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Alternative Archaeology

Creationists in Auckland

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Submission

Ellis Petition

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Contributions

Contributions are welcome and should be sent to:

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Deadline for next issue: 10 October 2003

Letters for the Forum may be edited as space requires - up to 250 words is preferred. Please indicate the publication and date of all clippings for the Newsfront.

Material supplied by email or IBM-compatible disk is appreciated.

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Living in Interesting Times

HAD an email the other day from someone we hadn't heard from in a while. Among other things, he took the opportunity to ask why we heard so little from the Skeptics in the media, and made unfavourable comparisons with the Consumer's Institute. Given the breadth of that organisation's support base and consequent level of funding, that hardly seemed fair.

I guess the media have a lot of calls on their attention, and a rational voice often seems to be the last thing they want to hear. But there has been a lot of often unrecognised activity from individual members, and this is reflected in the makeup of this issue. Bill Keir, for example, has been investigating claims about New Zealand prehistory. By an amazing coincidence (how do Skeptics explain this kind of thing?) our email correspondent also wanted to know why the society wasn't challenging the conventional archaeological paradigm when there was so much evidence that the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Romans and others had colonised this country at least 2000 years ago. Bill's article had arrived a couple of days previously and it was very nice having it on hand to refute a couple of points straight away.

In a similar vein, Alastair Brickell reports on the evolving (if that is the appropriate word) situation with the most active of the New Zealand creationist groups, Answers in Genesis. And several society members were signatories to the widely publicised Peter Ellis petition.

Bob Brockie is just one of several columnists and journalists in the society. We republish one of his columns from the Dominion Post in this issue; look for more in the future.

Of primary concern to the society has been the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) discussion document, also reported in this issue. Again, individual members have sent in submissions alongside the official one from the society.

Then, of course, there's the annual conference which is once again upon us. This is always an enjoyable event, and once again the organisers have come up with a first-rate lineup of speakers. Hope to see as many of you as possible in September.

Finally, thanks to all of you who alerted us to the absence of apostrophes and other punctuational oddities in the last issue. The gremlins responsible have been rounded up and disposed of humanely.

Annette

Invent Your Own History of New Zealand

Bill Keir

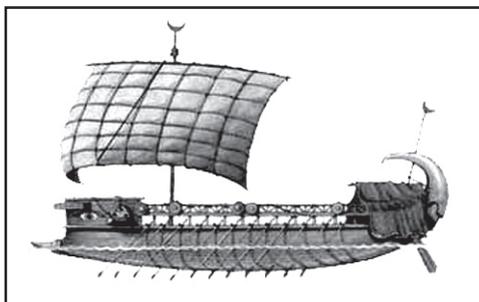
Ancient Phoenicians in New Zealand? A recent book makes the claim, but the evidence doesn't bear scrutiny.

ROSS Wiseman's book, *New Zealand's Hidden Past* (Discovery Press, 2001), is his personal analysis of over 100 inscribed rock drawings on Mount Tauhara near Taupo. He claims they are evidence that Phoenicians from the Mediterranean lived beside Lake Taupo before the Taupo eruption, dated around AD 200. He declares confidently that 2000 years ago there were nine Phoenician settlements spread around New Zealand from Northland to Otago comprising at least 1000 people whose forebears arrived around 600 BC in a fleet of about 10 square-rigged ships. They built pyramid-styled houses and hunted moa with bows and curved throwing sticks. They established a centre at sacred Mount Tauhara and had a charismatic leader called Ishmun (the name of a Phoenician god).

Wiseman extrapolates all this detail and more from the Tauhara rock drawings and similar drawings at other sites around New Zealand. Notable amongst the drawings are detailed maps of the world and New Zealand which he argues must be dated before the Taupo eruption.

These are extraordinary claims. We would be entitled to

insist on a bit more hard evidence than a collection of peculiar rock drawings. In the large corpus of New Zealand archaeological evidence from hundreds of excavations over the past century or more we could expect to find some hint of such a significant group of inhabitants. Where are their dwelling sites, bones, artifacts, tools, food rubbish middens and other paraphernalia of domestic life? Where are the site-specific radiocarbon dates? And where are their present-day descendants with the appropriate genealogical traditions? So far, no carbon dates from archaeological sites have identified human habitation in New Zealand older than about 1000 years.



Did ships like these once sail the coasts of New Zealand?

Sixth century BC Phoenicians had metal tools, coins and a written language with an alphabet similar to that of classical Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. We could

expect such people to leave easily identifiable linguistic inscriptions associated with their art and practices, and easily identifiable settlement sites with abundant artifacts including metal and its related technology. Maybe we have just not found them yet. If we do find them it will be very exciting. But a collection of enigmatic rock markings is not enough.

How has Wiseman arrived at these elaborate conclusions? You don't have to look far into his book to find the answer: a vivid imagination, heavy doses of fanciful speculation, flawed methodology and argumentation, and careless, amateurish procedures masquerading as careful science. On detailed scrutiny his case falls apart.

For a start, he dates the rock drawings by a method he invented himself from his own dubious theory of the erosion rate of Rangitaiki ignimbrite (the type of rock in which the drawings are inscribed). After having two geology academics tell him that such a method would be too difficult he forged ahead anyway.

Interestingly, he obtained an age of 2000 years for the rock drawings, but only by misplacing a

decimal point in the crucial calculation. This aside, his dating method is intriguing for its naivety. He took silicon moulds of the cut depths of two examples of rock markings. One was a less distinct specimen found on a ridge exposed to the weather; the other was a more clearly defined example found under an overhang protected from the weather. Wiseman carefully measured the difference between the cut depths of the two samples at 3mm and assumed this difference to be due to the erosion rate of ignimbrite from weathering since the cuts were made.

Unquantifiable Variables

The unquantifiable variables in this comparison are obvious at a glance, not the least being the whim of the carver at the time he determined the cut depths. Then there is the question of whether protection under an overhang is a guarantee of zero weathering. Then there is the question of whether the two samples were inscribed by the same artist at the same era. It is crucial to establish this independently, otherwise the argument is circular. The date of the drawings is what you are trying to establish, so you can't assume both samples were made at the same date and then derive a date from that assumption.

He then determined an average erosion rate of ignimbrite over 30 million years to be 450 metres. He determined this figure by a geological argument I found incomprehensible, involving changes in the height of the volcanic plateau over 30 million years. Then, when he applied the figure he bungled the arithmetic. He

concluded, "If it takes 30 million years to erode 450 metres of average hardness rock, this is equivalent to an erosion rate of 1.5 mm per 1000 years." I'm afraid

The date of the drawings is what you are trying to establish, so you can't assume both samples were made at the same date and then derive a date from that assumption.

not. The arithmetic yields 15 mm per 1000 years. Either Wiseman didn't check his maths, or he has incorporated some factor he didn't tell us about.

When he applied the figure of 1.5mm per 1000 years to the 3mm difference between the cut depths of his two samples he got an age of 2000 years for the drawings. If he had applied the correct figure of 15mm per 1000 years he would have got an age of 200 years.

Although this is amusing, the dating method was so crude that it could not have produced an indicative age in any case.

He then presented evidence that he claims corroborates the 2000-year-old age. He identified a rock drawing which he deemed had been buried under the Taupo eruption ash layer and exposed by a slip in the 1970s. This led him to the conclusion that this drawing must have been done before the Taupo eruption. His analysis of the strata comes from the exposed sides of the slip, not from the location of the rock drawing in the centre of the slip, so the stratigraphy cannot be applied to the rock

drawing. Also, he offers no evidence to rule out the possibility that the rock drawing may have been covered by more recent slips subsequent to the Taupo eruption and prior to the 1970s slip. In an erosion-prone area we could expect slips to occur more than once in 1800 years.

In support of his dating he also cites Dr Richard Holdaway's 2000-year-old carbon dates for rat bones found in Nelson and the causal link between the presence of rats and human visits. Although Holdaway's carbon dates are important, they are not site-specific to the Taupo rock drawings and so can't be linked to them. Even if humans visited New Zealand 2000 years ago to bring the rats, no conclusions can be drawn from this about the age of the Taupo drawings.

More Supporting Evidence

Another piece of evidence Wiseman offers to support his theory is a marking found on a rock at Whakaipo Bay about 15km west of Mount Tauhara and reproduced in his book as a line drawing. He declares that it is an "exact" drawing of the seven stars of the constellation Ursa Minor (the Little Bear) commonly called the Little Dipper. "Each star has been incised as a deep circular hollow in the rock, with a small mound remaining at the centre," he tells us.

Since this constellation is only visible in the northern hemisphere, Wiseman takes this marking to be evidence that the rock carver had knowledge of northern hemisphere stars. This would only be remarkable if it can be shown that the drawing predates already known visits to New

Zealand by people from the northern hemisphere, and Wiseman has certainly not demonstrated that.

Correspondence Exaggerated

In any case, a cursory comparison of the drawing with actual star configurations reveals that Wiseman's claim of "exact" correspondence is an exaggeration stemming from his own excitement. The rock marking can only be described as a very rough rendition of this constellation at any time in the last 3000 years. By joining the points in different ways I could also produce rough renditions of the Southern Cross-Pointers group and the Pleiades. Both these groups are visible from the southern hemisphere and both contain seven stars. You could probably find other approximations if you looked – star configurations are arbitrary and in the eye of the beholder. It seems not to have occurred to Wiseman that, in the absence of additional clues, the drawing might not represent stars at all.

We could dismiss Wiseman's theory on the spurious dating alone, but there are other glaring flaws in his work. The material presented in his book consists of reproductions of the rock markings from silicon moulds, selective chalking, "enhanced" photographs, and third-generation scanned copies. Such practices clearly risk accidental contamination or modification of the evidence, or simple misinterpretation. He admits that some of the field work was done by his young children unsupervised.

I have not yet seen the Tauhara drawings for myself, but I was able to check the "Pakanae" map of New Zealand. This is a key ingredient in his case because the

map includes Lake Taupo configured in a shape Wiseman believes is close to its shape before the Taupo eruption and therefore evidence that the map originated before that time. This map is reproduced in his book as a line drawing. He says it is to be found etched on a large stone hauled from the Hokianga Harbour in the 1950s. This stone now stands at Pakanae Marae as a memorial to Kupe.

The Stone Examined

Recently I examined the surface of this stone carefully and found that the only obvious engravings on it are initials carved in very recent times. On one side there are some natural raised humps on the surface which, with imagination, might be interpreted as a very rough shape of the North Island, or probably any other random shape you wanted to see in it (a hat or a boot?). The rock is covered in lichens which either help or hinder your search depending on what you are looking for. I could see nothing which could possibly yield the detailed shape in the drawing in Wiseman's book, and certainly nothing which could justify the detailed conclusions he drew from it.

This looks to me like a classic case of a vivid imagination at work assigning great precision to something that is essentially impressionistic and therefore inherently imprecise. My experience in checking just this one item of Wiseman's evidence makes me very cautious about accepting his other evidence at face value. Much of his analysis of the drawings displays this tendency to attribute precision to images which, in many cases, were obviously little more than artistic doodling and

never intended to be definitive. On Wiseman's own admission, the lack of clarity of some of the images makes it difficult to distinguish between natural and artificial marks. Yet there are several cases where he reads extraordinary symbolism and detail into the slightest scratch.

Another case in point is the map of the world reproduced as line drawings in his book and featured on the book's cover in the form of a photo ("slightly highlighted," as he puts it) of the actual Tauhara rock marking. In fact, the line highlighting on the photo is so dominant that the rock marking itself can't be seen and therefore can't be evaluated. His 9-year-old daughter had done the chalking unsupervised, and he didn't notice the map himself until he later examined the photos of the chalking job.

A Convoluted Scenario

Putting these problems aside, let us assume that some artist drew a rough map of the world on this rock, and let us assume that Wiseman's rendition of it in his book is faithful to the original. It is unmistakably a map of the continents of the world as we know them today. The inaccuracies are of the sort that I could create myself if I tried to do a freehand drawing of the world's continents from memory.

Wiseman's interpretation of this map is a convoluted scenario which dates it around AD 100 and attributes it to an artist descended from a group of Phoenician seafarers who sailed from the Mediterranean to New Zealand in the seventh century BC and eventually settled at Lake Taupo. He attributes the map's accuracy

to the assumption that the Phoenicians in the centuries before Christ were familiar with the entire map of the world because of their global trading and exploration voyages. The map includes, we should note, Antarctica and the Arctic coast of Canada, but excludes Britain, Scandinavia and the arctic coast of Russia and Siberia. Wiseman's frantic attempt to make these facts fit his theory expresses awe at the Phoenician's amazing knowledge of the world, oddly combined with the conclusion that they did not know about Britain! Did he consider the possibility that the artist just didn't finish the drawing? Apparently not.

Another Explanation

The more obvious and prosaic scenario seems to have escaped

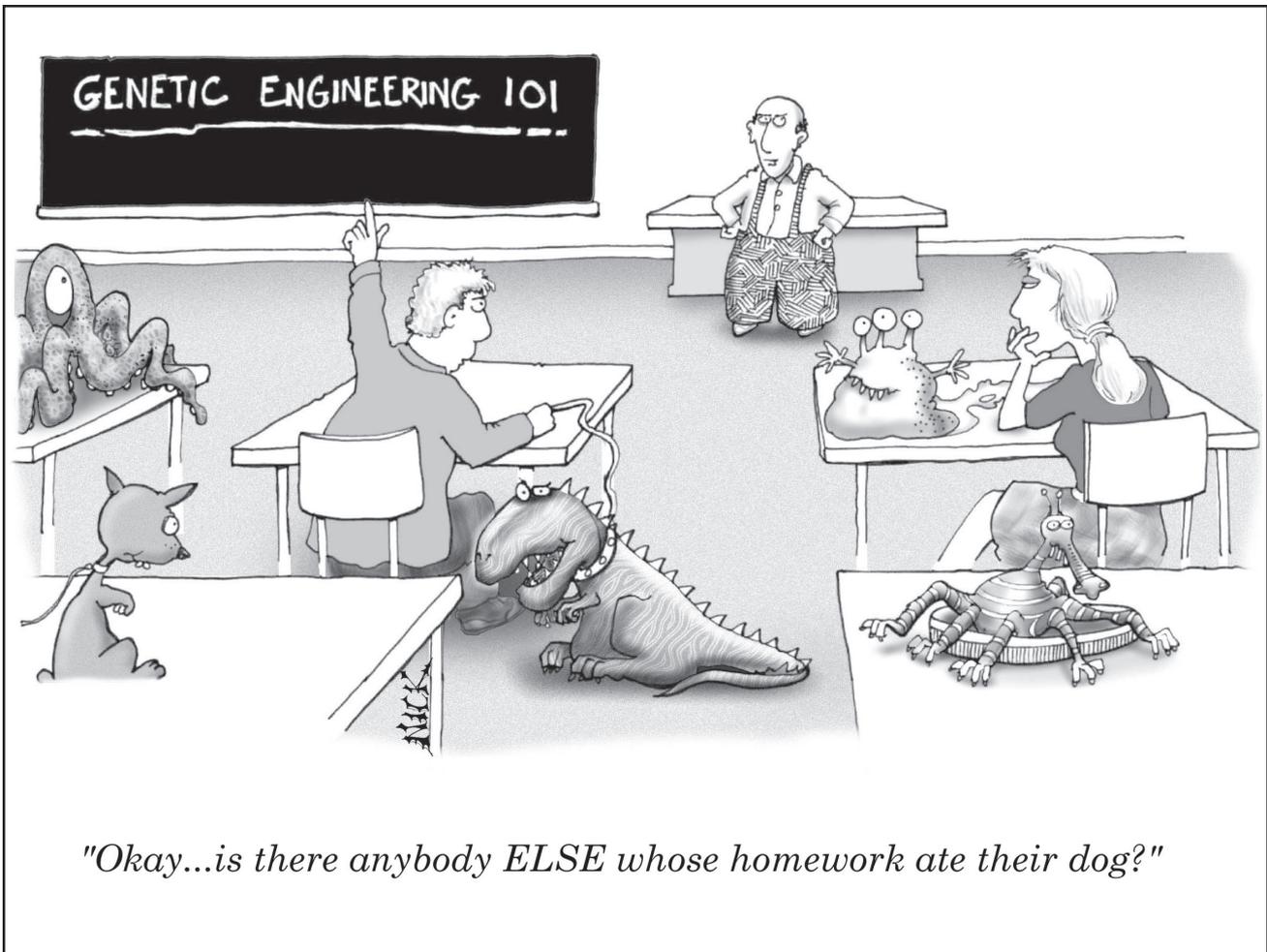
Wiseman, namely, that the map's detail virtually guarantees that it was drawn by a moderately well educated person in the last 200 years, or maybe even within the last 100 years by a person with a

Would not a drawing depicting an event be conclusive evidence that it was drawn after the event?

primary school education. A well known rule of thumb in this kind of inquiry is that if there is a choice between a complex and a simple explanation, the simple one is the more likely.

Wiseman often prefers the far-fetched version, and it gets him into difficulties. One drawing

(which he dates before the Taupo eruption of course) seems to depict fallen trees, which he takes to be the flattened forests caused by the Taupo eruption. In fact, the content of the drawing is so ill-defined that you could read almost anything into it. Wiseman's analysis is that, because the drawing was done before the Taupo eruption, it foresaw the Taupo eruption. Now hang on a minute. Here we have Wiseman arguing that because his dating of the drawing can't be wrong the artist must have foreseen the Taupo eruption. Would not a drawing depicting an event be conclusive evidence that it was drawn after the event? Not for Wiseman it seems. Such contrived manipulation of the evidence to fit a strongly held theory, especially by resort to the paranormal, is grossly unscientific.



But Wiseman dug himself into this quagmire by allowing his preconceived ideas to dictate his findings, and by reading detail into the rock markings that is simply not there.

Geometrical Shapes

Wiseman makes much of the geometrical shapes he finds in many of the rock drawings and reads extraordinary symbolism into them – a diamond symbolises life, a trapezium death, a circle materiality. He uses two such drawings to construct an abstruse symbolism depicting an ancient theory of the universe to support his theory of Phoenician origins. In these two drawings he identifies two-dimensional representations of cubes, dodecahedrons, a stellated dodecahedron and an icosahedron (the latter term he confusingly interchanges with the term stellated icosahedron). He concludes that the drawings “indicate that the Phoenicians knew of the existence of all 10 regular polyhedra and the symbolism behind them”, and that their knowledge in this field preempted western knowledge by more than 2000 years.

This sounds very impressive but is mathematically and historically garbled. A regular polyhedron (solid) is defined as one that has identical (congruent) regular polygons forming its faces and has all its polyhedral angles congruent. There are only five possible regular convex polyhedra: the tetrahedron, cube, octahedron, dodecahedron, and icosahedron. Euclid defined them, Plato knew of them, and the Pythagoreans and probably all the early Middle Eastern mathematicians knew of at least three of them. The so-called stellated dodecahedron and stellated

icosahedron are really examples of concave regular polyhedra.

As for the two drawings which feature these figures, on Wiseman’s own admission they are not well defined. The copy in his book of the figure he identifies as a stellated dodecahedron could as easily be identified as a stellated pentagon (a two-dimensional plane figure). The figure he identifies as an icosahedron (possibly he means a stellated icosahedron) can only be described as a confusing jumble of irregular triangles and other shapes from which it would be reckless to conclude anything. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Wiseman has constructed a complicated historical theory from a few casual geometric doodlings by someone who took pleasure in artistic creativity with no mathematical pretensions at all.

There can be no denying that the Tauhara rock drawings are tantalising, and it would be nice to know who made them. Although Wiseman is prone to fanciful interpretation of the slightest scratch, broad interpretation of some of the drawings is possible. One is a convincing line sketch of activities during a moa hunt. The moa is easy to identify, and the stick-figure hunters with spears certainly seem to be ambushing it. Moa feature unambiguously in several of the drawings, which cannot be surprising because archaeological excavations have produced evidence of moa hunters, dated about 600 years ago, in the lower layers of Whakamoenga Cave about 13km west of Mount Tauhara. Wiseman ignores this rather conspicuous clue about who might have made the moa drawings.

Sailing Vessels

Three drawings feature clear sketches of sailing vessels with yardarm or boom rigging. Wiseman seems to read more detail into these than is reasonable. There is certainly no imperative that they depict 2000-year-old Phoenician ship design as he argues. They are typical of the rough impressionistic sketches a school child might do on the back of an exercise book with no intention to be accurate. They could have been done at any time in the last 1000 years by anyone familiar with Polynesian craft, or within the last 200 years by anyone familiar with European craft. Artists often create a unique stylised version of an object applying artistic licence by economising on the detail or embellishing it.

Another example features a line drawing of a house which is not difficult to see as a high-walled, hip-roofed bungalow on wooden piles complete with a square window. Taken with the human and animal figures in the drawing it is possible to see the whole image as a New Zealand colonial farmyard scene. To Wiseman it is the Ishmun family home of AD 100 with a “new improved design of dwelling”. He even identifies which member of the family each stick figure represents, identifies one of the trees as a fruit tree, identifies a rectangular shape as a storage box, and identifies the animal as a milking goat.

Contrary to Wiseman’s assumption, it is entirely possible that the drawings on Mount Tauhara were not all done in the same era. Some may be 600 years old, and some may be only 50 years old – we probably won’t ever know for certain. Successive generations of humans may well have left their

marks on the same group of suitable rocks. Humans are well known for following trends, fads, or a catchy idea. I have been known to scratch a cryptic image on a mountaintop myself.

Lateral Thinkers

Wiseman sees himself as part of a growing brigade of "lateral thinking amateur researchers" breaking through the barrier of the blinkered orthodox view of New Zealand history to reveal "the truth". He complains that the media and mainstream academics invariably try to suppress anomalous "discoveries" such as his.

I find this ironical. I made a cursory analysis of media coverage of these fringe theories over the past 10 years and found they get at least as much coverage as orthodox theory. It is not an exaggeration to say that the media is hungry for sensation and pounces on a good mystery. They will especially jump at the chance to publicise maverick researchers challenging orthodox theory, and they especially love conspiracy theories claiming that mainstream science has suppressed scientific information. Expert refutations are often relegated to brief addenda, or reluctantly presented later with less prominence, because they are perceived as boring.

A classic case was the media frenzy about the Kaimanawa stone wall in 1996. (It needs to be repeated that geologists confidently declared it to be a natural rock formation, but the credulous still believe it is man made).

Wiseman was completely free to make his self-published book available to the world through book shops and libraries without

restriction and without any prior critical assessment or expert evaluation.

Even if the book is total fantasy the citizens are free to read it uncritically and swallow it whole if they want to, and many will. What more could Wiseman ask for? If the book is scientifically substandard, he can't be surprised if mainstream researchers don't want to waste time dialoguing with him.

Probabilities and Certainties

Theorists such as Wiseman seem to have little understanding of how science works. Much science relies on probabilities rather than certainties with conclusions expressed as confidence levels based on the abundance of the evidence. Archaeological investigations can never give full coverage to all the possibilities and must be done by prioritising representative samples or targeting highly suggestive clues based on current knowledge and known patterns.

The current corpus of evidence of human settlement in New Zealand is already substantial enough to be indicative to high confidence levels. We are talking here of a body of evidence from hundreds of excavations, hundreds of carbon dates and thousands of artifacts.

Of course, the discovery of revolutionary new evidence is always possible. Wiseman is obviously convinced that archaeologists have not looked in the right place to find the evidence that would prove his theory. Maybe so. But the archaeologists are the most competent people to assess

that. Every archaeologist would love to be the first to find evidence of 2000-year-old human habitation in New Zealand. I don't think Wiseman's book will help them much.

It is difficult to find any scientifically redeeming features in this book. But speculation is socially acceptable if it is not claimed to be anything else. Wiseman claims to have made "the most significant archaeological discovery in New Zealand history." Time will tell about that. Richard Holdaway's rat bone datings indicate that humans made at least casual, itinerant or accidental visits to New Zealand 2000 years ago.

But it is much more likely that such visitors were from the Pacific Islands than from Europe, given the well-documented facts that these islands were only about 20 days sailing time from New Zealand and were inhabited by accomplished seafarers 2000 years ago. And we could not rule out the possibility that humans actually settled here 2000 years ago (by "settled" I mean dwelt and bred successive generations). But no hard evidence exists for this at present. Wiseman's book does not constitute such evidence. It is little more than pseudoscientific credulity, and a blind alley that will mislead many gullible readers.

Bill Keir is a Hokianga skeptic

Waikato lecturer on Church Hit-List

A WAIKATO University lecturer has been named on a website for Latter-Day Saints as anti-mormon.

American history senior lecturer Dr Raymond Richards has accused the Mormon Church of irresponsible conduct after the site warns “if you don’t want the target shot at, don’t raise it”.

“I think the language is irresponsible, especially given the Mormon Church’s history of violence. They have a sordid history of polygamy and massacres.”

He said he was not anti-Mormon but the religion was aggressive, racist and sexist.

Dr Richards said the website was an attempt to intimidate people who didn’t accept what the Mormons thought of themselves.

“If the Mormons don’t want to be known as a cult they have to stop acting as a cult. This list of supposed enemies and the language they have used is irresponsible, but I’m flattered to be on it with others such as the New York Times.”

New Zealand Temple Visitors Centre director Paul Ashton said the Church did not have any response.

“Many people have called us a cult in the past, but we just tend to ignore it. We encourage people to read and study and find out for themselves. I feel sorry for people who tend to try and fault us.”

In 1998, Mormon students charged Dr Richards with harassment after he said the religion was started as a scam by convicted

fraudster Joseph Smith. He said the religion didn’t allow freedom of thought and academics needed to be alerted to that danger.

Dr Richards was to present a paper called The Mormon

Challenge at the university’s Fulbright American Studies Conference in July.

June 27 2003

Chinese herbal specialists treat Hong Kong Sars patients

TRADITIONAL Chinese medical practitioners have given herbal remedies to Hong Kong Sars patients along with Western drugs, and public hospital officials said more patients might get similar treatment despite uncertainties about whether it helps.

The experts from mainland China visited 23 patients, and while two refused to take the herbs in conjunction with Western antiviral drugs and steroids, 21 received a combination of the two treatments.

Five of the patients have now been discharged and one died - numbers that are in line with Hong Kong’s broader experience with severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars). So far, 1213 people have recovered from Sars in Hong Kong but 251 have died.

Professor Lin Lin and Professor Yang Zhimin, both from the Guangdong Provincial Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, said the herbal treatments can work, although the rest of the patients are still hospitalised.

Western experts say there is no scientific proof that traditional remedies are effective and remain sceptical about any benefits.

Meeting with local journalists, Lin and Yang declined to say which herbs they gave to the Sars patients.

Hong Kong’s hospital authority invited the herbalists to assist in the fight against Sars - the first time that public hospitals there have allowed traditional medicines to be part of their official treatment. Herbs have been used previously on a voluntary basis for some patients or in research by universities.

An executive manager of professional services at the Hospital Authority, Dr Choy Khai-meng, declined to say whether the herbs were helping anybody. But he said the mainland experts have been asked to stay for another three months so officials can learn more.

Some of the patients who received the combination Chinese-Western treatment did better, Choy said, but there is no evidence to explain why.

“I think we are not making any comment that it is Chinese medicine or Western medicine that has led to this result,” he said.

“Dr Jaz” Dies

Dr Neil McKenzie, better known to music lovers as Dr Jaz, died in May following a long battle against a brain tumour (Bay of Plenty Times, May 15 2003).

Neil McKenzie was also a long-time member of the NZ Skeptics, and wrote the “Skepsis” column on medical issues for this magazine from 1997 to 1999.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, he was raised in Surrey and attended medical school in Charing Cross hospital. He first came to New Zealand in 1974 and subsequently took up a post as a GP in Tokoroa. He settled in Tauranga in 1985.

Neil McKenzie first formed a skiffle band at age 16 in England and took up the banjo - an instrument which became his trademark. In 1980 his band, ‘Dr Jaz’ was born, and has been a regular feature of the local music scene here and overseas ever since.

Equally comfortable in the worlds of music and medicine, he will be greatly missed in both.

ACC Investigates Acupuncturists

ACC is investigating 20 acupuncture providers after discovering they were getting half its annual funding for the treatment (Nelson Mail, Dominion Post, May 21).

More than \$2 million was going to only 20 of almost 200 registered acupuncturists, ACC Healthwise division general

manager David Rankin said. Some were claiming for 12 hours a day for every day of the week.

Acupuncturists will now have to consult ACC clinical advisers after 10 treatments, rather than the previous 24, before further treatments will be authorised. ACC spends about \$4.6 million a year on acupuncture treatments.

Register of Acupuncturists president Kevin Plaisted said the new limit was unlikely to stop further sessions going ahead.

“There is no reason why ACC will not approve further treatment... it’s certainly not designed to stop treatment at 10 but simply that we’re accountable for the treatment we’re providing,” he said.

Dr Rankin said injuries like sprains were treated with acupuncture but it required more sessions than other treatments.

Who Would Have Predicted This?

T Bromley, of Greymouth, takes the Press to task in a letter to the Editor (May 22) over the accuracy of the paper’s Christmas “clairvoyants” Maureen Rose and Rosina Bond.

Neither were able to predict the main stories early in the New Year, which included the Australian bushfires, Sydney’s train disaster, and even the space shuttle crash.

Rosina Bond’s prediction for the war in Iraq read, “While Iraq has become the US’s New Russia it’s predicted the two countries will

not go to war in 2003... When conflict comes to a head it will be late September-early October, Bush will be stopped in his tracks.”

No mention either of the power crisis, nor (and this, says T Bromley, is the grand-daddy of them all) the Sars virus. Like shooting fish in a barrel, really.

Watch Out for Those Ladders

Joanne Black’s Blackchat column (Dominion Post, April 28) had a novel perspective on the Sars epidemic. Pointing out that 110 people dying of the disease in China in one month was equivalent to four New Zealanders dying in a year, she took a look at the statistics to see what types of things kill four, and only four, New Zealanders in a year.

In 1998, the “latest” year for which mortality figures are available, three people died from cystitis, from varicose veins in the legs and from male breast cancer. Eight died from falling in holes, two from acute tonsillitis, four from curvature of the spine, three from genital prolapse, five from falling off ladders or scaffolding, and 14 from being hit by rolling stock (which Black thinks is to do with trains rather than sheep tumbling down hillsides).

Investigating Sars has taught her plenty, she says. She wouldn’t hesitate to travel to China, but from now on, she’ll certainly be more vigilant when crossing railway lines, take more care on ladders, and particularly watch out for those lethal holes in the ground.

Psychics “See” Missing Woman

Psychics have told police they know what happened to missing Hauraki Plains woman Sara Niethé (Dominion Post, June 16).

Several psychics have called police since investigators announced a \$20,000 reward for information which would help them find the woman they now believe may have been a victim of foul play.

“They have had visions of where Sara is and where her car is. If they are specific enough we will check them out,” a spokesman said. Most, however, have not been specific.

Ms Niethé vanished on March 30 after drinking in Kaihère with a friend. Wide police searches of the plains, rivers and an irrigation ditch found no sign of her or her light blue-green late 1980s Honda Civic. Her family say it is out of character for her to leave her children, and her bank accounts have not been touched.

We Suspected As Much

The incidence of cancerous tumours in the brain, neck and head has not risen since the arrival of mobile phones, according to the Wellington School of Medicine (Dominion Post, June 16).

Researchers collected data on men and women aged 20 to 69 from the cancer registry between 1987 and 1998, as well as data on cellphone use. Professor Alistair Woodward said the findings, published in the New Zealand Medical Journal, should provide users with some reassurance. He said the study’s weakness was that it looked at the overall population

rather than particularly at those who used mobile phones, meaning it was not known whether those developing tumours were using cellphones or not. But the research still showed there was not a strong link between cellphone use and cancer. The findings backed up a similar study in Denmark.

A study of tumour rates among cellphone users compared to non-users would be completed next year.

And on a Similar Note...

British researchers have cast further doubt on fears of a link between overhead power lines and childhood leukaemia (Dominion Post, June 16).

A study published in the British Journal of Cancer found no evidence to support such concerns from laboratory experiments. Researchers used blood cells from a donor to test the effect of magnetic fields on the normal repair process and found cells exposed to strong magnetic fields repaired themselves naturally.

Funds Raised for Alternative Treatment

A former Hawkes Bay goal-kicker and member of the Blues Super 12 rugby team will use more than \$100,000 raised at charity functions to fight his motor neurone disease with alternative medicine (Dominion Post, June 2).

Jarrold Cunningham, who was diagnosed with the disease last year, said \$45,000 was raised at a Hawkes Bay auction on May 31, and up to \$70,000 at a rugby game the following day, featuring All

Blacks Norm Hewitt and Bull Allen. This would go toward research and education on the natural supplements which had “cured” him.

Cunningham, 34, said he was on the road to a full recovery from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a form of motor neurone disease, after taking a course of 20 capsules of astragalus, from the root of the astragalus plant, over five days, and says it has put him into full remission.

After his Christchurch-based Chinese “healer” told him that chicken parasites caused the symptoms of his disease, he has vowed to use money raised to prove this and help others with the disease seek herbal remedies to treat it.

The money raised at the weekend would be fed into a trust to be administered by the healer Cunningham has been working with.

Before taking the herb he was unable to get out of the bath without help. Three weeks after the dose he was able to do so on his own. “If that’s not remission of symptoms I don’t know what is,” he said.

Cunningham was also prescribed a dose of cayenne pepper to help unblock his lymph nodes, which he says worked. He based this on his armpits smelling like curry.

He no longer visits his doctor in Britain where he has been based, saying the doctor was closed-minded and negative. However when his muscles grow back in three to six months, as he predicts, he will tell his neurologist how he did it.

True Home of Father Christmas Discovered!

I am always astonished that famous mystical persons, such as the Virgin Mary (who was transubstantiated into an Australian fencepost in February) reveal themselves to us mere mortals. I once had an experience like that.

Four years ago I was on a German research ship in the Southern Ocean taking sediment cores from the sea bottom. The cores were cut in half lengthwise to expose sedimentary structures. In one of the cores was a clear image of Father Christmas.



Luckily we were thousands of kilometres away from human habitation; otherwise the ship would have been overrun by thousands of children wanting to see this apparition. The consensus of people on board was that, being so close to Antarctica, the message was obvious. Father Christmas does not live at the North Pole, but at the South Pole.

Gerrit van der Lingen
Originally published in the
Christchurch Press, February 14,
2003

Indian Socialism

I possibly shouldn't come into a debate that seems to be going on for some time which I haven't actually followed, but a couple of the statements that Jim Ring makes in his letter (Autumn 2003) need at least some clarification. He maintains that "under socialism India was a poor country, people starved". This is a very vague statement. What does Ring mean by socialism? It has been a pluralist secular democracy since independence, albeit with a fairly controlled economy. More importantly, what is meant by people starved? I doubt if there is a country in the world, socialist or capitalist, where you couldn't say in the past people starved. People have starved in America, the world's capitalist icon.

The suggestion to me is that India suffered famines. Perhaps this is not meant but it should be noted India has not had a famine since 1943 when it was under British rule. It has been exporting food on an off for years, even under so-called socialism. The deciding factor for famines according to Sen is not so much whether a country is socialist or capitalist, but whether it is a democracy or dictatorship.

Lastly India has been manufacturing if not exporting (I have little information about exports) much more complicated goods than textiles for years, such as cars and motorbikes. Admittedly these were not particularly modern models, but anyone who has driven in an underdeveloped country would know that once outside the main cities anything that can be repaired by a local blacksmith is a much better bet than the more complicated modern stuff.

Leaving aside the figures on the increase or decline in world poverty for which both sides claim sound evidence, this debate deserves something other than glib generalizations and inaccurate case studies.

Bob Metcalfe

Evolutionary Ethics

I am surprised that the Skeptics have chosen to support this environmentalist campaign (Family Obligations, Skeptic 67). Evolution implies no "family obligations" to our fellow creatures, but a relatively utilitarian attitude. We support cows, wheat, kiwifruit, roses and brewer's yeast. We discourage possums, rats, the painted apple moth and the Sars virus.

Chimps are cute, but so are rabbits, possums and stoats. They have a lot of our DNA, but the people of Ethiopia, Chechnya, Congo, Bosnia have even more and they need our help.

Chimps would survive longer if they went back to work instead of becoming permanent social welfare beneficiaries. Revive the "chimpanzee's tea-party" at the zoo. Put them back in the circus. Recruit them for advertising tea, or appearing in movies with US presidential hopefuls. And what is wrong with being an experimental animal?

Vincent Gray

As stated on Page 2, opinions expressed in the New Zealand Skeptic are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of NZSCICOP or its officers -ed.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Submission Now Out

The Word-based submission to the CAM discussion document which was sent out in our (NZCSICOP) name is now available for you to read at <http://skeptics.org.nz/cam>

My apologies for not being able to circulate this prior to submission, but we only just finished the proof-read five minutes before submissions closed, with the much

appreciated help of researchers world-wide (Stephen Barrett of Quackwatch has even sent his own submission in with a line-by-line critique of the proposals!).

I've tried to be as hardline as possible in those areas which are not negotiable. And I've tried to provide some grounds for cooperative, rational development in those areas where CAM may

prove its utility, rather than rejecting it out of hand.

I hope that for the most part I have the mix about right, and that you consider it a reasonably representative view of our organisation.

Exhaustedly,

Vicki Hyde

The list below, taken from the submission's introduction, covers the general recommendations it makes; each point is covered in detail in the remainder of the document.

Problems of Basic Focus

- The basic question is whether CAM can help, not how;
- Ministerial Advisory Committee on Complementary and Alternative Health (MACCAH) definition of CAM is too broad;
- Better definitional analysis of CAM is required;
- Categorisation and prioritisation necessary for evaluation, research and application;
- Broader representation on MACCAH needs to be addressed for credibility of policy recommendations.

Regulation

- Need to recognise public demand for regulation;
- Does training imply competency? Disclosure and liability responsibilities must be enforced;
- Regulations required against disproven and unsafe practices and products;
- Need to ensure that apparent safeguards arising from regulation are not misleading to consumers;
- Costs should be borne predominantly by CAM industry with independent monitoring;
- Regulations need to recognise range of risks;
- Lower standards for CAM harm its own credibility and should not be accepted;
- Self-regulation is inadequate and inappropriate;
- Issues of public accountability and enforcement have to be addressed;

- Failure to regulate products leads to public harm;
- Clear, consistent product regulation is vital and achievable;
- Recommended response to ensure safety and efficacy.

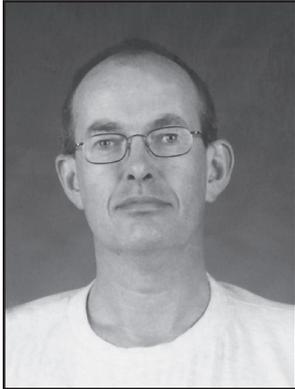
Consumer Information Needs

- Informed choice should be a primary requirement and must include totality of available evidence;
- MOH database needs to be balanced, neutral to achieve credibility;
- Vested sources can be inaccurate, misleading and potentially dangerous;
- Publication bias has to be recognised and assessment provided.

Research, Evidence and Efficacy

- Identify practices, products outside the scope of research;
- CAM is big business and should contribute to research;
- Credible research programmes can provide useful information;
- Public research programmes need to prioritise promising approaches over questionable ones; Public funding should be based on results and capped at appropriate levels;
- All research programmes need to be robust and defensible;

Continued on page 15



Nervousness based medicine

Fear of litigation is a powerful stimulus to over-investigation and over treatment. In an atmosphere of litigation phobia, the only bad test is the test you didn't think of ordering.

NZ Medical Journal Nov 24 2000 p. 479

Magnet Quackery

While setting the VCR the other day I caught a segment on TV where a particularly slimy and irritating Australian was extolling the virtues of magnetic pillows and underlays. I was further reminded of this incident when Dr Keith Davidson of Blenheim, gave me a brochure on "Magnetic Energy". Ever the humorist, Keith had scrawled across the bottom the words "doesn't attract me!"

The web address is www.magneticenergy.com.au (shouldn't that be 'dot.con'?)

One of the great things about quackery is that it can be recycled after a period of time when people have forgotten the lessons of history. Charles Mackay – "Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds", outlines the last great era of magnetic therapy in his book. Refer page 304.

When recycling an old fraud it is important to modernise it for a more sophisticated New Zealand audience (don't laugh). It also helps to link it with other modalities such as acupuncture and auricular acupuncture. Some highlights from the brochure: Magnetic water. Placing a jug of boiled water on top of the Mega Multi Magnet for 2-3 hours makes this. The daily use of "magnetised water may keep your negative and positive ions and pH levels balanced."

What about an antinauseant magnet with the unfortunate acronym of "SCAT". (Sea, Car, Air, Train). Scat is a North American term for animal sh*t which pretty much sums up these useless magnetic products.

Sexual abuse claims set to spiral

In Vol 62 I predicted that moves to allow lump sum compensation for sexual abuse claims would then be subjected to Welch's Law. (Claims expand to take up the amount of compensation available).

Since the Government announced the reintroduction of lump-sum payments, 12,000 people have lodged "sensitive claims" and may be in line for \$100K each regardless of whether police have investigated the complaint (they have been too busy collecting speeding fines) and claimants are not required to name the perpetrator.

I am very concerned that this absurdly unfair legislation excludes people who have really suffered through alien abduction. It should not matter that such claimants are unsure as to the identity of their

abductor. In the half-light a Martian can resemble a Raelian. Unless the spaceship was speeding, it's unlikely the event would come to the attention of the police. In passing, I wonder what the penalty is for doing Warp 9 in Taihape?

Marlborough Express 29 April, 2003

Work Stress

Employers have much to fear from proposed changes to the Health and Safety in Employment Act. Employers are about to become responsible for managing stress in the workplace. If this foolish proposal is implemented I predict that there will be a surge of complaints followed by requests for compensation as disaffected workers struggle to get their snouts into the ACC trough. Many already have by successfully claiming for spurious conditions such as chemical "poisoning", multiple chemical sensitivity, and occupational overuse syndrome (OOS). These are all classical conversion disorders where personal stress and anxiety is manifest as physical complaints. Workers are now being given the opportunity to take their own personal worries to work and make them the responsibility of their employer and ACC.

Dominion Post May 5 2003-05-16

Food Supplements

These have been in the news lately and thanks to Alan Pickmere for sending me a range of what's on offer in Whangarei. In an accompanying letter Alan recounted how his queries to various suppliers were met with a dose of "vehemence medicine".

Zenith Corporation are promoting “Body Enhancer” and “Bee V Balm” via their website www.zenith.co.nz Claims are made that their products are backed by research but none is evident, only the usual testimonials which are the hallmark of snake-oil salesmen. The language is very carefully chosen, for example: “Under NZ law and the Medicines Act 1981 we are prohibited from telling you how our products and the ingredients they contain will work for your benefit.” Wrong. They are prohibited by law from making claims for which they have no evidence.

Malcolm Harker’s website www.malcolmharker.co.nz tells us that he has been making traditional herbal medicines since 1981. The website is a bit “clunky” and lacks functionality but is worth a visit, if only to enjoy some of the product names. Troubled by “brain fatigue”? Try “E-sense”, a mixture of sage (geddit?), rosemary, ginkgo, kelp and fucus. That last ingredient sounds a trifle unpleasant.

I urge all readers to visit these websites and send in questions about these products. The alternative health literature is an endless source of whacky ideas and because so many of the people involved are scientifically illiterate, there are some wonderful howlers. Take this one for example:

“The activity (ie “hotness”) of the capsicum family is measured by British Thermal Units (BTU). Good quality cayenne capsules come in extra hot which is 100,000 BTU.”

One BTU is the energy required to raise the temperature of 1lb of water by 1°F. It has nothing

to do with the perceived “hotness” of cayenne pepper. Consider a hot water cylinder containing 200lbs of water. 100,000 BTU by my calculations would raise the temperature of your cylinder by 500°F. I will leave you with Alan Pickmere’s comment: “rather a cheap way to heat your bathwater”.

Yoga for Sickness Beneficiaries

For many years I have been corresponding with various officials and bureaucrats about the continuing scandal of the sickness benefit. A short-term benefit for illness has been turned into a lifestyle and all that is required to gain this benefit is a signed certificate from a doctor. It is a matter of some regret to me that members of my own profession have been largely responsible for an increase of 3000 on the sickness benefit since July 2000. Over 4000 people have been on a sickness benefit for more than five years, 182 for more than 15 years and five for over 20 years.

At the expense of sounding like a redneck I get particularly annoyed when I read in the paper of professional criminals described as “sickness beneficiaries”. They are too sick to work but well enough to commit burglaries and serious criminal offences. All of my attempts to find out details of these cases have been thwarted by “privacy considerations”. This means that a third party (a doctor) can commit the state to providing a benefit with no independent means of auditing these decisions. The Government continues to express concerns as to why so many people are going on to sickness benefits.

The answer is simple: because they can!

But wait... a novel solution has been found. Selected sickness beneficiaries are being offered “yogic breathing to help them get a job”. This has been described by critics as “unscientific, dangerous, and bullshit”.

However, let’s not write it off completely. If they also offered yogic “flying” this could offer the dual benefit of a return to work and a means of getting there. But what next? I predict language courses in Klingon?

Sunday Star Times May 18 2003

John Welch lives in Picton and is a doctor with the Royal New Zealand Air Force

Continued from page 13

- Binding negotiated research protocols required;
- Negative results need to be acknowledged, accepted and publicised;
- Anecdotal evidence should be treated as an indicator for research, not a research result.

Integration

- First, do no harm; second, do some good;
- Education and training required: acknowledged where limited or conflicting;
- Evidence of safety and efficacy vital prior to integration;
- Integration efforts require monitoring and evaluation as current examples are inadequate;
- Ethical standards necessary regarding declaration of commercial interests;
- Cost-benefit analysis required prior to integration.

Creationists in Our Midst Again

Alastair Brickell

Answering Answers in Genesis

The young earth creationists have been active again... the Australian-based group Answers in Genesis (AIG), has been doing the circuit in New Zealand. Warnings on the Skeptics email list had alerted us to the fact that Carl Wieland, the head of AIG, was coming over to pollute young Kiwi minds so this was an opportunity we couldn't and shouldn't miss. Wieland is very influential in creationist circles, having produced many books, pamphlets and videos, and is really the driving force behind their main publications *Creation Ex Nihilo* and the impressively, but inappropriately, named *Technical Journal* (or "TJ" as they lovingly refer to it). It thus promised to be a good chance to see Wieland in action first hand and to get some clues as to how to handle him next time he appears on our shores.

The Practice Sessions

There was an opportunity to get a little practice in before the big event as their New Zealand CEO, Adrian Bates, was doing a run around some of the churches on the Coromandel at the end of March. I went along to both of his church meetings one Sunday, one in Whitianga and one in Coromandel. Bates was a little surprised to find a skeptic in church (so was I!), but

kept smiling ever so sweetly as he tried to explain to me just how the two kiwis from the beached Ark managed to walk all the way from Mt Ararat to NZ (just how did the worms manage to outrun them and breed fast enough to provide enough food?). I found that once I asked a slightly (alright, very) heretical question then others in the audience plucked up the courage to query some of his comments also, which was very encouraging. So Bates was easy, but I knew that Wieland was a consummate professional and would be a bit more savvy re skeptics and their stupid questions. Nevertheless it was good to go along and pick up some of their publications (there's now one of their videos in the Skeptics Video Library). Also they tend to use the same overheads from talk to talk so it's all good preparation for the next time.

The Big Ones

Wieland's meetings in Auckland at the end of May were really big time...held over two days the first one was billed as a six hour seminar and took place in the huge Greenlane Christian Centre. It was packed – about 250 people I estimated, and only 4 skeptics. Where were they all, I kept thinking. Megan Mills competently represented the Auckland

Skeptics, and veteran creationist busters, David Riddell and Annette Taylor from the Waikato joined me in the lion's den yet again. It was an interesting session. Wieland proved to be, as we expected, a well-practised and confident speaker and soon had the audience lapping it all up. They especially liked the bits where he ridiculed science and scientists with funny(?) cartoons and snide remarks and slogans ("from goo to you via the zoo"). This one thing perhaps riled me more than anything...you don't mind them just being stupid, but when they try and make scientists look like a bunch of ignorant idiots I feel one has to stand up and be counted. The anti-science lobby in New Zealand is strong enough without some Aussie idiot coming over here to further poison our children's minds with this drivel.

Wieland was a much better speaker than his colleague, a Steve Kumar, who held forth for an hour or so between Wieland's sessions and I noticed a few of the faithful nodding off as he spoke. No doubt they'll be punished in due course!

For the last session Wieland was in charge again and he rather worryingly asked for questions to be written on pieces of paper and placed in a box on stage to be answered before he would take

questions from the floor (“if there was time”). After all there was a room full of publications, videos, games, CDs, puzzles, magazines, etc. that people had to have a chance to purchase. And they did! Time and again they ran out of “special” packs of his little paperback books at \$125 a piece. I was flabbergasted... the turnover for the weekend must have been in excess of \$10,000 I would estimate. Not to mention the donations in the offering buckets (I saw many \$20 bills) and all the subscriptions to Creation ex Nihilo he signed up... a huge ongoing source of funds for this highly profitable, non-taxed multinational business (“non-profit” - yeah, right!).

Anyway, back to the questions. We decided that we would take our chances and try for questions from the floor rather than risk having them censored from the box. To his credit Wieland did answer a few curly ones from the box, but there were quite a few that he read to himself on stage and then quickly put right back as they were “the same as the last one”. Not very original, I thought! Finally the time did come for questions from the floor and I think we skeptics achieved some success. We did manage to dominate the question session and got to engage Wieland in debate from the floor at length. And again, to his credit, Wieland didn’t cut us off short and I was a bit unprepared for that! Whether we changed any minds amongst the believers is debatable. However, I do think we served as a good foil to his unquestioning dogma and I do believe that we may have stopped some people from swallowing his slick show hook, line and sinker.

The three meetings the next day were just as big and the last one had over 350 people in attendance. Interestingly, no questions were allowed from the floor for any of them. I also noted that Wieland did tone down some of the outrageous things he had been saying that we had challenged him on but that was probably only because I made sure he could see me watching him from the audience!

Is It Worth It?

So was it all worth the effort? I do believe so. It’s only the fence sitters that we have a chance of saving, but that alone is worth the seven-hour return drive, the costs, and time spent doing research on their techniques and ideas, etc. What’s the point of being a NZ Skeptic if all we do is talk amongst ourselves...there’s serious work to be done. They are after our children. I learnt at the Coromandel meeting that the pastor of the Elim church, who hosted Adrian Bates, is now the head of the Coromandel Area School BOT

and has instigated little lunchtime religious chats for the kids. The science department is furious, as one would expect. So there’s lots for us to do. We must be vigilant and regularly scan the local church notices to see who’s coming to town. These creationists are not just a wacky overseas problem; they are in our community and in our schools right now. We all need to get involved and perhaps get sufficiently organised nationally so that no creationist meeting anywhere in NZ is without at least one skeptic in the audience.

Some Useful Websites

- for the believers
www.answersingenesis.com
- for the skeptics
home.austarnet.com.au/stear/

Alastair Brickell is a Whitianga geologist and the NZ Skeptics Video Librarian

American Foreign Policy Explained

A Washington think-tank has announced a breakthrough in the search for a pattern in the seemingly random episodes of US military aggression since the war.

“We think they are spelling out a message,” a spokesperson explained.

“If we take the first letters of Korea, Vietnam, Libya, Iraq, Iran, El Salvador, Grenada, Nicaragua and Somalia, it spells ‘ELVIS_S KING’. We just need to find another ‘I’ country to complete the message.”

Does this explain the recent second attack on Iraq?

Ellis Petition — Open to Everyone

The New Zealand Skeptics, as a group, has always expressed its concern about the nature of the Christchurch Civic Creche case and its disturbing implications for the New Zealand legal system.

A number of members of this organisation have been listed amongst the prominent New Zealanders (which includes nine law professors, nine QCs and a retired High Court judge) on the recent petition presented to Parliament.

In response to public demand, the organisers have opened a second petition which is being distributed widely. You can

use the petition form available on the following websites (skeptics.org.nz or www.peterellis.org.nz), or simply produce your own.

The wording of the current petition is:

We the undersigned petition the House of Representatives to urge the Government to establish a Royal Commission of Inquiry, presided over by a Judge or Judges from outside the New Zealand jurisdiction, to enquire into all aspects of the investigation and legal processes relating to the Christchurch Civic Creche case. This case is one of great public

and professional concern, and raises serious questions about the administration of justice and the working of existing laws, which must be addressed.

Don't forget to include your signature, name, occupation and city.

Mail the petition to Don Brash or Katherine Rich at Parliament Buildings, Wellington (postage free) to arrive before the end of July.

Vicki Hyde

the
single
best
idea,
ever.

*Edited by
Amanda Chesworth et al.*

with contributions from
Richard Dawkins
Robin McKie
Steven Pinker
Elliott Sober
Eugenie Scott
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Psychologists Not Suited to Court Work

Bob Brockie

Should we trust psychologists and psychiatrists, especially as expert witnesses in court cases?

This is an important question because, depending on their opinions, a person can inherit vast sums of money, lose custody of a child, be tried for murder or shut away for life in gaol or an asylum.

Two American psychologists, Jay Ziskin and David Faust, have looked at the performance of their own profession with a scientific eye and think they have good reason to question the accuracy of their colleagues' opinions in courts. They point to several famous experiments.

In one study, several psychologists examined the same group of mental patients. The experts disagreed on the patients' diagnoses, motivations or conflicts, and their conscious and unconscious feelings more often than they agreed on these things.

In other experiments, professional psychologists did no better than office secretaries in recognizing people with damaged brains, and few clinicians could distinguish between people with real brain damage and those only pretending. More studies showed that children feigning brain damage fooled most practitioners and professional psychologists did no better than high school students in predicting violent behaviour.

Several studies showed that psychiatric judgment did not improve with wide experience or special qualifications. Highly qualified old psychiatrists were no

better than novices in spotting the presence, location or cause of brain damage.

Drs Faust and Ziskin think that many of these experts are ill fitted to work on criminal courts for two reasons. In their day-to-day work, psychologists and psychiatrists have an ingrained tendency to help and sympathise with their patients. But in the unfamiliar arena of the court they must do something quite different—uncover truth whatever the implications are for the accused, so their judgment is often clouded.

Another reason for their failure is because their disciplines are not yet true sciences. Human thought and behaviour still resist objective, direct, reliable

observation and measurement, so clinicians can make few accurate predictions. In the place of science, psychology has only loosely bound conjectures—dozens of fashionable personality theories and hundreds of ever-changing approaches to psychotherapy. New theory may not be better, only a fresh attempt to resolve a recalcitrant problem.

Check this out in Jay Ziskin and David Faust's three-volume *Coping with Psychiatric and Psychological Testimony*. Fifth Edition 1997. Nothing here about New Zealand psychologists and psychiatrists who are, of course, a cut or two above their American counterparts.

Originally published in the Dominion Post, January 26, 2003. A book of Bob Brockie's collected columns is being released August 2003.

Slops the latest Health Threat

The World Health Organisation has issued a new warning against non-essential travel to the entire Western Hemisphere following renewed concerns about the spread of Severe Loss of Perspective Syndrome (Slops).

Officials are warning travellers not to visit western Europe and North America where outbreaks of the disease have led to mass panic among the media, and increased profits from DIY stores as the gullible public rush to bulk-buy face masks and boiler suits.

A WHO spokesman said, "You'd be much better going to somewhere like Thailand or China, because all you've got to worry about there is Sars, and let's face it, you're about as likely to die from that as you are to get kicked to death by a gang of zombie nuns."

The Sars virus has now claimed a staggering 500 lives in only six months, which makes it considerably more deadly than, say, malaria, which only kills around 3000 people every single day. Malaria, however, mainly affects only natives what speak foreign, whereas SARS has made at least one English person feel a bit iffy for a couple of days, and is therefore considered much more serious.

The spread of Slops has now reached pandemic proportions, with many high-level politicians seemingly affected by the disease. Its rapid spread has been linked to the end of the war in Iraq and the need for western leaders to give the public something to worry about. Otherwise, they might start asking uncomfortable questions about domestic issues.

If undelivered, return to:

NZ Skeptics
PO Box 29-492
Christchurch

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Permit No. 3357

Per-



**New Zealand Skeptics Conference 2003
19-21 September, Victoria University, Wellington**

Yes, once again the Skeptics are getting together for a weekend of stimulating papers and good company.

Meals need to be booked by August 12 so be quick!

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