

*Skeptic*

*a person in a state of terminal caution*

*Margaret Mahy*

**When good doctors go bad  
NZ Skeptics 21st anniversary**

**Creationists tackle UFOs**

**Bishop Ussher**

**Skepticism in perspective**

# new zealand **Skeptic**

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*Modern Version*

*These modern versions of Marriage (left),*

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# Time for a new name?

OVER the last few years, there have been frequent suggestions that the Skeptics organisation in New Zealand should have a new name. At present, our formal name is the New Zealand Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal Inc. Originally, this was an adaptation of the name of our sister organisation in the US, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The American organisation has recently changed its formal name to Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. This has been a prompt for our committee to re-open the issue here. The reasons put forward for change, both here and in the US, can be summarised as:

- The present name is very cumbersome, and few people can remember it, let alone use it.
- Because of its length, it is very seldom used by the media.
- Perhaps most importantly, the emphasis on 'paranormal' does not accurately reflect the current breadth of our interests.

On this last point, it is interesting to note that over the last several years there have been very few, if any, journal articles or conference presentations on paranormal issues, particularly if one takes the common perception of 'paranormal' as being substantially equivalent to 'supernatural'. To quote one of the arguments put forward for the USA change, "We have never been limited to just the 'paranormal'. From the beginning we have been concerned with all manner of empirical claims credulously accepted without sufficient critical examination. Our goal has been to provide scientific examinations of these claims, so that reliable, fact based, verified information can be used in making judgments about them."

If it is accepted that there is a case for change here, we are then faced with the choice of a new name. The first obvious thought is to once again mirror the US name. We would then become the New Zealand Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. However, the word 'Committee' seems inappropriate in New Zealand usage. Our organisation is a large and broad-based national society, and is legally a registered incorporated society. This leads to an option 'New Zealand Society for Skeptical Inquiry Inc'.

Another suggestion is 'Skeptical Enquiry New Zealand (Inc)' (SENZ).

(It is probably worth noting here that the use of the word 'inquiry' in any new name would be in line with the traditional distinction that reserves 'inquiry' as pertaining to 'a formal investigation' rather than simply asking for information or clarification, the traditional meaning of 'enquiry'. However, 'Skeptical Inquiry New Zealand' would be an unfortunate choice as it would leave us with the acronym SINZ.)

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# When good doctors go bad

John Welch

*Alternative medical practitioners often start out in the mainstream, but other currents may take them into new channels. This article is adapted from a presentation at the 2006 NZ Skeptics' Conference.*

A RECENT survey of general practitioners found that about one third practised some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). The term CAM refers to a range of medical treatments which are considered outside the realms of conventional medicine because they remain scientifically unproven. Why is it that so many GPs get involved with CAM? Should we accept the term CAM? There can surely be only proven and unproven medical treatments.

I entered medical school in 1971 when I was 19. For the next six years I studied and was taught that doctors were supposed to talk to people, examine them and make a diagnosis. This is quite a sound approach for hospital-based medicine but not very useful in general practice which is where I found myself.

Many general practice surveys have shown that a large proportion of patients do not have a clear diagnosis. These people are often referred to as the 'worried well'. They have symptoms rather than diseases. There are GP abbreviations for common conditions such as TATT syndrome for 'Tired all the time'. People who attend regularly with

a litany of such complaints are often referred to as 'heart sink' patients.

In my own general practice I had the same sort of patients. I became dissatisfied with my inability to diagnose and treat problematic conditions and was in the right frame of mind to try something new, something alternative. Acupuncture seemed to offer all the answers.



I spent a week training in Auckland. The trainer had palatial rooms and drove a Mercedes. He was a charismatic figure. I was impressed! However, some things troubled me. I noticed that acupuncture points seemed to be very close together and it was

time-consuming having to refer to charts to locate the correct points. Why use a particular set of points? The trainer said to me "Don't worry John, acupuncture is very forgiving".

My scientific curiosity was provoked and I immediately wondered whether it mattered at all where acupuncture needles were placed. I found that it didn't and got the same results just sticking them in at random.

I soon lost interest in acupuncture.

The great thing about learning from your mistakes is that you recognise them when you make them again. My next experiment was with spinal manipulation. I attended a weekend workshop run by another GP who had written a book on the subject. The techniques were easily learned and I was soon able to produce pleasing noises from any part of the spine. The results could be spectacular and soon my appointment books were full and I was making a lot of money. I realised I had unwittingly stumbled across the secret of chiropractic and osteopathy. Create a need or a belief and then fill it.

I stopped doing spinal manipulation when I had a patient

faint after I had manipulated her neck. I thought I had either damaged the spinal cord or damaged arteries in her neck.

There is a known association between manipulation of the neck and stroke. The shearing forces used in manipulation of the neck are capable of damaging the blood supply to the brain. It was always believed that this complication was rare but when a stroke unit started specifically enquiring about prior chiropractic or osteopathic manipulations they found that the incidence of stroke was ten times higher than previously suspected. A sore neck will get better on its own with no risk of such complications. I think I was wise to abandon spinal manipulation.

### Case Studies

All of the information for the following case studies has come from the public domain. I have referred to some patients as index patients where for some reason they became important either through media interest or disciplinary proceedings.

#### Case One

Dr A became interested in Vega testing and homeopathy when he was about 35. The Vega test machine is a derivation of the Wheatstone bridge, an instrument used to measure resistance. Most alternative medical devices are derived from legitimate scientific instruments.

Testing of a small child involved the application of one electrode to the mother's left middle toe while she held the other electrode in one hand. The child, who was not actually

examined, sat in her lap until he became bored and ran around the surgery. Dr A directed questions telepathically to the mother with the responses being analysed by the Vega machine. This revealed allergies as well as evil miasmas which were treated by homeopathic solutions. Homeopathic solutions contain only water but they can also contain a lactose base. The child had lactose intolerance and suffered what was described as a violent gastrointestinal disturbance.

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**There is still a great deal of uncertainty in medicine. Some doctors find it difficult to cope with uncertainty...**

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The next child was tested in the same manner and the diagnosis was further evil miasmas from a promiscuous grandmother but this time the mother was also diagnosed with latent diabetes and cancer of the cervix.

Another child with suspected allergies and asthma was diagnosed as having selenium deficiency, allergies to wheat, caffeine and dairy products, as well as more evil miasmas inherited from criminal ancestors. The Vega machine was obviously working to capacity on this day because Dr A was also able to predict for the child diabetes at age 40, and Alzheimer's at 70, provided he did not succumb from the possibility of a fatal motor vehicle accident at 17. However, the machine failed to see the heavy hand of the Medical Practitioners' Disciplinary Committee (MPDC) and Dr A was rebuked and heavily fined.

#### Case Two

Dr B was aged 32 years and a GP at the time of an emerging interest in CAM.

As a fourth year medical student, he was involved in the care of a patient who suffered a fatal drug reaction and died. At the time Dr B said "I was pretty horrified and from then on I questioned the whole philosophy of medicine." Distraught, he dropped out for a while and then began using nutritional supplements in general practice. He consulted with a lawyer to avoid any breach of medical ethics and continued using nutritional supplements, hair analysis and chelation therapy.

The index patient was a 62 year old with terminal brain cancer who was not confident about proven medical treatments. He was diagnosed with heavy metal poisoning on the basis of hair analysis and treated with chelation therapy and nutritional products for which the GP was getting a 25 percent commission from Neo Life, a multi-level marketing organisation.

The patient's son complained that his father was spending \$800-1000 per month on these..

Dr B was investigated by the MPDC and Consumer but there was no adverse finding in law because Dr B had demonstrated the "honesty and good faith" required by the Medical Practitioners Act. Dr B said "there are some large powers that have financial interests in maintaining general practice as it is, with doctors writing a lot of prescriptions." The irony of this appears



to have been overlooked by Dr B whose own financial interests appeared to be flourishing.

### Case Three

Dr C practises electroacupuncture using black box devices such as the Vega machine to diagnose mercury poisoning and other environmental illnesses.

Dr C is anti-immunisation, anti-fluoridation, anti-dental amalgam and claims that ascorbic acid (vitamin C) "is uniformly effective in treating all of the childhood illnesses including hepatitis and polio."

In 1995 I complained to the MPDC about his anti-immunisation activities. Off the record, I was told that at least 30 other doctors had written similar complaints but the MPDC was powerless to act until a patient either made a complaint or was harmed.

### Case Four

Dr D is also a GP who graduated in 1977. He became interested in an unconventional approach following a mysterious family illness which allegedly turned out to be arsenic poisoning, an unlikely diagnosis in my opinion.

Dr D took up using a combination of Bi-Digital O-Ring Test (BDORT) or peak muscle resistance testing as well as homeopathy and prayer.

Some patients complained they had been harmed by his treatments and duly complained to the MPDC. During this hearing one of the expert witnesses offered to devise a blind trial of BDORT and Dr D declined. Dr

D was struck off the medical register and fined.

Some time later he was back for a second appearance. This time there was a complaint from a patient who had been suffering from abdominal pain, flatulence and was passing blood in his bowel motions.

The patient was seen 19 times and diagnosed with: salmonella, campylobacter, helicobacter, bowel bug, blood fluke, Tordon poisoning, amoebic infection, colitis and irritable bowel syndrome.

He was seen by another doctor who organised a colonoscopy which revealed terminal bowel cancer.

So why do so many GPs get involved with CAM?

### Doctor factors

There is still a great deal of uncertainty in medicine. Some doctors find it difficult to cope with uncertainty and are attracted to any pseudoscience that ends uncertainty and reduces complexity by relying on a simple diagnostic or treatment method. Some become disillusioned with medicine due to bad experiences in training or become unhinged by life events.

Psychologists refer to the "power of vivid instances" and this can apply equally to both good and bad experiences. Medical students are selected from the general population and bring with them their own belief systems.

Some doctors have a powerful personality and although they may be aware of and sensitive to the placebo effect this is no

guarantee against becoming subject to a belief in their own placebo. Some doctors practising CAM have been challenged to put their methods to the test. They will generally refuse; since these doctors know that their methods work, they conclude there must be something wrong with the scientific method which must therefore be avoided. They will argue that their belief system works through some as yet unknown mechanism. This argument has been described as loopholeism or "the plea for special dispensation". It is such a common argument that when it is invoked it is diagnostic of quackery.

There is no doubt that some doctors are motivated by money and this wealth becomes a de facto validation of their practices.

I could not find any comparable surveys of specialists who are actively involved with CAM but I suspect that few specialists would be, because the focused nature of specialist practice would tend to exclude unproven treatments.

### Patient Factors

The essentially psychosomatic symptoms of the 'worried well' have changed very little from the 1920s, with pain and fatigue being dominant symptoms.

There is a huge market for all sorts of unscientific treatments and people are ready and willing to pay for these.

There has been a loss of the folk culture of knowledge which gave people commonsense understanding of their own bodily sensations. As a child I can

hardly remember being taken to a doctor. My mother treated our colds, sprains and other injuries. Now people demand antibiotics, X-rays and physiotherapy.

The pharmaceutical industry has not been slow to exploit this by promoting drugs for symptoms rather than diseases. For example, indigestion is now called gastro-oesophageal reflux disease and widely treated with omeprazole or Losec.

Modern medicine can exclude organic illness with a high degree of certainty. Psychological illness is neither fashionable nor acceptable. Symptomatic individuals attribute their symptoms to some external cause such as poisons or toxins and there is a constant background of conditions such as total allergy syndrome and yeast infection, punctuated by epidemics such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Occupational Overuse Syndrome. Because such conditions are largely rejected by conventional medicine they provide a fertile source of income for CAM treatments.

The treatment of cancer is often unpleasant and again it is hardly surprising that sufferers are attracted by the promise of painless treatments with good results. The Lyprinol scandal is a case in point. People are living longer and tend to accumulate a range of chronic disorders such as arthritis, insomnia, and diabetes. Chronic diseases typically undergo a cyclical course with peaks and troughs and the trick is to provide a CAM treatment during a trough so as to coincide with a naturally occurring improvement.

### Lessons from Medical History

One hundred and fifty years ago you could easily argue that most doctors were quacks. Medicine had little scientific basis and treatments were often dangerous if not lethal. It was safer to have no treatment at all rather than subject yourself to bleeding or purging. Homeopathy was much safer and the doctors who chose such treatments would have had a following.

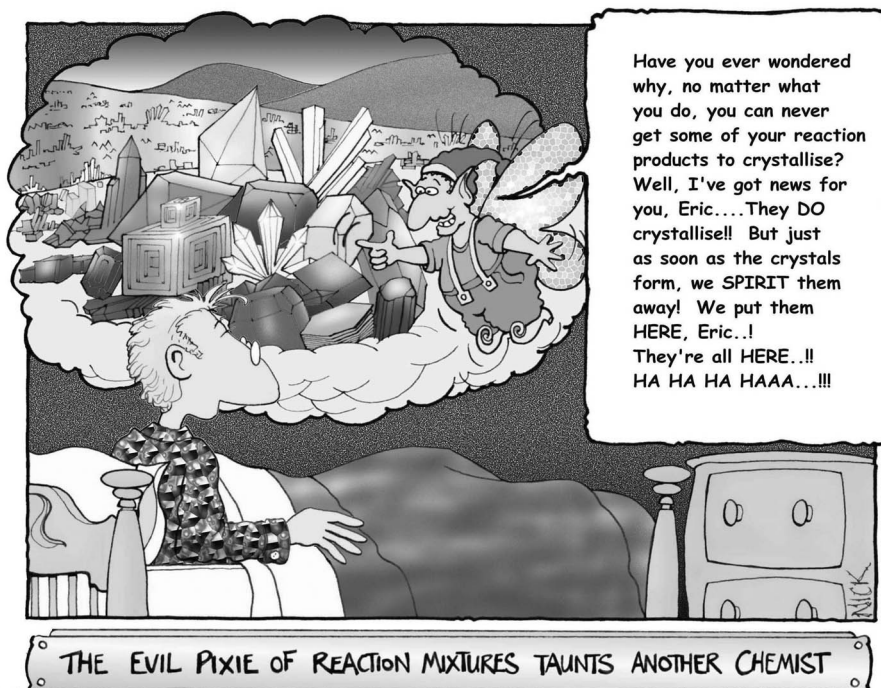
As medicine built on a secure knowledge base, the advent of the randomised placebo controlled trial (RPCT) meant the arrival of effective treatment.

Such trials are a threat to unscientific treatments and are able to refute them. A common argument is that RPCTs cannot be used to evaluate homeopathy, for example, because the homeopathic treatment is especially tailored for each patient. This has led to the testimonial becoming the form of evidence favoured by alternative medicine.

People are not comfortable with the idea that they have a psychosomatic condition. It's easier to admit you have a broken arm than that you are depressed. In the 20th century the dominant theme is the loss of the nuclear family with associated isolation and a loss of intimacy leading to a great fear of the outside world, expressed as agoraphobia and multiple chemical sensitivity.

Perhaps the greatest lesson from medical history is the way various ideas are constantly recycled. The early 1900s was the era of autointoxication from the large bowel. People have always been obsessed by constipation and at one stage a fashionable surgeon, Sir Arbuthnot Lane, was performing total colectomies for this spurious condition. The operation soon fell into disrepute but the theory of autointoxication has undergone a revival with 'colonic cleansing clinics'.

During the 19th century Parliament recognised the need for some kind of registration of doctors in order to give them some legal standing



and acknowledgment of proper medical training. The first medical registration act passed in 1858 included a 'homeopathy clause' that has persisted to this day, which says in effect that no doctor can be found guilty of misconduct merely because of a particular practice or belief if he has acted honestly and in good faith.

In practice this means that registered medical practitioners can practise the most blatant quackery and get away with it provided that they don't harm any patients.

Some countries such as Canada have dropped the homeopathy clause and NZ should do the same.

### Media/Internet/Technology

Doctors used to be an authoritative source of health information. Now anyone can go online and access health information. Informed choice has become fashionable. An element of consumerism has crept into medicine and as well as being GPs, doctors have to run a successful business. CAM is a lucrative area and if people are prepared to pay it's hardly surprising that many doctors cater for this demand.

A recurring theme is natural versus unnatural. There is a nostalgia for the natural remedies used by Rousseau's noble savage. Many herbal remedies vary widely in composition. Some brands of ginseng don't contain any active ingredient at all. At least you get what's on the label when you fill a prescription for digoxin.

### Conclusion

There is something about general practice which attracts an interest in CAM. The case studies are extreme but there are plenty of GPs continuing to use such diagnostic methods and treatments. Is it acceptable for

medical graduates with a science degree to be allowed to carry on in this manner? Should we amend the relevant legislation so they can't? I welcome your thoughts and suggestions.

### anniversary

## The first 21 years

*Warwick Don celebrated the 21st annual NZ Skeptics conference by presenting a potted history of the society.*

IN 1976, several arch skeptics got together in the US to found the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). Any results would be disseminated to a wider audience, both scientific and the general public. One means of dissemination was their publication, initially called *The Zetetic* (meaning 'skeptical seeker') and renamed *The Skeptical Inquirer* the following year. Among the founders were Carl Sagan, James (The Amazing) Randi and Martin Gardner.

I am indebted to our resident historian, Bernard Howard, for providing details of our group's formation. The idea to establish a similar organisation in this country was conceived by the late Richard Kamman, a colleague of David Marks in the Department of Psychology at Otago University. Jointly they wrote *The Psychology of the Psychic*, first published by Prometheus Books in 1980. Around that time the exploits of Uri Geller were making headlines. Both psychologists adopted a very skeptical view of Geller's

claims, one of which was to be able to bend metals through the power of the mind alone. Their examination of Geller's claims is presented in their book. Geller, of course, is the inspiration for our annual Bent Spoon award for the most gullible piece of reporting or writing.

The formation of a New Zealand group remained just the germ of an idea until late in 1984 when, in Bernard's words, "a more forceful voice was heard, lecturing us in an American accent on the Shroud of Turin and other weird things." In 1985, discussions between Denis Dutton and David Marks and a few others led to the revival of the idea of a national society, and on a hot Waitangi Day afternoon in 1986, a small group met at the University of Canterbury to decide whether the time was ripe to launch such a venture. I learned early on of plans to form a New Zealand skeptics group when David Marks and I met in the street one day (we lived close by in Dunedin and near the university).



Bernard says he was late joining the Christchurch meeting. The first words spoken to him were: "We have decided to form a committee, but don't have a treasurer yet. Are you interested?" Bernard, who readily admits to being unable to refuse anything Denis asks him to do (I have this in writing!), was immediately appointed Treasurer. One of the first points discussed of relevance to the Treasurer's role was the size of the subscription. Should it be large, in line with an exclusive elite, or low, more in keeping with a popular movement? Not surprisingly, the vote was in favour of the latter, and the subscription has remained comparatively low ever since. Bernard left the meeting weighed down with seven \$10 notes, the subscriptions of the founding members: Kerry Chamberlain (Massey University), Dr Denis Dutton (Canterbury University), Professor Bernard Howard (Lincoln College), Dr Gordon Hewitt (Victoria University) and Dr David Marks (Otago University).

### **What's in a name?**

The subject of what to call the new group came up. Should it be, again in Bernard's words, "a snappy New Zealand Skeptics, or a lengthy dignified New Zealand Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal"? In reality both names have prevailed. Informally we are known as the New Zealand Skeptics and formally as the NZCSICOP – the best of both worlds. The first postal address of the group was Bernard's personal box number at Lincoln College. When Bernard first applied for a box in 1964, the post

office lady at Lincoln College apologised that the only available box she had was No 13. "I wonder why?" asked Bernard. His offer of the use of his PO Box 13 was greeted with hilarity by the rest of the committee, and was seen as most fitting for an organisation such as ours. PO Box 13 remained our address for quite some time.

### **A salutary lesson**

No adverse consequences appear to have arisen from our association with No 13, although I have to admit we had a close call with destiny in 1988. A member of our group, in a series of letters published in the Star Midweek newspaper in Dunedin, accused a self-proclaimed Dunedin psychic of being a fraud, alleging she was guilty of a criminal offence involving intent to deceive. He also sent letters to several other organisations. The psychic brought a \$20,000 defamation action against our member, and subsequently she was awarded \$12,000 in damages, \$6000 to be paid by our member and \$6000 by Allied Press Ltd. Fortunately, because of the prudent way our constitution and public statements are worded, the New Zealand Skeptics was not a party to the action, and so escaped what could have been a crippling penalty. Needless to say, our member and the NZ Skeptics parted company soon after. Our constitution provides suspension or expulsion of any member charged with bringing the society into disrepute if found guilty of the charge. We as a group learned a vital lesson, oft issued as a reminder by Denis: accusations of fraudulence or

cheating are taboo. We should never forget this.

### **The New Zealand Skeptic and our first conference**

Our version of a skeptical journal was the New Zealand Skeptic. Issue No 1, a modest production by David Marks, our first chairperson, appeared in May 1986. David reported on tests of the alleged telepathic and tarot reading abilities of Auckland Colin Amery. Controlled tests of Amery's telepathic claims showed no evidence of psychic ability, and although not under controlled conditions, the tarot readings showed Mr Amery to be a proficient exponent, but that they could readily be explained with standard cold reading techniques. This first issue also contained a message from David Marks in the form of an open letter to all New Zealand skeptics. He reported that our recently founded Skeptics Society was growing fast with almost 50 paid-up members and already was providing a counterbalance to the ever-increasing number of paranormal claims. At the conclusion of his letter, David invited proposals for talks and speakers for the inaugural conference of the New Zealand Skeptics, to be held in Dunedin in August of that year (1986). The proposed papers were: What is Pseudoscience? (Denis Dutton), Creationism and the Misuse of Biology (Gordon Hewitt), The Australia-New Zealand Stop-over for International Psychics (Mark Plummer, Founding Chairman, Australian Skeptics), Psychics I Have Known (David Marks), and Psychics, Clairvoyants and Cold Reading (Denis Dutton). There's a familiar ring



to these topics. Unfortunately for skepticism in this country, David Marks left soon after to take up a university post in London.

### **The great fire-walk**

Jumping to 1989, the conference that year, held in Christchurch, featured a fire-walk, one of the high points of our history (a burning issue, you could say!), organised by Denis Dutton and John Campbell, a physicist at Canterbury University. Fire-walks at that time were often conducted by unscrupulous so-called trainers claiming that fire-walking could only be achieved without physical injury if the mind was suitably prepared beforehand – at a price, of course. Some 80 of us trusted physics that evening, rather than the assurances of charlatans. The video of the event as presented on the Holmes Show, 4 September 1989, is available on loan from NZ Skeptics Video Library.

As Denis Dutton later explained in his role as the society's media spokesperson, it's all a matter of physics. The red-hot coals have low heat capacity and low thermal conductivity. If you walk rapidly over them you suffer at most only minor burns.

### **Distinguished visitors**

Our group has been fortunate in being able to host some distinguished overseas skeptics, with the financial assistance of kindred organisations, most notably the Australian Skeptics and the New Zealand Rationalists and Humanists. Among those we have hosted have been James (The Amazing) Randi (US, 1993), Susan Blackmore (UK, 1995), Richard Dawkins

(UK, 1996) and Ian Plimer (Australia, 2000). I had the pleasure of organising Richard Dawkins' open lecture in Dunedin in 1996 – he attracted huge audiences in all four main centres. At Otago University, two large lecture theatres had to be video-linked in order to accommodate the overflow. At the Dunedin conference in 2000, Melbourne University's Professor Ian Plimer presented a scintillating overview of Earth's geological history at our conference dinner. At that conference we were also honoured with the participation of David Marks.

### **The public face**

Numerous public statements and comment have emanated from our organisation in print, on radio and on TV over the years. Denis Dutton, Vicki Hyde and Frank Haden (through his Sunday Star Times column) have been particularly active in this regard. Among the topics that have prompted public skeptical comment have been the 1999 Liam Williams-Holloway cancer case involving the notorious Rife treatment, and Jeanette Wilson's Dare to Believe series on TV3 (2005).

One other matter springs readily to mind. In 1995 the Bent Spoon was awarded to the Justice Department for a report on domestic violence, called Hitting Home. Vicki Hyde issued a Press Release in which she described the report as "alarmist" and as painting "a disturbing picture of New Zealand men as abusers of wives and partners, until you examine the fine print". In Denis Dutton's words, the award "ruffled a few feathers" within our group (NZ Skeptic, No 37), and a motion was passed at the AGM

that year that a subcommittee re-examine the 1995 Bent Spoon Award. Non-committee members were also invited for comment. Several submissions found their way into our newsletter (Issues 37 and 38). Most supported the decision. An important point arising from this matter is that we are prepared to question and review decisions. Long may this attitude prevail.

Members of the New Zealand Skeptics participate in celebrating the life and achievements of Charles Darwin on the 12 February each year, the anniversary of Darwin's birthday. Several of us were able to contribute to the first collection of Darwin Day essays (Darwin Day Collection One, Tangled Bank Press, 2002).

As well as through public statements, we have communicated skepticism in other ways, by means of truth kits (collections of papers on specific topics, such as astrology and creation 'science'), for example. The truth kits have been replaced by information flyers available on our website, with a far wider distribution than that of the truth kits. And, of course, the website has greatly extended our sphere of influence overall. Several years ago we issued a primer, An Introduction to Critical Thinking, and the opportunity was taken to introduce our group – its aims and areas of interest.

**Warwick Don attended the first New Zealand Skeptics conference in 1986, and has been to every one since.**

## A skeptical columnist bows out

ONE of New Zealand's most senior journalists, and a long-standing member of the NZ Skeptics, has announced his retirement (Dominion Post, 2 December, Sunday Star Times, 3 December).

Frank Haden has been best known in recent years for his columns in the Sunday Star Times, but his 50 year career in journalism has included time as editor of the Sunday Times and assistant editor of the Dominion.

He has listed his favourite issues as "The Iraq invasion, the persecution of Ahmed Zaoui, compensation for uncontrollable thugs, euthanasia, prostate cancer screening, anywhere/anytime speed cameras, quack medicine, the excesses of the Treaty industry, Parole Board decisions, nuclear power, global warming myths". He has claimed that he doesn't U-turn on his views: "I spend a lot of time saying 'I told you so!' after being proved right."

He has often been described as right wing, a label he denies. "I'm simply not a right-winger. I hold a lot of inflammatory ideas that might seem to some people to be right-wing, but I'm not at all. Stripped to bare necessities I'm quite a compassionate kind of person, so long as people are prepared to take a fair measure of responsibility."

Ironically it is prostate cancer, for which he advocated screening long before being diagnosed with the illness, which has now

forced his retirement at the age of 76.

Haden's departure from the country's newspaper scene has been widely commented on. Even those who did not share his views respected his professionalism. Nicky Hager, who has never been accused of being right-wing, had this to say in a recent press release:

"The recently retired Frank Haden was an honourable example of a genuine commentator. I quite often did not agree with his views but I respected his independent and considered opinion."

### Water spraying exercise 'successful'

A special police convoy carrying Maori elders has sprayed 10,000 litres of Waikato River water on SH1 and SH2 in a bid to free the spirits of crash victims (Waikato Times, 4 December).

Dick Waihi, iwi liaison officer for the Counties-Manukau police district, said the operation had been successful.

"It was a first for the country and we have had some really good feedback," he said.

Maori elders consider the combination of blessed river water and prayers to be a trigger for the release of the spirits of those trapped by violent deaths on the roads.

Water was pumped from the Waikato River into a tanker at Tuakau by the New Zealand Fire Service.

From 5.30am the convoy drove south from Mt Wellington to Mercer on SH1, and then along SH2 to Maramarua. The ceremonial spraying was interrupted at Mercer and Maramarua, where a karakia was performed. Mr Waihi said the 2½-hour exercise was cost-free, with people donating labour and resources.

Despite the prayers, Mr Waihi said the exercise was non-religious and not just for Maori fatalities.

"Some people don't have an understanding why we are doing it. They should find out more about Maori protocols before making comment."

### Telephone telepathy exists: Sheldrake

Maverick British scientist Rupert Sheldrake has proof, he says, of telepathy. Many people have the experience of receiving a phone call from someone shortly after thinking about them – Sheldrake conducted experiments that proved that such pre-recognition exists (Dominion Post, 7 September).

Each person in the trials was called by four relatives or friends at random. In 45 percent of cases, the subject correctly guessed who was calling before picking up the phone.

"The odds against this being a chance effect are 1000 billion

to one,” Mr Sheldrake told the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

If it worked both ways – so my friends wouldn’t ring me during a movie – now that would be impressive.

### **Chip off the old block wasn’t a UFO**

Cool headed detective work has put paid to a UFO which apparently soared over a long-forgotten cycle race at Lancaster Park more than a century ago. Sports writer Joseph Romanos said an object in the sky was spotted by a photo processor who was preparing an 1890 image for a book on the history of the park published last year (Dominion Post, 7 September.)

“She blew it up large and the more it was blown up the more it looked just like a UFO. You could just about see people in it,” Romanos said.

No one knew what it was and the photo didn’t look doctored so Romanos and co-author Don Neely went to Christchurch where they tracked down the original negative in the Canterbury Library, where all was revealed.

“It was a chip in the original glass negative,” said Romanos, adding that up to that point he was starting to believe in UFOs. “I’m disappointed, as I was hoping the book would sell well in Canterbury and Roswell.”

He decided to mention his close encounter after publication of another UFO image found

recently at the Devonport Navy Museum.

That photo, taken from the bridge of the navy cruiser Royalist in 1965, has baffled experts who are squabbling over what the mystery object may be.

### **Get me to the church on time**

According to a new study, older people who regularly attend religious services are healthier than those who don’t.

The study, conducted by Dr Joanna Maselko at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, looked at 1174 highly functioning men and women in their 70s. It found that those who went to a church, synagogue or mosque at least once a week had a significantly slower decline in their lung function over the following years than their peers who didn’t attend services regularly.

In 1988, when the study began, 65 percent of female participants and 51 percent of men reported attending services regularly. Over the follow-up period, lung function declined twice as much in people who didn’t attend services regularly compared with those who did.

While the more religious individuals were more physically active and less likely to smoke, these differences didn’t account for their better lung function.

Dr Maselko said that attending regular services could possibly protect people by giving them a supportive community. “In the US, social isolation among the elderly is a huge problem.”

### **Prof packs punch**

Skeptic columnist Raymond Richards got saturation coverage in the Hamilton papers (Waikato Times, Hamilton Press, Hamilton This Week) before and after his charity boxing match at Auckland’s Sky City Convention Centre on November 17.

Richards, dubbed ‘Sugar Ray’ by the Waikato Times, was the only 50-year-old academic on the ‘Fight Nite’ bill (which included former All Black Frank Bunce), and was up against an opponent, Andy Neish, who was 2kg heavier and 12 years younger.

“My first goal is to make it up the steps into the ring,” he said. “Then, with my eyes, if I can make him out, I hope to drop him before I topple over. I don’t want to chase him.”

The event raised money for child cancer work (“What’s a little concussion compared to the big C?”), but Richards also said he was fighting for everyone who has been told they are too old to do something.

The Waikato Times also noted his other public fights, centring on his “feisty academic opposition” to Mormons, homeopathy and quackery.

In the event, he was able to use his longer reach to keep Neish at bay (apart from two blows to the ear in the second round) and bloody the younger man’s nose, winning on points. He has been approached to appear at this year’s Fight for Life, but is seriously considering hanging up his gloves and going out on a high.



# The demon-haunted universe

David Riddell

*Some people are skeptical about UFOs and alien abductions – but for all the wrong reasons.*

GARY Bates is the latest in a long line of Australian creationists who have mounted tours of New Zealand since the early 1990s. Every year, speakers from Creation Ministries International (formerly Answers in Genesis, and before that the Creation Science Foundation) make the journey across the Tasman to address church halls full of the faithful on the importance of adhering to strict biblical literalism, and to distribute an ever-expanding catalogue of books, videos and magazine subscriptions. This strategy, dubbed ‘linking and feeding’ by CMI chief executive officer Carl Wieland (see NZ Skeptic 45), is quietly but very effectively establishing a broad-based creationist movement in this country, avoiding the largely unsuccessful head-on confrontations with the educational establishment which have characterised the creationist movement in the US. There are now several locally grown speakers on the circuit, groomed by the New Zealand branch of CMI from its base in Howick.

In October I was one of four local skeptics who attended a meeting addressed by Bates in Rotorua. He began with a reminder that their ministry was fully ‘faith-funded’, and urged his audience to support it by purchasing his merchandise during the intermission. This was to be a recurring theme throughout the

night. A form was passed round on which people could subscribe to CMI’s Creation magazine; there were plenty of takers.

He then launched into the now-standardised CMI patter. We are engaged in a “War of the Worldviews”, he said, with our allegiances determined by where we think we came from. Morality is a Christian virtue, grounded in Genesis, and those who refuse to accept that book’s authority have no basis for ethical behaviour. This, he maintained, was the root cause of the modern world’s ills. We had a choice between accepting the words of men or the Word of God.

Well, no, actually. We can’t climb Mt Sinai and ask God Himself whether He wrote the Bible. We only have the word of men like Bates that He really is its author. So it comes down to making a choice as to which set of men one listens to.

Bates then turned to some of the alleged evidence against evolution – 20-year-old fossilised felt hats, “unfossilised” *T. rex* bones containing red blood cells, complex geological structures formed in a matter of days at Mt St Helens, and the way dead fish float, rather than lying on the sea bed to be fossilised. None of this material was new, and space precludes a refutation of it all here, but I’ve appended some websites which cover it.

But Bates has a point of difference from other creationist speakers. He is the author of *Alien Intrusion: UFOs and the Evolution Connection*, and after the intermission (and more exhortations to purchase stuff) he outlined the book’s argument. In a nutshell, it is that life elsewhere in the universe does not exist, and that reported encounters with extraterrestrials, including UFO sightings and alien abductions, are actually the work of demons, who are on a “crash and burn” mission to bring down as many human souls as they can in order to spite God, in a cosmic war that began in Eden.

Ironically, there was some material that a skeptic could agree with. He did a fair job of explaining the sheer immensity of the universe and the difficulties that would confront any would-be space-farer wanting to visit our little blue dot, although some basic errors (the Hubble telescope in “geosynchronous” orbit, Proxima Centauri the closest galaxy) revealed a strictly limited knowledge of astronomy. But then he explained there couldn’t be any aliens to make the trip anyway, because the Bible said so. If aliens existed elsewhere, they would be under the curse of Adam. Since the Church is described as Christ’s bride through all eternity, and since Christian marriage is monogamous, he cannot have brides

(ie churches) on other planets. Nor will he be crucified and raised again elsewhere, because his death and resurrection was for all of Creation. Many in the audience dutifully nodded at each of these points.

Belief in aliens is predicated on evolution, Bates says, and Lucifer is using this belief to mount a campaign based on deception. By creating apparitions of UFOs, he encourages people to doubt biblical truth, and by subjecting people to alien abduction experiences he spreads misery and sows confusion. In the past he has adopted other guises, says Bates. Among these were his appearances, disguised as an angel, to Muhammad and to Mormonism founder Joseph Smith.

His audience lapped it all up, although after almost two and a half hours some of the children were dozing off. Finally, he came to an end and the small skeptical contingent headed home for re-viving hot chocolates. We didn't buy anything.

### Websites

*T. rex* bones: [home.austarnet.com.au/stear/YEC\\_and\\_dino\\_blood.htm](http://home.austarnet.com.au/stear/YEC_and_dino_blood.htm)

Floating fish: [home.austarnet.com.au/stear/fossil\\_foolishness.htm](http://home.austarnet.com.au/stear/fossil_foolishness.htm)

Mount St Helens canyon: [home.comcast.net/~fsteiger/grandcyn.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~fsteiger/grandcyn.htm)

Rapid fossilisation: [talkorigins.org/indexcc/CC/CC361.html](http://talkorigins.org/indexcc/CC/CC361.html)

Other creationist arguments used by Bates and others: [www.talkorigins.org/indexcc/list.html](http://www.talkorigins.org/indexcc/list.html)

## Castles in the air founded on a rock

**New Zealand's Amazing D'Urville Artefact and Equations of Life, by Ross Wiseman, Discovery Press, 2004. Reviewed by Hugh Young.**

**T**HIS book proves that there is no limit to the human imagination. If you let go all critical impulses, you can convince yourself of absolutely anything.

Ross Wiseman has come by a small wrinkly stone found on d'Urville Island, and convinced himself, by reading its wrinkles with the help of his 11-year-old daughter, that he has uncovered a saga of time travel by a hero he calls Alex. This he has expanded into a book that explores every realm of science and pseudo-science – mainly the latter, and of course with no guide as to which is which. It is more than a little disconcerting to find quarks on page 9 and the four elements of alchemy on page 14.

Mr Wiseman goes readily from "looks like" to "is". Some of the wrinkles form an approximate square with a depression near the middle. His interpretation:

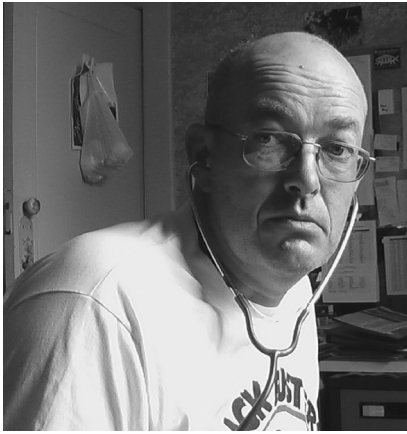
"The third picture shows a flag with a large circle in the middle. The flagpole is to the right and the flag is fluttering to the left. This is the opposite way to how we draw flags, or run a series of comic pictures, in our civilisation. Our civilisation is a materialistic one, and Alex's may also be the opposite of ours in that regard too. The opposite of a material civilisation is a knowledge civilisation. The large 'blue' circle in the middle of the 'white' flag represents knowledge. So far, the story reads, 'Alex goes to the dinosaur age and plants the flag of knowledge.'"

I found that too much of this kind of thing made my head hurt.

And there is much more: atomic structure, galactic structure, Aristotle's hierarchy of souls, DNA, evolution, entropy, genetic engineering (the cheetah was genetically engineered), alchemy, time travellers in Auckland (which explains how a NZ Army Argo – an all-terrain vehicle of c1970 – appears on the stone), continental drift, crop circles (no reference to hoaxes), September 11 (of course) and reincarnation.

Mr Wiseman draws some fascinating conclusions – largely on the basis of facial appearance – about who has reincarnated as who: Hammurabi — Solon — Sulla — Mussolini; Pericles — Hitler; Julius Caesar — Napoleon; Lincoln — JFK (of course); King Francis II — Zachariah Wiseman (Who? Apparently the author's son: "Zachariah Wiseman was born in 1989 in Auckland as a Moon genius because of his kindness to other people in that life. He is now a Venus genius." What caused the transition is not explained.)

To proceed, John Locke was reincarnated as Bertrand Russell – to the latter's great annoyance, one supposes. Plato — Sir Henry Moreton Stanley — Ian Scott "... (born 1945) is a Mercury genius and one of the greatest artists New Zealand has ever



# Liquor still quicker

**John Welch**

**T**HERE is little doubt there are criminals who are prepared to drug women in order to sexually assault them. History records the commonest drug used was chloral hydrate in an alcoholic drink (Mickey Finn). The modern equivalent is rohypnol, a drug discontinued in New Zealand owing to its abuse potential. However, as Ogden Nash observed “liquor is quicker” and alcohol remains the most likely cause of incapacity leading to unwanted sexual activity.

There has been recent publicity alleging ‘drink spiking’ but a remarkable dearth of evidence to support these allegations. Invoking the law of parsimony, if women drink a lot of alcohol it is more likely that they were drunk rather than drugged by some additional chemical. This has been my experience in clinical practice. I was working in a hospital emergency department and a woman brought in her daughter who alleged she had been drugged during an evening out. They requested a blood test. I ordered a drug screen as well as an alcohol level. The time was 3pm the day after her night out. The drug screen was negative; however, the young woman’s blood alcohol was still 112 mg/100ml blood. The legal limit for driving is 80mg/100ml

blood. I leave it to readers to do the maths but I suggest she must have been seriously intoxicated the night before!

The current hysteria about ‘date rape’ is a smoke screen to cover up serious alcohol abuse by many young people.

## From the Journals

Bromelain, an aqueous extract of the pineapple plant, is widely sold as a natural organic anti-inflammatory agent. The results of a randomised controlled trial cast doubt on claims that it is an effective treatment for osteoarthritis. Although the trial was too small to be definitive, there was no benefit over placebo (Quarterly Journal of Medicine 2006, 99: 841–50).

High blood pressure features in a randomised controlled trial of acupuncture appropriately named SHARP (Stop Hypertension with the Acupuncture Research Program). Despite the promise suggested by case reports and small observational studies, active acupuncture was no better than invasive sham acupuncture at reducing systolic or diastolic blood pressure in 192 patients with untreated blood pressure (Hypertension 2006, 48: 838-45).

A New Zealand doctor has been given a grant of \$5000 to continue her research into the treatment of autism. Her alternative methods involve dietary manipulations. In one case, “within a week of having colours and preservatives removed from his diet”, Dr Gullible (not her real name) claimed the subject had a vocabulary of 200 words. Well then, within a few more months he will have conquered the Concise Oxford Dictionary! Dietary manipulations involve a change in management and attention and it is this which is responsible for any observed improvements. These are placebo interventions (NZ Doctor, 15 November 2005).

## Fat Lazy Teenagers

Claims have been made that overweight adolescents should have surgery. Some of these fatties have weighed in at 150-200kg. They can be seen in any shopping mall, usually eating a bag of chips and clutching a bottle of soft drink. The parents, usually the mother, are also obese and the situation is not a disease but one of child abuse. The standard of reporting and medical insight is pitiful. A report in the Christchurch Press (23-24 December, 2006) claimed that



a possible cause of obesity was hyperinsulinaemia, an excessive production of insulin. Obese people who develop diabetes do have hyperinsulinaemia but this is caused by their obesity, not the other way round. The obesity causes an insulin resistance at the cellular level and the pancreas responds by cranking up its production of insulin.

After surgery, one teenager lost 80kg and is now training to be a chef! I think there needs to be a great deal more informed debate before the health system starts funding this sort of surgery.

### **Occupational Health-Disease of the month**

The history of occupational medicine is full of examples of absurd complaints being linked to the workplace. For example, pain syndromes in women who are only typing a few words per minute (refer Dr Yolande Lucire's book: RSI Belief and Desire).

The latest medical construct is 'acoustic shock' seen in call centre workers. Seven hundred employees have reached out-of-court settlements in the UK with a payout of three million pounds. A further 300 cases are pending. It pays to have an employer with deep pockets. An article in the Guardian Weekly (24 November, 2006) advises that "acoustic shock is caused by exposure to a sudden increase in noise, but people who are already anxious or under stress appear to be particularly prone to it."

Note the careful wording. The 'disease' is not created in normal

people but in those who are naturally "anxious or under stress". These words are designed to obscure the fact that this is not an occupational disease but an attempt to attribute personal angst to the workplace.

Although not given to crystal ball gazing, I predict that this condition will next appear in Australia closely followed by New Zealand. Furthermore, I predict that the condition will remain unheard of in India, the origin of most call centre calls, since there is no compensation available.

The next time you are disturbed by a call centre while eating dinner, yell loudly down the phone and tell the caller to make a claim for 'acoustic shock'.

### **Sickie Busters**

Fraudulent absenteeism is just as common across the Tasman as it is here. Absenteeism costs Australian industries an estimated \$7 billion dollars per year. Rates are around 3.5 percent but this figure can double with – you guessed it – call centres! These must be the people who are away from work while consulting their advisors about their claim for 'acoustic shock'.

Some savvy people have set up a business (Direct Health Solutions) and they check up on people taking a sickie. Client absenteeism has been reduced by one third and for every dollar spent there have been gains of \$12 saved in terms of productivity.

A DHS Nurse reports "you can always tell people throwing

a sickie, because very often they haven't decided what's wrong with them".

Sunday Telegraph Australia, 12 November 2006

### **Selenium Poisoning**

A 75-year-old man had a blood test which showed an elevated prostate specific antigen (PSA). He became concerned about prostate cancer. The article does not say whether there was a suspicion of prostate cancer or whether the PSA test was done as a 'check'. Prostate cancer is certainly common in males of this age, being found incidentally at autopsy in 40 percent of those over the age of 75 years. A screening 'check' of PSA cannot be defended in this case because a male diagnosed with prostate cancer at the age of 75 years is more likely to die from some other cause (ie with the disease rather than from it).

The patient visited one of "287,000 sites discussing the use of selenium in prevention and treatment of prostate cancer" and "was able to purchase 200g of sodium selenite powder without adequate instructions." Three to four hours after ingesting 10g of the powder he presented to an emergency department, acutely unwell, and subsequently died of acute selenium toxicity.

The authors comment: "This case highlights the risks associated with failure to critically evaluate Internet material and exposed the myth that natural therapies are inherently safe".

Medical Journal of Australia 2006, 185 (7): 388-389

## From Page 13

produced, but goes relatively unrecognised to this day.” Socrates (whose most defiant political act was to go home rather than take part in an execution) — Nelson Mandela. Mozart — Elton John and Beethoven — Bob Dylan. I keep wanting to stop, but Joseph Haydn — Buddy Holly; Joseph Banks — Rolf Harris; and Charles Darwin — Homer Simpson — no, I made that up.

The 12 Equations of Life can only be expressed with Wingding-like characters. They are all of the form  $A = B \ C/D$ , the connection between B and C/D undefined. So Equation 2, Contact, is [star]= [circle with equator (“passive subtraction”)] [heart]/[3 arrows pointing together], and the explanation is “An arithmetic operation defines the second equation, which in this case is passive subtraction. Passive subtraction belongs to a duodecimal system of arithmetic operations. When it belongs to the octave of creation it corresponds to the angelic realm. Having achieved perfect atonement a soul lives in the kingdom of god as one of the gods or becomes an angel.” And so on.

Oh, on p 281, Mr Wiseman proves the existence of God. The proof is only four lines long, so I might as well include it:

Take two subtraction pi in the Octave of Creation. Take the pi from one and give it to the other. This equals an Octave of Creation, and proves there is an almighty God.

I’m sure you will be as convinced as I was.

# 4004 BC and all that

*Jim Ring takes another look at Bishop Ussher’s famous date for the creation.*

HAMILTON skeptics chose the date 22nd October for a celebration to “be as close as possible to Bishop Ussher’s date for the creation of the Universe” (NZ Skeptic 78). Any date is a good excuse for a party but the group was about one month late. Most sources state that Ussher chose Sunday October 23rd 4004 BCE, but this is not correct using our calendar.

Stephen Jay Gould in *Fall in the House of Ussher* and *Questioning the Millennium* has popularised ideas about the date of creation but his account is confused. Gould even claimed he was quoting from his own copy of Ussher, but if so he had neither fully understood it nor read it carefully.

The dates given in King James bibles are on the authority of Dr John Lightfoot, vice-chancellor of Cambridge in the late 17th century, who wrote: “...man was created by the Trinity on Oct. 23, 4004 BC, at 9 o’clock in the morning.” Which sounds very precise; Lightfoot had followed Ussher’s ideas with some modification.

James Ussher, born 1581, became Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland. His biblical chronology was not original; in 1738 De Vignolles claimed he had discovered 200 computations of dates, all based on the bible, and no two were alike.

Ussher claimed to have used biblical chronology plus the

records of Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. He puts the birth of Jesus exactly 4000 years after the date of creation (Dionysius who produced the AD calendar made an error of four years which puts the date of the nativity in 4BCE – at least according to Matthew’s account).

Ussher was logical, but to us he based his arguments on false premises. He decided that the Hebrew calendar (and language), were divinely given and therefore God had created the earth on the first day, of the first week, of the first year. He knew more about the Hebrew calendar than most modern commentators (including Gould) and he tried to translate their dates and times into those understood by his contemporaries. But he believed falsely that the Jewish year started on the first Sunday after the autumn equinox.

Ussher knew that the Jewish day began at sunset. This does not fit well with God’s words, “Let there be light”, so he decided that God started His preparations at that time and said the words at sunrise. Sounds good: God says “Let there be light” and the sun comes up on the first day. The problem is that God had not yet created the sun; that job lay some days into the future.

At the equinox day and night are of equal length irrespective of latitude. So Ussher’s first day started at what we would call 6pm on Saturday and the visible effects (“Let there be light”)

started at 6am on Sunday. Ussher correctly called this time mid-day (it was both dawn and mid-day), but various commentators (including Stephen Jay Gould) have fallen into the trap of calling it noon by assuming Ussher meant 12 o'clock.

Most commentators have also failed to realise that Ussher was using the calendar introduced by Julius Caesar; the modern Gregorian calendar was adopted in England (and Ireland) only in 1752. The Julian calendar had an error that had blown out to ten days when the Pope introduced calendar reform in the late 16th century. The Julian error falls to zero going back to year 45 BCE (when that calendar was introduced); but then climbs again going further back to the year 4004

BCE. On the Gregorian system the equinox falls on either September 21 or 22, and Ussher's choice was the first Sunday after the equinox. This was October 23 on the Julian calendar, but September 25 according to the Gregorian calendar we all now use.

In the second creation story in Genesis (which contradicts the first), 'man' is the first object created by God (but note that woman was the last object created) which is why John Lightfoot has him created on the first day, though why he preferred the second account and chose the precise time I have been unable to discover. According to the first creation story in Genesis, 'man' was created on the 6th day after the start of creation and Jewish

scholars insist on this. On Ussher's system this would be Friday September 30 (Gregorian).

We do not know the precise details of the Jewish calendar in the first century of our era, but we do know that the Essene sect wanted to introduce a more rational solar calendar. In the manner common to many reformers, they introduced this idea as a return to the correct ideas of their ancient forebears.

Jews settled on the present Hebrew calendar in the fourth century of our era and their year 1 approximates to our year 3761 BCE [they do not agree with Ussher's chronology]. The first description of the Hebrew calendar comes from the famous Islamic mathematician al-Khwarizmi some centuries later. Days are numbered not named – Yom Rishon = first day (of the week) but this does not exactly equate to Sunday as it starts at sunset on Saturday evening. Months are strictly lunar and there are 12 or 13 in a year.

The Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) starts on the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month, and it starts with the New Moon. In 2006 this coincided with the equinox though this is unusual. But it does not start on a Sunday – there are complicated rules to ensure this cannot happen (to make various Holy Days fall on the correct days). So Ussher was incorrect on this point.

Furthermore it was not possible to calculate the exact time and date of a new moon when the calendar was invented – it had to be done by observation. Consider the difficulties posed

forum

Presentations raise concern

Two presentations at the Skeptics' Conference had some features in common that arouse disquiet. Both had inflammatory titles - "Ethnic fundamentalism" and "Linguistic fascism" - that were not supported by the content.

Both were well outside the realm of "scientific investigation" or "claims of the paranormal". Both were heavy on assertion and anecdote and light on referenced facts. Both used arguments by analogy that would have been laughed to scorn in more scientific subjects.

Both had a racial/political aspect: both promoted a monocultural Aotearoa of a kind that was fashionable two or three decades ago. Both attacked the trends

towards multiculturalism and bilingualism as if (per the titles) they were being imposed from above, rather than grassroots movements being accepted by popular consensus.

I am sorry they were (reportedly) well received, apparently because they were outside the usual fields of study of most skeptics, in much the same way that lay groups eagerly accept pseudoscientific presentations.

The Skeptics have partially overcome the male bias of a few years ago. We are still overwhelmingly white. Presentations like these two will contribute to ensuring that this remains the case.

Hugh Young  
Pukerua Bay



# Keeping it in perspective

**Raymond Richards**

*The promotion of critical thinking can seem an uphill struggle, but at least we don't get torn limb from limb for trying.*



**A**S SKEPTICS, we fight to uphold certain freedoms: freedom of enquiry, freedom of speech, academic freedom. The battles are worth waging to enjoy the blessings these principles bring, including knowledge and understanding, and because the alternative is darkness.

Skeptics skirmish in public debates, across the kitchen table, and in the workplace. While I think every academic should be a skeptic, I work alongside lecturers who oppose our organisation and who are hostile to science. Some of them believe in Creationism, homeopathy, or the Book of Mormon as a divinely inspired history of ancient America. Such lecturers exasperate me. University managers who do not appreciate academic freedom irk me. Being a skeptic can be tiring and frustrating.

Still, we need to keep our battles in perspective. In parts of the world, debating a university speech code is the farthest thing from the concerns of millions of people. For example, the girls and women of Afghanistan would be overjoyed to have any education at all. Five years after being ousted by the United States, the Taliban still control large parts of Afghanistan. They invoke societal codes in the

name of custom and religion as justification for denying women their rights, including the right to an education.

The director of education at Ghazni, Fatima Mustaq, says she has received death threats for refusing to send girls home from school. The threats are also against her husband and their eight children. During the Taliban's rule, she and her sister secretly taught girls at their home. "They found out and raided us. We managed to persuade them that we were only teaching the Koran. But they spied and found out we were teaching algebra. So they came and beat us. Can you imagine, beating someone for teaching algebra?"

In November, gunmen came for Mohammed Halim and dragged him from his home at Ghazni while his children cried and his wife begged for mercy. The 46-year-old schoolteacher was then partly disembowelled before being torn apart with his legs and arms tied to motorbikes. His remains were put on display as a warning to others to stop educating girls. Halim was one of four teachers killed in rapid succession at Ghazni for defying a Taliban order to not teach girls.

Before they can hope to gain an education, Afghan women and girls need protection from abduction and rape by armed men, being traded to settle disputes and debts, and forced and underage marriage. By being married as young as 12, females are denied their right to education and the freedom to decide the course that they wish their lives to take. A ban on interaction between unrelated men and women greatly inhibits women's access to the workplace, courts, and schools, because these places are segregated or exclusively male.

Afghan women get almost no protection from the state. In fact, a report issued in November by the Pentagon and the US State Department found that the police force in Afghanistan is largely incapable of carrying out routine law enforcement. Violence against Afghan women is normal. It is tolerated at the highest levels of government. Some judges disregard the law and rely on tradition to hold women responsible for being attacked, thus sanctioning brutality. The perpetrators of violence against women are rarely charged. If cases are prosecuted, the men are usually let go or punished lightly. Women who report rape risk being accused of having committed

the crime of having sex outside marriage.

Violence against women by family members also is common. It ranges from forced deprivation of education to beatings, sexual violence and killings. Many acts of violence involve traditional crimes of honour, when a female is punished by her family for shaming them; perhaps she got raped. Punishment can mean being stoned or burned or beaten to death.

Glimmers of progress are visible in Afghanistan. In 2004 a new constitution was adopted which proclaimed that “the citizens of Afghanistan – whether man or woman – have equal rights before the law.” It also provides for a minimum representation of women in both houses of parliament.

In 2005 the first woman was appointed as governor of a province. Over 40 percent of women were registered as voters in 2004. Women are officially allowed to seek employment -- albeit with permission from family members. One in five girls now attends primary school. Nearly all the younger women interviewed recently by Amnesty International expressed their wish for the future as simply being able to continue their education. As skeptics in New Zealand look to soldier on in 2007, we can be thankful for the freedoms we enjoy.

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

### From Page 17

by a calendar that cannot be calculated before it happens!

If one wants to hold a celebratory party there are lots of dates to choose from. However we should not lose sight of the fact that all this is predicated on a flat earth. Our earth does not have days, sunsets, sunrises, or times; these apply only to specific places on earth. The sun is always rising somewhere, and it is also setting somewhere else. Just consider day 5 in Eden when god created fish and birds. At that time it was day 4 in America when he should still be creating the sun and moon. And when he was busy creating humans in Eden on day 6 it was day 7 in NZ when he should have been resting.

The Jesuit Christopher Clavius (1537-1612) was the architect of the Gregorian calendar reforms. He was the first to show in print an understanding that a spherical earth was fatal to a literal reading of the Genesis account. The new calendar was produced at least in part as an attempt to get a ‘correct’ date for Easter and critics complained the new calendar did not allow all Christians to celebrate Easter simultaneously. Clavius pointed out this was impossible now Christians were spread out across many meridians, and therefore some compromise was needed.

Clavius also explained that the traditional ideas on the correct date for Easter (based on sightings of the new moon and the Jewish calendar) were predicated on a flat earth (it is a wonder that he was never seriously threatened by the inquisition, however

he was protected by a close relationship with the pope).

It was essential, wrote Clavius, that the church adopted a compromise because the new moon does not occur at the same time at all longitudes. The first sighting of a new moon requires an observer at a particular longitude. Thus in some months it will be seen in Rome though it could not be seen at Jerusalem a few hours earlier. In fact people at different places on earth may see the same new moon on different days. Therefore any calendar that depends on the sighting of a new moon will not work for a globular earth.

### editorial

### From Page 2

It has also been suggested by some that we should move away from the term ‘skeptic’ completely, because it has negative connotations and is commonly misunderstood. To quote one of our committee members, “I get fed up with explaining to people that sceptic does not mean cynic and we are not party-poopers!” However, it is difficult to come up with a suitable alternative. Terms such as ‘Society for Science and Reason’, ‘Sense About Science’ and ‘Common Sense About Nonsense’ have arisen, but none of these seem to properly reflect our *raison d’être*.

If we are to change the name, it will require a resolution at our next AGM. For the moment, the committee invites discussion and suggestions on whether we need a name change and what it should be.

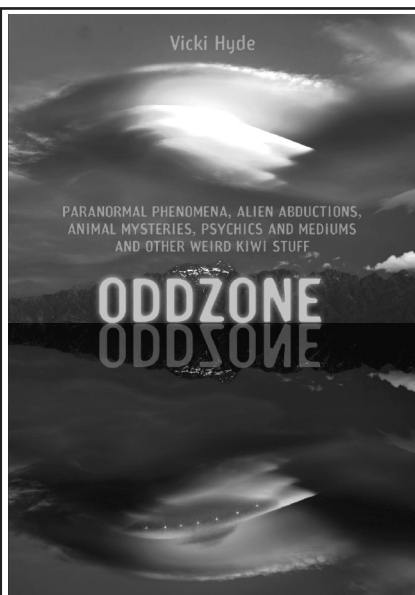
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