

*In their early years children are knowledge junkies,
questioning everything in their view, though exhibiting
little skepticism. Most never learn to distinguish between
inquisitiveness and credulity. Those who do either come to
a bad end or become professional skeptics.*

Michael Shermer

Far North UFO

Australian creationism takeover

Circumcision's origins

new zealand

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Some things do change

It always helps keep matters in perspective to read about skeptical episodes from days gone by. I've recently been reading *The Secret Life of Houdini: The Making of America's First Superhero*, by William Kalush and Larry Sloman; Houdini, of course, is regarded as one of the godfathers of the modern skeptical movement. Though he made his reputation from his magic act and, particularly, his miraculous-seeming escapes, he devoted much of his later life to an ongoing battle with fraudulent mediums. Always open to the possibility of communicating with the dead, he nevertheless knew better than anyone, from his background in magic, how easy it was to fool an observer unversed in the techniques of deception. Indeed, in his early years, struggling to put food on his table, he had performed a spiritualist act himself, before developing a full appreciation of the ethical issues involved with preying on the bereaved.

Although there are still many who claim they can talk with dead people, Houdini's campaign has had one significant result. In his day, mediums routinely produced physical manifestations from beyond the grave – ectoplasm, ghostly lights, knocking noises, or trumpets that played themselves. In at least one case a man was reunited physically for an hour with his dead wife, though the excitement proved too much and he promptly expired of a heart attack. Houdini exposed these manifestations as conjuring tricks, and they have not been taken seriously ever since. Mediums today have a much more limited repertoire, mostly confined to passing on simple verbal messages.

While Houdini is far from forgotten, his campaign against the spiritualists deserves to be more widely recognised. I wonder how many viewers of *Sensing Murder*, or any of the innumerable TV medium shows realise the history of this stuff, and how the ability of spirits to contact the living has undergone such a strange attenuation.

The influence of the mediums themselves seems also to be in decline. According to Kalush and Sloman, the spiritualist movement regularly engaged in roughing up their opponents – including Houdini. They claim that besides the well-documented blows to the stomach that ruptured his appendix and led to his death, there was a second punching attack on Houdini's abdomen, and that both attacks were engineered by the spiritualists. They also cite other attacks on opponents of spiritualism. It is difficult to imagine such incidents today. Modern skeptics may feel psychologically affronted by practitioners of paranormal idiocy, but the threat of physical violence seems remote. There will always be a place for skeptics, but society does move on. Progress is made, even if it's three steps forward and two steps back.

David

The Ahipara UFO photos: an investigation

Bill Keir

Photos of a bright, slow-moving object over Northland caused quite a stir when they were published in the local newspaper last year, but some patient detective work has revealed the likely identity of this UFO.

Around sunset on 28 April 2007 Mr Wayne Ferguson took eight photos from Ahipara Beach, near Kaitaia, of an anomalous illuminated object in the western sky near the horizon. He used a Sony DSCF828 compact digital camera and took the photos over a time interval of about three minutes. He reported perceiving the object to be moving very slowly in a northerly direction to his right,

and away from him, during the few minutes that elapsed while he was photographing it.

Some time later Mr Ferguson gave the photos, in electronic form, to UFOCUS NZ who published them on their website in August with a summary of Ferguson's report of the circumstances, other witness reports, and an excerpt from an assessment of the photos by the well-

known American UFO analyst Dr Bruce Maccabee.

Suzanne Hansen, of UFOCUS NZ, contacted the Northern News seeking publicity for this event, which she classified as an "unusual aerial phenomenon" (UAP). The newspaper published two of Wayne Ferguson's photos with a front-page story on 29 August 2007. This triggered much public interest in the form of further witness reports and further coverage by the Northern News.

Of the eight Ferguson photos published on the UFOCUS website (www.ufocusnz.org.nz/ahipara.html) six were close-ups of the sky object with no ground references. The other two photos included ground features – a headland and sea horizon. These ground references allowed the possibility of geometrical analysis. The planet Venus was present in the northwest evening sky at the time of Ferguson's photos, and aircraft vapour trails was another possible explanation. Establishing the photo geometry could

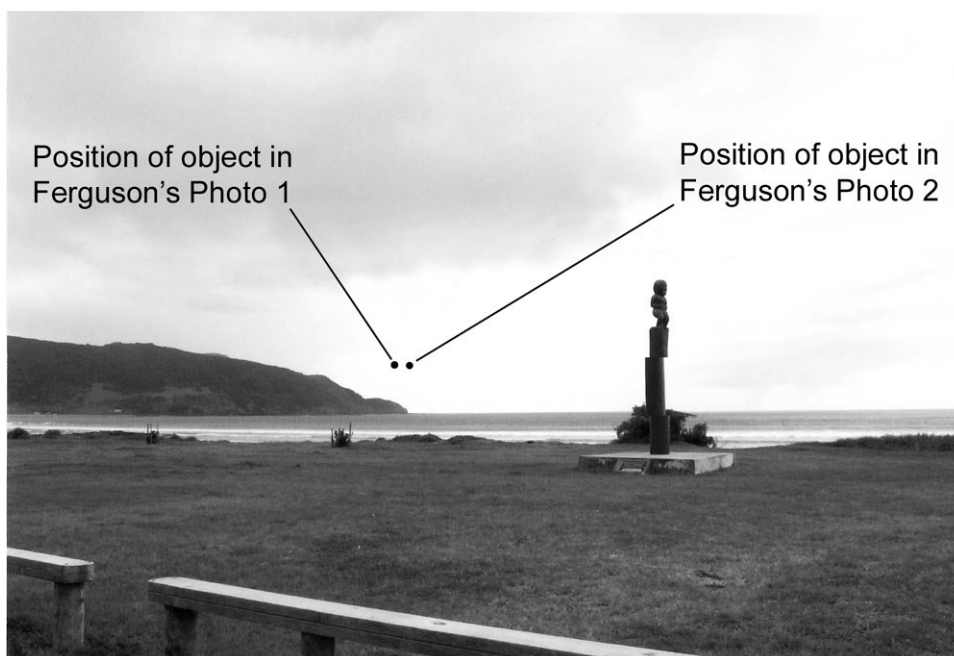


Figure 1. The author's wide-angle photograph (5.8mm) taken on 6 September 2007 from approximately Wayne Ferguson's camera location on the Ahipara Beach foreshore. It shows the position, relative to the headland, of the illuminated object in Ferguson's Photo 1 and Photo 2. The distance from the camera location to the headland is 2.25 km. At the time of Ferguson's photo the planet Venus would have been visible just outside this photo to the upper right, keeping in mind the distortion of scale caused by the wide-angle lens.

well be a useful avenue for investigating these possibilities, so I determined to do some on-site measurements.

The report posted on the UFOCUS website said that Air Traffic Control had confirmed there were no scheduled flights in the area at the time. I thought it worthwhile to verify this independently in the interests of thoroughness.

Measurements

I visited Ahipara Beach on 6 September 2007 between noon and 4pm. I had not been able to communicate personally with Wayne Ferguson, but I had read the UFOCUS website report and taken my own prints of the photos from the website.

I located Mr Ferguson's camera position by looking for the viewing angle of the westward headland that revealed the exact headland profile as in Ferguson's photos. Using my own camera I took replicating photos of the same sight line at a variety of zoom settings (Figure 1, 2).

From this location I then took a compass bearing to the north end of the headland where it met the reef. Applying the appropriate magnetic-grid-true adjustments I plotted this bearing on the topographical map with a protractor and it yielded a true bearing (horizon azimuth) of 284° . The distance from the camera location to the end of the headland derived from the map scale was 2.25 kilometres. I derived the latitude and longitude of the camera location from the map grid coordinates using a coordinate conversion tool. The ephemeris sunset azimuth

for that date, viewed from that location, was 287° , and sunset time 5.49 pm NZST (rounded values).

I then estimated the angular altitude above the sea horizon of the anomalous sky object in Ferguson's photos by reference to the object's proportionate spatial relationship to the headland in the photos, but taking the measurement by sighting to the actual headland. It was necessarily an estimate because the object was, of course, not there in the sky when I was taking the

on anyway, so I made do with the backyard astronomer's favourite way of roughly measuring sky angles by sighting finger widths at arms length – previously calibrated with a clinometer and by reference to well-known star separations. The potential error of this method would be less than five degrees, which I deemed not critical for this measurement. Because the angular separation of the object from the headland and horizon was so small I also ignored the small errors inherent around the edges of the photos from the focal-plane distortion of

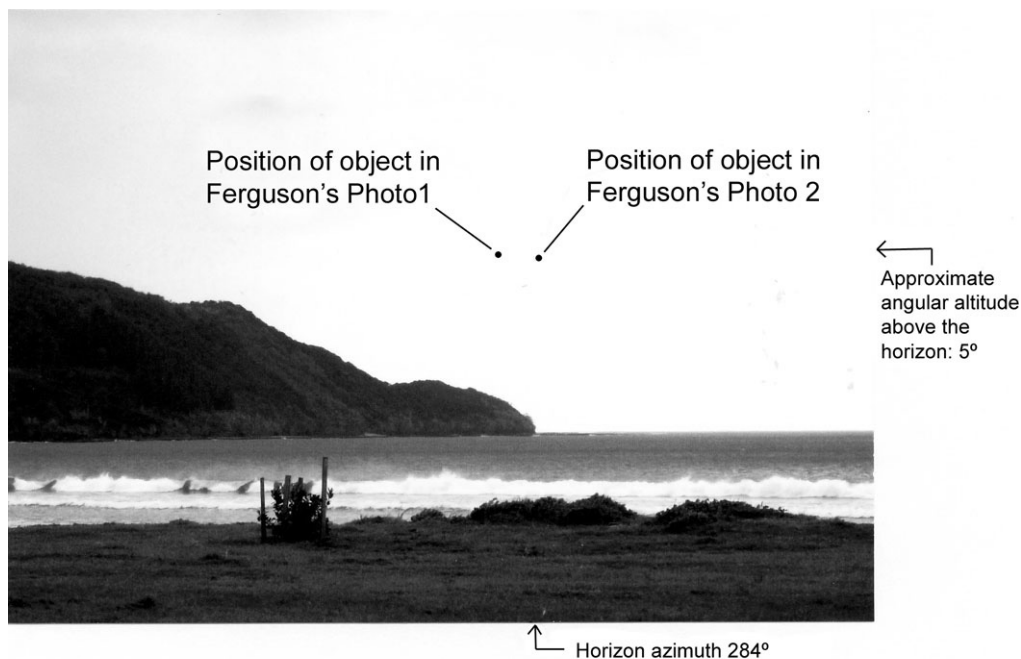


Figure 2. Telephoto photograph (23.2mm optical zoom 4x) from the same camera location, closely matching Ferguson's Photo 1.

measurement. (It would have been methodologically improper to take this measurement within Ferguson's photo because of the unknown telephoto factor). I estimated the altitude of the object to be about five degrees. My measurement technique for this was cruder than that for my azimuth measurement. I didn't have a navigator's sextant or other precise altitude instrument, and there was no sky object to fix it

scale caused by camera lenses.

Using the measured azimuth of the end of the headland I then estimated that the azimuth of the sky object was 283° in one of the headland photos, and 284° in the other headland photo, by reference to its obvious different azimuthal alignment with the headland in the two photos (Figure 2). In other words, the

sky object in Ferguson's photos had apparently moved about one degree of azimuth northward in the short time that elapsed between the two photos. If the camera location was the same for the two photos this change could only be real motion of the object itself. If the camera location was different for the two photos the change could be accounted for by parallax shift (apparent motion) due to the change in the observing position, and not real motion of the object. At the measured distance between the camera and the headland (2.25 kilometres) an apparent motion of about this magnitude due to parallax shift would result if the camera were moved as little as 50 metres laterally right (Figure 3). So far, my efforts to contact Mr Ferguson for clarification have failed. Meantime I assume that he did not move his camera position significantly and the object itself moved about one degree of azimuth northward in less than three minutes. This is consistent with Ferguson's own description of his observation reported on the UFOCUS website.

Although the six close-up photos had time tags logged by the camera clock, unfortunately the two photos containing the headland did not. I assumed that the two photos containing the headland were taken within the same time window as the close-ups, but I have no way of verifying this at present.

It was not Venus

At the time of Ferguson's photos the planet Venus was at magnitude -4.1, and approaching

its maximum brightness. At this magnitude it is visible in broad daylight in the middle of a sunny day and becomes a conspicuous object in the western sky a few minutes after sunset. No other astronomical body except the Sun and Moon matches the brilliance of Venus when it is at this magnitude. It becomes this bright about every 19 months and maintains it for many weeks. This is why it frequently trig-

Although we could not rule out the possibility that the object was a hat-shaped moving craft of unknown origin and technology, it was more likely something quite ordinary.

gers UFO reports by people unfamiliar with the behaviour and motions of planets and stars, and this is why I investigated it in this case. Venus would have been visible in the northwest quadrant of the sky when Ferguson took his photos. However, my measurements of the photo geometry conclusively ruled out Venus. The azimuth of Venus from Ferguson's camera position at the time was 323°. The camera line of sight was around 284° azimuth. So, on the telephoto zoom setting used, Venus would have been more than 30° outside the camera field of view northward. This is corroborated by the altitude geometry – the altitude of Venus above the horizon was 19° and the estimated altitude of the anomalous object in the photos was about 5°.

Was it vapour trails?

The next likely explanation was a vapour trail of a high-flying jet aircraft. In some of the sharper of Ferguson's photos the object seems to be divided into two elongated parts with slight curvature. It was no doubt this feature that led American UFO investigator Dr Bruce Maccabee to suggest, as quoted on the UFOCUS website, that the object might be "a jet contrail viewed end on." The website noted, "However ATC has confirmed that there were no scheduled flights in that area at that time." Further scrutiny of the photography and checks on air traffic records were called for.

Photography analysed

The clock in Wayne Ferguson's camera indicated that his photos were taken around sunset. However, the camera clock gives certainty only for the time interval over which the photos were taken, not for the actual time of each photo, unless the clock error at the time of photography is known. If the clock error is known it can be added to, or deducted from the clock reading to determine the actual time of the photo. In this case the clock error would have to be more than five minutes fast or slow to have a critical effect on the analysis. Since I was not able to ascertain Ferguson's camera clock error I assumed the camera clock was reading within plus or minus five minutes of the correct time. Greater precision than this is no advantage in this case because, although sunset time for a particular location can be calculated to an accuracy of seconds, the actual time when the Sun is seen to disappear below the horizon

can differ from the calculated time by up to two minutes due to the refraction of the atmosphere at the horizon on the day.

Camera autofocus systems do not handle difficult light conditions well. The classic problem situation is where there is a bright light source in the middle of poorly lit surroundings. In these situations the autofocus system is likely to misread the distance to the object and it will be blurred. The use of manual focus mode is essential in these situations.

Digital zoom tools hugely increase the telephoto effect of the optical zoom capabilities of the lens to the extent that camera shake has a blurring effect on the image. It is essential to use a tripod, or steady the camera on something rigid, when using the digital zoom tool on a digital camera.

Since I don't know the specifics of Ferguson's camera settings I have to make some assumptions based on the nature of the images. His six close-up photos have obviously been taken on a high telephoto setting given the tiny relative size of the object in the other two photos. It is possible the images were cropped and enlarged further in computer photo-editing software. His camera features a 'Smart Zoom' tool in addition to the optical and digital zoom tools. This feature can extend the telephoto zoom effect to 36 \times , but only at the lowest resolution. Such a large telephoto effect will considerably reduce the image defini-

tion, especially if the image was further cropped and enlarged in photo-editing software. At the maximum telephoto setting on this camera these definition defects would be compounded further by camera shake if the camera was not steadied on a tripod. These considerations dictate caution in reading too much into the detail of the illuminated sky object in the images.

If you use your imagination you can see in Ferguson's close-up images the hint of an oval hat-shaped object. The most blurred

Although we could not rule out the possibility that the object was a hat-shaped moving craft of unknown origin and technology, it was more likely something quite ordinary. Such an ordinary explanation presents itself quite conspicuously in this case.

Flight EK 433 was there

I browsed the commercial airline flight schedules and found that Emirates Flight EK 433 leaves Auckland for Brisbane every day, all year round. Its scheduled departure time is 4.55

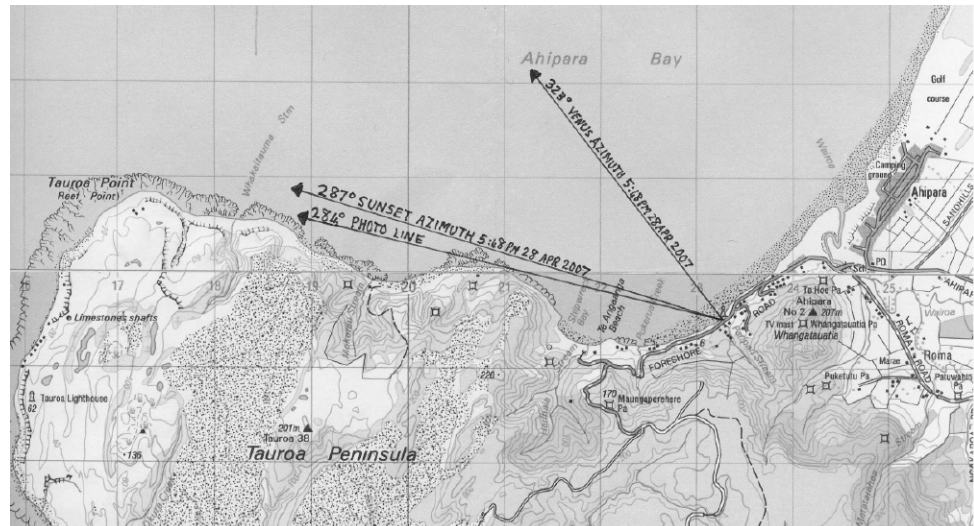


Figure 3. Key bearings at the time of the Ahipara UFO sighting.

image of the six especially gives this impression. (Notably it was this image that UFOCUS supplied to the Northern News.) In my opinion this is an illusion caused by a random trick of the light combined with the poor definition of the image. This is a similar kind of illusion to the so-called "ambiguity" illusions, such as the well-known outline of a duck's head that can also be perceived as a rabbit's head. All eight of Ferguson's photos were quite low resolution, which fosters the illusion.

pm. I requested the air traffic record for this flight from Airways Corporation of New Zealand. Mr Ken Mitchell replied:

"I can confirm that EK 433 departed Auckland at 5.12 pm NZST on 28 April 2007, and would have been approximately 75 nautical miles west of Kaitiaki at 34,000 ft at 5.45 pm." (Personal communication dated 25 September 2007).

At this altitude and distance the aircraft would have been still in sunlight at the time. If it generated vapour trails the light of the setting sun would have lit up the trails brilliantly. But, at

a distance of 75 nautical miles (139 kilometres), the aircraft itself would not have been easily visible.

A simple trigonometric calculation shows that an object 139 kilometres away at an altitude of 34,000 feet (10,370 metres) would be seen at 4.27° above the horizon by an observer at sea level. This figure is impressively within the margin of error of my estimate of the angular altitude above the horizon of the illuminated sky object in Ferguson's photos. The direction is also consistent with Ferguson's camera line of sight.

The rate of movement of the object reported by Wayne Ferguson during the three or four minutes he observed it was consistent with my own finding that the object moved about one degree of azimuth in the short time between the two headland photos. This apparent rate of movement is consistent with an ordinary commercial jet aircraft flying at cruising speed at 34,000 feet, 139 kilometres away, on a course obliquely away from an observer. Such aircraft commonly generate vapour trails that disappear at the trailing end as they are formed at the leading end, giving the impression that the trails are following the aircraft in unison with its motion. This explanation fits the photographic, geometric and eyewitness evidence very well.

If the object in Ferguson's photos was not Flight EK 433 but some other unidentified craft, it seems a remarkable coincidence that the unidentified craft was on a similar course at a similar time travelling at a similar speed as Flight EK 433. We could invent

far-fetched scenarios to support this possibility (perhaps the unidentified craft was shadowing EK 433?). But we are dealing with probabilities here. Which is the more likely scenario? The far-fetched one or the ordinary one? The complicated one or the simple one? The scientific approach is to accept the more probable explanation – the ordinary simple explanation – until proved otherwise. In the absence of hard evidence to the contrary, the simple explanation is preferable in terms of the principle of parsimony – also known as Occam's razor. This well-known principle in science states that one should not introduce more hypotheses than are necessary to explain the data.

What would constitute hard evidence of the extraordinary explanation in a case like this? It would need to be more than a collection of distant photos of a blurred point of light. Extraordinary claims demand extraordinarily good evidence.

Even if the remaining uncertainties constrained us to continue holding this case in the 'unidentified' category, this would not necessarily mean it was something extraordinary. The absence of a fully proven explanation does not mean the case totally defies explanation. It just means we don't have enough information to clinch it.

Bill Keir is an amateur astronomer of Hokianga who has published many articles on astronomy.

creationism

The great downunder creationism takeover

David Riddell

A strange transformation has overtaken the murky world of the creationists. This article is based on a presentation to the 2007 NZ Skeptics Conference.

Creationism has always been primarily an American phenomenon. But something strange has happened in the creationist world over the last decade or so. While the US remains its heartland, a small but highly active group of Australians have seized control of large sections of the movement. Now, with the creationist movement worldwide growing and fragmenting, a situation has arisen in which two

factions, both headed by Australians, have become enmeshed in a vicious battle for what has become a global, multi-million dollar industry.

Although creationism is of course an ancient concept, it was only in the second half of the 20th century that it really arose as an organised movement, actively opposing the spread of evolutionary ideas. Today it comes in many flavours – there

are Old Earth creationists, who are happy to accept that the Earth may be millions of years old, and may have a history which includes eras not mentioned in scripture. And of course there's Intelligent Design, which claims to set aside any biblical presuppositions, and simply argues that because life is so complicated, it must have a designer. Here I'll mostly be discussing Young Earth Creationism, which is the brand seen most commonly in this country, and arguably the most vociferously promoted worldwide.

The modern creationist movement is generally held to have begun with the publication of *The Genesis Flood*, by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris, in 1961, the first widely published work to present the stories of Genesis as if they were scientifically credible. Morris would go on to be one of the founders of the Creation Science Research Center in 1970, before splitting

to form the Institute for Creation Research in 1972. The ICR would for many years be the pre-eminent creationist organisation.

Going global

Elsewhere in the world, creationism was operating on a much smaller scale. There were early glimmerings in New Zealand when Dr Tony Hanne, an Auckland GP and obstetrician, invited Henry Morris to undertake a speaking tour here after reading *The Genesis Flood*. Over the next decade or so there were a few more tours by creationists, including Morris's colleague at the ICR, Duane Gish, in 1975. (Gish made a presentation at our school when I was in the sixth form – I credit him with convincing me once and for all that creationism had no scientific credibility.)

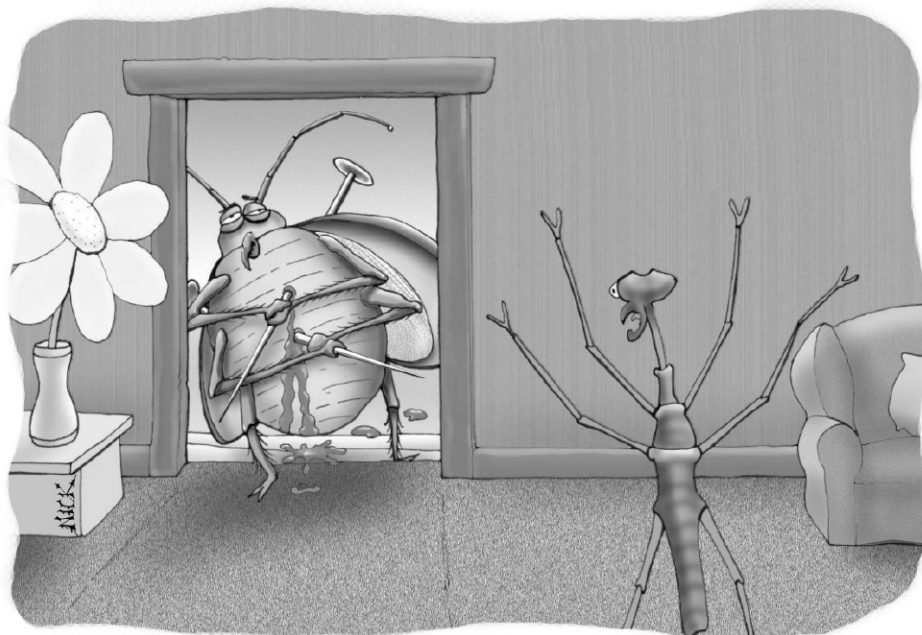
But if the creationist candle was kept alight through the 70s in New Zealand largely through the efforts of a few individuals

and very occasional overseas visitors, Australia was developing a significant home-grown movement. Credit for this development goes to three Queenslanders, who are still very active, as we shall see.

The one with the highest profile today is Ken Ham, who began giving creationist addresses in 1976 while still working as a science teacher. In 1979 he dedicated himself full-time to his creationism advocacy work, drawing no salary and relying on the support of family and friends. Working from home with his wife Mally, he ran two ministries – Creation Science Supplies, which distributed creationist books, and Creation Science Educational Media Services, which concentrated on teaching resources.

Also at about this time, general practitioner Dr Carl Wieland founded the Creation Science Association, and began publishing a small magazine, *Ex Nihilo* ('Out of Nothing'). Ham and Wieland joined forces in 1980 to form the Creation Science Foundation; Wieland then handed over the running of the magazine to Ham, and to the third of our key players, John Mackay, who became editor. The magazine's name was changed to *Creation Ex Nihilo*; in time it would become just plain *Creation*.

For several years these three worked harmoniously together, building up their business and establishing a management framework. The first significant hiccup came in 1986, when their



"I'm having second thoughts about the health benefits of acupuncture..."

financial records showed a loss of \$92,363. This came about because one of their directors, John Thallon, had invested interest-free loans from members, along with a substantial sum of his own money, in a company that re-invested it fraudulently. Their rank-and-file members were not informed until the Australian Skeptics went through their books and brought the loss to widespread attention.

But that incident was nothing compared to what happened the following year. Margaret Buchanan, a widow in her early 40s, was working as Ken Ham's personal secretary and appears to have been well-liked and respected. But in 1987 John Mackay announced that he had discovered, by a process of what he called "spiritual discernment", that Margaret Buchanan was a servant of Satan. Specifically he accused her of being:

"... an 'angel of the devil'... the literal incarnation of Jezebel ... a broomstick riding, cauldron-stirring witch ... a frequent attender of seances and satanic orgies; a witch with the ability to invade both inanimate objects ... and animate objects (at least one dog and one cat – and even John himself) with [her] own personal demons."

Her supporters have also stated that Mackay insisted "that Margaret had claimed to have had intercourse with the corpse of her late husband"!

Mackay then gave CSF an ultimatum – either she goes or I go. Ham stood by Buchanan, as did Wieland, who later married her.

John Mackay was left with no option but to form his own organisation, also based in Brisbane, which he called Creation Research. You can find him on the web at creationresearch.net, not to be confused with creationresearch.org, which is the website of the Creation Research Society, a small American group. Creationists often remind me of the Judean liberation organisations in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* – the People's Front of Judea, always at war with the Judean People's Front and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Judea. Keeping track of all these different groups is not easy – and it's about to get even messier.

CSF spreads its wings

Ken Ham also made a move in 1987, going to work on secondment for the ICR in the US. He stayed there until 1994, then left to found a US branch of the Creation Science Foundation. Since, in the US, a foundation is a body that hands out money, and CSF didn't do that, he had to change the name. He first called it Creation Science Ministries, but predictably there was already a group with that title, so he adopted the name Answers in Genesis.

Also in 1994, CSF opened an office in New Zealand. It and the Australian, UK, Canadian and South African branches adopted the Answers in Genesis brand in 1997. The UK branch is now the biggest creationist organisation in that country.

The local branch, currently headed by former lawyer, drug education officer and fireman Adrian Bates, operates out of

Tony Hanne's 1.5 ha waterfront property on Bleakhouse Rd in Howick, Auckland. Dr Hanne runs a bible school and youth camp from here, although in 2003 he was subject to an enforcement action by the local council for running a bible college in breach of his resource consent and the council's district plan. Presumably this issue is now resolved.

Linking and Feeding

Meanwhile in Australia, Carl Wieland was proving himself to be a good business manager and a master strategist. Rather than taking on the educational and scientific establishments head-on, as the American creationists had tended to do, Wieland focused on creating and developing a grass-roots creationist organisation (see NZ Skeptic 45). He did this primarily by making connections with church groups through public meetings, and today his operation holds more than 100 such meetings around Australia every year, and several in New Zealand. Adrian Bates and occasionally other local speakers engage in speaking tours, and there are usually two or three visitations annually from across the Tasman, although the last year or two have been fairly quiet on the touring front, perhaps because, as we shall see, they have other things to think about.

I have attended a few of these events, one of them addressed by Wieland himself (in person he comes across as intelligent, thoughtful, and quietly competent – quite unlike Ham and Mackay, who both have a fanatic's gleam in their eyes).

Biologist expelled from 'Expelled'

The Intelligent Design (ID) movie *Expelled* (Editorial, NZ Skeptic 86) has scored a spectacular public relations own-goal at a screening in Minneapolis (New York Times, 21 March). University of Minnesota developmental biologist PZ Myers, best known for his blog Pharyngula, was one of many who took up the offer to register on-line for the pre-release public screening.

A vocal critic of creationism, he appears in the film, and is even thanked for his participation in the credits. But, when he turned up at the theatre, a security guard refused him entry. Myers' wife, his daughter and her boyfriend, and his guest were, however, allowed in. No one seemed to recognise the guest, who was ... Richard Dawkins! He also appears in the film, along with Eugenie Scott from the National Centre for Science Education, and skeptic Michael Shermer. All say they were interviewed under false pretences, having been told it was a film about the interface between science and religion, to be called *Crossroads*.

On Pharyngula, Myers recounts how Dawkins, who was in town to attend the American Atheists conference, used the question and answer session at the end to challenge the film's producer, Mark Mathis, on Myers' expulsion. What Mathis must have thought when he spotted Dawkins in the audience one can only guess. The irony of someone being expelled from a movie called *Expelled* – a movie

which purports to defend intellectual freedom – has been lost on no one.

Except, possibly, the ID lobby group, the Discovery Institute. In full damage control mode, they're accusing Myers and Dawkins of trying to sneak in without a ticket, in what they call a sophomoric stunt. But this was a screening where nobody had tickets, and Myers had registered, in the approved way, under his own name. Dawkins was not asked for identification, although he had his passport ready. In any case, surely these two are justified in attending a film they both appear in? The hypocrisy of the people behind this movie defies belief.

New Age fair does roaring trade

"Psychic medium" Sue Nicholson was picked out for special attention by the Nelson Mail (25 February) in their coverage of a recent New Age fair, the Festival of Opportunities. Best known for her appearances on *Sensing Murder* and TV One's *Good Morning* show, Nicholson was selling copies of the book she has written to capitalise on her TV-enhanced fame.

On the first page of each copy she wrote a brief message – two purchasers reported themselves happy with their messages, declaring them accurate and relevant. She also held psychic workshops on both afternoons of the fair.

The Wellington-based Mrs Nicholson said she had seen spirits from an early age but only "came out of the closet" as a psychic 13 years ago. She claims everyone is born with a sixth sense and just has to learn how to develop it and be open to it.

Festival organiser Debby Verdonk estimated the event attracted about 1800 people, despite the drizzly weather.

New twist on Nigerian scam

Nigerian scammers seem to be getting craftier (Dominion Post, 4 March). Dawn McKee, a US-born Auckland woman seeking a partner on the NZMatch.com website, was contacted by a man calling himself Robert Thomas, and claiming to be a 41-year-old, Italian-born man who had gone through a "messy divorce" in the US before coming to New Zealand.

He provided photographs, including some with friends, and the pair developed a rapport.

Two weeks later, he said he was going on a business trip to Amsterdam ... then Nigeria. And not long after that, Ms McKee received an email from him asking her to lend him money, saying his cheques were useless in the country as only cash was used there. She sent \$400, then \$900 to help with airline tickets. When he asked her for another \$400 to cover "flight tax", alarm bells rang and she cut off contact.

Ms McKee, a computer programmer, told her story to the

paper to warn others against fraudsters during Fraud Awareness Week.

“He said all the right things,” she said. “I feel a bit stupid ... and really angry. How could people be so non-caring that they hurt somebody else like that?”

Fraud Awareness Week was organised by the Commerce Commission and Consumer Affairs Ministry, who were promoting the message: “Fight the Scammers. Don’t Respond” to educate people about those trying to fleece them.

Commission spokeswoman Deborah Battell said it was impossible to say how many people were targeted as fewer than five percent reported their experiences – most were too embarrassed.

Most scams originated from outside the country and probably cost the economy millions every year, she said.

“People have been scammed out of hundreds of thousands of dollars. They need to be extremely careful and not respond.”

Scams can be reported at www.consumeraffairs.govt.nz/scam-watch

Kennedy conspiracies still hold appeal

More than 40 years later and half a world away, the assassination of John F Kennedy continues to fascinate. Now three young Palmerston North film-makers have concocted an 88-minute documentary, titled *Imagining the Kennedys* (Manawatu Standard, 10 March).

The film is the work of school friends Matthew Keenan and Seamus Coogan, now in their 20s, and Agnieszka Witkowski, who “wandered into their lives from Nova Scotia, Canada.”

In the years immediately following World War II America was unquestionably The Good Guy, Coogan said. Now, this has eroded to distrust and events such as the assassination and 9/11 have become wreathed in conspiracy theories. “The result has been the birth of a conspiracy industry and the dehumanising of the victims.”

The trio point out their documentary doesn’t set out to solve any mysteries. Rather, it looks at the impact of the event on people like Coogan thousands of miles from Dallas. The documentary follows him as he travels to the US and talks to Americans about the event.

Seamus Coogan admits to having had a fascination with the assassination since he was about eight. He said he believed Oswald was set up to be caught as a cover for another shooter.

“My mother always said there was something more to it and the moment I saw the Zapruder film I said ‘Holy guacamole, there’s no way that shot came from behind.’”

In one of those coincidences science can’t explain, I watched an episode of Penn and Teller’s *Bullshit!* last night on conspiracy theories. The pair showed, with the aid of a honeydew melon, how a shot to the back of the head will propel the head *backwards*. Hard to see where any second gunman could have been

standing, then. Certainly not on that grassy knoll.

Foreskins and the universe

There was plenty of interesting reading in the Sunday Star Times’ Sunday magazine recently (23 March). First, a cover story on the circumcision debate – remember, you read it here first (NZ Skeptic 86). Circumcision is still seen as a rite of passage in some Polynesian cultures, and there have been calls for the procedure to be publicly funded. But the Ministry of Health says that won’t happen any time soon. Says Auckland University of Technology pathology lecturer Ken McGrath: “We spent 50 years turning it [circumcision] off, and we don’t want to see that sort of nonsense again.”

The same issue also discussed Rhonda Byrne’s best-selling book, *The Secret*, which states the universe will give you anything you ask, if you truly believe. It recommends downloading a blank cheque made out to the universe from the book’s website, and believing the money into existence. Writer Angela Barnett wrote out a cheque for \$100,000; all she got was a \$25 library refund. *The Secret* has a handy explanation, she says – she must not have believed enough that she really deserved the money.

The article concludes by quoting Einstein: “Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not so sure about the universe.”

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And at these meetings, they sell their books and videos, and hand around forms on which people can subscribe to their magazines. Once those links are made, they feed material out into the community, which they urge people to spread as widely as they can.

Their main instrument, Creation Magazine, comes out quarterly, and has very high production values. They also have a “peer-reviewed” journal – it’s peer-reviewed by other creationists – which again has had several name changes, but is currently called the Journal of Creation.

The big split

So the decades since the 1980s have been interesting times for the creationism movement in this part of the world. But things have gotten *really* interesting in the last five years. As Australian skeptic Roger Stanyard (www.noanswersingenesis.org/aig_inherit_windbags.htm) has put it, Carl Wieland and Ken Ham don’t appear to be buddies any more.

It seems in part this has to do with AiG-Australia’s adoption of this notion of peer review. The issue is highlighted in an anonymous article on an obscure website lambasting AiG’s strategy; Stanyard managed to discover the author was John Mackay, of all people. In summary, AiG would urge anyone producing creationist material to send it to them, and they would, for a substantial fee, critique it and make any changes deemed necessary for the work to be scientifically credible. (Yes, they

really do think this is achievable.) If the authors refused, AiG would publish and distribute negative reviews of the work. In effect, Mackay is accusing AiG of extortion.

AiG-Australia also developed a web page pointing out arguments it urges creationists not to use (creationontheweb.com/con-

I sometimes wonder what’s going to happen if Wieland and company ever realise that *all* creationist arguments are flawed.

tent/view/2996/), for example the claim that Darwin recanted on his deathbed, or that the rotted carcass of a plesiosaur was fished out of the water off the coast of New Zealand in 1977. Quite correctly, they say it was almost certainly a basking shark.

Ken Ham, however, has rejected this approach, and is much more prepared to trot out any argument which supports the creationist position. I sometimes wonder what’s going to happen if Wieland and company ever realise that *all* creationist arguments are flawed. I suspect Ham has the correct instincts for long-term creationist survival.

The peer review issue is just the beginning though. In 2004 Carl Wieland criticised the way the US branch was run, and Ken Ham appears to have taken offence. The following year the US and UK ministries announced their desire to operate autonomously, and not to be subject to the peer review system. Most of what follows is based on material from the Australian group’s website. They’ve

adopted a strategy of being very open in telling their side of the story, while the American group has played things much closer to their chests. So this account may be rather one-sided. But it mostly seems plausible, and is backed by a lot of documentation. This material is not easy to stumble across on their website, but Jim Lippard, a long-time creationism-watcher in the US, found it and linked to it on his blog (lippard.blogspot.com).

The Australian group’s expressed concerns were about the way Ken Ham dominated the ministry and spent money on his fellow executives, and his shift away from delivering the creationist message to raising donations. He has very much, in other words, adopted the modus operandi of many of the evangelists in his adopted country.

Memorandum of Agreement

According to the material on the Australian group’s website, in October 2005 the Australian directors, without the knowledge of Carl Wieland and the rest of the Australian management, were induced to fly to the US to sign a Memorandum of Agreement setting forth the terms of the separation. The memorandum had been drafted by the US group’s attorneys, and was entirely favourable to them. Once it was signed, the Australian directors resigned en masse, under condition that they be given indemnity for their actions, then joined the US board in Kentucky. One of them was John Thallon, who had lost the \$92,363 back in 1986.

The MOA was a beautiful piece of work. It hands over to the US group perpetual licence for all articles published in Creation magazine and the Journal of Creation, which are produced in Australia, including the right to modify articles and change the names of the authors. It also includes a false statement that the authors have given permission for this. If anyone sues the US group for copyright infringement, the Australian group is to pay all costs. And all costs for items are to be set by the US group, which promptly trebled the prices it charged the Australian group for DVDs and other material.

Another magazine

The following year the Americans dropped their publishing agreement on Creation magazine, and attempted to start their own magazine under the same title. Their attempted theft of the Creation name failed, and in 2006 they released their first issue of a new magazine under the title Answers.

The 35,000 US Creation subscribers were told they could be “upgraded” to the new magazine, or have their money refunded. They were not given the option of remaining with the Australian magazine, in fact its continued existence was not even mentioned! Recently AiG have also launched their own “peer-reviewed” Answers Research Journal.

And so, in March 2006, having had the rug well and truly

pulled out from under them, AiG-Australia rebranded as Creation Ministries International, along with the NZ, Canadian and South African ministries.

Later that year, AiG-US began sending speakers on tours of Australia; CMI now run tours in the US, and have opened branches there and in the UK. The two groups are now in direct competition for the creationist dollar. Ken Ham appears to have set aside his former contretemps with John Mackay, and is using him as AiG’s man on the ground in Australia until they get their own structure up and running in that country. Which is why CMI have posted all the background information on the Margaret Buchanan Affair – they want



The Trinity: from left, Ken Ham, Carl Wieland and John Mackay.

their supporters to understand the sort of guy Mackay is.

Legal proceedings have now been initiated by CMI, accusing AiG of deceptive conduct, and seeking damages.

High finance

Jim Lippard has posted a series of reports on creationist finances which give an indication of the money involved. The most recent Inland Revenue declara-

tion (Form 990) from Answers in Genesis-US, for the first half of 2005, indicates the organisation had revenues for the year close to US\$11 million, and net assets of \$11,673,847. With the recent completion of their Creation Museum in Kentucky, reputedly valued at \$27 million, funded entirely from donations, this figure is now likely to be substantially higher. Ken Ham’s salary is around \$120,000, with tens of thousands more in benefits and expenses, not bad for a resident of a state where median household incomes are about \$40,000 (all figures in US dollars).

The ICR meanwhile, once the biggest by far of all the creationist organisations, is languishing. Andrew Snelling, who has been

one of their recent stars, and one of the few creationists with a genuine geology degree (he has published in the mainstream literature, keeping his beliefs under wraps), has recently gone to work for AiG as the Research Journal editor. It hardly needs to be said that he’s another Australian. The

ICR’s revenue and expenses in 2005 were both a little over \$4,000,000 (revenue slightly ahead of expenses), and they had net assets of \$5,228,062.

CMI, despite the best efforts of AiG, don’t seem to be doing too badly either. They opened a new headquarters building in Brisbane, in 2007. Again, it’s funded entirely by donations, and they own it freehold.

John Mackay is a regular visitor to the UK, and comes to New Zealand every couple of years, giving talks and leading so-called geology field trips, but his organisation on the ground here seems to be very much part-time. He does have a few supporters, though. His website claims a couple of them have opened a creation museum in Dannevirke, although it's hard to find much independent information on this – it sounds like it's just a few fossils and rocks.

Christianity in New Zealand is currently in decline – 55.6 percent of those who answered the religion question in the 2006 census identified as Christian, compared to 60.6 percent in 2001. But the devil is in the details. Pentecostals have increased over that period to 79,155 from 39,228, which was 55 percent higher than the census before. There are also good numbers of Baptists, and quite a few Jehovah's Witnesses

and Mormons. We seem to be seeing a polarisation of New Zealand society on religious matters – more moving away from any religious belief (about 1.3 million stated they had no religion), but a rapidly growing though still small percentage who insist on the literal truth of every word of the Bible. If they spent less energy fighting among themselves, their numbers could be even higher.

The mythical origins of circumcision

Jim Ring

In our last issue, Hugh Young looked at the practice of circumcision. But how did such a bizarre tradition ever get started?

Hugh Young's article on circumcision (Skeptic 86) was excellent but it is worth looking further at the origins of the practice. Some parents claim they have the right to circumcise their sons because it is a necessary part of their religion. But is it?

According to the Old Testament, circumcision started as a Jewish custom. God instructed Abraham, as a mark of a covenant between them, to adopt this practice for all males of his extended family. In this story Abraham had lived in Egypt, he had Egyptian slaves and a half-Egyptian son, Ishmael.

However the story ignores the fact that circumcision had been an Egyptian custom for many

centuries. It seems probable that Ishmael's Egyptian mother (even though she was a slave) would have tried to insist on her son being circumcised according to ancient custom; it seems incredible that she would not have at least mentioned this to the child's father. How could Abraham (and of course God), have been ignorant that circumcision was an ancient Egyptian practice?

Centuries later, in the story of Moses' childhood, he is discovered as a baby by an Egyptian princess who instantly recognises he is a Jewish child. Generations of Christians have claimed this is because she saw he was circumcised but this cannot be true. All Egyptian boys were circumcised;

it is possible that some Jewish babies were not.

Jesus supposedly said (John 7.22.) "Moses gave you the law of circumcision (not that it originated with Moses but with the patriarchs)". This reflects an ignorance of the bible shared by many modern Christians and Jews.

According to Exodus, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land but it was a slow journey. In this story Moses was entirely opposed to the Egyptian custom of circumcision and while he ruled (for about 40 years) Israelites were not allowed to circumcise male babies. Clearly Moses had no knowledge of any prior agreement with God

about circumcision, nor did God enlighten him on the subject although (according to the story) they met more than once. Only after Moses' death did the Israelites resume the Egyptian practice (Joshua 5). Furthermore Moses refused to circumcise his own sons, which caused some marital disharmony (Exodus 4).

The precedent of Moses is very important when dealing with modern Jews who insist circumcision is necessary for the proper practise of their religion. If uncircumcised boys were good enough for Moses, why are they not good enough for you?

Herodotus writing about 450BC states clearly that the Egyptians and Ethiopians were the first to use circumcision, but it is unknown as to which of them started the practise, while all other nations admit they learned it from the Egyptians either directly or indirectly. The inhabitants of Palestine he calls 'Syrians' and 'Phoenicians' and both circumcise their sons, (although some Phoenicians under Greek influence had stopped the practice). Did a separate Jewish state exist in the middle of the 5th century BC? If so Herodotus was clearly unaware of it. It is certainly a myth that circumcision distinguished Jews from their neighbours in Palestine.

Jewish ritual circumcision is (or was) odder than one might imagine. Originally it was supposed to have been done with a stone knife, but by Roman times a steel blade was acceptable. The operator was and is called a 'mohel' and there are three parts to the operation. The first part, the cutting of the foreskin was called the 'milah'. In the second phase

called the 'periah', the mohel used his thumb nail and index finger to separate the inner lining of the foreskin from the glans. The third part is the 'mesisah' and until the 19th century this involved the mohel sucking the blood from the wound by taking the penis in his mouth.

This raises some interesting questions about the circumcision of adults. According to Acts 16.3, Paul personally circumcised Timothy; however according to his own letters, Paul was vehemently opposed to circumcision. Reading these to get Paul's opinion on the subject, it is difficult to believe that Paul circumcised anybody. Consider: Philippians 3.1-3 (most but not all Bible scholars accept this letter as authentic): "Beware of those dogs and their malpractices. Beware of those who insist on mutilation - 'circumcision' I will not call it; we are the circumcised, whose worship is spiritual".

Galatians is regarded as authentic by all serious Bible scholars and there Paul wrote: Gal.5.2-3. "... if you receive circumcision, Christ will do you no good at all." and, "... every man who received circumcision is under obligation to keep the whole law."

The details of the mesisah sound so strange that it seems almost unbelievable. Indeed open-minded skeptics may imagine it is just another anti-Semitic 'blood libel'. They can easily check via the internet that these details come from unprejudiced Jewish sources. The Jewish abhorrence about tasting blood may seem to cast doubt on the story, but one should remember that in religion there is a close

relationship between sacred and banned practices. A practice may be offensive unless it is involved in a sacred ritual.

There is however an obvious medical explanation. The periah using a nail and finger is obviously so unhygienic that infection would be likely without proper cleaning. Sucking the wound is an excellent mode of cleaning (compared with alternatives available when the custom originated) and we might expect it would have become widely used once it became obvious that it reduced the risk of infection. However once medical hygiene became understood during the 19th century it became permissible to use a swab for the completion of the operation.

As one might expect there are conservative groups of Jews that cling to old custom. Christopher Hitchens in Op-Ed Free Inquiry Feb/March 2006 states that a primitive sect of Hasidic Jews in New York still have mohels who perform circumcision in the traditional manner. The mohel "sucks off the foreskin and spits it out in a mouthful of blood".

Hitchens also states that the practice has caused several cases of genital herpes and at least two deaths. There has been pressure to outlaw the custom but the New York health authorities have decided to "be neutral". Hitchens in this article is protesting the views of liberals who justify the health authority action as part of "free exercise of religion".

Jim Ring is a Nelson skeptic, who says there is nothing like a childhood in the Exclusive Brethren for instilling a deep knowledge of obscure parts of the Bible.



One hand wash for the road?

John Welch

A surgeon claimed that an alcohol-based hand wash had been responsible for a failed evidential breath alcohol test (EBA). He had been operating all day, went home, had two glasses of wine went out again, and failed an EBA. He argued that “the moderate amount he had drunk was not enough to have put him over the limit.” He claimed that an alcohol-based hand wash had been absorbed by his skin. What was he doing? Drinking it?

I use such products every day at work and have never noticed any degree of intoxication. The human skin is relatively impervious to chemicals. The alcohol contained in such hand washes evaporates very rapidly and requires frequent re-application.

Assuming for a moment that it was possible for alcohol to be absorbed in such a manner, it would mean that all over the country, surgeons who used this hand wash were operating under the influence of alcohol!

The flaw in this whole argument is the self-reported consumption of a “couple of wines”.

This episode reminded me of the conundrum presented at

one of our conferences. Peter is taller than Bill, and Bill is taller than Peter. All sorts of esoteric explanations were advanced and we all forgot the obvious ones. The statement was either a mistake or a lie.

The same logical approach can be applied to the alcohol hand wash issue. Whilst not normally given to divination, my recent examination of the entrails of a goat predicts that the alcohol hand wash defence is doomed to fail.

Dominion Post 14 March

More PTSD

If you are facing some serious legal problems it's good to have a medical certificate. This process is well described by Dr Andrew Malleon (Whiplash and Other Useful Illnesses).

A funeral director was facing charges of tax evasion which he excused by claiming he was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The article did not make it clear whether a medical certificate was presented.

I still enjoy a judge's criticism of a doctor for “showering sick

notes like confetti”. If you are facing charges of any kind it is extremely helpful if you can present a doctor's certificate stating that you were depressed or your budgie had died. Such certificates are always supplied after the offence, never before.

Marlborough Express 10 March

Bodytalk

I had never heard of this treatment method so went straight to www.quackwatch.com and there it was under the index of questionable treatments.

The article, (Marlborough Midweek, 12 March 2008) explains that “a simple muscle testing technique is used to find imbalances within the body.”

This smells of the discredited pseudoscience of applied kinesiology. As Quackwatch explains:

“For every malfunctioning energy circuit that is found, the practitioner or client contacts the corresponding ‘points’ with their hands. The practitioner then lightly taps the client on the top of the head, which stimulates the brain centers and causes the brain

to re-evaluate the state of the body's health. The result is that the general energy balance of the body is greatly improved."

The 'Bodytalk' system was evidently developed by a Dr John Velthiem. Needless to say, he is not a qualified doctor but a pretentious chiropractor. Have a look at his web page. If you feel the need, there are study modules as follows: "right brain practical, mind crystals, and manual lymph drainage". The last one sounds a bit painful.

I am formulating a theory that wacky ideas are promoted by people who are bald and have beards. Think Andrew Weil for example.

Perhaps Bertillon's ideas should be revived as the "anthropometry of quackery"?

Reinventing the Wheel

A doctor studying musculoskeletal medicine has found that saline (read 'placebo') injections are remarkably effective in treating conditions such as fibromyalgia. There is nothing new here. Fashionable society doctors used to inject neurotic patients with water in the 1930s. (Read *The Citadel*, by AJ Cronin.)

Saline given by injection is a potent placebo. Fibromyalgia is a condition affecting mainly women who have tender areas all over the body. It is a psychosomatic condition. The tender areas have been studied and are indistinguishable from any other

part of the body. It is hardly surprising that the condition responds to a placebo treatment. The doctor speculates that the saline blocks the sodium channels. This is simplistic. Many medical conditions respond well to placebos. They are usually conditions where belief and psychosocial factors are important. The administration of a placebo by an enthusiastic doctor merely empowers the patient to recover. I have seen this effect on many occasions but have not been taken in by believing I have

The Alternative Fix

This documentary on the mainstreaming of alternative medicine in the US is available free on-line at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/alt-med/

Includes footage of Maori "traditional healers" on a visit to California who use deep tissue massage to "clear out stored-up bad energy".

discovered some new miracle cure! Acupuncture and homoeopathy are examples of placebo treatments that can produce quite marked improvements in well-being. The credulous practitioners of these treatments are taken in by their own placebo.

Dominion Post, 4 February

"Every needle has a sharp end that goes into the patient and a blunt end that is attached to a health care provider. Anyone who thinks that all of the action occurs at the sharp end does not understand human behavior."

- Dr John Loeser, 2004: *Spine*, 29(1): 9-16.

Buccaline Berna

This product is no longer sold in Australia but has been heavily marketed in New Zealand.

It is a grandfathered product for which there is no evidence of efficacy. It contains the bacteria *Pneumococcus*, *Streptococcus* and *Haemophilus*. In a pharmacy advertisement it is claimed to "protect against the bacterial complications of colds." It clearly is of no value in colds which are caused by viruses and I doubt whether anyone needs to take it. How often do people suffer from bacterial infections after a cold? I can't see any reason why this product should work and neither did Medsafe when they classified it as a pharmacy only medicine.

It had earlier been classified as a restricted medicine which meant that it could not be openly displayed or easily advertised. Needless to say, pharmacists were upset and made representations to change its status.

According to the company's submission sales total 150,000 units annually and there are an estimated 75-120,000 users in New Zealand. At \$10 per box that's \$1.5 million, a tidy sum for a useless and unnecessary product. The research quoted in support of the product was laughable. One trial involved 16 women and another studied nine children. Any effect that this product has on antibody levels is likely minor and non-contributory. Whilst not given to predictions I see a great future for this product which is being aggressively marketed and promoted.

Full Page Advertisement, Marlborough Midweek, 5 March

Mild Traumatic Brain Injury a real condition

John Welch seems to think that knee-jerk name-calling and immediate dismissal equates to scientific consideration. His constant ridiculing of many conditions with psychological components amounts to narrow-minded materialism. For those of us who have worked with severe cases of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) it seems bizarre to deny that the symptoms reflect a real underlying pathology of brain and emotional functioning. And of course, shell shock has been described since early in human recorded history. Denying its reality as a condition and disputing any need for treatment simply relegates those affected to ongoing suffering, but will not cause the condition to evaporate.

John describes as “absurd” the diagnosis of Mild Traumatic Brain Injury, found to occur after exposure to roadside blasts. I have no doubt that such a condition is real and reflects actual brain injury. I suspect it is a version of Postconcussional Disorder, long recognised by psychologists but as yet described in the Diagnostic Manual of Psychiatric Disorders only as a condition requiring further research. This condition is associated with subnormal scores on tests of information processing speed and other intellectual functions. Significant emotional, psychological and memory symptoms are always present, and they do not result from the patients being “coached into supplying the right symptoms of this

disorder”. The predicted pattern of subnormal performance on timed tests could not be faked by most people. For that matter, disruption to stereopsis in vision is a measurable, permanent effect of significant concussion. Postconcussional disorder seems to result from insufficient rest and recuperation after a closed head injury, and I predict that is what happens in proximity to explosions, the brain being compressed in the skull but the victim having to continue full physical exertion under stressful conditions, including riding in trucks on bumpy roads causing further brain assault.

John Welch’s railing against both new and well-established syndromes does no credit to the Skeptics. Identification of syndromes is important to begin to reduce real suffering and as a basis for further investigation that will often result in understanding of the physical basis of those syndromes.

Hans Laven

John Welch responds:

My opinions are based on years of historical study as well as 15 years’ military service.

Hans Laven writes: “For those of us who have worked with severe cases of PTSD it seems bizarre to deny that the symptoms reflect a real underlying pathology of brain and emotional functioning.”

There is no scientific evidence of any brain ‘pathology’. There is a lot of evidence that counseling and the like is actually harmful for people who have been involved in something unpleasant. The history of science and medicine is full of examples of beliefs and practices which have been discarded, for example N Rays, canals on Mars, crop circles, alien abduction, gastric freezing for the treatment of peptic ulcer.

Psychiatrist Dr John Mack popularised alien abduction but could not gain enough ‘consensus’ to have it included in the DSM.

PTSD was an invention by consensus. As far as scientific processes go, consensus is the lowest form of evidence, right at the bottom of the list with the randomised placebo controlled trial at the top. The popularisation of PTSD is well outlined in Edward Shorter’s History of Psychiatry: “In the years after 1971, the Vietnam veterans represented a powerful interest group. They believed that their difficulties in reentering American society were psychiatric in nature and could only be explained as a result of the trauma of the war.”

Similar pressure by the gay lobby group lead to the deletion of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder, so one deletion and one inclusion! Shorter commented “Given such antics, it would be difficult to take seriously any official psychiatric pronouncement about problems surrounding sexual orientation, the psychiatry of stress....” Shorter is also critical of the ethnocentricity of the

DSM and points out that anorexia doesn't exist in some countries and if the DSM had been written in India it would have to include demonic possession!

I graduated with little knowledge of medical history and have been making up for it ever since. I

recommend that the following books which I have studied will help Hans Laven understand the evolution of fad diagnoses:

Edward Shorter-A History of Psychiatry and his History of Psychosomatic Illness

Elaine Showalter -Hystories

Ian Whitehead- Doctors in the Great War

Ben Shephard-A War of Nerves

Anthony Babington-Shell Shock

book review

Elton's latest a nightmare vision

Blind Faith, by Ben Elton. Bantam Press. Reviewed by David Riddell.

The world of Ben Elton's latest novel is a skeptic's worst nightmare. In this future London, government has been captured by the Temple, a bizarre fusion of fundamentalist Christianity and the New Age. The sea level rise that has flooded half the city is viewed as God's punishment on the people of Before The Flood, for their ungodly practices such as vaccination and contraception, and their God-denying belief that they were descended from apes.

Childhood mortality is at 50 percent, and the streets are choked with kerbside memorials to lost innocents, safe in the arms of Jesus or Diana. It is a world in which everyone must loudly express their love and respect for their fellow human beings, and most especially for themselves. All must be proud of the bodies God gave them, and flaunt them in revealing clothes even though most are considerably overweight due to the chocolate-coated, sugar-enriched diet that only the suspiciously weird would reject.

Above all, it's a world where nothing is private, though unlike Orwell's 1984, the population

are active participants in their own surveillance. Every aspect of their lives is 'Tubed', including births of children and losses of virginity. The pressure to conform by celebrating individuality is intense and all-pervasive.

Trafford Sewell is a man who feels himself out of step with the world around him. He would like to keep some part of himself private, and he wants to call his newborn child just plain Caitlin. But that isn't celebratory enough, so Caitlin Happymeal she becomes. He will do anything to protect his daughter, and when he is contacted by one of the shadowy cult of the Vaccinators, he is persuaded to have her immunised against the city's innumerable plagues. Gradually, he is drawn into a resistance movement of sorts.

Ben Elton has never been the most subtle of writers, and *Blind Faith* is frequently heavy-handed, even if its general thrust is entirely commendable. In its basic plot it is also uncomfortably close to 1984, and after about a hundred pages, you have a fair idea where this one is going to go.

But Elton has some strong points to make, and none stronger than the relative merits of faith and reason. Trafford argues that he believes in vaccination, in evolution, and an understanding of the physical universe based on empirical evidence and deduction. This, he says, is his faith. Since, in the law of the Temple, a person's faith is inalienable, and to deny a person's faith is incitement to religious hatred, Trafford believes he's within his rights to hold such views. But, as he discovers, if something can be proved to be fact then it requires no faith, and so it has no protection under the law. Ideas that are demonstrably false are given precedence over those that are demonstrably true.

Blind Faith is not so much a vision of the future (I hope!) as a satire on existing social fads and trends. Fundamentalist religion, New Age hokum, the anti-vaccination movement, reality TV, YouTube and the cult of the individual all get skewered. Despite its shortcomings, this is a book that will resonate with many skeptics.

If undelivered, return to:

NZ Skeptics
PO Box 29-492
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Heads Up!

Once again, the NZ Skeptics annual conference is returning to the Waikato Diocesan School for Girls in sunny Hamilton, the heart of the Waikato.

Your committee is already hard at work on a stimulating programme of presentations and activities. See next issue for full details.

So keep 26-28 September free, and we'll see you there!

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