks around it in ever decreasing circles; praying to the particular animal completes the process. It is sold in 30ml lots but a litre of this energised water would sell for $NZ60. But don't forget homeopathy is also based on imprinting hugely diluted substances in water.

The therapeutic spectrum

I haven't said much about the modern medical professor's attitude to some of the deviant qualified doctors I encountered while following up complaints to the Medical Council about their aberrant practices.

One way of looking at this is to imagine a spectrum of therapeutic participants. On the left, the scientifically hopeless – iridology, reflexology, colour therapy, aromatherapy (smelly massage) and various black boxes.

On the right are most ordinary doctors, GPs and specialists who base most of their activities on evidence-based medicine. On the very far right are neurologists who in their inverted modesty, claim the top spot.

In between these extremes are more traditional offerings like homeopathy. Curiously it never prospered in the US but was a favourite with the British royal family. Somewhere in the middle you could put chiropracty, osteopathy and acupuncture and there are features of naturopathy with which we would not argue.

One of the matters that has concerned the profession and the Medical Council as its governing body, is the move of some orthodox doctors towards the left in our spectrum.

A de-registered doctor is still deceiving Aucklanders under the guise of a specialist in 'biological' or 'eco-medicine.' At his formal de-registering hearing he seemed to totally ignore orthodox and ethical medicine, attributing most illness to toxic chemical sprays identified by black box diagnosis and then uses non-pharmaceutical regimens with hyperbaric oxygen, Vitamin C and homeopathic drugs.

As a further example, some years ago I investigated another rather confused Auckland GP who also used the black-box Vega machine to diagnose allergies in young children. Finally three mothers complained and agreed to recount their experiences. While the machine's diagnosis of toxic rashes and biological scarring from vaccination or sensitivities based on 245T and other herbicides seemed unlikely, what was more worrying was the use of ancient homeopathic explanations going back to Hahnemann himself in the late 1700s – so-called miasms or evil spirits.

The concerned mothers were given an explanatory handout and told the children's troubles went back to ancestors who were rapists, or whose grandmother had syphilis. One child of three had been reincarnated five times, was involved in Satan worship and had a back pack of 10 miasms which would lead to:

- a possible fatal road accident at 17;
- asthma recurrence at 30;
- diabetes at 60;
- Alzheimer's at 70.

The GP was severely dealt with by the disciplinary committee.

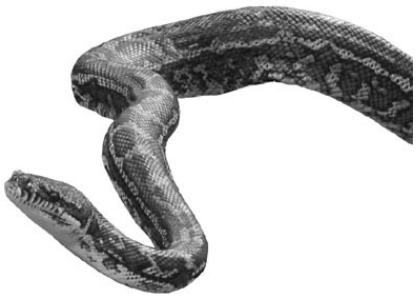
Sure, these are extremes, but this is what some therapists, including previously orthodox doctors, are offering. And many New Zealanders are still going to them. Some to the Rainbow Clinic in Rotorua, others to Tijuana in Mexico. The ability of many people, some desperate, to fall under the spell of quacks, is something we will never change, although good publicity and a more educated and discerning public may help.

A new factor is the internet as a source of information and advice. Medical material from this source is not assessed, as are contributions to a reputable medical journal, and unproven information is taken up. GPs are now familiar with patients bearing scraps of internet print-out.

Conclusion

Professional knowledge, compassion, honesty and integrity must be the base-line for the caring professions but, in the face of the complexity of ill-health management, healthy scepticism nurtured by good science should be hovering around in the background.

David Cole is a former cardio-thoracic surgeon and later dean of the Auckland Medical School, now an ageing enthusiast for the University of the Third Age.



A very merry unbirthday

Bernard Howard

"There are three hundred and sixty-four days when you might get un-birthday presents and only one for birthday presents, you know."

A quotation is always a useful heading to an article, and one from 'Alice' always lends an air of paradox and profundity.

Christchurch Skeptics, and some fellow-travellers, met recently to celebrate TWO birthdays; Charles Darwin (12 February 1809) and the New Zealand Skeptics (NZCSICOP) (6 February 1986). As a gesture from youth to age our function was held closer to the twelfth than the sixth; on the evening of Saturday, 11 February (an UNbirthday?) at the Cotswold Hotel.

In addition to the usual aids to eating, the tables were lent a skeptical air with cards carrying Darwinian/Skeptical quotes selected by chair-entity Vicki Hyde and some pseudoscientific baubles made by myself. Large jugs of gin (homeopathic, 30C), irreducibly complex bacterial flagella for lashing evolutionists, magnifying glasses for seeking answers in Genesis, pyramids for sharpening razor blades and brains, and magnets to be carried in male trouser pockets (cheaper than viagra). The door between the Kitchen and the dining Tables became the K/T boundary, with dinosaurs on one side and chickens on the other. The toast "Charles Darwin" was proposed by our chair-entity, and the meal then began with (what else?) primordial soup. The dinner then proceeded on its usual course with much conviviality.

Despite the late hour, the after-dinner address by Denis Dutton held the gathering's attention to the end. 'Darwinian Aesthetics: what Evolution tells us about the Nature of Art' described how some eminent and ardent evolutionists resisted the application of Darwin's ideas to human behaviour and social structures, yet such an extension of evolutionary principles explains much about us. Four hundred generations of urban living have not obliterated eighty thousand generations as hunter gatherers, so people in all present day cultures find most pleasing the type of landscape in which our distant ancestors developed. Dr Dutton gave a number of other examples relating our ideas of beauty and ugliness to ancestral behaviours of selective advantage. Blame for the poor peacock's caudal load lies firmly with the peahen; one example among many of sexual selection. After a brief question and answer session, our chair-entity thanked the speaker and declared the Darwinday Dinner ended.

The success of the evening was due to the hard work of our Get-things-done Secretary. Thank you, Claire!

book review

A French perspective on some old favourites

Debunked! by G Charpak & H Broch, translator BK Holland. Johns Hopkins University Press, Reviewed by Bernard Howard.

FOR a refreshingly new look at some familiar skeptical themes, try this translation from the more elegantly titled French: Devenez Sorciers, Devenez Savants, by a CERN Nobel Laureate, and a professor at the University of Nice, recipient of a top CSICOP Award. Like all the best such writing, it treats serious matters with a light touch.

In discussing astrology there is a clear explanation of the precession of the equinoxes, showing how all the signs of the zodiac have moved round one notch in two thousand years, and a warning to would be post-grads at the Sorbonne to avoid those academics who awarded France's leading astrologer, Elizabeth Teissier, a doctorate. Forer's notorious experiment (in which all subjects are given identical, but supposedly personalised character readings) has also been visited upon a hapless class of psychology students at the University of Nice, with the usual results. At the same institution a dowser was tested and found wanting, and Chevreul's 200-year-old test of

pendulum dowsing is described in detail (he was French).

The book has several well explained examples of 'magic' tricks for convincing others of your psychic powers: telepathy, levitation, metals-with-memory, and (not for the faint-hearted) shocking feats with pieces of wire.

A long section is devoted to coincidences (extraordinary events), with striking examples and clear explanations of the statistics involved. There is such an enormous number of such events possible, and so many people to witness them, that some extraordinary event is not unexpected, but inevitable.

The famous NASA photo of the Earth from the Moon accompanies the question: If we Earthlings can see a Moonrise, why cannot Moonlings see an Earthrise?

At a church in southern France is a stone sarcophagus with a 'miraculous' property: though covered with a substantial lid, it fills with water. Careful experiments published 40 years ago showed that the lid , though of thick stone, is porous, and rain soaking through can account for the water in the sarcophagus. Despite this, unscrupulous journalists and TV producers today insist on the miracle. They are either liars or have never seen it. This section of the book emphasised for me a feature which is irritating throughout – the translator has converted all the original metric measurements into USA units. Can many readers visualise an American quart? And when he writes that the water was 0.039 inches deep, the authors are not trying to tell us that the depth was measured to an accuracy of one thousandth of an inch, just that it was about a millimetre.

A final chapter upbraids the anti-nuclear energy lobby, reminding readers of the numerous sources of natural radioactivity we are exposed to all the days of our lives, and finishes with the familiar plea for the application of science to solving the world's problems.

An appendix explains the mathematics behind a couple of apparently unlikely, but quite probable coincidences. There is no index.

'Voodoo vets' create a stir

A WEBSITE poking fun at veterinary homeopathy has become the unlikely symbol of a global backlash by conventional vets against their homeopathic colleagues, according to New Scientist magazine.

The "British Veterinary Voodoo Society" (BVVS) is a parody, but its creators say they are making a serious point: that the claimed effectiveness of homeopathic veterinary medicine has no more solid scientific evidence behind it than voodoo. They object to a decision by the UK's Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to publish an official list of homeopathic vets, which they say undermines the credibility of conventional veterinary medicine.

In May 2005 John Hoare, a homeopathic veterinary surgeon, submitted a complaint against "the Officers of the British Veterinary Voodoo Society" to the RCVS, claiming the website "writes disparagingly about other veterinary surgeons".

Supporting his complaint he submitted photocopies of four pages from the site, not including the two pages containing the strongest criticisms of homeopathic vets. Says the site's author: "I wonder if there were other points made on those pages which he didn't want to put in front of the RCVS?"

On being notified of the complaint, the voodoo vets responded, explaining the concept of satire, and asking the RCVS to give details of what constituted 'disparaging remarks'. "Then we ... declared that our web site represented justified criticism of a practice which was demonstrably inimical to animal welfare."

No doubt this story has more to run.

www.vetpath.co.uk/voodoo/

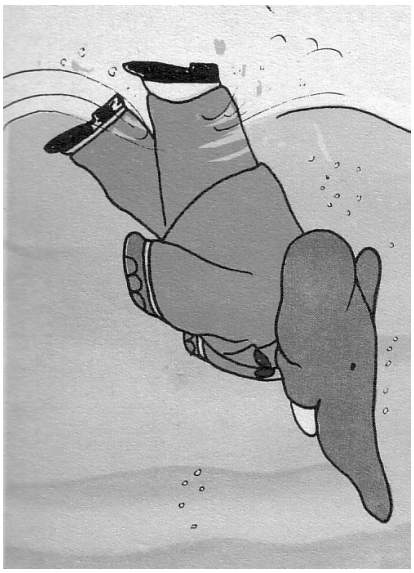
Compiled by Annette Taylor

Elephants in Loch Ness?

Nessie's an elephant, says a leading British palaeontologist (Dominion Post,7 March).

Neil Clark, curator of palaeontology at Glasgow University's Hunterian Museum, spent two years investigating the Loch Ness myth and suggested the idea for Nessie was dreamt up as a "magnificent piece of marketing" by a circus impresario after he saw one of his elephants bathing in the loch.

In 1933, the same year as the first modern 'sighting' of Nessie, Bertram Mills offered £20,000 to anyone who could capture the monster for his circus, sparking international interest.



Most sightings could be explained by floating logs or waves, but there were a number, particularly from 1933, were more difficult to account for.

He believed some were elephants belonging to circuses – which visited Inverness and stopped along the banks of the loch to allow their animals to rest. When they swam in the loch, only the trunk and two humps could be seen – the first hump being the head and the second the animal's back.

University fears cancer from wireless internet...

Lakehead University, in Ontario, Canada, won't allow campus-wide internet access because of health worries (Dominion Post, 1 March.)

President Fred Gilbert told a university meeting that some studies showed links to carcinogenic occurences in animals, including humans, related to energy fields associated with wireless hotspots – "whether these hotspots are transmissions lines, whether they're outlets, plasma screens or microwave ovens that leak." The university has only limited Wi-Fi connections, in places where there is no fibre-optic internet connection. The decision, apparently, was a personal decision by Gilbert.

The stance has caused a backlash from students and Canadian health authorities. "Considering this is a university known for its great use of technology it's kind of bad that we can't get Wi-Fi," student union president Adam Krupper said.

...but cell phones are OK

Meanwhile, according to a new study, cell phones do not increase the risk of developing brain tumours, the Dominion Post reported (21 January.)

After a four-year survey, scientists at the Institute of Cancer Research in London and British universities in Leeds, Manchester and Nottingham found no link between regular, long-term use of cellphones and glioma brain tumours.

The results were consistent with the findings of most studies done in the US and Europe, although this survey was bigger than any previous research and involved 13 countries.

The researchers questioned 966 people with glioma and 1716 healthy volunteers about how long they had used mobile phones, the make and model, how many calls they made and how long the calls lasted.

Earlier mobile phones used analogue signals, which emitted higher power signals than the later digital models. Any health danger would be more likely to result from the earlier models, but the scientists found no evidence of it.

Ghosts keep the tourists away

The existence of ghosts may be debated, but the impact of traditional Asian beliefs on Thailand's tourism trade since the December 26, 2004, tsunami appears indisputable (National Geographic News, January 6).

Tourism from Europe, Australia, and the United States has rebounded since the disaster, but tourist arrivals from elsewhere in Asia have not. Industry observers cite Asian tourists' fears of ghosts in tsunami-stricken

areas as the main reason for the decline.

Buddhism and other Asian belief systems hold that if bodies are not properly buried, their spirits restlessly wander the Earth, and may try to drag living beings into a spiritual limbo.

"Please tell your fellow Japanese and Chinese back home to stop fearing ghosts and return to this region again," Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra reportedly told tourists after a memorial service to commemorate the victims of the tsunami.

Since the disaster, tales of ghost sightings have become endemic. Foreign ghosts seem to be particularly common, and many of the accounts are being covered in local newspapers.

One Phuket taxi driver reportedly said he was hailed by four western tourists who asked to go to the airport. The driver chatted as he drove, but when he pulled up at the airport to let the passengers out there was no one there.

Police procedure allows for sorcery concerns

Maori should not be forced to give DNA samples because of concerns over sorcery, says a report in the Dominion Post (5 December 05). A new police manual says Maori have spiritual beliefs about samples taken from the body, and that "a person should not be forced to provide samples for testing purposes". Police management said the direction would be amended or deleted in future editions.

'John of God': it's all been seen before

Chair-entity Vicki Hyde is gnashing her teeth over the upcoming visit to New Zealand of Joao Teixeira de Faria, 'one of the world's most powerful spiritual healers.'

In a full-page feature on the 'healer' in the Dominion Post (28 January) Vicki told reporter Stefan Herrick she was convinced Teixeira de Faria, who goes by the name John of God, was a con man "who peddles miracle cures that don't withstand even light scientific scrutiny.

"Sad to see this chap coming here as it just means more exploitation of vulnerable people."

Hundreds of foreigners visit Abadiania, the small village in Brazil where Teixeira de Faria has established a clinic where 'miraculous cures' take place. He is promoted as "the greatest healer of the past 2000 years", and claims to be guided by 35 healing spirits.

Vicki Hyde said if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, "it's probably just another duck..."

John of God, the report said, doesn't charge for visits to his clinic (although the Wellington sessions will cost $115) but he appeared to be well off. The ABC network reported that he owned a 400-hectare ranch down the road from his clinic.

Magnets attract support

Magnet therapy, said to be favoured by Cherie Blair, is to be made available on Britain's National Health Service (NZ Herald, 11 March).

The 4UlcerCare – a strap containing four magnets that is wrapped around the leg – is available on prescription from GPs. Its maker, Magnopulse, claims that it speeds the healing of leg ulcers and keeps them from coming back.

The announcement has created excitement in the world of alternative medicine. Lilias Curtin, one-time therapist to Cherie Blair, sent a poster-sized announcement to newspapers declaring her "sincere belief that, in the next five to 10 years, magnets will be seen in first-aid boxes".

Other experts are sceptical. Professor Edzard Ernst, head of complementary medicine at the University of Exeter, said that he was puzzled by the NHS decision. "As far as I can see, there hasn't yet been enough research to prove that these magnets help people with ulcers."

More powerful electromagnets could help to heal tissue injuries, but that was different, he said. His own study of small magnets on arthritis sufferers had failed to yield compelling results.

In January, researchers from the Kaiser Permanente Medical Center, in California, published a paper in the British Medical Journal that cast doubt on the therapeutic use of magnets. "Patients should be advised that magnet therapy has no proven benefits. If they insist on using a magnetic device, they could be advised to buy the cheapest - this will alleviate the pain in their wallet," they wrote.

Genealogy and gender: it ain't necessarily so

KEITH Garratt's critique of genealogy (New Zealand Skeptic 77) is a strange mix of arguments. He purports to be addressing genealogy "as normally practised" or "as often practised" but offers no evidence that this is the way that things are actually done. He also identifies a "traditional approach," a term which is used, however, almost interchangeably with the others. He presents no evidence as to the prevalence of these approaches amongst genealogists and most of his examples of misuses of genealogy, such as Dan Brown's bestselling novel The Da Vinci Code, are not drawn from the genealogical literature. A review of the contents of the volumes of the bi-monthly New Zealand Genealogist for 2004 and 2005, as an example, contradicts most of his claims about what represents usual practice. Ordinary claims require ordinary evidence, at least, but little is provided.

I have been a member of the New Zealand Society of Genealogists since 1989. Genealogy is an enormously popular pursuit so people undoubtedly do it for all sorts of reasons. In my experience looking for famous ancestors or ancestral fortunes is rarely the motivation. Most people treat genealogy or family history for what it is – an absorbing hobby providing a chance to do historical research which means something personally to them and their families. In New Zealand it is also about why people came here, how, and when. In short, a lot of genealogy is about the recent past because that is what people find most relevant. This is the approach that Keith Garratt says that he takes to genealogy, but which he says is not genealogy "as normally practised."

I don't know any genealogists who wouldn't admit that their reconstructions are often based on partial or potentially flawed evidence. It is very well known that the mother of the child is more likely to be correctly recorded than the father. Generally the further back in time, the more incomplete the record. This is one of the reasons why genealogy as usually practised is usually about the recent past. Beyond about 300 years there is only the certainty that most people with British ancestry, for example, are related one way or another to almost every one else.

The term 'bloodline' is seldom used by genealogists. A search on the internet reveals that this talk tends to happen amongst breeders of dogs and horses, those interested in royalty, and those concerned with religious ideas. Garratt's critique of bloodlines is valid, but I doubt that this has much relevance to current genealogical practice. I suspect that many New Zealanders are deeply unimpressed by any claims of merit or quality based on ancient, royal, or noble bloodlines.

I have characterised the current practice of genealogy differently from Keith Garratt. There is a world of difference between knowing that your distant nameless ancestors come from, say, every part of Britain and knowing that some recent named ancestors lived in particular places at particular times within about the last 300 years. My eight great grandparents between them came from places in six different counties in England. I can't know the whole picture, but I can know something about some of my recent ancestors, and that is enough. (Abridged)

Tony Walton
Wellington

Keith Garratt replies:

I am pleased to hear that serious genealogists use the rational approach to genealogy that I advocated in my paper, rather than the traditional gender-biased system. I would expect nothing less. However, I think it is a matter for debate as to which approach is most often used. I based my comments on what I have experienced, and hundreds of examples of surname-based family tree projects on the internet.

I think Tony Walton has failed to recognise that the primary target of my paper was not genealogy itself, but the way the traditional approach reinforces obsolete notions about the role of women. It also reinforces the objectionable principle of primogeniture, which was certainly alive and well in provincial farming areas of NZ just a few years ago. The same principle gives New Zealand the prospect of having as sovereign a person whose only qualification for the position is that he is the oldest male offspring of the current incumbent.

Maori Bashing?

The following is a message received via the NZ Skeptics Contact page.

Chairwoman Vicki Hyde appears to suffer from a certain lack of education - perhaps she should take a Ritual & Belief paper at Massey before adding her simplistic views to yet another gratuitous piece of Maori bashing. That way she might be prepared to accept that the 'Skeptic' view point has a quite different cultural resonance.

There is every reason why we should challenge belief systems – particularly our own – and every reason not to furnish the tabloid press with cheap quotes to be used as weapons with which to beat up the practices – health or otherwise – of our indigenous people.

A lack of care in this respect might well be regarded as an unfortunate tendency towards hubris.

If it reads like ego, and sounds like ego – it very likely is. Rather than the detached scientific approach it might purport to be.

Andy Beck

Vicki Hyde replies:

Thank you for your comment regarding my concern at the potential for harm from non-evidence-based medical practices.

I'm sorry if you read it as gratuitous Maori-bashing, and sorry that you feel the need to descend to an ad hominem attack, rather than taking on board the principle that neither deception nor delusion are ethically acceptable foundations for medical treatment.

As someone proud of her Tainui whakapapa, I am more than well aware of the problems and issues of Maori health. While appeals to waiata have their place – as does awareness of the pyschological interaction with the physiological – it is necessary for someone to say 'taiho' when such applications overstep the area for which they are appropriate. That is the area of concern for the NZ Skeptics.

We have seen cases where, for example, poultices of kawakawa leaves were applied externally to 'treat' lung cancers. If that sort of practice, whether an ethnomedical approach or a New Age one, goes unquestioned, then the patient is the one who is being put at unacceptable and unnecessary risk.

The first tenet of the Hippocratic Oath is "First do no harm". The next implicit step is "second, do some good". There will be areas where psychological and cultural contexts are important, and the NZ Skeptics acknowledge that – our concern lies with ensuring that the cash-strapped health system provides the accountability and transparency to ensure we get the best possible care available.

As a society it has taken us years of consumer action and legislation and attitudinal change to ensure our evidence-based medical community provides informed consent, undertakes patient consultations and accepts independent overviews and accountability for their actions. Maori deserve no less than anyone else in this regard where medical claims are being made.

Cancer, meningitis, broken legs – none of these respond to cultural resonance.... *(see Hokum Locum, p15).*

TV credibility done to death

The Sensing Murder programme on TV2 (January 10) was appalling. Any respect I had for the integrity of Rebecca Gibney has now gone down the toilet. It was terribly bad taste with a re-enactment of the murder of Tracey Anne Patient that was shown again and again in graphic detail.

However, the real sleaze in the programme was the two 'psychics' who claimed to be in touch with the murder victim and, according to Gibney who hosted the programme, were able to give investigators lots of new clues about the murderer. According to Gibney the 'psychics' were chosen from a large field of candidates because they were able to offer some quite specific and accurate details about the case.

The 'information' the 'psychics' actually gave was a mixture of high probability stuff such as "the victim is very frightened" and "the murderer is definitely a man". There was also a great deal of pure speculation masquerading as 'fact' which can never, of course, be verified.

However, both 'psychics' did make some quite specific hits and frequently agreed with each other to a surprising extent (each were supposed to have

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Dark eddies in the mainstream

So-called conventional medicine isn't immune to nonsense

John Welch – Family motto: Nullum merdam accipimus

I DO not confine myself to examining the conduct of alternative medicine. The conventional medical literature also presents rich examples of foolish and fanciful activity. Have a look at **bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/full/331/7527/1231?etoc** which has the title, Randomised controlled trial of animal facilitated therapy with dolphins in the treatment of depression. Surely there are more important research topics than this nonsense. Another recent favourite of mine was a MRI scan of two people having sex inside the scanner. One finding was that the penis is boomerang shaped during coitus.

bmj.bmjjournals.com/cgi/content/full/319/7225/1596

That piece of weirdness won the 2000 Ig Nobel award for medicine. And you thought homoeopathy trials were nonsense! Speaking of which…

What is homoeopathy?

I found a useful article in Next Magazine Dec 2005 and learned that "gone are the days of the natural health practitioner wearing a long, flowing purple dress and rings in the nose. Today's homoeopaths are more corporate and business orientated." As we all know, there's plenty of money to be made in quackery. One homoeopath spent five years studying biology, chemistry, physics, anatomy and physiology, pathology and pharmacology to gain a Masters degree in the subject. One cringes to think that this nonsense is now creeping into tertiary training institutions in New Zealand. It is the height of absurdity that anyone could study chemistry and physics and somehow reconcile that with homoeopathic theories.

Drain cleaner for health

Grapefruit seed extract (GSE) has been promoted as a "natural antimicrobial". Bandolier 142 (December 2005 Volume 12 Issue 12) found no evidence that this was true but did find that the GSE was contaminated with cleaning chemicals such as benzalkonium chloride, triclosan and methyl parabene. These are actually contaminants from the manufacturing process and are not found in the grapefruit before processing. It is these contaminants, which are responsible for the "antimicrobial effect"! Bandolier rightly takes the media to task for promoting this product and the expression "Wake up and smell the drain cleaner" is apt.

Cough mixture flunks

You only have to visit your local pharmacy to see that there is a lot of money to be made from cough mixtures. Most of them are illogical mixtures containing both expectorants (make you cough) and anti-tussives (stop you coughing) in the same mixture.

I recall years ago a Consumer article finding that they were useless and this was my own experience raising two children. Of course they asked for them because the mixtures are sugary and tasty. It gives parents something to do when their children are sick. In many households, both parents are working and have a low tolerance of a coughing child keeping the household awake. This is probably also the reason for the absurd amount of antibiotics given to children for 'bronchitis' or 'chest infection', both pseudoscientific diagnoses used to justify such prescribing.

The vast majority of these paediatric infections are viral and self-limiting.

More recently, research has confirmed that cough mixtures are placebos. If they continue to be sold I would have thought there would be a case for invoking various consumer protection laws.

BMJ 2006;332:8 7 January 2006

Saw Palmetto

Saw palmetto is an herbal treatment taken for the relief of benign prostatic hypertrophy (BPH) by an estimated 2 million men in the US. BPH is a gradual age related increase in the size of the prostate gland, which sits at the base of the bladder. BPH causes symptoms related to obstruction of urinary outflow, eg slow urinary flow, retention of urine and incomplete bladder emptying. Some poorly designed trials had shown some improvement in these symptoms with the use of saw palmetto. A randomised, double blind study found however that saw palmetto is of no benefit in the treatment of BPH. There is a curious rider at the end and this is another hallmark of quackery: "this study tested a specific preparation of saw palmetto, leaving open the possibility that a different preparation or dose of saw palmetto might have been effective." I call this 'shifting the goalposts' and it is a frequent strategy to defeat testing of a particular product.

In a nutshell, this illustrates the difference between "alternative and complementary medicine", call it what you will, and the scientific method. How often do we find gushing reports of some new herbal wonder remedy which is dutifully promoted via the medium of shonky and poorly designed trials. Then somebody comes along and does a properly conducted trial and the claimed benefits mysteriously disappear! It's little wonder that quacks fear and condemn the randomised placebo controlled trial. It's their greatest threat. Men with BPH would be well advised to take cough mixture – it's likely to be a cheaper placebo.

New England Medical Journal Feb 2006

A Syllogism

Ernest Rutherford: "A science is either physics or stamp-collecting".
The Nobel Committee awarded Rutherford a prize but not in Physics.
Therefore: Rutherford won a Nobel Prize in Philately.

Bernard Howard

Traditional Maori therapies

In the year 2004/2005, 1.3 million dollars were wasted on ridiculous treatments such as prayer and "the use of hot rocks applied to the body to treat cancer" (hangi therapy). It is a scandal that such absurd treatments are being funded at a time when Maori have appalling health outcomes from diseases such as diabetes, ischaemic heart disease, gout and hypertension, not to mention other complications such as renal failure.

The government have chosen not to refer these traditional therapies for evaluation by its own quango, the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Complementary and Alternative Health (MACCAH). MACCAH, as suspected, has turned out to be a useless and expensive white elephant. Of course, it might be culturally unacceptable to test massage and prayer and show that they are useless.

A Mr Morrison from Rotorua says, "doctors themselves occasionally miss the mark" and "does the GP have to give back funding for failed attempts?" A GP is quoted as saying "we've got to be careful about using our tools on another culture" and calls on us to recognise where "efficacy is unproven in conventional medicine".

These are pathetic arguments, based as they are on using the failings of medical science to justify the alternative use of 'non-science'. Prayer (karakia) has been tested and shown to be useless. Why even bother to test hangi therapy? Perhaps the early Maori weren't actually cooking and eating each other. These were Hangi treatment sessions that went too far! Revisionist historians read on.

This whole futile and silly waste of money is pandering to fanciful cultural whims which are sadly redundant in the face of the onslaught of western style disease and it is western medicine that has the solution, not prayer and herbs.

Doctor 22/2/2006

BOMBY: the Creationist's favourite beetle

Bernard Howard

A knockout blow for evolution turns out to be nothing of the sort

AS JBS Haldane famously said, God must have an inordinate fondness for beetles, he made so many of them. Of all the tens of thousands of the horny-winged horde, the creationists have chosen, as the absolute knockout anti-natural selection example, the bombardier beetle. Only the great Organic Chemist in the sky could have designed the chemical weapon system which enables this beetle to deal with ants and other predators.

The special feature is a sac containing a mixture of two chemicals, which do not react with each other spontaneously. When danger threatens the beetle is able to initiate changes in this mixture which cause it to be expelled explosively. The resulting missile is not only toxic and corrosive, but also, because of the heat generated by the reaction, it is boiling hot. Some species adopt a blunderbuss or scattergun method of discharging their weapon, others are even cleverer and can aim at their target like a marksman.

To understand why creationists have been so excited, and to follow the suggested evolutionary pathway leading to this phenomenon, we must look more closely at the chemistry of the process. The storage sac contains two substances, hydrogen peroxide and a relatively simple organic compound, quinol. The latter is oxidisable to quinone, but, although hydrogen peroxide is an oxidising agent, the two can coexist without reacting if left undisturbed. When danger threatens, the sac containing this mixture is emptied into a reaction chamber containing the enzymes catalase and peroxidase. The catalase decomposes the hydrogen peroxide almost instantaneously into water and oxygen, and the peroxidase causes it to react with the quinol, oxidising it to quinone. This in turn causes two things to happen; the heat released in this reaction raises the temperature to boiling point, and the sudden release of gaseous oxygen forces the liquid out with great force. In passing, we note that the creationists have the chemistry and sequence of the process wrong, but, as is their wont, they persevere in their error after being corrected.

Why have the creationists seized on this as a clincher for their belief? Well, it's all so complicated, isn't it? Quantities of two unusual chemicals, two enzymes, as well as the anatomical arrangements. Each is necessary, the system would not work if any one was missing. In modern creationist jargon, it is irreducibly complex.. Therefore dear old Bomby must have been intelligently designed, mustn't he? No. It ain't necessarily so! A plausible sequence leading from a generalised arthropod to this specialised animal can be suggested. It nicely illustrates the way features with one function can be co-opted for other purposes, and demonstrates how small steps, each conferring a minute selective advantage, can lead eventually to large changes. We can note first that each of the four chemicals is not unusual, as claimed by creationists, but is a common constituent of arthropod metabolic systems. Quinone is made by numerous insects; it 'tans' the cuticle making the exoskeleton more or less rigid and dark in colour. Quinol may be synthesised by a similar route; it is not confined to bombardier beetles. Hydrogen peroxide is widespread in nature as a product of oxygen metabolism. Catalase and peroxidase are also found universally in the animal kingdom; oxygen, on which our life depends, is not an unmixed blessing, and these enzymes destroy dangerous by-products of oxygen metabolism (think anti-oxidants). Greater gene activity, leading to the biosynthesis of increasing amounts of these chemicals, seems an obvious pathway of natural selection. M Isaak (2003) has linked this process to the anatomical changes

which would have taken place concurrently with the chemical developments. Each step in this scheme confers an obvious advantage and so would be selected for. Though the combination of features makes the bombardier beetle unique, individually they have counterparts in many other insects; for example, the secretory glands which produce the pheromones and other chemical signals. Isaak's article discusses the issue in more detail, and is recommended (Isaak, M. Bombardier beetles and the Argument of Design **www.talkorigins.org/faqs/bombardier.html**).

This article was suggested by my reading The Bombardier Beetle's Chemical Defence, by Marten J ten Hoor, Hoogezand, Netherlands, in CHEMNZ, no. 100. I am grateful to Mr ten Hoor and the editors of that journal for providing that stimulus.

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been interviewed on different days). Gibney kept telling us that the 'psychics' had no prior knowledge of the case and that there was no collusion going on. Bollocks! It seems to me that it would not have been difficult for each of these psychics to have gained a great deal of background information before the interviews. In short, I think there was a great deal of cheating going on that Gibney swallowed hook, line and sinker!

Each 'psychic' was apparently told they were going to do a story on the unsolved murder of a NZ teenager. It would not have taken much effort to come up with a very short, short-list for who the victim was likely to be. Perhaps, like me, they can remember some details of the case from when it actually happened.

I think that the 'psychics' were cheating and I would like to nominate Rebecca Gibney for a Bent Spoon award. The whole programme was a terrible exploitation of a brutal murder.

Mark Fletcher

Skeptical Podcasts

Skepticality is a hugely entertaining podcast that explores rational thought, critical thinking, science, and the de-bunking of the supernatural and pseudoscience. It features interviews with famous skeptics such as James Randi and Tom Flynn, as well as scientists, such as Phil Plait and Michael Shermer. The podcast also features general discussion of all things sceptical with its two intelligent hosts Swoopy and Derek.

www.skepticality.com/

Defrauding the dying

Raymond Richards

Mexican cancer clinics continue to do a roaring trade, despite their poor track record.

WHEN civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, the world lost a voice for decency and truth. The death of his widow earlier this year, however, was attended by greed and lies.

The family of Coretta Scott King rushed her to Hospital Santa Monica at Rosarito Beach, Mexico, on 26 January. She died five days later. The underlying cause of her death was ovarian cancer. King's death in one of alternative medicine's dodgiest facilities highlights a relationship between quacks and Mexicans that is evil.

Hospital Santa Monica is located near crashing surf, 25 kilometres south of San Diego. The climate there may be the best in the world, consistently pleasant. Cruise ships call at beach resorts along the coast, unloading passengers who like the sunshine and the cheap peso. The region also has about 20 alternative medical clinics for desperate patients, almost all from the United States. Coretta Scott King was barely alive when she arrived in Mexico, but like the tourists, she had money. She was one of perhaps 10,000 paying US citizens who check into some Mexican clinic every year. Mexican locals and authorities welcome money from both the tourists and the sick.

Sadly, Hospital Santa Monica and the dozens of similar facilities sell patients only false hope. Kurt W Donsbach founded the Rosarito Beach facility. "The major patient clientele is comprised of cancer patients who have been told that there is no more hope, all traditional therapies having failed," he boasts on his website. Donsbach claims to use "wholistic" techniques to treat the "whole" person; body, mind and spirit. He repeats the usual twaddle favoured by quacks: about how orthodox doctors treat only symptoms, not the disease; about detoxing the body and boosting the immune system; about avoiding standard treatments because they make cancer worse. Hospital Santa Monica offers "a very eclectic approach," he says, including ultraviolet blood purification, mag-ray lamps, hydrogen peroxide solutions dripped into veins, ozone gas blown into the colon, a microwave hyperthermia machine (with a rectal probe), induced hypoglycemia by administering insulin, shark cartilage, a Rife frequency generator machine (remember Liam Williams-Holloway?), magnet therapy and other nonsense. Deluded groups such as the so-called Cancer Control Society, based in Pasadena, California, run trips to such Mexican clinics, taking thousands of cancer patients there for useless treatment.

Donsbach fails to reveal on his website that he has a criminal record but no medical degree. Born in 1933, he graduated in 1957 from a chiropractic college in Oregon. By the late 1960s he was running a health-food store in California, selling supplements that he said treated cancer. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he was repeatedly in legal trouble for practising medicine without a licence, selling unapproved drugs and related wrongs. In 1979 he founded a correspondence school – the nonaccredited Donsbach University – that awarded bogus degrees in nutrition, and he sold his own supplements. Officials in New York said the products were useless and sued him. Under pressure in the US, Donsbach started the Mexican clinic in 1983. In 1996 he pleaded guilty to charges of smuggling $250,000 worth of unapproved, adulterated or misbranded medicines from Mexico into the US. Sentenced to prison, he avoided serving time by plea

bargaining. In other words, Kurt W Donsbach's life has been devoted to a range of health-related scams.

The Mexican medical clinics are a blot on the page of human history, but they continue to exist because they attract money. Mexico is a very corrupt country, and bribes and fraud allow unconscionable activity to thrive there. Mexican officials claim they can investigate the facilities only if there are complaints, which are rare because the clinics usually treat non-Mexicans and do not advertise in Mexico. Sometimes clinics get shut down, but they re-open. A week after Coretta Scott King died, the Mexican government closed Hospital Santa Monica, saying it lacked authority to carry out some of its treatments and that several of its unconventional practices put patients at high risk. Patients from the US, Canada, Australia and Italy were at the facility when it was closed. Interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, Donsbach was shameless. He blamed the closure on the US medical establishment and predicted that his clinic would reopen soon: "The moment they close down a clinic, they open it up very quickly, the same place, same people." Immoral quacks and their allies continue to fleece the dying.

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

Trans-Tasman fight against scams

THE Australasian Consumer Fraud Taskforce has launched a trans-Tasman campaign to inform consumers about the most common types of scams and how to recognise whether an offer is genuine or false.

Consumer Affairs Minister Judith Tizard announced in March the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and the Commerce Commission were joining the Australasian Consumer Fraud Taskforce, along with 16 agencies from across Australia.

Each year it's estimated that millions of dollars leave Australian and New Zealand shores to line the pocket of professional fraudsters.

"The amazing thing is that the scams that succeed in getting consumers to part with their money are well known and documented. Yet, consumers continue to respond, despite warnings from government agencies, police and financial institutions," Judith Tizard said.

Last year, an elderly Auckland woman's involvement in a $2 million Nigerian scam (or advanced fee fraud) sent her to prison for seven years and had a shattering effect on other family members, friends and business associates. This case was an example of how a scam can take hold of someone's life, with the woman and her husband still holding out hope that the scam will turn out to be a reality, despite evidence to the contrary.

Scams are a global problem and are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the way they target people. The increasing use of email and the internet to locate potential victims, and as a vehicle to perpetrate their crimes, makes it easy for scammers to send out anonymous emails worldwide, making it difficult for the enforcement agencies trying to catch them. Consumers need to look closely at any unsolicited information that is sent to them, resist these approaches and refuse to respond.

Key characteristics for consumers to look out for in identifying a scam include:

- it comes out of the blue
- it sounds like a quick and easy way to make money
- it tells you there is almost no effort or risk, and
- it sounds just too good to be true.

The top scams in 2005 identified by the Commerce Commission and the Ministry of Consumer Affairs included international prize and lottery scams, Get Rich Quick schemes such as Nigerian scams, and 'phishing' emails from criminals pretending to be your bank in an attempt to obtain your personal details and passwords.

The Ministry of Consumer Affairs operates the Scamwatch website (**www.scamwatch.org.nz**). This site provides consumers with information on types of scams currently operating, and links to New Zealand and global enforcement agencies that consumers can report scams to.

If undelivered, return to:

NZ Skeptics
PO Box 29-492
Christchurch

Put this in your diary!

The **2006 NZ Skeptics' Conference** will be held Friday 29 September-Sunday 1 October at Kings College, Otahuhu, Auckland.
It will be the 20th anniversary of NZ Skeptics and the 13th anniversary of our current Chair-entity Vicki Hyde.
Facilities at Kings include superb chefs and comfortable single or double bedrooms with en-suites, and a wide range of recreational activites. See the Skeptics website for more details.

For further information, or to offer a paper or presentation, contact Felicity Goodyear-Smith, f.goodyear-smith@auckland.ac.nz, 021 897 244