

Skeptic

*a person who looks for the simplest explanation first,
but is willing to consider other possibilities in the light
of unambiguous evidence*

Kaupapa Maori Research

Richard Wiseman tour

Critical thinking course

Creation magazine

Stem cell ethics

new zealand
Skeptic

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A weird and wonderful event

IT WAS an eye opener. Under the stern glare of past headmasters of Kings College, the NZ Skeptics were holding their annual dinner that always goes with the annual conference.

We had arrived at our seats to find tidily folded strips of tinfoil and were instructed to get creating – tinfoil head adornments have the added goodness of blocking evil mind controlling rays.

Within minutes highly talented skeptics had whipped up mediaeval crowns, medusa snake heads, devil horns and shark fins to pop on their clever heads. We are a disparate bunch with hidden talents, I concluded as I looked around me. Some were less talented, it has to be said – all I had was a scrunched up piece of tinfoil. And – further shame – I didn't even get the prize for the most pathetic effort.

Skeptic conferences are, like the creations we made that night, weird and wonderful affairs. Throughout the heady mix of thought-provoking sessions there is a real pleasure in hanging out with like minded people from all over the country.

This 2006 Auckland conference was another cracker. Our very own John Welch tackled the questions of why doctors go bad, we heard about the charms and harms of herbal medicine, bad science in the courtroom – and a high school student telling us the connection between hair length and musical talent. Mad cow disease, science and TV, and ethnic fundamentalism. Being our 20th anniversary, it was especially pleasing to have the presence of two founding members, Bernard Howard and Warwick Don. Warwick treated us to a potted history of the Skeptics, complete with fire walking clips and a youthful-looking Paul Holmes.

Over the next few months the NZ Skeptic will bring you many of these presentations. But we won't be able to reproduce the feeling one takes away from this annual flocking together of our group. And it is a good one.

On another note, this is my last issue as editor. The editorial reins are being passed to David Riddell, a fine bloke although it must be said that his tinfoil hat was truly pathetic. He will, however, make a fine editor. And as he lives at the same house as me, I'll keep an eye on things.

One more thing, before you read Louette McInnes' piece on Richard Wiseman (p 7), check your powers of observation by watching the video at viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/grafs/demos/15.html – all you have to do is count the number of times the players in the white shirts pass the basketball among themselves. Ignore passes by the black players. Then read the Wiseman article. And email us your totals.

Annette

Is kaupapa Maori research methodology credible?

Dannette Marie
Brian Haig

New Zealand has its own version of 'postcolonial science studies'. This is supposed to emancipate those who see themselves as subjects of colonial oppression, but the actual consequences may be very different.

KAUPAPA Maori research methodology (KMR) has been systematically integrated into New Zealand's national science framework and presented as a viable methodology for conducting research that involves Maori as participants and in areas identified as being of specific relevance to Maori. Statements requiring research scientists to take KMR seriously are now variously found in government science policies, national-level research funding guidelines, national and university ethics committee guidelines, and professional bodies' research codes of conduct. Further, many

departments in the state services sector have commissioned KMR. In the field of health, for example, state-sponsored KMR research has been undertaken on issues such as mental health and youth suicide, sudden infant death syndrome, and cancer care services. Within the field of justice, KMR has been one of the dominant methodological positions employed to examine family and domestic violence along with criminal offending. Moreover, a wide range of disciplines within the tertiary sector now teach KMR methodology as a stand-alone, fully fledged conception of inquiry. Because

KMR methodology has largely been developed by postcolonial educational researchers (see especially L Smith, *Decolonizing methodology*, University of Otago, 1999), the field of education has proven to be a particularly fertile ground for the proliferation of KMR theory and practice. Of further interest, is the fact that the influence of KMR methodology is not confined to New Zealand's shores. Often described as 'critical cultural pedagogy', the KMR perspective has also been exported to other nations including Australia and Canada, and presented as a feasible research methodology.



Jacqueline Allan models the latest in anti-mindcontrol headware at the 2006 NZ Skeptics Conference dinner.

We believe that KMR methodology needs to be taken seriously, but not for the reason that it contributes a credible alternative to standard research methodology. To the contrary, we suggest that KMR methodology may very well be a suitable candidate to represent New Zealand's own variant of *fashionable nonsense* (cf A Sokal & J Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, Picador, 1999). As we will argue, while KMR adherents employ the notions of liberation and empowerment to promote their doctrine, the uptake of their views and practices may in fact subvert the potential for

researchers to undertake genuine scientific inquiry in areas of clear national need.

Postcolonial science studies

According to the postcolonial view, so-called Western science (hereafter referred to as *orthodox science*), promotes a distinctive set of values, methods, and standards of scientific rationality that are consistent with European culture and its expansion. Traditional science is therefore assumed to be complicit in the historical subjugation of peoples and, in the contemporary context, culpable in actively oppressing alternative ways of coming to know the world. All manner of possibilities are meant by 'alternative ways of coming to know the world', including indigenous science, deep ecological wisdom, spiritual connectedness, cosmological narratives, and not the least, narratives constructed through 'blood memory'. The objective of postcolonial science studies is therefore to emancipate those people who identify themselves as the subjects of (post) colonial oppression and to legitimate their views of what constitutes reliable and coherent knowledge. In other words, it is a rescue and reunite mission.

KMR methodology is best thought of as a localised strain of postcolonial science studies. It, too, has its own alternative way of coming to know the world, which involves 'decolonising' methodology. This task is performed by "[interrogating] methods in relation to cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural reliability, useful outcomes for Maori, and other such measures" (F Cram, Maori Science, Auck-

land Uniservices Ltd, 2000). The colonising features of conventional methodology that KMR proponents are most concerned to identify include a commitment to objectivity, the requirements of justification, and a failure to acknowledge that historical and structural causes are responsible for current problems where Maori are over-represented. In addition, the interrogation demands that Maori are characterised in a specific way. This requires making explicit statements about a Maori worldview, collective identity, cultural values, and spirituality.

Being responsive to Maori needs and aspirations does not equate to endorsing the epistemic imperative of the KMR doctrine that there is a Maori way of knowing.

It is thought that once the interrogation has been completed, and replacement notions such as cultural sensitivity have been incorporated into a research framework, a genuine 'Maori way of knowing' or 'Maori methodology' will emerge.

Use of the term *decolonise* clearly signals that KMR embodies a postcolonial view of science. Moreover, by advocating a 'Maori way of knowing' that replaces, or exists alongside, orthodox science, proponents of KMR methodology make the strong claim that the acquisition of scientific knowledge is, and ought to be acknowledged as, culturally relative. We believe that the KMR strategy of 'interrogation' actively distorts the conduct of inquiry and has led to the misguided patronage of

epistemological and methodological relativism within many New Zealand research circles. Just as importantly, we suggest that KMR adherents' refutation of objectivity, reliability, and validity as they are conventionally understood, combined with the demand that Maori be characterised in a particular way, is seriously misleading.

Ideological influence on scientific matters

Since the passing of the Treaty of Waitangi Amendment Act in 1985, New Zealand has steadfastly reorganised itself along bicultural lines. In 1988, with the release of the Royal Commission on Social Policy report, the Crown acknowledged the importance of the concepts of protection, participation, and partnership. These concepts were drafted into public policy, including science policy, to reflect the nation's commitment to the socio-political ideology of biculturalism. We maintain that these concepts entail a political and moral obligation to be responsive to Maori needs and aspirations. But this does not equate to endorsing the epistemic imperative of the KMR doctrine that there is a Maori way of knowing. However, the justification for the recommendation that KMR methodology needs to be taken seriously by research scientists is usually found in recourse to these concepts, which generally inform government and institutional policies that acknowledge the Treaty of Waitangi.

We believe that KMR advocates have exploited the political environment by insisting that the ideology of biculturalism affords

their doctrine special privilege and protection, which has resulted in many fields of research being domesticated by KMR. By drawing on a key tenet of bicultural ideology, KMR adherents can claim that their doctrine has epistemic parity with standard accounts of scientific methodology on the grounds that it represents a separate, yet equal, worldview. However, the problem that arises here is that with KMR adherents' rejection of orthodox research methodology, including standard criteria for evaluating knowledge claims, the means by which the epistemic worth of KMR outputs are to be evaluated remain to be disclosed. In short, it is questionable whether the products of KMR can be said to constitute empirically validated knowledge. Although this might seem to be a glaring oversight from a doctrine committed to liberating Maori, KMR advocates have simply side-stepped the issue of evidence by claiming a disinterest in it. Rather, KMR is now considered to represent a 'rights-based approach' to research as the following passage from a recent report on cancer services delivery to Maori makes abundantly clear:

The project was informed by a kaupapa Maori framework that recognises the structural causes of inequality, such as unequal power structures, colonisation, and institutional racism ... The project was influenced by a rights-based approach to health, which recognises Maori human, indigenous, and Treaty of Waitangi rights (D Cormack et al, Access to Cancer Services, Ministry of Health & Wellington School of Medicine & Health Sciences, 2005, p 2).

Kaupapa Maori research methodology

Although KMR methodology has been characterised in different ways, the following doctrines are among the most important: the rejection of orthodox science as an inappropriate model for conducting research of benefit to Maori; an assumption that this prevailing view of research is positivist in nature; a selective commitment to elements of both postmodern thinking and critical theory; and, a determination to use research methods, especially qualitative methods, in a liberatory manner.

The rejection of positivism

KMR methodologists roundly reject a position they call *positivism*, which they take to be the general philosophy that underlies orthodox science. However, their treatment of this topic is beset with two major problems. First, positivism is given a minimal characterisation that bears limited resemblance to any recognised form of positivist thinking, such as the logical positivist philosophy of science that was influential in the first half of 20th century philosophy. Second, it is mistakenly assumed that positivism is the philosophy that underwrites modern science. This is not so. Logical positivism has been a spent force for about 50 years, a significant historical fact that seems to have escaped the notice of KMR methodologists. Moreover, the influence of positivist ideas on social science research has been overemphasised. There is good evidence that the post-positivist philosophy of scientific realism (C Hooker, *A Realistic Theory of Science*, State University of

New York Press, 1987) has been the philosophy of primary influence in the social sciences. By remonstrating against a position that is no longer influential in philosophy, and whose influence in the various sciences has been considerably overrated, KMR methodologists have been lulled into a false sense of security about the worth of their own position.

The rejection of objectivity

Advocates of KMR methodology have frequently criticised "positivist" social science research for its commitment to the ideal of objectivity. However, again, the target of criticism is not subjected to an informative examination, and no convincing reasons are given for thinking that the pursuit of objectivity should be dispensed with. Basically, objectivity involves putting aside one's predilections and preferences in order to secure impartial reason. It is this very pursuit that makes science rational. However, it is important to stress that seeking objectivity does not preclude taking contextual factors into account when determining what counts as good reasons, nor does it imply that one should factor out the notion of human agency in the process of knowledge production.

It is important to appreciate, further, that the pursuit of objectivity does not require one to take a neutral stand on relevant matters. Objectivity and neutrality are different things, although they are often confused. Objectivity is concerned with validity and reliability. Neutrality has to do with serving interests. One can take a stand, or seek goals,

without compromising objectivity. We think that in objecting to the aims of orthodox science, KMR methodologists are inclined to believe mistakenly that one must challenge the processes that aid objectivity in order to allow researchers to serve their preserved set of interests.

KMR methodologists also claim that the pursuit of objectivity results in the adoption of a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched that results in a distancing of Maori from the research process. It is for this reason KMR methodologists favour the use of research methods which are participatory and democratic. However, there are a number of methods in orthodox social science that explicitly adopt a participatory methodology capable of contributing to an understanding and improvement of the worth of both individuals and society. One example is the autobiographical method in which a team assists the central participant to accurately represent how they view their own life-course.

We also think it worthy to note however, that while KMR adherents argue for a more democratic and participatory approach to research, they seem to ignore the fact that Maori social organisation is replete with examples of hierarchical interactions. Jahnke and Taiapa (in *Social Science Research in New Zealand*, Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2003) attest to this point by insisting that within Maori settings, knowledge is hierarchical and not universally available to all. If the motivation of KMR methodologists is to emancipate the people by liberating and legitimating a Maori way of knowing, then they should reconsider the merits of pursuing objectivity.

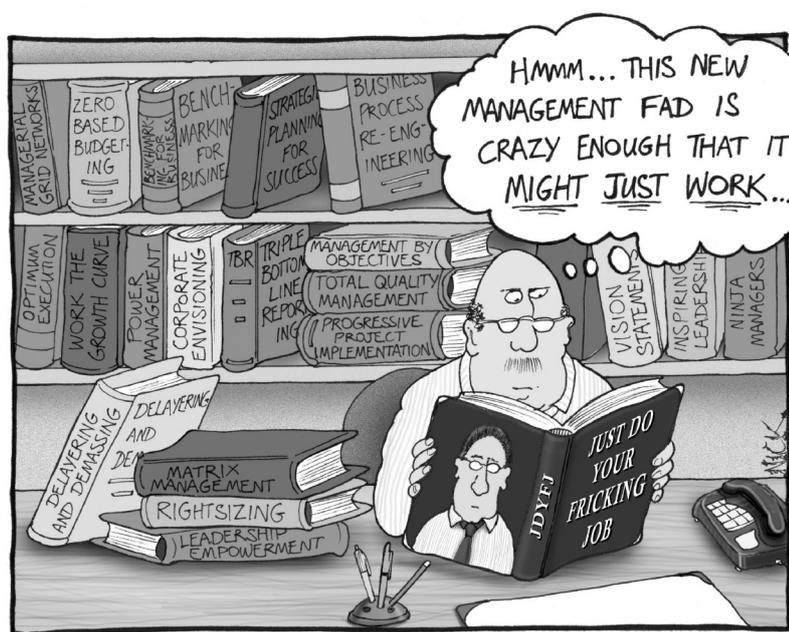
The use of qualitative methods

KMR methodology is strong in its commitment to the use of qualitative research methods. This probably reflects the widespread assumption in social science methodology that quantitative methods are an outworking of positivist thinking, and that they should therefore be replaced

by qualitative methods, which are thought to be more appropriate. In our view, this belief is difficult to defend. The fact that many statistical methods are used in research to fashion empirical generalisations in no way prevents the researcher from fashioning theories in order to explain those generalisations. Indeed, the production of empirical generalisations motivates the anti-positivist activity of constructing explanatory theories. The widespread use in the social sciences of latent variable methods to construct explanatory theories is an expression of a commitment to the philosophy of scientific realism, and not to positivism.

We think a better understanding of research methods is to be had by viewing them, not as either quantitative or qualitative, but by regarding them each as having both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. For example, grounded theory, the most prominent qualitative methodology in the social sciences, is in good part the product of a translation of ideas from selected sociological quantitative methods of the 1950s. Moreover, there is nothing in principle to prevent researchers from using quantitative methods within its fold. For example, one might use the statistical method of exploratory factor analysis to help generate explanatory theories that are grounded in robust data patterns.

KMR methodologists are part of the widespread tendency among qualitative methodologists to misleadingly cast orthodox science as incapable of dealing with qualitative methods.



However, even logical positivism is capable of accommodating qualitative methods, though of course, it does not do so with the same degree of flexibility and success as contemporary realist accounts of science.

The misuse of methods

Despite criticising the methodology of orthodox science, KMR researchers have nevertheless made use of a number of its research methods. Often, they have interviewed research participants by using focus groups. This procedure permits researchers to obtain and analyse qualitative data by focusing on a specific topic or set of issues. The method is thought appropriate for research with Maori because of its claimed ability to give participants a genuine voice and thereby empower them in the research context.

However, despite its seeming simplicity, focus group research is very difficult to carry out effectively. Although there is an extensive literature detailing the requirements for carrying out focus group research, the data analytic part of the method is underdeveloped. As a result, focus group research tends to have low reliability and validity and is subject to various forms of moderator and respondent bias. Such biases may in fact be compounded in particular settings where hierarchical interactions have been institutionalised, and there is differential access to knowledge. By using focus groups as a primary method of data collection and analysis, KMR faces a difficult challenge to produce the quality research it seeks.

Conclusion

Despite the considerable influence KMR exerts within New Zealand policy and research circles, its attendant methodology is unsound. We believe the integration of KMR methodology into New Zealand's science policies, institutions, and programmes has occurred as the result of a policy imperative rather than because it offers a satisfactory account of, or genuine alternative to, orthodox research methodology. KMR methodologists provide no good reason for abandoning the best methodologies of orthodox science. There is an irony in the fact that contemporary mainstream scientific methodology contains resources that are better suited to research with Maori than those

of KMR methodology. We invite KMR researchers to engage the methodological literature of orthodox science seriously. We believe that if they do so, they will find resources sufficient for carrying out worthwhile research in their fields of interest. Marie and Haig (New Zealand Science Review, 63, 2006) contains an overview of such a methodology, as well as a more extensive critique of KMR methodology.

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wiseman

Natural Born Liars

Louette McInnes found a talk by Richard Wiseman at Canterbury University well worth braving the winter cold for. Professor Wiseman holds the Chair of Public Understanding of Psychology at Hertfordshire University.

GETTING up and out on a cold Sunday morning for a 'lecture' barely seemed worth the effort, but several hot cups of coffee later, the idea didn't look quite so unappealing. Thinking I was now alert and able to function and observe the world, I was amazed, amused, and horrified at how easily Prof Wiseman destroyed this illusion. He very entertainingly showed how easy it is to misdirect people, lie to them, or have even normally good observers (of which I thought I was one!) miss important details. He then went on to examine, via a BBC study, how well the general public can tell if a person is lying.

By way of introduction, Prof Wiseman explained that he got interested in the area because he had started out as a magician trying to capitalise on missed perceptions and misdirected observations, something magicians become adept at doing. I'm going to give a bit of detail on some of his tricks because as a Skeptic I could see myself using some of them with a class at some stage, and because it shows just *how* we are fooled or fool ourselves.

As his first example (or magic trick), he said he would flash up on the OHP five playing cards, then flash them up again but

without the one most people in the audience had mentally chosen. Of course, whichever card you chose wasn't there! A few people objected that something had changed – and he admitted, yes, he'd actually changed all the cards so none of the originals were present – but he had replaced cards with a different suit, so most people, concentrating on their chosen card, hadn't noticed the switch.

We were treated to an audio of the song *Stairway to Heaven*, which apparently some people claim is a demonic song if played in reverse (who would ever bother to do that?!). A few people, afterward, had thought they heard the phrase “sad Satan”. However, when this was pointed out *and* a copy of the words put onscreen to ‘help’, the alternate reverse Satan version seemed far more apparent – but only as long as the words were up on the screen. We were tending to ‘hear’ what we thought was there – the brain picking out the sounds to fit the words.

For his next, and most amazing, demonstration of misdirection, Wiseman said he would show us a video to compare the observational ability of males versus females. Each group was to observe some people passing a basketball around. We were to concentrate on the players in white shirts and count their passes. “Ignore any passes by the players in the black shirts,” was the strict instruction. I was sure I could manage to concentrate to do this. After the short video, the Prof asked “Who counted 14 passes?”

My husband and I were still debating our count and sev-

eral people yelled out 12 or 13. Then he asked “Who saw the gorilla?”

In a stunned audience of about 150 people, only about eight raised their hands. A replay then showed, walking amongst the black and white-shirted players, someone in a gorilla suit who weaved around the players, paused, beat its chest, and exited stage right! Intense concentration on the white shirts in the scene meant we had missed a major item. I consoled myself with the fact that a group of Nobel Laureates in London, who presumably are top notch observers with a high concentration ability did no better than I did.

What a good lesson in science. This brought to mind a case from geology of trying to predict when a volcano is about to erupt. The most obvious signal seemed to be the small, sharp, short quakes preceding an eruption. But no one had been able to find the pattern (count the passes of the ball).

One person, however, looked behind the many small, sharp quakes to the less obvious/visible long period events, and these eventually proved much more useful in prediction. Yet no one else had seen what was right in front of them because they were concentrating on only part of the picture...

Wiseman then moved into magician mode and explained how mis-direction is used in a trick called the French Coin Drop. He pointed out that it took him two weeks of intensive practice as a young magician to master the trick and learn to carry out the misdirection. In the trick, a coin

held up in the left hand appears to be passed to the right hand, where it disappears only to reappear in the left hand. Simple, it seemed, but much sneakier and more subtle in psychology and mis-direction than it sounds. The trick works because the coin is just dropped from between the thumb and forefinger of the left hand into the palm as the right hand passes over but doesn't take it. The real trick is that the left hand is held still while the right hand moves to draw the eye to it. At the same time, the magician must move his head and eye as if to follow the coin. (He said that was the hardest part to do as a young apprentice magician.) Try it yourself! He repeated the trick several times, showing that the trick just didn't work nearly as well if he moved the left hand away instead of the right, or if he failed to move his head and eyes to follow the right hand.

The next trick depends on our assumption that people aren't out to trick us by being dishonest, and aren't able to tell a lie, or at least not tell the whole truth, with a straight face. A member of the audience was asked to pick one of three cards – yellow, green, or orange (but you could use more). We were told Prof Wiseman had already predicted her answer. He then turned on the OHP to show the word ‘orange’, which had been her choice. Magic?

As R Heinlein said, “one man's technology is another man's magic.” In this case, technology had little to do with it – Wiseman then pointed out that he had, also, an envelope already on the table with the word ‘yellow’ inside as well as a slip

of paper in his pocket with the word ‘green’ printed on it.

People apparently can lie more easily, and at a younger age, than most people realise. He quoted several studies, including one on very young children. Left in a room with a toy they are told not to peek at, 40 percent of children aged three lied about peeking despite assurances from their parents that they didn’t know how to lie.

One hundred percent of five year olds lied. And 83 percent of people lie at job interviews, and 90 percent lie on dates. Furthermore, probably to no Skeptic’s surprise, he said that good liars could easily beat a polygraph test. Good liars are not under stress when they lie, hence no increase in heart rate or any of the other normal body signals monitored by the polygraph.

The BBC wanted to run a countrywide programme to see how well people could tell if a person was lying by their behaviour, facial expression, and voice. Wiseman suggested they use politicians since they must alternately lie and tell the truth and appear sincere. However – no surprise here – none were willing to take part. So an older, respected actor was hired to do two interviews, one where he lied about his favourite film, one where he told the truth. Well, on watching the interviews at the talk, only about one third of our audience picked the lie, one third were wrong, and the other third couldn’t decide.

Liars do *not* tend to fidget or blink more, or smile real smiles (the muscles around the eye that move and create wrinkles at the

corner when you smile are involuntary muscles and not under conscious ‘liar’ control), look to the right and down or look left and up etc, or move their arms or feet more.

Liars *do* tend to answer more slowly; speak more slowly as they think out the lie (unless the lie has been used repeatedly and is smooth with use); pause more to think; use the word ‘I’ less in descriptions; give less detail in

descriptions than for a real event because they are having to invent the details, and link a lie to other events less often.

Prof Wiseman’s parting advice was: to tell if someone is telling the truth, it is better to listen to what a person says and how they say it rather than judge by appearance.

Louette McInnes is a teacher at Christchurch Boys’ High School

New course on critical thinking for 2007

Canterbury University will next year be offering a Stage I course on critical thinking, to be called Science: Good, Bad, and Bogus. Named after a classic book by Martin Gardner, the course, Philosophy 110, will be headed by founding member of the NZ Skeptics, Denis Dutton. Prof Dutton says it will fulfill a demand for a sharp, smart course in critical thinking from a standpoint quite different from that offered by traditional logic and philosophy.

“It will make use of recent research into the reasons why human thought is prone to specific patterns of fallacious analysis. It is a course in the spirit of the Philosophy Programme’s most illustrious and redoubtable member: Sir Karl Popper. In fact, part of the course centres on his ideas about the nature of science,” Prof Dutton says.

The course aims to introduce students to the structure of scientific thinking both through an historical/analytical survey and by contrasting it with varieties of pseudoscientific and irrational

ways of thinking. In fulfilling this mission, the course proposes to:

- review the history of science from the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century through to the advent of Darwinian biology;
- give students a grasp of the philosophical thinking that developed alongside the growth of science in the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries;
- present the contrasting philosophies of science of Thomas Kuhn and Karl Popper as marking an important intellectual divide in thinking about science;
- show how legitimate science and scientific explanations differ in kind from bogus attempts to ape science and parasitically acquire its power and prestige;
- familiarise students with the fallacies and traps, both logical and psychological, that bedevil both ordinary and apparently scientific reasoning.

'Homeopathic' malaria pills no good

HOLIDAYMAKERS planning trips to the tropics have been warned to avoid homeopathic remedies that are claimed to prevent malaria after several UK travellers contracted the potentially fatal disease (NZ Herald, 14 July).

An investigation by the charity Sense about Science found ten homeopathic clinics selected at random on the internet offered a researcher unproven homeopathic products which were claimed to prevent malaria and other tropical diseases including typhoid, dengue fever and yellow fever.

In all ten consultations the researcher was advised to use the products rather than being referred to a GP or travel medicine clinic where orthodox anti-malarial drugs are available.

Tropical medicine specialists have condemned the practice.

The UK Health Protection Agency warned last year that travellers from Britain had fallen ill with malaria after taking homeopathic pills claimed to prevent it.

Oxford University Professor Nicholas White said this was very dangerous nonsense and needed to be stopped. "The prescribing of homeopathic remedies to prevent malaria is a reprehensible example of potentially lethal duplicity."

Although conventional anti-malarial drugs had some side effects, they provided excellent protection.

"These decisions require discussion with a knowledgeable person who can assess the risks and benefits," according to Professor Brian Greenwood, president of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine. "The use of homeopathy creates a more dangerous situation than taking no precautions if the traveller assumes that they are protected and does not seek help quickly for any illness that might be malaria."

The Faculty of Homoeopathy said it did not recommend homeopathic remedies for the prevention of malaria.

Peter Fisher, clinical director of the Royal London Homoeopathic Hospital said "Malaria is a life threatening disease and there is no published evidence to support the use of homeopathy in the prevention of malaria."

Timothy Leary was right

Mystical experiences induced by hallucinogenic drugs are in essence no different from the 'genuine' article, say scientists at Johns Hopkins University (NZ Herald, 12 July). They argue that the potential of such drugs, ignored for decades because of their links to illicit activities, must be explored to develop new treatments for depression, drug addiction and the treatment of intolerable pain.

They are not, however, interested in the "Does God exist?" debate. "This work can't and won't go there," they say.

In the study, 30 middle-aged volunteers who had religious or spiritual interests attended two eight-hour sessions two months apart, receiving psilocybin (the active ingredient in magic mushrooms) in one session and a non-hallucinogenic stimulant – Ritalin – in the other. They were not told which was which. One third described the experience with psilocybin as the most spiritually significant of their lifetime and two-thirds rated it among their five most meaningful experiences. In more than 60 percent the experience rated as a "full mystical experience" based on established psychological scales.

A third of the volunteers became frightened during the drug sessions with some reporting feelings of paranoia.

Huston Smith, America's leading authority on comparative religion, writes that mystical experience "is as old as humankind" and attempts to induce it using psychoactive plants were made in many cultures. "But this is the first scientific demonstration in 40 years, and the most rigorous ever, that profound mystical states can be produced safely in the laboratory. The potential is great."

Creation Museum Coming Soon

Journalist Alec Russell was treated to a personal guided tour of Ken Ham's under-construction Creation Museum in

Kentucky by Ham himself, but did not seem persuaded by his arguments (Dominion Post, 30 June).

The NZ\$42.7 million museum, which has been paid for mostly from donations, is scheduled to open early next year. It features animatronic garden of Eden scenes of children and young tyrannosaurs playing happily together, vegetarians all in a world without death. Since Genesis says Adam didn't 'know' Eve until after they were driven from Eden, children in a pre-Fall world would seem to be at odds with scripture. But never mind, the 'Wow' factor is the important thing, says Ham. There's also a 1/48th-scale Noah's Ark with stegosaurus being loaded along with the giraffes, and multimedia presentations on the wonders of creation.

A few hours later, Russell had dinner with three scientists who were campaigning against the museum. They were thinking of marching up and down outside waving placards, and running 'alternative' tours of the exhibits, much in the style of evangelical protesters against the scientific establishment.

After having endured two hours of his "machinegun delivery", Russell didn't think the scientists stood much chance in any confrontation with the "gruff Australian". When he put the gist of their arguments to Ham later, Ham turned to him "with an air of triumph mixed with pity" and delivered his trump card: "When it comes to the past, you weren't there."

This is Ham's catchphrase. It's like saying a detective can't

solve a crime if he wasn't there to witness it. Russell should have pointed out that Ham wasn't there either. Nor was he there when Genesis was written, so he can't be sure it was the work of God. The Statement of Faith of Ken Ham's own ministry, Answers in Genesis, declares that all humans are fallible; he needs to be aware this applies to himself. When he says Genesis is the divinely inspired word of God, *he could be wrong about that.*

Psychic helps in Manawatu mystery

Personal items belonging to a missing Alzheimer's sufferer were found near the Manawatu River after police were directed to the site by a local psychic (Dominion Post, 3 July).

James Alexander, 73, had wandered from his rest home a week previously and had been sighted only once. Sergeant Bill Nicholson said a local woman contacted them and described a location which was familiar to police, though she said she had never been there. A search began late on Friday and the items were found on the riverbank soon after 11am on Saturday. Requests from the NZ Skeptics for details of what the psychic actually disclosed have met with no response, but it seems clear the police still had to do quite a bit of searching before finding the items, which were on the riverbank close to the rest home.

Mr Alexander's body was eventually found at Pukerua Bay on 17 August, after apparently being washed down the river.

Rita leaves 'psychic imprint'

A Massey University artist-in-residence living in Rita Angus's two-bedroom Wellington cottage has hired a clairvoyant to contact the former resident's ghost (Dominion Post, 18 August).

Dane Mitchell said he hired the clairvoyant because it was a way of exploring a different kind of knowledge. A recording of the reading would be displayed alongside pencil rubbings – including one of Angus's paint-splattered studio floor – at his exhibition, 'Thresholds'.

The clairvoyant determined that although "the entity that was Rita Angus" had long moved on, she had left a huge psychic imprint on the house, especially on an old armchair and chest of drawers used to store artwork.

"I'm feeling a huge vortex of emotions, which started as I came up the path," the psychic, identified only as Penny, said on the tape.

Angus, regarded as a pioneer of New Zealand modern art, loved the house and felt safe in it, but used it to isolate herself from the world, she said. Googling the artist might have been more informative.

Why are we not surprised?

This just in from Blenheim's Marlborough Express (known colloquially as the Marlborough Excuse, we are informed), 7 October:

"The visit to Blenheim of clairvoyant Jeanette Wilson has been delayed due to unforeseen circumstances"!

Article unfair to Darwin

JIM Ring's article, Lamarck's ghost rises again (NZ Skeptic 80) does an excellent job in laying Lamarck's ghost, and its recent revival, but it is bitterly unfair to Darwin and to one of the fundamental concepts of evolution when he attacks group selection and sociobiology. He is also wrong when he claims that social behaviour does not influence genetics.

Every organism on this earth, above the level of the prokaryote cell, is a social group whose heredity is determined by genetics. The human organism consists of a complex assembly of specialised cells which originate from a single embryo, fulfilling multiple functions, accompanied by a whole host of 'slave' organisms, mainly bacteria, which assist metabolism. The whole society is enclosed in a membrane we call the skin. The group has little trouble dealing with 'altruism' which is firmly suppressed by chemical mechanisms, which occasionally fail to produce cancer cells.

Biological groups occur at many different levels. Without the skin there are groups which are almost as tightly controlled by genetics, ranging from Portuguese man o' war, and lichens, to colonies of ants and apes, all of which undergo Darwinian selection which always influences genetics. Those who do not survive because of 'inefficient' organisation, behaviour or technology make way for those who are 'fitter' in these departments.

Group selection has a long history, well before Darwin. Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan

showed how an ideal human society allocates duties in much the same fashion as the cells within the body. Adam Smith showed that the 'Wealth of Nations' is also dependent on organisation and technology. In each case they showed that survival and prosperity were determined by superior fitness, and of course, this impinged on the heredity of the members. Those who do

not survive do not pass on their genes.

Maynard Smith and Bill Hamilton completely failed to understand group selection. Hamilton deserves the Ig Nobel prize, and as for Maynard Smith, he was the Chairman of Cambridge Communist Party when I went up to Cambridge in 1940, so what is the evidence that Marxists are

Discrimination against non-psychics?

This advertisement (below) is from the Sits Vac of the DomPost, Wednesday June 28, 2006. I didn't know whether to send it to the Listener, the Skeptics or the Human Rights Commission – we Muggles are being discriminated against again! The Skeptics won.

Googling "ONUVA frequency" gets the same message again and again: "What is onuva? How do you begin to describe the indescribable, a frequency of love so clear that it feels like Source?" and a broken link: www.onuva.co.nz

"...frequency so clear it feels like Source"? What are they on (about)?

"Travel to the USA is essential"? Looks like a hook to me.

Hugh Young

Wellington

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supporters of group selection. Marx himself took the idea from Darwin and Spencer to argue that capitalism will evolve into a better more just society called 'socialism'. Opponents of group selection are positively obsessed with altruism which they cannot explain without group selection.

Herbert Spencer illustrated group selection as applied to nations and civilisations in his many works. He invented the term 'survival of the fittest', which originally applied to groups. Darwin enthusiastically welcomed Spencer's work, and his slogan as the inspiration for selection of individuals as a major mechanism of evolution. Darwin wrote important works on group selection. His *Descent of Man* has a large section on sexual selection. The revival of sociobiology by E O Wilson was based on the work of many previous writers. (Abridged.)

Vincent Gray

Jim Ring replies:

I wrote that those claiming Darwin was wrong should demonstrate that they have read the collection of essays by John Maynard Smith: *Did Darwin Get It Right?* This also applies to those claiming Bill Hamilton was wrong.

Vincent Gray has not read Smith who provides the evidence Gray demands. Smith explains in detail how political views (his own included) influenced biologists, and vice versa. Levins and Lewontin produced this gem in an essay defending the Soviet Union's espousal of Lysenkoism:

"There is nothing in Marx, Lenin, or Mao that is *or can be* in contradiction with a particular set of phenomena in the objective world" (my emphasis). The ant expert E O Wilson provided a biologist's opinion of Marx's vision: "Wonderful theory; wrong species."

"Hamilton deserves the Ig Nobel prize". This is mere personal invective; Hamilton's work was in mathematics so he provided proofs, which is unusual in science. Gray needs to show how these were incorrect.

Not only did Hamilton understand Group Selection he set the parameters under which it could occur. Briefly: Group Selection cannot operate when one or more members can defect. At the same time he provided a firm basis for the understanding of altruistic behaviour. If Gray has found an example of altruism outside Hamilton's limits he should publish his discovery in a peer-reviewed journal.

More Howards

In response to Clive Shaw's letter (NZ Skeptic 80):

Dear Clive,

There are a number of explanations for the preponderance of letters from Howards in a previous issue of NZ Skeptic, which you thought "spooky".

One possible reason is that bearing the name predisposes one to obsessively writing Letters to the Editor (a view held by my wife, but not otherwise entertained).

Another is that my dead ancestors are desperate to see the family name in print, and, by channeling their desires through Larry King's psychics, are influencing editors never to refuse a proffered Howard contribution, however pointless or irrelevant.

A really probable explanation is that so many things can happen that improbable events are bound to occur.

Fraternal greetings to Hazel,

Bernard Howard

'Informed' test necessary?

I wondered what had happened to Muriel Newman (see *Agenda-driven History*, NZ Skeptic 80). Thank God she seems to have moved on intellectually. I had been engaged in a running battle with her in the pages of our local paper, where she seems to get a free ride on her hobby horses. Most recently it was youth crime and zero tolerance. When I pointed out the science in her argument ranged from inconclusive to outright wrong, and recommended an article in *Scientific American* which to my mind said we should be very cautious about ascribing reasons to drops in the crime rate, the result was a fairly scathing personal attack.

I think however, with some pride, that historians are doing a better job at contradicting this sort of thing than scientists, although I have no evidence to support it really. A terrific example of this is Evans's book about the David Irving trial. A great read in which Evans completely



Debunking debriefing

John Welch

IT HAS become a cliché that whenever something bad happens, a horde of counsellors descend on the survivors to make their lives a misery. It's true. Counselling does make you more sick compared to doing nothing.

A child is run over and killed. Instead of teachers and parents rallying around and doing what they have done for hundreds of years, 'professionals' are now called in to make things worse.

In a study, survivors were randomly allocated to "emotional ventilation debriefing" (whatever that is), educational debriefing or nothing and were followed up at two weeks, six weeks and six months. The only difference in outcome was that at six months the first group had significantly more emotional distress.

Not only are these forms of counselling useless they are harmful and the relevant authorities should face up to this by not inflicting it on people. People have always coped with death and disaster and feelings naturally settle with time. Ordinary people underestimate their own ability to just be there for their friends and family and support them. No fancy talk is necessary.

bjp.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/abstract/189/2/150

More on Placebos

It can easily be argued that the history of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) is intimately involved with the history of the placebo effect. The placebo effect is also intimately involved with the practice of medicine although attempts are made to control for it.

The placebo effect is poorly understood, even by doctors, and if you interview specialists they generally discount the placebo effect in their own specialty and attribute it to their colleagues in other specialties. Orthopaedic surgery is rife with placebo procedures such as arthroscopic washout of arthritic knees. At least two good trials have shown that it is worthless yet orthopaedic surgeons continue to inflict this useless procedure on their patients. I confronted one such specialist and he argued that "in my experience it makes the knee feel better." This is the typical feeble appeal to authority which is the lowest and most contemptible form of evidence. This refusal to accept the evidence is not unusual and in the past other placebo operations have been

performed for years until such time as there is a critical mass of peers crying stop.

With respect to homeopathy, there are wide variations in the results of placebo controlled trials because, as someone put it, not all placebos are equal. One wag suggested that "double strength placebos" were needed.

In an interesting study subjects were given placebo analgesia and subjected to painful stimuli. The painful stimuli were then surreptitiously reduced to make the analgesia appear even more effective. This enhanced learned response lasted up to seven days and the authors concluded that this effect "may explain the large variability of the placebo responses that is found in many studies."

My conclusion from all of this is that my own profession fails to use the placebo effect in a positive way. It is viewed instead as a nuisance to be controlled or minimised. The CAM industry has shown no such reluctance and the placebo effect is behind most of these treatments. Perhaps this explains the public fascination with quackery?

www.chaser.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1182&Itemid=26

Occupational Health Delusions

Medical Journal of Australia Vol
179 18 Aug 2003

Pain Vol 24 Issues 1-2, Sep 2005
Pg126-133

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

Advocates of TCM argue that it cannot be evaluated by clinical trials because TCM has a different philosophical basis to western medicine. This is known as the 'plea for special dispensation' and is a hallmark of quackery.

TCM evolved in China in the same manner as western medicine under the teachings of Galen. Teachings were gospel and anyone who dissented was criticised. In many respects this process has the features of a religion where beliefs are more important than facts.

Galen solved the problem of the circulation of the blood by proposing that blood got from one side of the heart to the other through tiny pores in the heart. No one was ever able to demonstrate these pores but it was taken as fact. When Harvey described what actually happened in the circulation of the blood (ie arteries to capillaries to veins and back again) based on his anatomical studies he was treated as a heretic.

TCM is a placebo-based philosophy and every time there is a scandal such as herbs adulterated with western drugs, for example Viagra and steroids, this strengthens the argument that such products and practices should be banned as being consumer fraud.

Unhappy people in boring jobs can escape their stressful situation by attributing some mythical illness to the workplace. This entitles them to compensation from ACC. Many such people become extremely litigious and unpleasant if there is any suggestion that their illness is psychosomatic. Complaints and symptoms are out of all proportion to any evidence of an actual injury.

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Claire.LeCouteur@xtra.co.nz

A recurring theme in the occupational health literature is the statement that "psychological factors might be important." There is seldom any suggestion that a condition has nothing to do with work. Conditions such as railway spine and miners' nystagmus were compensated when we now know that these conditions were a delusion, a folie a deux between plaintiffs and their gullible doctors.

Sick building syndrome (SBS) is a modern example of this. I recall an earlier study where symptoms bore no relationship with building ventilation. This experiment involved varying the ventilation rate without the workers' knowledge. If the air was being changed at a very high rate there should have been a corresponding drop in symptoms.

Another recent study has found "symptoms of SBS are more strongly associated with

job demands, workload, social stressors, and support at work than with the physical environment."

Occupational and Environmental Medicine 2006;63:283-289

More on Goji Juice

I revisited the goji juice site www.best-goji-juice.com and decided to investigate Dr Earl Mindell. He has a legitimate Bachelor's degree from the University of North Dakota and a PhD from a diploma mill, the University of Beverly Hills. Quackwatch has some good information about his vitamin industry and the goji juice industry is a good example of multilevel marketing similar to Amway. Has anybody tried the stuff? I would be interested to hear.

The ideal marriage?

Consider an iridologist married to a reflexologist. The iridologist can look into her partner's eyes and tell him what's wrong with his feet. The reflexologist can look at her feet and tell her what's wrong with her eyes.

Many thanks to whoever it was who passed that on at the conference and thanks to Dr Keith Davidson for passing on a half page advertisement devoted to reflexology from the Christchurch Press, 26 September. It's clearly a growth industry with their own website www.reflexology.org.nz. You can train at a reflexology school or even gain a diploma from the Canterbury College of Natural Medicine.

A little light reading

Jim Ring finds some material to pass the time on a recent flight.

QUEENSLAND is the home of young-earth creationism in Australia so it was perhaps not surprising that I found Creation Magazine for sale in the Brisbane airport. None of the other four Australian airports we visited displayed it. Curiosity overcame my reluctance to provide money for their cause.

This was volume 27 but I feel sure it has not been running for 27 years in this format. "Peer reviewed by leading creationary (sic) experts". As there are no adverts there is no legal necessity for listing the numbers of copies sold or estimated readership. I would like to know these figures.

The cover picture with a caption DINGO: Australia's Wild Native Dog suggested a wildlife theme and the glossy cover was just like hundreds of other magazines on the rack. However a few key words – fossil, God, Darwin, massive flood, evolution, suggested otherwise. Not to mention the web page address for Answers in Genesis (*branches outside of the US have recently re-branded themselves as Creation Ministries International - ed.*).

With all the present attention on Intelligent Design it is worth reminding ourselves that young-earth creationists are still very much around.

A letter page called Feedback (borrowed from New Scientist?) gives some indication of the readership. A letter from Lower

Hutt thinks pet budgies prove a creator. I cannot quite follow the argument but apparently teaching one to say "Hello, God made me" is important.

The editorial attacks other publications – National Geographic, Time, and Scientific American, because they do not take creationist views seriously. I imagine these editors are trembling in their shoes. In contrast the editor remembers a young farmer who said, "When I drive around the countryside I see evidence for Noah's flood everywhere."

A number of news items taken (with acknowledgment) from New Scientist, Science, Nature, etc have the theme that new discoveries discredit science by proving that older ideas were wrong. If one believes that all answers lie in Genesis I suppose this is logical, but to me it is an entirely alien idea.

An article on UFOs and aliens surprised me but perhaps belief in a completely unsupportable worldview opens one's mind to more nonsense. Some famous pictures described as "genuinely unexplained sightings" help to plug a book for AiG. This apparently links abductions with demonology, and shows how "belief in evolution has opened the door to alien visitations." The book is claimed to provide answers for Christians puzzled by UFO phenomena.

The lead article on Dingoes is quite good until it gets to the

historical problem. When did humans and dingoes actually arrive in Australia? Australians convinced that the earth is only about 6000 years old have huge problems in compressing their history to make it fit.

The second major article is on how the (Irish) Giant's Causeway was produced by the biblical flood about 4500BP over a very short period. This is hilarious because it is obviously meant to be serious. The author is a staffer at AiG with a BSc (Hons) in geology and the article has references to recent geological articles and journals. However he brushes over the problem of geological dates with "Once we realise the dates assigned to the causeway are not measured, but just someone's opinion, we can look at the evidence in a different light." He is in agreement with modern opinion that the Causeway was produced by a huge eruption followed by a flood. However, according to Richard Fortey in *The Earth: An Intimate History* that flood was the opening of the Atlantic Ocean.

All this is benign but three pages of material towards the back are not. The headlines for three articles:

Darwin's Impact – The Bloodstained Legacy of Evolution

Evolution and Social Evil

America's Evolutionists: Hitler's Inspiration?

– would disgrace any publication.

While *A Timeline of Evolution Inspired Terror* features Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Pol Pot.

I am not sure how Mao escaped here but he is mentioned in the text.

Somehow Darwin is responsible for the behaviour of these men.

book review

forum

Origins research a work in progress

Genesis: The Scientific Quest for Life's Origin, by Robert M Hazen. Joseph Henry Press, Washington, DC, USA. Reviewed by Bernard Howard.

THERE'S one thing I hope for before I die; to hear of some convincing facts, rather than speculation, bearing on the origin of life on Earth (I'm 86, so hurry up, chaps!). If one wanted a non-biblical, one word title for this book, it would have to be 'Emergence'. The author writes: "The science of emergence seeks to understand complex systems – systems that display novel collective behaviours that arise from the interaction of many simpler components." The development of life from non-life can, using this concept, be seen as a hierarchy of emergent steps, and these steps form a framework for Hazen's survey of the field.

The initial emergence was of the simple molecules, the "building blocks" of living organisms, in the prebiotic world. The sugars, amino acids, etc, of which all living things on Earth are constituted, are the next necessary emergent step; the formation of these in the laboratory has been tried by various means, with varying success.

The next question is how these monomers could be combined under prebiotic conditions into the polymers – the proteins, nucleic acids, etc, without which complex life is impossible. The culminating emergent steps, the

formation of membrane-bounded cells, and their coalescence into the first multicellular organisms, are just as mysterious.

A great variety of hypotheses have been proposed and ingenious experiments carried out, regarding all these steps, and Hazen, as far as I can judge, discusses them all. Early ideas appear to have originated mainly in Europe, starting with Darwin's "warm little pond", and the later speculations of Oparin, Haldane, Cairns-Smith, Prigogine, and Eigen and Wächtershäuser. The experimental work, as appears from this book, has been done wholly in the US, mainly by the author's colleagues and buddies with occasional help from himself. Some readers will find the personal comments about these people and what they did lighten the tone of what can be fairly heavy going; others may find this a slight irritant.

Hazen's wide-ranging survey should be comprehensible to those with high-school level biology and chemistry. Don't look here for any answers, just an impartial laying out of competing explanations of only some of the steps leading to us and our fellow occupants of the planet. The mysteries remain, and the search continues.

This would be funny if it was not serious; it is a timely reminder that it is important to keep creationists out of schools.

Jim Ring is a Nelson skeptic.

From Page 13

demolishes Irving's politically driven conclusions.

I am coming to the opinion that before anyone should be allowed to publish their views anywhere, that they should be forced to sit an 'informed' test. This would establish whether they had bothered to read around the subject or just jumped in on what amounts to a wing and a prayer. There should be some small penalty involved for promoting foolish opinions, somewhere between public ridicule and death.

Although the quality of history taught in New Zealand schools isn't bad, the amount required of our students is risible. Having said that, history is one of the few subjects in schools or to some extent at undergraduate level and universities that requires critical thinking from day one.

I think Dr Newman's efforts would be better directed to trying to correct this rather than promote pseudo history, particularly as like so many other New Zealanders she is not qualified to judge, and under the Metcalfe system would be punished with that rather gross looking instrument I have just noticed at the front of John Welch's column! What on earth is that thing? It makes me cringe just to look at it. (Abridged.)

Bob Metcalfe

President Bush to Scientists and the Sick: 'Drop Dead'

Raymond Richards

In George W Bush's America, it's okay to throw human embryos in the trash, but not to use them as a source of stem cells.

A POLITICAL question on the minds of scientists in the United States is: How big will the Republican losses be in November?

History shows that Republicans are almost certain to lose ground. The party that holds the White House almost always loses seats in the midterm Congressional elections held in the sixth year of a two-term presidency. This year should be no different. President Bush is suffering from low approval ratings, and there is widespread discontent about the war in Iraq. Perhaps 2006 will be one of those landmark years in which control of Congress switches parties. If Democrats in the House of Representatives gain 15 seats – a number that is within reach – then Republicans will lose power there for the first time since 1994. Democrats need to gain six seats in the Senate to take control there – a less likely prospect but still possible.

The elections are particularly important to scientists because the Bush Administration has hindered scientific knowledge, usually to please backers who are fundamentalist Christians. The religious supporters of George W Bush and other Republicans are

generous, organised and, thus, powerful.

President Bush opposes human embryonic stem-cell research because his Christian sponsors say clusters of cells have souls in the image of their god and deserve the same rights as other humans. The likelihood that stem-cell research might lead to breakthroughs in the treatment of devastating medical conditions such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, heart disease and spinal cord injury does not matter to them.

In July of this year, President Bush used his first veto when he struck down the Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2005, which would have removed some restrictions on federal funding of human embryonic stem-cell research. The bill proposed to let the federal government fund research using surplus embryos generated by in vitro fertilisation (IVF) procedures. Bush claimed he opposed such research because it involves the destruction of human life. The president's message echoed anti-abortionists and evoked images of mad scientists killing babies for hideous experiments. On religious grounds, the Bush



Administration considers spare embryos from IVF procedures as the equivalent of human beings. However, early in its existence as a blastocyst, the embryo is not a fixed individual, as shown by the fact that it can spontaneously separate into many parts. The embryos have no prospect of developing the capacities and properties of persons because they will not be implanted in a womb. These surplus clusters of cells are usually discarded as medical waste, about 400 000 per year in the United States. President Bush knows this, but he did not seek to ban IVF.

His self-righteous posturing insulted the countries that have started embryonic stem-cell programmes, such as Britain, Australia, Sweden, Germany, Canada, South Africa and France. Meanwhile, scientists in the country with the world's biggest laboratories have their hands tied by dogma.

In Bush's home state of Texas, Republican politicians are divided on the issue. Former state lawmaker Randy Graf says no taxes should go to embryonic stem-cell research. (He also says Creationism makes at least as much sense

to him as evolution. On the question of the age of the Earth, Graf is blunt: "I don't know, and I don't care. I've got my Christian faith, and I'm very comfortable with that.") Auto-shop manager Mike Jenkins says he is against federal funding for stem-cell research because the government will waste the money. He also opposes government support of aids and cancer research for the same reason. On the other hand, Mike Hellon, former chair of the Arizona Republican Party, said, "It is inconsistent to say it's okay to throw embryos in the trash, but it's not okay to harvest stem cells."

The six Democrats seeking the seat all support federal funding of stem-cell research. Retired federal bureaucrat Francine Shacter says the opposition to stem-cell research reflects the Bush Administration's anti-science bent: "I have lived on the outskirts of the scientific world my entire life. One of the things I deplore about this Administration is the dumbing down of science. There's a fundamental dishonesty there that disturbs me very badly." Jeff Latas, a pilot, says watching his son fight leukaemia has given him a firsthand look at the importance of stem-cell research: "By vetoing to satisfy a very small sector of the conservative side of the Republican Party, essentially, you're signing a death warrant to millions of Americans."

Perhaps the November elections will get Republicans off the back of scientists.

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

Critical Coverage Needed at the Listener

A LISTENER article on Brazilian medium and 'miracle-worker' Joao de Deus has taken the annual Bent Spoon Award from the New Zealand Skeptics.

The article by Diana Burns, Come and Be Healed, ran before the self-proclaimed healer's planned visit to New Zealand where a Wellington performance was expected to take in 3000 people at \$115 a head. It received a very large number of nominations from members concerned that the anecdotal accounts of miracle cures would help boost such businesses.

"We're used to seeing these sorts of stories in tabloid publications and B-grade 'exploitainment' shows, but many of our members expected better quality analysis from the Listener," says Skeptics chair-entity Vicki Hyde.

The article did contain some caveats, noting that pushing forceps up a patient's nose is a common circus routine.

"You have to ask why does someone who claims to be channelling King Solomon and St Frances Xavier, amongst others, have to resort to hoary old magic tricks? Where is the proof that paying to have your photo taken to Brazil is going to cure your ills?" questions Hyde.

"It's taken us a long time to require proof of efficacy and informed patient consent from our medical fraternity – we should demand no less from any other industry that purports to help us physically and mentally."

The New Zealand Skeptics were pleased to see a more critical look taken at the claims of de-registered doctor Hellfried 'Dr Ozone' Satori. Sunday reporter Janet McIntyre receives a Bravo Award for her item (TV One September 3, 2006) on Satori's claims to cure cancer through ozone injections and the use of caesium chloride.

Other recipients of Bravo Awards from the NZ Skeptics are:

- David Russell, retiring head of the Consumer Institute

"We often say, somewhat cheekily, that the Skeptics are the Consumers' Institute of the mind. Despite having once awarded Consumer magazine a Bent Spoon, we nonetheless have appreciated David's many years of leadership in critical thinking."

- Linley Boniface, for her piece, Clairvoyants dead wrong (Dominion Post, May 1, 2006)

"Though the fictional treatments of clairvoyance are pure entertainment, TV2's 'documentary' series Sensing Murder is something far more repellent... characterised by a striking lack of progress in the chosen criminal investigations."

- Claire Sylvester, Campbell Live, TV3

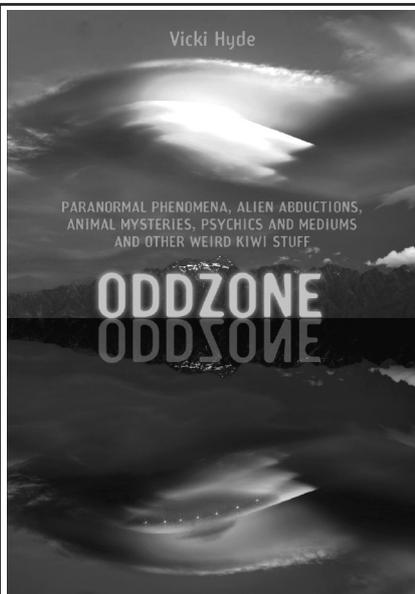
"Claire has brought a critical edge to her reports on Campbell Live, covering a range of subjects and taking the time to seek out alternative explanations."

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