

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

> **Ethnic fundamentalism Psychic hotlines** Missing persons **Meteorites**

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Contributions

Contributions are welcome and should be sent to:

David Riddell 122 Woodlands Rd RD1 Hamilton Email: number8@ihug.co.nz

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An Aussie takeover?

THE Letters to the Editor columns have been spilling over with irate readers concerned about yet another attack on New Zealand's sovereignty. The cause of all the anger is the proposed Therapeutic Goods Act, which would see a trans-Tasman agency take over the regulation of therapeutic products — a term which includes not only medicines and medical devices, but also complementary medicines and dietary supplements. No one seems too concerned that the new Australia New Zealand Therapeutic Products Authority will be regulating medicines; the fuss is all about what this move will do to the alternative health industry.

The bill's opponents say about half of the 700 or so alternative remedies and supplements currently on the market would have to be removed from the shelves, and small companies would not be able to afford the \$1500 to \$50,000 required to register a product. About half the population – some two million people – use such products, and this move would deny them choice, they say. But it's the notion that this country's health decisions will be made by a "foreign power" that really seems to have gotten people worked up.

Strictly speaking, this is to be a trans-Tasman authority, with offices in both Wellington and Canberra. But it is clear that this is being driven, at least from the New Zealand side, by assessments in 2000 and 2002 from the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER), showing that the country's therapeutic products regulatory system was not sustainable. We do not, the NZIER argued, have the technical expertise to continue to evaluate the risks and benefits of increasingly complex and high risk products. It is inevitable, given Australia's greater population and superior resources, that that country will be the senior partner in the new authority, but this is still a body in which New Zealand will be an active participant.

It makes sense in this increasingly globalised world for countries to share resources in the increasingly complex task of assessing and regulating all that's on offer, conventional or otherwise, in the health field. It also removes a somewhat anomalous special exemption for the Closer Economic Relations agreements.

The number of products on the shelves has risen exponentially in recent years, and if this move results in some reduction, consumers will still have plenty of choice. We should not bemoan the fact that some treatments which have no demonstrated efficacy will no longer be available. And the regulations apply to only to pre-prepared and manufactured complementary medicine products which are sold off the shelf. They don't apply to practitioners such as naturopaths, traditional Chinese or Maori healers, and the products they make and supply to individual patients, or to personal imports or herbs cultivated for immediate personal or family use. Those who insist on their right to unproven treatments will not be short of options.



Ethnic fundamentalism in New Zealand

Elizabeth Rata

Ethnic fundamentalism is a form of 'secular religion', an oxymoron that resists criticism. This article, originally presented at the NZ Skeptics conference in Auckland, September 2006, interrogates the beliefs of those who insist that ethnicity plays the primary and determining in creating the person. Are such beliefs merely old-fashioned and discredited racism in a new guise?

IDESCRIBE ethnic fundamentalism or culturalism as a 'secular religion' because this particular way of understanding what ethnicity means shares a number of important features

with religion. First, it is a set of beliefs about human nature. Second, those beliefs are unchallenged and unchallengeable. Third, ethnic fundamentalism rejects doubt and has a difficult relationship with reason.

The need to keep beliefs that are not exposed to the challenges of doubt, reason and judgement away from politics is the reason why the separation of church and state, the separation of science and religion are at the heart of democracy. Democracy is peaceful battle. It can work only if its battles are fought with reason, and

not with blind faith. Reason is the democratic method. Those forces that enter the political arena without a commitment to reason are deeply subversive of democracy. One such is ethnic fundamentalism.

I want to describe five beliefs of ethnic fundamentalism in

order to show how the politicisation of ethnicity is subverting democracy in New Zealand. But before I do I need to clarify my terms. 'Ethnicity' refers to a combination of culture – what



Elizabeth Rata: "Reason is the democratic method."

we do and how we understand ourselves – and genetic inheritance (or race). Ethnicity became popular in the social sciences in the late 1960s and spread rapidly into common usage. It was an attempt to 'edit out' the increasingly discredited term 'race' from our vocabularies.

However changing a word does not change the concept. Ethnicity does not mean culture only. It has a genetic, biological, ie race, component that does not go away simply because it is an

> uncomfortable notion for the social constructivists amongst us.

> The confusion which dogs these words was vividly demonstrated in the responses by Pita Sharples and Willie Jackson to Don Brash's musings on the complexity of identity. According to Pita Sharples, as quoted in the New Zealand Herald when describing what it is to be Maori: "Culture is not about the amount of blood you have, it is about beliefs, customs and aspirations." Well, that it true, but to be eligible for the

Maori electoral roll and to claim tertiary Maori scholarships, one does in fact need the blood. It is disingenuous of Pita Sharples to ignore this fact. Willie Jackson, on the other hand, did refer to "whakapapa" as "what determined being Maori, the ability to link genetically to a Maori

ancestor". Put both these explanations together and we have a more complete understanding of ethnicity. It is about identifying with a particular social group in order to live a certain way - ie culture - and it is also about genetic or racial inheritance being the means to classifying oneself with that particular group.

Interestingly I have noticed in recent months that the softer term 'diversity' is increasingly favoured in light of the inability of 'ethnicity' to shrug off its genetic or race component. However, softening the words, first by ity', then by replacing ethnicity with diversity doesn't change the concept itself - the idea of identifying with a social group on the basis of genetic ancestry. Not that there is anything wrong with that in itself.

The primacy of racial identity

Before turning to what the problem really is I first need to describe the five main beliefs of ethnic fundamentalists or culturalists. The first belief holds that our ethnic or racial identity is our primary and determining personal identity. This denies the fact that identity in the modern democratic world is individual identity. The modern person is the autonomous, self-creating, self-directed, independent individual who makes choices (even the choice not to exercise choice and not to be independent). This privilege of choice was not available to our ancestors who were locked into the birthascribed identities of traditional cultures. It is not available today to the millions who live under neotraditionalist elites - these

are theocracies and oligarchies (such as the Tongan elite) who use traditional beliefs as political controls on others while themselves enjoying the fruits of modernity.

We modern individuals make choices about which identity matters the most to us - which identity is the one that we will invest with enormous subjective meaning. An example is the welleducated professional class of the 1980s who chose to identify in ethnic terms, and referred to

According to this belief the replacing 'race' with 'ethnic- way a person thinks, behaves and relates to others is caused by 'blood' or in more acceptable terms, by 'spirit'. It is biological determinism or racism dressed in intellectual garb.

> themselves with considerable pride as 'pakeha'. Not all settler-descendants chose to do so. The interesting question, and one I don't have time to discuss here, is why a particular group within the post-war new middle class chose an ethnic identity. Previously of course, the term 'pakeha' was one used in the main by Maori to describe those who arrived from Britain and their descendants. It is unusual to find a group, particularly a relatively privileged middle class group, who take on an ethnicised identity as the identity of choice. It does appear, however, that since the early 1990s there has been a silent retreat from that process.

> For many people, the meaning of who they are is intimately tied

to the idea of ethnic belonging. There are those who choose their primary social identity to be pakeha. Others, with Maori ancestry, choose Maori identity as their defining subjectivity. From a democratic point of view the right to choose a determining identity, including an ethnicised one, must be supported. It is the same for those who wish to define themselves in religious terms. As long as such identities remain private choices, practised in association with others

of like minds, there is no problem however much one may dislike the emphasis on a primary identity that is genetically based. It is the right of an individual in a democratic country to make that choice.

Primordial racial groups

The second belief is that the ethnic or racial group is primordial - existing from the beginning of time and known through the mythologies that are regarded as histories - that the group is distinctive and separate. This denies the universal human reality of migration, genetic mixing and social mixing. It certainly denies the New Zealand reality.

Cultural determinism

Third is the belief that how people live and understand their lives (culture) is caused by who they are (their ancestral descent or ethnicity/race). Who we are in terms of the ancestral genetic group causes what we do and the meaning we give to our actions (ie culture). It is a belief that has taken on its own life in education. Such cultural determinism is behind the idea of kaupapa Maori

research, 'Maori maths', 'Maori pedagogy', 'Maori research' and so on. It is currently being extended to the idea of a Pasifika pedagogy. The equivalent in India is the idea of Vedic science, the Hindutva fundamentalism that made huge inroads in India during the 1990s and is roundly criticised by the philosopher, Meera Nanda. According to this belief the way a person thinks, behaves and relates to others is caused by 'blood' or in more acceptable terms, by 'spirit'. It is biological determinism or racism dressed in intellectual garb.

Autochthony

The fourth belief is that an ethnic group indigenous to an area is autochthonous, that is, the group is 'of the land' in a way that is qualitatively different from those who arrive later. The important point here is that - as a consequence of this fact – the first group claims a particular political status with entitlements not available to others. It is 'blood and soil' ideology, located in mythological origins and seductive in its mystical appeal. By separating those who are 'indigenous' from those who are not – in terms of political recognition, a fundamental categorisation occurs which then becomes built into political institutions. Such a categorisation principle can be extended – why not have a number of 'classes' of citizens - those who arrived first, those who came a little later, while those who have only just arrived would be a most unfortunate class indeed. In time it is quite possible that these 'classes' could become rigid caste divisions

Ethnic rights

The fifth belief is that because of the claim of the primacy of ethnicity as the mechanism for classifying social groups, individuals should be classified as members of ethnic categories and that these groups should be the bearers of political rights and be recognised in the public and political sphere. This means that membership of an ethnic category takes precedence over citizenship as a person's primary political status. This is perhaps the most serious of all the beliefs in this racial ideology because of its implications for national cohesion and democratic government. It is where ethnic fundamentalism becomes a major problem for us all.

The politicisation of ethnicity

Since the 1970s, the worldwide shift to identity politics has led to the politicisation of ethnicity. This means officially classifying and categorising people according to their ethnic or racial heritage. It is now pervasive in all areas of state and public activity in this country, particularly and most dangerously in education, including those places which should be the bastions of disinterested science, the universities. New Zealand is not alone of course. In fact I have chosen a UK example of how ridiculous the process of ethnic classification can be because it is an extreme version – though we are not far behind.

The example is taken from the United Kingdom's Department for Education and Skills' Race Equality Scheme. The document makes use of a plethora of terms. Within the space of a few

pages the reader can find: ethnic groups; Asian backgrounds; Chinese and Indian (in the UK); White British; ethnic minority groups; Black Caribbean pupils; Black and Asian students; Black British; Asian British (all on the same page); minority ethnic groups; pupils from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds; BME (which is explained in a Glossary at the end of the document as meaning Black and Minority Ethnic); BEMG (which is said to refer to Black Ethnic Minority Group); Traveller; Irish heritage; Gypsy/Roma; individual minority ethnic groups; Black young people; White British young people; Black young males; and Ethnic Minority and ethnic diversity; Black, Asian and people of mixed ethnic origin.

I need add here that I am talking about politicising ethnicity. I am not talking about the social reality – that we do have diverse communities where we meet as Maori, as Irish, as Hindu, as Muslims, as Rotarians, as Anglicans, as inline hockey players, as Plunket parents, as alienated youth, as Skeptics and so on. For some people, ethnic identity is extremely important and for these, associating with others of the same ethnicity to practise the culture of the group is necessary for their well-being. For others, such identification is much less so. Like religion, like lifestyle identities, maintaining close ties with others whom we regard as 'like us' can provide psychological security and stability in a complex world. I have no quarrel with this and fully support the wonderfully vibrant celebrations of diverse cultures (some ethnic based, some religious, some lifestyle) that occur throughout the country. This includes Maori television, Chinese New Year celebrations, theatre and music which has its origins in Europe, contemporary youth culture, and so on.

Why have a nation?

What I do consider a serious problem is politicising these forms of social classification so that ethnic categories become a means for the public recognition of people. Individuals are treated by government and its agencies, including schools and hospitals, as members of their ethnic group. This is so serious because the democratic political arena is where we meet as New Zealanders, as equal citizens of a united nation. That public arena is textured by the contributing communities certainly, but it is the place where we unite – as a social group that is also a political entity. Because if we don't, why have a nation? The New Zealand nation exists because it has both a site – the state – and a subject – the citizen.

Obviously we want to recognise the social reality that New Zealanders are descended from a range of ethnic ancestries and, as a result, contain groups who do wish to maintain a range of different cultural values, beliefs and practices. That is their democratic right. However, while retaining those links with our various histories we also need to identity with the larger New Zealand social group that is present and future oriented. The past does matter but so too does the future.

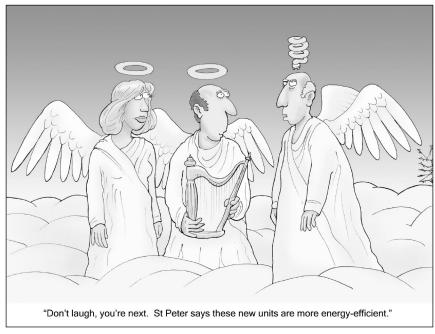
Sincethe 1970s, we have worked systematically, particularly in education, to demolish the political and symbolic structures of nationhood. These are the tangible and intangible forces that create and maintain social cohesion and a sense of belonging to the nation 'New Zealand'. Without a common national identity what is to stop New Zealand going the way of other fragmenting nations?

That there is considerable uncertainty about how to classify 'New Zealander' is demonstrated by the response to the census last year. Here a number of people insisted on recording 'New Zealander' as their ethnicity. Of course this exacerbated the problem. It turned a term that refers to national identity into one that refers to ethnic identity - reducing 'New Zealander' to just one of a number of ethnic categories in the process. However it did show that there is considerable frustration about politicising ethnic categories when the political category of a democracy is citizenship of the nation.

The problem is that when we politicise ethnicity – by classifying, categorising and

institutionalising people on the basis of ethnicity – we establish the platform for ethnonationalism. There are sufficient examples of ethno-nationalism in contemporary times, let alone horrific examples from history, for us to be very wary of a path that replaces the individual citizen with the ethnic person as the political subject.

Interestingly the process of ethnic politicisation is one driven by small well-educated elites. In Rwanda for example, the ethnic doctrine 'the Mahutu Manifesto' of 1953 was written and promulgated by 11 highly educated individuals identifying politically as Hutu. Even the killing weapons in the 1994 genocide, the machetes and scythes, were deliberately chosen and imported in their tens of thousands to represent the glorious new peasant ethnic republic that was about to dawn (once its 'enemies' had been eliminated). The raw material of the ethnic ideologies that fuelled the violence in Bosnia and Serbia was supplied by intellectuals. Pol Pot began his killing campaigns immediately on his return from study in Paris.



In New Zealand we are obviously not far down the track towards ethno-nationalism. However we need to recognise that the ideas which fuel ethnic politics are well established and naturalised in this country and that the politicisation of ethnicity is underway. The idea that people should be recognised in government institutions, such as schools and universities, by their ethnic category, is part of such racial ideology, part of the ethnic fundamentalism that is so difficult to challenge because if one does so one is labeled racist or anti-Maori (despite the opposite being the case). However ethnic fundamentalism must be challenged, not only because of its potential threat to democracy but because the challenge itself is democracy in action. All ideas, all movements should be reguired to account for themselves through rational debate.

My main purpose has been to contribute to such a debate. to identity the beliefs of ethnic fundamentalism and to ask why ethnic identity should be more fundamental, more primary, more determining of our lives, than national identity? This is a decision we make for ourselves. We choose what matters to us. Yet for several decades, the decision has been, under the bicultural banner, to prioritise ethnicity. The problem with that approach is that we can't change who our ancestors are

Ethno-nationalism is the antithesis of democratic nationalism because the former creates its political categories from the past while democratic nationalism has one political category – that of citizenship, a category

that quite rightly looks more to the future than to the past in order to include individuals of all ethnicities, religions and lifestyles.

Ethnic fundamentalism is no better and no worse than the myriad of other fundamentalisms that some individuals impose upon themselves (or have imposed upon them) to give their lives meaning. It becomes a danger to liberal societies regulated by democratic politics when ethnicity is politicised. By politicising ethnicity, by basing this man-made system of classification and categorisation on historical rather than contemporary group membership, we set

ourselves on the path to ethnonationalism. We shall reap as we have sown.

Elizabeth Rata teaches in the Faculty of Education at Auckland University and is an Honorary Research Fellow in Political Studies and founding member of the Politics of Social Regulation Research Group. She was a Fulbright Senior Scholar to Georgetown University, Washington DC in 2003. With Roger Openshaw she is the author of Public Policy and Ethnicity: The Politics of Ethnic Boundary-Making. (Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2006).

phone psychics

Psychic hotlines cast a dreary spell

Robin Shepherd

An Auckland University study reveals the costs – financial and emotional – of telephone psychics.

THERE are no published reports estimating how many people use psychic hotlines in New Zealand, but belief in paranormal phenomena is widespread. It is also not known how much is spent on psychic hotlines in New Zealand, but it is known to be a billion dollar business in the US.

Psychics are encouraged to keep the caller on the phone for at least 15 minutes, generating \$40-\$60 per call. In America, one service had approximately six million callers spending an average of \$60 (NZ\$90). Likewise, New Zealand psychic hotlines can charge from \$2.99

(excluding GST) to \$4.99 per minute.

In this context, psychic hotlines aim to make as much money as possible and exploit human vulnerabilities as quoted on a website:

"In turn, the other end is a person who has been set up with a phone by the psychic company. The scammer will keep the unsuspecting *victim* on the phone for as long as possible as they are being charged minute by minute and the charges are astronomical. Most of the scammers are just good actors and incredibly skilled at keeping people intrigued."

Frederick Woodruff, an American telephone psychic, wrote candidly about his experience working on a psychic hotline in his book, Secrets of a Telephone Psychic. He confesses:

"So, imagine sitting by a phone that has been converted into another worldly pipeline – waiting for it to ring. And if rent is due, I am hoping it will ring, and ring a lot."

One woman, Sarah Lassez, describes her experiences addicted to psychic hotlines in her book, Psychic Junkie. She writes:

"It goes without saying that I couldn't afford these readings. The issue of my massive debt and barely-there unemployment cheques versus my tendency to spend a lot on psychics was one I knew I had to address, but the problem was that stopping just didn't seem to be an option. No. I had to think of something else, and was thus quite pleased with myself when I discovered the free three minutes that Psychicdom and a couple other sites offered."

As a psychologist, I was fascinated to explore why individuals would ring psychic hotlines. I was particularly interested in individuals who were 'addicted' to ringing the hotlines. In total, I interviewed 17 women and one male (this study is ongoing). All but one sought guidance for relationship issues. Most were recruited on an online support group for 'psychic junkies'. The ages ranged from early 20s to 60 years of age. Most of the women were single. Most participants in the sample were raised as Catholics and they either became 'spiritual' or changed their religion over time. Most of the women dabbled in other psychic phenomena such as tarot card reading, astrology, runes, numerology, and angel cards. Two of the women considered themselves psychic and one of these psychics worked on a psychic hotline for a short time.

Two of the women were befriended by their hotline psychics. One woman psychic lured a woman to join a psychic development group. The woman was not happy when the development group (after one session) did not provide her with information about her lost cat. The other woman became 'friends' with another phone psychic. The woman would visit the phone psychic at her home. The woman disclosed that the psychic told her that she worked as a phone psychic since she lost her teeth and she didn't want any face to face contact, but she had to provide some income to feed her five children. In exchange for psychic readings, the



woman would bring the psychic coffee and lunches. This friend-ship ended abruptly when the psychic left her five children to be with her lover in Australia (I thought the psychic was worried about her missing teeth?).

What does this small sample of self-selected people say about psychic hotlines? The findings, although limited, suggest that individuals do not ring psychic hotlines for entertainment purposes! All of these participants rang psychic hotlines to provide temporary relief, thus giving them some hope in the short term. One of the callers said that when she rings she feels like a closet alcoholic and she enjoyed being 'naughty'. She disclosed that her friends would be shocked if they knew. Most reported getting a 'buzz' from the readings.

Another interesting finding was the amount of money individuals spent on psychic hotlines. The amount varied, but the average per year in this sample was more than \$7000. For example, one person said that she had spent \$10-15,000 in two years; another has spent \$60,000 since 1993, with a binge cycle to her spending; a third has spent \$30,000 in eight years. Others confessed to being binge callers ringing several times a day and then stopping for a few days. The figures are summarised in Table 1. Not all participants answered all questions. Data keeps coming in; a recent participant spent US\$3000 in one month, with \$1500 on a single session. The record so far goes to a British participant, who spent £40,000 in 10 months

The first three free minutes is usually taken up locating the right psychic for you.

The View from the Other Side

I also interviewed two women, Stacy and Lydia², who had worked on psychic hotlines for a short time. These are their stories.

Stacy, a mother of two, worked on a few hotlines for short periods to get her through university. She uses tarot cards during the phone readings. Stacy reports request a reading, rather they were lonely and they wanted to chat.

Lydia defines herself as a practising psychic as well as a medium. Lydia worked on two psychic hotlines approximately six or seven years ago. She did not stay long at the hotlines. Lydia states, "The people were mainly quite desperate in wanting changes and wanting me to make it for them. I hated it when

ing about relationships (Will he come back to me? Is my husband having an affair? Will I ever find the right man?) Men would most likely ask about gambling results (eg Lotto numbers, horse racing).

Overall, one of the hotline psychics depicts the callers as lonely or desperate for some reassurance regarding relationships. The other psychic made similar comments, but added

> that she didn't want to be responsible for other

> people's lives. However, she would rather practise mediumship and provide messages from beyond the grave. Both psychics reported that callers do not ring 'for entertainment purposes' as advertised in the psychic hotline ads. Rather they are looking for relief from uncertainty in their lives.

Interestingly, the Psychic Readers Network "briefly established" the Professional Advisors Network in 1993 to replace psychics with psychiatrists and psychotherapists but no one rang.

Unlike the psychics, I will let you come to your own conclusions.

Robin Shepherd is a research psychologist at Auckland University who also conducts research in gambling and social phobia; however, studying paranormal phenomena is her passion. People who have rung psychic hotlines excessively, or have worked on a psychic hotline and who wish to participate in this survey, can contact the author at rm.shepherd@auckland.ac.nz

Participant	Annual Cost	Period	Amount per call	Total spent
1	\$7500	2 yrs	\$50-100	\$15,000
2	\$3750	8 yrs	\$30-50	\$30,000
3	\$6670	3 yrs	\$10-50	\$20,000
4	-	4 yrs	\$70 package deal	"thousands"
5	\$4000	5 yrs	\$30	\$20,000
6	\$5000	2 yrs	\$50	\$10,000
7	-	3 yrs	\$30-200	"thousands"
8	\$3000	5 yrs	\$20-100+	\$15,000
9	\$20,000	10 mths	\$20-300	\$20,000
10	\$2000	2 yrs	\$5	\$4000
11	-	-	\$30-70	\$20,000
12	\$4000	6 mths	\$150	\$4000
13	\$20,000	8 mths	-	\$20,000
14	-	2 yrs	\$75	"several thousands"
15	\$4280	14 yrs	\$20-300	\$60,000
16	\$3000 (worst year)	-	\$50-240	-
17	\$20,000	1 yr		\$20,000
18	\$4170	6 yrs		\$25,000

Table 1. Spending patterns of phone psychic 'addicts'.

that 90 percent of the queries on her weekend shift were concerning relationships, another 10 percent included queries such as finding a lost item (such as a ring), money and job issues, or queries regarding their children. Sunday morning was the busiest time with the majority of questions involving the breakdown of relationships on the Friday or Saturday night. Her clientele were mainly women, with gay men the next largest group. Interestingly, elderly people would ring up late at night following TV advertisements of psychic hotlines. The elderly would not

2

the calls were looking for the lucky numbers for Lotto, so I put them right about the 'odds' and they didn't want to hear that! And I refused to bluff them, against my integrity to do that."

Lydia further states, "I found it all much too depressing as I am not responsible for others' lives. However, I did get some rewards when I got a strong link with spirit to bring them a message from someone who had passed over from this life."

Lydia reports that the majority of callers were female ask-

Creationist Museum up and running

A fter years of planning and fund-raising among the faithful, the Creation Museum has finally opened in Kentucky (Los Angeles Times, May 31).

The 5600 square metre museum cost US\$27 million and brings, says the LA Times, new standards of high-tech polish to anti-evolution arguments and takes creationist tourism to a new level

Patrick Marsh, who worked on the Jaws and King Kong attractions at Florida's Universal Studios, is largely responsible for the slick animatronic dinosaur displays, which feature Velociraptors cavorting among buckskin-clad children in an innocent and vegetarian pre-Fall world. Actually, this is a puzzle: creationists maintain that Adam and Eve didn't have children until after the Fall – by which time Velociraptors would not have been vegetarian. Dinosaurs are everywhere in the museum.

"Kids are fascinated by them," said Ken Ham, the Australianborn president of Answers in Genesis, who has spearheaded the museum project. "We like to say, 'You've captured them for evolution, and we're going to take them back.""

Organisers are expecting to attract 250,000 yearly visitors, who will pay US\$9.95 to \$19.95 for a ticket.

While the museum undoubtedly has a constituency, many are unimpressed. "This is to science what Joe Camel was to health – a crass marketing ploy that cynically preys on the impressionable minds of children," said Clark Stevens, the co-director of the Campaign to Defend the Constitution, a group that advocates science education and the separation of church and state.

The museum maintains that after Noah's Ark ran aground in Central Asia, the surviving animals repopulated the other continents by floating across the oceans on the "billions of trees" uprooted by the great deluge.

Assertions like that make-Cleveland University physicist Lawrence Krauss laugh out loud. "Any child knows that when they make up a story, and unfortunately make up the facts, they have to make up more and more excuses to justify those facts."

Meanwhile in the Coromandel...

Before we start laughing at those crazy people in Kentucky, we might consider a report in the NZ Herald (June 2). The Dinosaurs Aotearoa Museum Trust is working with Wellington's Weta Workshop to create life-sized dinosaurs for a 40ha theme park and museum, probably on the Coromandel Peninsula. Trust founders Darren and Jackie Bush operate a Wellington business called Dinosaurs Rock, which runs geology programmes for schools, presenting both evolution and the biblical view that the

Compiled by David Riddell

world was created in seven days about 6000 years ago.

Mr and Mrs Bush are New Zealanders who spent 20 years in Australia. They would not say whether they believed in evolution or creationism.

Their trust's objectives are to develop "a forum/facility where different world interpretations of science are presented without bias in the light of development of scientific knowledge".

Sounds like the old 'equal time' argument all over again. But whether they can come up with the \$30 million they want for this project remains to be seen.

Scientologists too

The Church of Scientology, at least, is not short of the ready cash needed to achieve its real estate aspirations (NZ Herald, June 6). In a move intended to boost their image and presence in this country, the church has bought a prominent Auckland building for \$10 million.

The Whitecliffe building, perched above the Southern Motorway at Grafton, will have room for about 100 church staff who are expected to move in and run courses on the teachings of its founder, L Ron Hubbard. It was formerly occupied by the Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, which has fitted the building out with art studios, a library, darkrooms, seminar rooms and a lecture hall. Built in 1929, the building has a Category Two listing with the Historic Places Trust.

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RIGHT AWAY!

"The building was not on the market and they had to pay a premium to get it," said Kevin Richards, a spokesman for the real estate consultants who handled the sale.

Church spokesman Mike Ferriss said the Scientologists had a philosophy of restoring heritage buildings which was "about creating links from the past into a stronger, brighter future."

'Snake oil' farmer still defiant

A farmer whose fertiliser product was labelled snake oil by a judge remains defiant after being ordered to pay fines and costs totalling \$272,499 (Dominion Post, June 2).

The Commerce Commission, who brought the case against Ewan Campbell, signalled further court action, saying it was considering a civil case to recover customers' losses incurred from the use of his product, Probitas.

It estimated the loss of production by Probitas' farmer-clients in the first year alone to have totalled \$5 million. But Campbell, who did not attend the sentencing, said the case against him was "a load of tripe" and "legal trickery".

Campbell said the commission had failed to produce any farmers who felt defrauded. "If we've caused so much harm, where are they?" he asked. Many of his 1000 clients had increased their farm income by more than \$100,000 from the use of Probitas, he said.

Farmers and horticulturists pay \$300 to \$350 a tonne for

Probitas, which is based on a silica conditioner that Campbell says activates the electrical and magnetic processes in the soil, releasing locked up nutrients otherwise unavailable to plants.

But soil scientist Douglas Edmeades told the court there was no scientific basis for the way Probitas was supposed to work. "Silica is one of the most inert minerals on Earth and it is beyond the realms of probability that the mode of action they are claiming is correct," he said.

Judge Russell Callander said Campbell's claims about his product had been proven beyond reasonable doubt to have been misleading and deceptive. "The real science shows that farmers were clearly taken in and misinformed by the representations and this, ultimately, would be to their detriment."

Student leader repays \$6000 psychic hotline bill

The lure of telephone psychics has claimed another victim (see article, p7). Victoria University Students Association acting women's rights officer Clelia Opie was sacked from her position after making almost \$6000 worth of phone calls to a psychic hotline (NZ Herald, May 22).

Her dumping came after it emerged she had been making calls to 0900 numbers from phones in the student union building, the student magazine Salient reported.

Her predilection for fortune telling was exposed after a bizarre evening at the student union offices when another association member went on an alcohol-fuelled graffiti-scribbling rampage. Ms Opie was on the phone making lengthy expensive calls to 0900 numbers and refused requests from suspicious association officers to hang up.

Association president Geoff Hayward described the fallout from the evening as the worst day of his presidency. Ms Opie was removed from her post – which she had been co-opted into after an elected member resigned – three weeks later.

Oh baby, what art thou?

The Waikato Times (June 30) had fun with a reader's question about how to predict an unborn baby's gender. Before getting down to the serious answers (ultrasound, amniocentesis), and after warning that sceptics might as well skip straight to these bits, it described what it called "the two biggies".

The first of these, the shape test, holds that if the mother's belly is pointed the baby will be a girl; if it has a more "sideways" appearance it will be a boy. For the ring test you rub a ring belonging to the mother over one of her fingers, then suspend it above the palm of her hand, or above her belly, preferably using a hair from her own head, and observe its movement. If it swings side to side, the baby will be a boy; if it circles, the baby will be a girl.

Another theory eliminates the need for any testing, checking or scrutinising. "Put simply, if you, um, do it with the lights on you will have a boy. Why? We have absolutely no idea."

Missing the mark

Mike Bradstock

An article in the Listener makes much ado about very little.

The week after the Listener won Best News-stand Magazine of the Year its cover featured three mug shots of ordinary-looking people and the headline:

6000 NZ cases each year

MISSING

What if someone you love just <u>vanished</u>?

Six *thousand* people vanish a

year? That's more than 16 a day! Many if not most of us would infer from these words that the people had been missing for a long time and would probably never be found

I thought, this *can't* be true, and my suspicion was soon confirmed as I read the article. The problem was that the writers, Denis Welch and Olivia Kember, had failed to come to grips with a range of differing statistics on 'missing', 'disappeared' and 'vanished' people, and the ambiguities inherent in those terms. Actually the article quoted a figure of 12,000, taken from the police website,

but omitted the website's crucial next sentence: "... within 48

hours most missing persons will either be found safe and well or will have returned home." Later I was to discover that the figure of 6000 came from a Missing Persons Unit police officer.

This struck a familiar chord. Twice in the past when members of my extended family have been on a motoring tour there has been some misunderstanding over their itinerary, resulting in no one was really missing: there was just doubt as to whether they were safe, and for a short time they could theoretically have vanished.

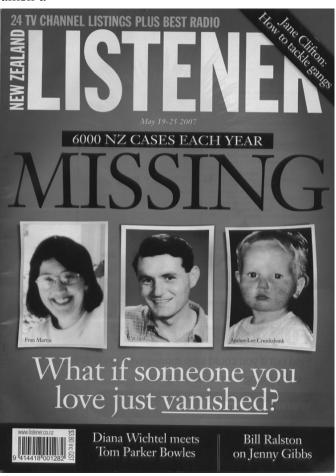
So I wrote a letter to the editor, making most of the above points and saying that the statistics were "disgracefully muddled ... a mish-mash of confused figures."

Welch himself replied, say-

ing, "I think you've been a bit harsh on us. I agonised a lot over what figure of missing people was correct and consequently feel that you have been rather selective in your own quoting of the article, as I did say 'All figures should be treated with caution'."

Yes, he had said that, and no, I hadn't quoted it. But I thought it was ironic that readers were expected to treat these figures with caution when the journalists had been so careless with them. For one thing, the caveat wouldn't be read by anyone who just saw the cover at the newsstand. If Welch "ago-

nised" over the missing-persons statistics, why didn't he make more effort to clarify them?



anxious calls to the police and presumably adding more "missing persons" to the statistics. But

Welch continued: "I was also careful to refer to 'cases' of missing people (I insisted our coverline should use that word) and not to imply that at any given time thousands were missing." But I couldn't see how the word "cases" clarified anything – and still I can't.

There were other things in the article that bothered me too, for example the statement that psychics hadn't located any missing persons "so far", and tabloidstyle innuendo in the comment on one genuine vanished-person case that "some of the original police files and photographs have gone missing." There was further innuendo about missing children ("child abduction continues to be rife in the US") and a man "allegedly a member of a paedophile ring" had been accused of murdering some children "but proof has still to be produced". Of course, each of these tidbits on its own is minor, but there were more like them and overall I thought this was a sitter for the Bent Spoon.

I wrote back to Welch and said this. He responded by inviting me to write "a new, more balanced letter", so I did (without quibbling over what was "less balanced" about the first). And he said that he was happy to print it – except for the following:

"Now, of course, the damage is done, and the '6000 a year' figure on your cover will probably become committed to folklore, like 'one girl in 4 will be molested before the age of 18', for which we have the promoters of the 1988 Telethon to thank."

This bit, he said, was "pure sensationalising".

Nonplussed, I replied that it was the most important point of the whole letter: that the Listener was fomenting an urban myth. It felt as though I was being censored, so I chose not to have my letter published at all, and turned my energies to writing this instead.

And I've thought long and hard about where the line lies between abridgement and censorship. I just don't know. Certainly editors shouldn't have to publish any old half-baked and ill-informed diatribe (though I

think that describes some Listener letters pretty well). But Welch arguably had a personal interest in abridging a letter that criticised not only the magazine, but his own work as well. This perhaps amounted to censorship, and would be all the more deserving of a Bent Spoon.

Mike Bradstock is director of the publishing consultancy Bradstock & Associates and was formerly director of Canterbury University Press.

meteorites

Who believed stones fall from the sky?

Jim Ring

It's often said that scientists long rejected the idea of meteorites, but the evidence for this assertion is far from convincing.

PSEUDOSCIENCE constantly attempts to discredit science. One method is to complain that scientists have failed to accept facts that were both plain and obvious. Then, if science does not accept homeopathy, telepathy etc, this is to be expected and no reason to doubt the truth of these beliefs.

For many years scientists refused, against contrary evidence, to believe that stones could fall from the sky. True or false?

In 1807 a meteorite fell in Weston, Connecticut and was investigated by Professors Silliman and Kingsley of Yale (a fact). Thomas Jefferson, then President was informed and said, "Gentlemen, I would rather believe that

those two Yankee Professors would lie than to believe that stones fell from heaven."

Jefferson corresponded with the leading scientists of his time. According to Asimov he was "the closest approach to a scientist-in-office among all the Presidents of the US." Did he really say this?

The story comes from a 1933 book by Harvey Harlow Nininger and has been quoted many times without question – even by Paul Kurtz in A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology and Asimov in his biographical sketch of Silliman. Nininger is something of a hero in the US, which is perhaps why this

To Page 16



Skull manipulation takes a lot of 'training'

John Welch

CRANIAL osteopathy is based on the notion that the bones of the skull can be manipulated. Even doctors have been taken in by this nonsense. The following account is by a registered medical practitioner, Dr Putative (not his real name).

The craniosacral movement is a rhythmical expansion of the skull and meninges around the cerebrospinal fluid. "It is a very subtle small amplitude excursion which is palpable with careful trained hands." (So there, all you Skeptics: if—like me—you can't feel it, you lack training.)

"The bones of the skull open and close rather like a flower opening to the sun."

"It must be emphasised the movement is very subtle and can only be felt after considerable practice."

The article goes on to claim that cranial osteopathy can successfully treat colic, a blocked nose, Bell's palsy, and facial asymmetry in infants. I wish it could cure terminal gullibility! When doctors involve themselves with such nonsense, it always reminds me of HL Mencken's criticism of an American gynecologist who believed in the literal truth of the story about

Jonah in the belly of the whale. I can't remember the exact words but it goes something like this: "How is it possible for the human brain to be divided into two halves? One capable of brilliant thought and the other complete balderdash!"

This quote could also apply to Dr John E Mack. (In 2004 he died after being hit by a car.) He collected a group of fantasyprone individuals whom he gradually came to believe had been abducted by aliens. Harvard was furious; some of his colleagues started a movement. Knife the Mack, but Mack became very wealthy from his book about these patients. He basically argued that because psychiatry can't explain such matters the accounts must be true. Wrong. It is well known that certain fantasy-prone individuals experience vivid dreams (hypnagogic) at certain stages of sleep.

Iridology

This absurd nonsense has now become part of mainstream pharmacy. Commercial pressures and PHARMAC, the government drug buying agency, have squeezed profits and many pharmacies stock a wide range of unproven and ridiculous products. One local pharmacy has a range of such items which is larger than the OTC section.

Another local pharmacy advertised it was going to have an in-store iridologist for the day. The iridologist was described as having a Bachelor Degree in Health Science. (BHSc) It is little wonder that universities continue to oppose the granting of such degrees by various polytechnic institutions

Chinese Frauds and Dangerous Products

The Chinese are already recognised as an international threat in regard to traffic in endangered species (eg tigers and bears) as well as promoting 'traditional products' which are adulterated with Western drugs such as steroids and Viagra.

A Chinese-made toothpaste (Excel) was withdrawn from sale in New Zealand when it was found to contain diethylene glycol, normally found as antifreeze in the radiator of your vehicle. Hmmm, could be useful when brushing your teeth in Antarctica.

It appears that Chinese doctors can be as venal and corrupt as their herbal industry. Reporters posing as patients produced urine samples which were actually green tea. The diagnosis made was urinary infection and the prescribed treatment cost \$40. One reporter re-submitted the same sample and received the same diagnosis. At least the quacks were consistent. These frauds are to be expected in a poor country where doctors are underpaid.

Some NZ Doctors perpetrate similar frauds by using 'black box' devices and other unproven treatments. These frauds are not to be expected in a country where doctors are both well paid and well educated!

Dominion Post 24 March

BMJ 9 June 2007 Volume 334 p1183

The Culture of Complaint

In his book, From Paralysis to Fatigue, Edward Shorter predicted that the next era of medicine would revolve around psychosomatic medicine. This also encompasses a culture of complaint which sees a whining populace avoiding responsibility for their own actions by finding someone else to blame for their misfortune.

There is a new vaccine (Gardasil) against human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV is the main risk factor for cervical cancer in women. Following vaccination at a school, about 25 girls presented to the sick bay with headache, nausea and dizziness. The media had a field

day while more sensible people correctly diagnosed 'mass sociogenic illness' which is a polite way of saying 'mass hysteria'. There is an excellent account online at www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20070528-Schoolgirls-have-mass-sociogenic-illness-but-Neil-Mitchell-needs-the-smelling-salts.html

There is a huge and fascinating published literature on mass hysteria. A constant feature is the rejection of this label by people involved in the incident. People do not like to accept that they have been victims of their own panic. It's much better to believe in a mysterious vapour or poison. My favorite mass hysteria story concerned a kitchen which was evacuated due to a bad smell causing symptomatic illness. It was traced to a rotten onion in a cupboard!

In the case of the Gardasil story, the media beat-up wiped \$A1 billion off the market value of the drug company.

Marlborough Express 26 April

Physiotherapy

Some time ago I roamed the internet looking for evidence supporting the efficacy of physiotherapy. I was interested in its scientific basis. I looked in vain. There are a few trials which showed certain practices were either useless or even dangerous.

I recently received a report from a specialist which included the following gem:

"I do not think that there is any specific medical contraindication to his undergoing whatever rigorous physiotherapy programme is planned for him, although by the same token I am not all that enthusiastic about physiotherapy in these situations: my opinion is that physiotherapy simply helps to pass the time and I cannot really understand what good it is meant to be doing. However...that..opinion does not sit comfortably with the ACC's and patient's enthusiasm for having their bodies tweaked and pummeled at great expense in the name of 'rehabilitation'."

The phrase "great expense" is important. There are so many treatment providers with their snouts in the ACC trough that treatment costs have become excessive. These treatment providers have developed a beneficiary mentality and whenever ACC attempts to control or restrict treatment practices there are indignant protests.

ACC reforms mean that patients can go to a treatment provider and register a claim and have treatment. If they need time off work this can only be provided by a doctor. The 'gate keeper' function of the doctor has been lost. I heard of two recent examples of how people can be harmed by this practice.

An osteopath gave a maximal number of treatments to a patient who was eventually diagnosed as having a complete rupture of the rotator cuff muscles of the shoulder. Osteopathic treatment is completely useless for this injury. In fact there is no published evidence showing that it works for *any* injury.

In the other case a 15-year-old child was treated by a physiotherapist for some time for a sore leg and was eventually diagnosed with bone cancer.

From Page 13

legend is so readily accepted, but he gave no early source for his story.

Proof needed

In the 18th century, science established that such things as fossils and stone artefacts had a terrestrial origin, though previously they were believed to have fallen to earth. Sceptical scientists began to question the idea of solid objects falling from the sky – some proof was needed. In the last decade of the 18th century two large falls of stones in Europe were observed by many people, and one of these followed the sighting of a large fireball that disappeared with a bang. The German physicist Ernst Florens Friedrick Chladni published a book translated as On the Origin of the Mass of Iron Discovered by Pallas and Others Similar to It. This carefully established a good case for the extra-terrestrial origin of meteorites.

Closer to the end of the century, Joseph Banks the president of the Royal Society, and the French mineralogist, Jackie-Louis Bournon then in England, obtained some pieces of rock, said to have fallen from the sky. These were analysed and found to be iron with a high percentage of nickel. This alloy had never been found in any rock that was definitely of earthly origin. These two scientists presented their theory to the Royal Society in London and the Institut de France in Paris respectively and it was well received by both. The latter heard also from Nicolas Louis Vauquelin who had reached similar conclusions. One

of the remarkable features of this cooperation is that Britain and France were at war.

By a fortunate coincidence a shower of stones fell near L'Aigle in Normandy on April 26th 1803. Nearly 3000 were found and the incident was investigated by Jean Baptiste Biot. Analysis showed these objects had a similar composition to previous meteorites. All major French scientists and most others around the world were convinced and Chladni received belated honour.

Well perhaps not so belated. Chladni did not really have to wait very long; it took about 10 years for acceptance of his theory. The story that scientists would not believe his story, in spite of overwhelming evidence is about as far from the truth as is possible. Also it is most unlikely that Jefferson was not fully aware of these scientific discoveries.

Giant rocks

It did take longer to establish that huge rocks, large enough to make enormous craters, could also fall. These craters were often argued to be of volcanic origin because there was clear evidence that molten rock had flowed. It was only after the work of Joule in the middle of the 19th century that it became possible to understand the huge quantity of heat that would be released in such strikes. The rock in and around the crater would be melted by the release of energy.

In 1902 Daniel Moreau Barringer, a geologist and mining engineer, decided that the great crater in Arizona was caused by

a meteor strike (though many thought it volcanic) and ought to contain a large and valuable amount of nickel/iron buried near its centre. He spent 30 years and a fortune without success, which gave some comfort to those who favoured the volcanic theory. But then in the 1950s Eugene Shoemaker showed by analysis of the data and further calculation, that most of the metal would have vaporised and this more or less settled the issue.

Years ago Fleur and I visited Meteor Crater, Arizona; I consider it one of the most dramatic natural features I have ever seen. Most geological phenomena have been produced slowly over millions of years. The idea of this one being produced in an instant is hard to comprehend. These days it is a major tourist attraction and it is not possible to explore the crater; one can only examine it from a viewing platform in company with a large number of other spectators.

We have also visited remote Wolfe Crater in WA, a much older feature on the edge of the true desert, which is gradually disappearing under wind-borne sand. This is not a tourist attraction: it is too far from tourist routes and reached via a track usable only by 4-wheel drive vehicles. We had the crater to ourselves and could wander at will. In a guide book we were amused to find the suggestion that it might be of volcanic origin. The idea that large stones cannot fall from the sky dies hard – at least among non-scientists.

Jim Ring is a Nelson Skeptic.

Potassium article activates BS-meter

ONE thing that activates my BS-meter is a miracle treatment with too many claims. Consider the following extract from an article, The Nutritional Benefits of Potassium Citrate, by John Gibb, from ezinearticles.com (search for "potassium citrate").

A paragraph entitled Symptoms of Potassium Deficiency reads:

"Some of the symptoms of potassium [deficiency] to be noted are:

- tiredness, high and low blood pressure,
- acne, dry eyes, irritability,
- irregular or rapid heartbeat, muscle weakness, depression, confusion,
- anxiety, insomnia, frail skeletal structure, bone and joint pain,
- decreased reflexes, constipation,
- high cholesterol, water retention,
- respiratory problems, excessive thirst, evidence of protein in urine,
- less than adequate growth, infertility and headaches are other symptoms of potassium deficiency."

The funny thing is that I have many of the same symptoms and have always ascribed them to increasing age.

Another funny thing is that I do believe that we don't get enough potassium in the typical NZ diet. Since potassium can counteract the hypertensive effects of salt, the anti-salt campaigns here in NZ are seriously imbalanced by not mentioning potassium.

Jay Mann Christchurch

Letter to Timaru Herald

It has long been known that you should never stick anything smaller than your elbow in your ear.

"An alternative way to clean ears", run recently in this publication (*Not us! The Timaru Herald! -ed.*), must be branded as unscientific, and possibly dangerous, nonsense.

By what mechanism can 'earcandling' possibly be beneficial?

Does the updraft from the burning candle draw wax from the ear? Apparently not, because "warm smoke circulates in the ear canal". So, no updraft but, rather, falling smoke.

Is there capillary action drawing wax out of the ear? If so, the candle would be trimmed at the lower end to clear this wax. However, it is clear that the top end is trimmed and relit, so no capillary action then.

The claimed amount of wax removed from each ear should have given your reporter some inkling of the nonsense she was paying for. How on earth would she get a tablespoon-full out of each ear? Oh, wait, we have a burning candle here. Look at the waste wax. Does it look like candle wax? Yes it does. Now we have a clue as to the amount and its source

All together now... "It's melted candle wax!" As Bart Simpson would say; "Duh!".

This writer is astounded at the numbers of 'New Age' peddlers of modern equivalents of snake oil allowed to go about their dishonest business without critical comment. I refer to 'clairvoyants', 'psychics', tarot readers, mediums, reflexologists and naturopaths and their variants.

Please make sure that these charlatans do not rip off you or your friends.

Clive A Shaw Timaru

PBRF assessments flawed

The Tertiary Education Commission has again issued flawed Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) assessments of academic research, sparking anger at its inaccurate labelling of hard working researchers as "Research Inactive" if they do not play the system. The United Kingdom has given up its similar scheme, and academics in Greece went on strike rather than accept the introduction of such nonsense there. For how much longer are New Zealand scholars going to put up with this insulting bullshine?

Raymond Richards Hamilton

Steiner Preschools: More taxpayer-funded loopiness

Raymond Richards

Rudolf Steiner kindergartens look set to cash in on free early childhood education initiatives.



THE plan of Education Minister Steve Maharey to provide 20 hours of free early child-hood education reminds us that New Zealand has a wide variety of preschools, based on diverse philosophies. Perhaps the weirdest is Waldorf-Steiner schooling, which was founded by the loopy Austrian, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925).

Hundreds of schools and even more kindergartens in scores of countries follow Steiner's system. Established in 1950, the Hastings Rudolf Steiner School and Kindergarten was the first Waldorf centre of education in New Zealand. The Federation of **Rudolf Steiner Waldorf Schools** was formed as an incorporated society in 1988 and lobbies the government. Today, the country has 10 Steiner-Waldorf schools or school initiatives and almost 40 Waldorf kindergarten groups. The Government gave most of them money from you and me even before Maharey's scheme started.

The education they offer is based on the notions of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy. He believed humanity

is living in the post-Atlantis period, which started with the sinking of Atlantis in 7227 BC. After the current European-American epoch ends in the year 3573, humans will regain the psychic powers they had before the time of the ancient Greeks. Steiner claimed to be the earthly ambassador of the world-encompassing spirit of our time, St Michael. According to Steiner, a hierarchy of angels and archangels influence earthly developments. Seven leading archangels take turns to guide the evolution of humanity for 354 years at a time. St Michael's stint as "time spirit" started in late November 1879. and Steiner declared that he himself had accepted the mission of being the Michaelic Initiate, to help guide the spiritual life of the Western World. This was an event of world historic importance that took place unnoticed. Anthroposophists regard Steiner with awe and reverence. They are as gullible as Mormons.

Anthroposophy can involve bizarre behaviour. For example, some anthroposophists sit alone or in groups to read to departed souls in order to form links from our sense-perceptible world to the "so-called dead". They claim to receive messages of "Thank you". Some anthroposophists ask questions of Steiner himself. Occasionally statements are circulated that allegedly came from him. The feeling that such a message evokes of loosening one's being from the physical body is a sign that the communication is genuine.

Steiner devoted time to many interests, including education, poetry, architecture, jewellery design, astrology, biodynamic agriculture, reincarnation, karma, medicine and the creation of what he called a new art, eurythmy (mime and movement). All these topics he treated in spiritual terms. Eurythmy, for example, is supposed to manifest spiritual states of being, calling upon influences from past lives and preparing for future lives.

The benefits of anthroposophical medicine are wildly exaggerated. The pricey Helios Therapeutic Retreat in Hawkes Bay sells eurythmy, massage, music and art therapy. Although perhaps nice, these pursuits will not cure any diseases. Patients who need a loan to meet the thousands of dollars in fees are

|comment| | last word

referred to a finance company in Napier. In 1921 Steiner himself started a business called Weleda that has spread internationally, selling useless 'natural' medicines with a spiritual approach. Waldorf schools have a reputation for opposing childhood vaccinations.

Waldorf kindergartens are based on the belief that there is a spiritual side to all of life. They focus on free play, art and craft, fairy stories, myths, eurythmy, and circle time for festivals such as Michaelmas. Waldorf teachers use the ancient idea of four temperaments (choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic and sanguine) to categorise children. They might seat pupils in the classroom according to their supposed type. The Steiner approach is sometimes called racist. He believed that souls pass through stages, including racial stages, with African races being lower than Asian races and European races being the highest form. Steiner education stresses fantasy and dreaminess, which anthroposophists associate with spontaneous clairvoyance. Other quirks of the system include teaching reading late and the banning of computers until high school. Television, radio and recorded music are excluded. While this approach can stimulate imaginations, it also is based on false and nutty ideas. I wonder how many New Age people and followers of alternative healers were handicapped in grasping reality because they went to a Steiner school.

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

Wi-Fi scare gains momentum

FOLLOWERS of Ben Goldacre's Bad Science blog (www. badscience.net), will be aware of the recent panic in Britain over wi-fi radiation in schools.

The story began on 21 May when the documentary series Panorama screened a programme titled Warning Signal, in which it was claimed that an invisible "smog" of radiation was having as-yet unknown health effects, which had been totally ignored in the unseemly rush to install wi-fi systems in British classrooms. The show was largely driven by an anti-radiation campaigner who runs a shop selling screens and paints, and even mesh hats, with which you can protect yourself from this invisible menace.

This was followed 10 days later by an article in the Independent by Julia Stephenson, who had been told by her naturopath that her generalised symptoms were caused by her wi-fi system and cordless phone. She's now gone back to a regular phone ("But at least I'm less radioactive"), and has bought a QLink pendant – eviscerated by Goldacre on May 19 – for £69.99.

Stephenson took exception to Goldacre's comments on her article, reminding her readers that "at one time scientists assured us the earth was flat and that mercury, asbestos, the atomic bomb and cigarettes were harmless."

The story was taken up by the New Zealand Herald on 24 May. David Black, a senior lecturer at the Auckland University Medical School, said parents need not fret about the British study, which claimed radiation levels

from wireless internet in classrooms were three times higher than those from a mobile phone mast.

Emission levels from wireless computer network technology were negligible, he said. Mobile phone towers were low-power transmitters, emitting only a few watts. "The fact that something that you're a metre away from appears to be three times as high is really quite irrelevant."

The frequencies emitted by wi-fi don't go much past the skin, he said.

Meanwhile, Auckland administrative finance manager Sheri-Ann Atuahiva said she had been involved in screenings around the country of a documentary by Dr George Carlo, explaining how radio waves from mobile phones and other wireless devices interfered with how cells communicated. Carlo formerly headed a US\$28.5 million research programme funded by the cellular phone industry. He initially found there were no significant health threats posed by such devices, but changed his mind about the time his funding ran out.

For more than two years Mrs Atuahiva experienced a "drilling pain" in her left shoulder blade, which was the side on which she was using her cellphone.

A friend introduced the mother of three to a cellphone chip meant to modify the electromagnetic radiation it emitted. Within two days, the pain was gone. She was now an independent consultant for the chip-maker.

If undelivered, return to:

NZ Skeptics PO Box **29-492** Christchurch 8540 New Zealand Permit No. 3357



See you in Christchurch!

Registration is now open for the annual New Zealand Skeptics' Conference, to be held in Christchurch, 21-23 September.

Details inside!

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