

THE SKEPTIC

Vol. 29, No 3. September 2009

the
well-travelled
skeptic





Events Calendar

Australian Skeptics (Vic) Inc – Terry Kelly

GPO Box 5166, Melbourne VIC 3001

Tel: 1 800 666 996 vic@skeptics.com.au

Skeptics' Café – Third Monday of every month, with guest speaker. La Notte, 140 Lygon St. Meal from 6pm, speaker at 8pm sharp.

21 September - Trevor Hand of Hands on Meteorites and Hands on Dinosaurs' will present and discuss exciting physical evidence for Deep Time and geological and biological evolution.

19 October - Video night

16 November - Steve Roberts on "astronomical hoaxes".

21 December – End-of-year social

More details on our web site www.skeptics.com.au/vic

Borderline Skeptics – Russell Kelly

PO Box 17, Mitta Mitta, Victoria 3701

Tel: (02) 6072 3632 skeptics@wombatgully.com.au

Meetings are held quarterly on second Tuesday at Albury/Wodonga on pre-announced dates and venues.

NSW Skeptics Inc – Eran Segev

PO Box 262, Roseville, NSW 2069

Tel: 0432 713 195; Fax: (02) 8088 4735

president@skeptics.com.au

Sydney Skeptics in the Pub – 6pm first Thursday of each month at the Crown Hotel, corner of Goulburn & Elizabeth Streets in the city (meeting upstairs)

October 24 - dinner meeting Chatswood Club – guest speaker Kerrie Dougherty, curator of space technology, PowerHouse Museum, on extraterrestrials in history - bookings from editor@skeptics.com.au

Hunter Skeptics Inc – John Turner

Tel: (02) 4959 6286 johnturner@westnet.com.au

We produce a 4-page e-newsletter six times a year; contact the newsletter editor (kevinmcdonald@hotmail.net.au) to add your email address to receive the e-newsletter.

Meetings are held upstairs at The Kent Hotel, Hamilton on the first Monday of each even-numbered month, commencing 7.30pm, with a guest speaker on an interesting topic.

October 5 – speaker Brett Edman, "Anonymous vs Scientology – dynamics of cyber-hackism"

Gold Coast Skeptics – Lilian Derrick

PO Box 8348, GCMC Bundall, QLD 9726

Tel: (07) 5593 1882; Fax: (07) 5593 2776

lderrick@bigpond.net.au

Contact Lilian to find out news of more events.

Queensland Skeptics Association Inc – Bob Bruce

PO Box 1388 Coorparoo DC 4151

Tel: (07) 3255 0499 qskeptic@uq.net.au

Meeting with guest speaker on the last Monday of every month at the Red Brick Hotel, 81 Annerly Road, South Brisbane. Meal from 6pm, speaker at 7.30pm. See our web site for details: www.qldskeptics.com

Canberra Skeptics – Pierre Le Count

PO Box 555, Civic Square, ACT 2608

Tel: (02) 6121 4483 act1@skeptics.com.au

Monthly talks usually take place at the Innovations Theatre at the ANU. Dates and topics are subject to change. For up-to-date details, visit our web site at: <http://finch.customer.netspace.net.au/skeptics/>

Skeptics SA – Laurie Eddie

52B Miller St Unley, SA 5061

Tel: (08) 8272 5881 laurieeddie@adam.com.au

Thinking and Drinking - Skeptics in the Pub, on the third Friday of every month
www.meetup.com/Thinking-and-Drinking-Skeptics-in-the-Pub/calendar/10205558 or <http://tinyurl.com/loqdr>

WA Skeptics – Dr John Happs

PO Box 466, Subiaco, WA 6904

Tel: (08) 9448 8458 info@undeceivingourselves.com

All meetings start at 7:30 pm at Grace Vaughan House, 227 Stubbs Terrace, Shenton Park

22 September - David Archibald, author of Solar Cycle 24, will speak on his book covering solar cycles and climate - why the world will continue cooling and why carbon dioxide won't make a detectable difference.

17 November - Joanne Nova will speak on "It ain't science: How bullies and status seekers destroy rational debate" - taking science to the streets and her Skeptics Guide to Climate Change. This will be the final meeting for the year.

Further details of all our meetings and speakers are on our website at www.undeceivingourselves.com

Australian Skeptics in Tasmania – Leyon Parker

PO Box 582, North Hobart TAS 7002

Tel: 03 6238 2834 BH, 0418 128713 parkerley@yahoo.com.au

Darwin Skeptics – Brian de Kretser

Brian de Kretser

Tel: (08) 8927 4533 brer23@swiftdsl.com.au



THE SKEPTIC

Volume 29 • No 3 • September '09

Contents

NEWS

- Events calendar 2
- Around the Traps 5
- 2009 Convention 8

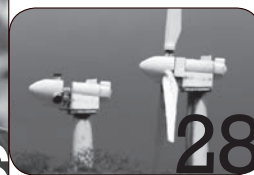
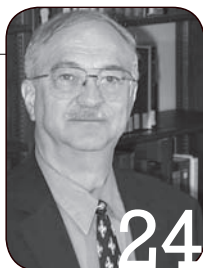
REPORTS

- Simon Singh 10
Tim Mendham
- Attack in Calabar 11
Leo Igwe
- Vax campaign 12
Tim Mendham
- Skeptics in Vegas 14
Eran Segev



FEATURES

- Bunker interview 16
Michael Wolloghan
- Seeking the Sydney 19
Brett Christian
- Joe Nickell interview 24
Richard Saunders
- Blowing in the wind 28
Mark Lawson
- Encounters with Con-men 31
Martin Bridgstock



ARTICLES

- Power to the people 34
Jon Donniss
- Cult counselling 36
John Perkins
- Prophets & psychics 38
William Harwood



FORUM

- Psychology 48
- Religion 52
- Global warming 56



REGULARS

- Editorial 4
- Reviews 42
- Puzzles 47
- Letters 60



Goodbye, Hello ... again

Ok, the revolving door that is *The Skeptic* editor's seat has come to a halt, and barring the proverbial bus, it should hopefully stay that way for some time to come.

But before your newly-enthroned editor launches into a manifesto about new brooms and directions and visions and the like, let me first pay a huge thanks and admiration to the work of Steve Roberts, Richard Saunders, Rachael Dunlop and Kylie Sturgess for doing such a sterling job on the previous issue of the magazine. Despite trying circumstances, they managed to produce a top class product and set an extremely high standard. Thanks guys (he says, through gritted teeth).

And on this particular edition of the magazine, I must thank Eran Segev, Barry Williams, Joanne Benhamu, Michael Wolloghan and again ... and especially ... Steve Roberts. There is no more indefatigable commentator and proof-reader than Steve - he won't let you get away with nuffin!

Now to the future. And the past.

Some of the longer-in-tooth subscribers might recall a skinny but somewhat bearded chap who acted as editor, treasurer and secretary of the Australian Skeptics back in the 80s. He left the fold because of work pressures, and disappeared into the limbo that is paid employment. Well, I'm happy to say that he's returned, decidedly less skinny and only somewhat more bearded, but raring to get stuck into them there para-abnormalists and pseudoscientific types. And it's scary to note that there aren't any fewer of them around than there were 20 years ago.

So what's changed? Well, certainly the Skeptics and a wide range of like-minded groups are now more fully taking advantage of media to reach a broader audience - they're blogging, and podcasting, and Facebooking like there's no tomorrow. But so is the other side. What is encouraging is the evident excitement in the skeptical

field, especially among the younger part of the community. There is definitely enthusiasm for a task that is by no means over - far from it - but also by no means insurmountable. Will we ever conquer superstition and ignorance. Not likely. Can we make a difference. We are. This magazine is one way to do that.

Which brings me to the future. There is much that is very good about *The Skeptic* magazine - thank you Barry, Karen and Steve - but every new editor likes to make their presence felt and impart a little of themselves into the pages you see before you. I don't see a need for wholesale change, but change is an important element of all our lives, so there will be some. At the moment, some of your favourite features of recent issues may not be in these current pages. That's not necessarily permanent - it's more to do with space and time as it is an indication of the editor's preference.

There is one thing that I must differ to Steve, and that is not a big issue but involves his stated preference - in his capacity as editor - for shorter articles and letters. I agree with him that, like Occam, if you can say it simply and quickly, then please do so. But I'm as much if not more concerned with quality as quantity, and that will largely be my criterion for decisions made whether to publish, not to publish, or be damned on all sides.

And before I go, a note about subscription periods. We have recently moved to an *ad hoc* subscription period - if you subscribe or resubscribe in June, you will receive issues from that month onward, and not, as in previous years, receive issues based on a calendar year. So if it is time for your renewal, please do so as soon as you receive a renewal notice in order to avoid missing out on intervening issues. No-one wants to miss out on their regular dose of skepticism, regardless of who sits in the editor's chair or how quickly it revolves. ■

Tim Mendham, editor

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Editorial submission deadlines
October 15, 2009
January 15, 2010
April 15, 2010
July 15, 2010



Around the traps...

Leo Igwe attacked

Leo Igwe, director of the Centre for Inquiry in Nigeria and a regular contributor to *The Skeptic*, was attacked by a mob of between 150 and 200 people, all members of a Christian church, while he was at a

conference he had organised on child rights and witchcraft in Calabar, a city in south-eastern Nigeria.

Leo reports on the incident elsewhere in this issue.

Fortunately, he was not badly injured, but it brings home in dramatic fashion how much some skeptics have to put on the line in defence of their beliefs and their 'cause'.

Australian Skeptics, along with his many friends and supporters around the world, send their best wishes to him in what is obviously a difficult situation – one that is thankfully (and hopefully permanently) far from our experience in this country.

Closer to home, however, police in Papua New Guinea say there has been a spate of sorcery-related killings in the Highlands province of Chimbu lately, with at least one elderly woman being burnt alive and two others stoned to death.

Borderline Skeptics

No, not those who are having second thoughts, but a group of like-minded skeptics on the Victorian/NSW border has recently become incorporated as Borderline Skeptics Inc.

While the definition of "borderline" may be a touch amorphous, president Russell Kelly says that any "regional areas that consider Albury/Wodonga to be their centre" can regard themselves as included.

Contact details are: PO Box 17, Mitta Mitta, Victoria 3701, or via email at asborderline@skeptics.com.au.

Air crash investigators

While authorities still do not know what caused the crash of Air France AF447 en route from Rio de Janeiro to Paris on 1 June, killing all 228 people on board, a Russian researcher has registered a radio message from 'the other side' which indicates the crash was possibly the result of a bomb.

According to reports, the "Russian Association of Instrumental Transcommunication develops technical devices that allow communication with the dead via radio signals." These are then "deciphered by special software" into plain audio files, "which a synthesised voice reads out loud".

The reports do not say which language the deceased used, nor how the devices managed to differentiate between the Air France passengers and crew and the other non-air crash deaths that day - approximately 152,000 people die in any one day. But the voices did apparently respond to questioning and responded with statements: "Air tragedy", "We are witnessing a crime", "There was some box there", "There is a real disaster in the Atlantic Ocean, everyone's burned down [sic]", "We are witnessing a crime, there was some box in the fuselage", and "Frenchmen, we are witnessing a crime!"

Back in the real world, investigators are still (at time of writing) not sure what was the cause of the crash, although some have said the plane's speed sensors had been "a factor but not the cause" of the crash. There had been speculation that old-style sensors may have given the pilots faulty information.

The fact that pieces of wreckage that have been recovered indicate that the plane broke up on contact with

water, and not in the air, suggests it might not have been a bomb that caused the plane to crash.

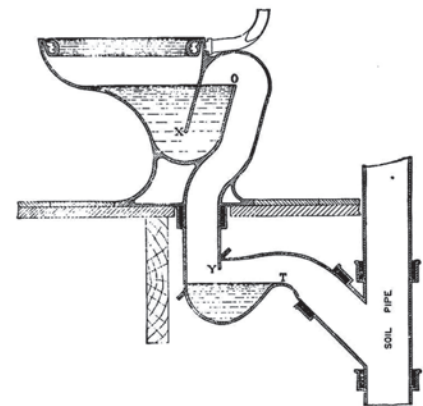
WHO rejects homeopathy

The Director General's office of the World Health Organisation has given confirmation that it does not recommend the use of homeopathy for treating HIV, TB, malaria, influenza and infant diarrhoea. This follows statements from five departments of the Organisation that expressed their opposition to the treatment in their areas. The Director General's office said these objections "clearly express the WHO's position".

The statements were in response to a letter sent to the Organisation in June this year by early career medics and researchers, under the umbrella of the Voice of Young Science (VoYS), a group allied with the Sense About Science group (www.senseaboutscience.org.uk).

The letter called for the body to issue a clear international communication about the inappropriate use of homeopathy for five serious diseases. The group said that they were frustrated with the continued promotion of homeopathy as a preventative or treatment for HIV, TB, malaria, influenza and infant diarrhoea.

**IF WATER HAS A MEMORY
THEN HOMEOPATHY IS**



**FULL OF SHIT
HOMEOPATHY: SHIT AND SUGAR**

Tough times for astrologers

Sometimes it doesn't pay to make negative predictions. AFP reports that Sri Lankan police have reportedly arrested an astrologer after he predicted serious political and economic problems for the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Chandrasiri Bandara writes an astrology column for a pro-opposition weekly paper, and he was arrested, according to a police spokesman, to find out the basis for his prediction. The astrologer had predicted that a planetary change on October 8 would be inauspicious for parliament and the government might not be able to halt rising living costs. Private economists, using less than planetary methods, had apparently predicted the same, but had not been arrested.

The reports do not indicate whether Bandara had predicted his arrest.

Pro and con for atheists

While atheists have been organising a summer camp in the UK as a counter-event to faith-based camps for kids, over in Turkey a TV show has been launched that offers atheists 'salvation' through conversion to one of the world's major religions.

Camp Quest UK, which is being held near Bath, Somerset, offers 24 places for the children of "atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and all those who embrace a naturalistic rather than supernatural world view". There are currently six branches of Camp Quest operating in North America, where the concept was first launched in 1996.

Organisers said the purpose of the camp is to encourage critical thinking and provide children with a summer camp "free of religious dogma".

Meanwhile, the Turkish show, called *Tovbekarlar Yarisiyor* (Penitents Compete) features a Muslim imam, a Catholic priest, a Jewish Rabbi and a Buddhist monk attempting to persuade 10 atheists of the merits of their religion, according to CNN Turk.

If they succeed, the contestants are rewarded with a pilgrimage to one of

their chosen faith's most sacred site – Mecca, the Vatican, Jerusalem or Tibet respectively.

Before you think this sounds like a good way to get a free trip, the CNN report points out that "Contestants will be judged by a panel of eight theologians and religious experts prior to going on the show to make sure their lack of faith is genuine."

The show has reportedly been condemned by Turkish religious leaders, with Hamza Aktan, the head of the Muslim High Board of Religious Studies, saying that the program was "disrespectful" to place different faiths in competition with each other and accused the TV channel, Kanal T, of using religion to boost ratings.

Cold reading exam

The appreciation of what underlies many supposed 'psychic' experiences took a step forward with the inclusion of a question on the cold reading technique in the General Achievement Test (GAT) of the 2009 Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).

The VCE is the credential awarded to secondary school students who successfully complete high school level studies (Year 11 and 12 or equivalent) in the state of Victoria, and is the equivalent of the Higher School Certificate in New South Wales and the

Certificate of Education in most other states. The GAT is an essential part of VCE external assessment. It provides the basis of a quality assurance check on the marking of examinations. Any student who is enrolled in a VCE-Unit 3/4 study is expected to sit for the GAT.

The questions on cold reading (number 3-6 in the exam) delivered a short description of the technique (beginning with "Cold reading is a group of techniques used by fortune tellers and psychics to covertly discover details about a person"). This was followed by a description of four common cold reading techniques: shot gunning (very general claims); fine flattery (suggesting valuable characteristics of the client); Barnum statements (apparently specific statements but actually applying to most people); and the 'Rainbow Ruse' (statements that simultaneously describe a specific personality trait and well as its opposite).

The exam then asked candidates to classify four different statements according to cold reading type.

However, not everyone is happy with the wording or even the inclusion of the question.

It bears some resemblance to terminology used by Ian Rowland, UK-based "mind reader and mind motivator" whose book *The Cold Reading Book* is regarded by many as a key text



Ian Rowland (r) and an other.

on this topic. However, Rowland told *The Skeptic*: “The question itself was neither written by me nor taken from my book, obviously. Some of the jargon or terminology is taken from my book, but by no means all.”

Rowland says “obviously” because he says “the [exam] question, as stated, contains material inaccuracies. You would think that the people involved in composing such questions would consider it important to get their facts right.”

Cold reading, he says, “is a set of techniques, to do with the psychology of communication, that enables you to influence what other people think, feel and believe. It has many uses and applications. Some people use it to pretend to be psychic or to give supposedly ‘psychic’ readings. This is one of the commonest and least ethically responsible uses. There are many others. ‘Psychics’ should be ‘fake psychics’ if the question is to make any sense at all. It does not involve covert discovery of details. This is an entirely separate area known as ‘hot reading.’”

He adds that, while “fine flattery” and “rainbow ruse” are terms he coined for his book, the term “Barnum statement” dates from the mid-1950s and he does not recognise “shot gunning” at all.

He says he “had no idea that this question existed until some friends brought it to my attention”. He says that he knows of no other example of such a question being used in an exam paper.

Mary the Stump

Irish Catholics have flocked to a church in Rathkeale, County Limerick, to pray at a stump of a recently-cut willow that some observers say has the silhouette of the Virgin Mary upon it.

While trees that were dangerously overhanging a neighbouring school playground were being felled, a branch fell off one tree and made “a funny shape”. A worker cut through the stump at a near-vertical angle, revealing a wooden relief that inspired some to see the Virgin Mary.

Not everyone, however, was convinced. While thousands have come to see the Holy Stump, the workman who made the revelatory cut says he



can't see it: “I see it as the grain of a tree myself.” And the Rev Willie Russell, stand-in parish priest while the local was away on holidays, was reported by Associated Press as suggesting the residents were letting their imaginations run wild and violating the second (or is it the first) commandment. “It’s just a tree,” he said. “You don’t worship a tree.”

The County Limerick diocese of the church said it viewed the stump with “great skepticism”.

“While we do not wish in any way to detract from devotion to Our Lady, we would also wish to avoid anything which might lead to superstition,” it said in a statement. Obviously, irony is not a strong trait in Limerick.

Seeing the light

A Jewish couple have claimed they are being kept prisoner in their holiday flat in Bournemouth because of an automatic light in a communal hallway. Dr Dena Coleman, a head teacher at a Jewish orthodox school, and her husband Gordon, say that an Orthodox biblical prohibition on lighting fires on the Sabbath also includes the switching on of electric lights. This means they can’t leave their flat between sunset on Friday and Saturday night because the light automatically comes on when they enter the hallway. The automatic switch was installed to save energy and money,

but the Colemans have offered to pay for an override switch to be installed that would disable the light sensors during their Sabbath days. The management company and most residents have objected, and the Colemans say they have been forced to bring legal action.

The case is due to be heard at Bournemouth County Court later this year.

SA committee examines suspect health practices

Health practitioners allegedly offering ‘bogus’ cures will be named and shamed as part of recommendations from a South Australian parliamentary inquiry, a story by Tory Shepherd in the *AdelaideNow* news says.

Labor MP Ian Hunter tabled a report from the Social Development Committee, titled *Inquiry into bogus, unregistered and deregistered health practitioners*, in June, naming four practitioners in the process. These were:

- Elvira Brunt, for allegedly claiming she could cure cancer through abdominal massage, encouraging patients to stop normal treatment and requiring cash payments for services;
- Elizabeth Goldway, for allegedly claiming she could cure cancer, charging thousands of dollars for treatment and not providing receipts;
- Monica Milka, for allegedly claiming she could cure cancer with injections to “kill the worms” that were causing the problem; and
- Lubomir Batelka, who allegedly subjected a patient to “vaginal blowing” with an ozone therapy machine, saying it offered a “50 per cent cure” for cancer.

“The committee understands that such practitioners are often skilled at exploiting people’s fears and creating a sense of hope based on deception,” the report says. “While some ... practitioners may be delusional – convinced they are able to cure serious medical conditions – the evidence presented to the committee suggested that others are driven by greed and, in some cases, sexual gratification.”

The committee recommended the state government establish legislation to regulate health practitioners and mechanisms to monitor them. ■

BRISKEPTICON '09

The Australian Skeptics NATIONAL CONVENTION

November
27, 28 & 29
BRISBANE

Myth & Misconception: because not all evidence is equal!

The 2009 Australian Skeptics National Convention will be held in Brisbane in November – a welcome return to the Queensland capital for the most important event on the Skeptics' calendar. The annual convention was last held in Brisbane in 2001.

This year's convention – nicknamed Briskepticon – is being held at the Riverview Room, Emmanuel College within the grounds of the University of Queensland's St Lucia Campus over the final weekend in November. The theme will be "Myth and Misconception: Because not all evidence is equal!"

This year's program consists of an eclectic mix of speakers covering a range of topics, all devoted to revealing the results of investigations into claims of pseudoscience and the paranormal.

Former Australian Skeptic of the Year, scientist, author and media identity Dr Karl Kruszelnicki kicks the program off on the Saturday. Dr Karl promises to take us on "a breakneck tour through various 'mythconceptions': how if we don't eat carrots we will go blind (actually a myth spread by the military); how absent university students are responsible for the longevity of their Geriatric Domestic Female Engineer Relatives; the origin of the True Version of Murphy's Law and how Universal it is and how it applies to Tumbling Toast, and much more!"

Saturday's program focuses on the often bizarre world of alternative medicine and some of the weird things that

people accept as being true in spite of what the evidence says. 'Jellybean Lady' and former Skeptic of the Year, Loretta Marron, will describe her experience exposing a cancer quack, as featured on A Current Affair.

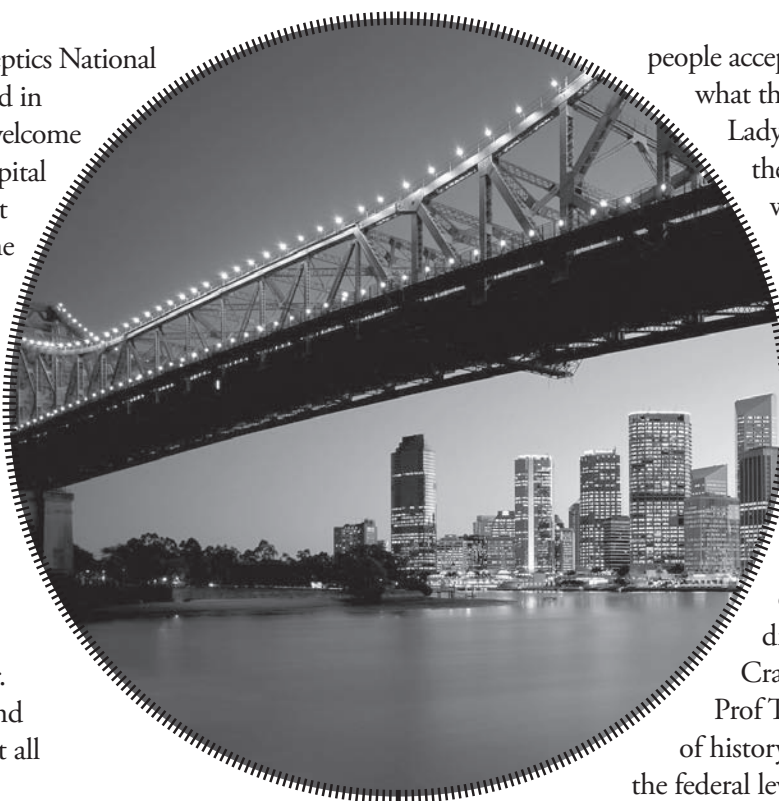
On Sunday, the focus moves to why people believe things which just aren't so. Associate Professor Tony Taylor is first cab off the rank on Sunday, discussing "The Art and Craft of Pseudohistory".

Prof Taylor is a major architect of history education reform at the federal level in Australia and the author of *Denial: History Betrayed*, a study of the ideology and the psychology of historical denial in modern history.

On the same day, Dr Krissy Wilson from the University of Tasmania will talk about the psychology of belief and her investigations into humanity's seemingly limitless capacity for self-deception.

Other speakers include Peter Macinnis, a professional writer with a passion for science, history and trivia and the author of *Mr Darwin's Incredible Shrinking World*, and Peter Ellerton, the 2008 winner of the Australian Skeptics Prize for Critical Thinking, whose topic is "The Fourth R – Reasoning in Education".

More details about the convention are available from the Queensland Skeptics website: www.qldskeptics.com. The latest program information is presented opposite.



BRISKEPTICON '09

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Friday 27th November
COCKTAIL PARTY

Venue: **James Birrell Room, downstairs at the University of Queensland Club**
From 6 pm, registration Informal meet, greet and skeptical trivia!
Meals and drinks available for purchase.

Saturday 28th November Conference Day 1

Venue: **Riverview Room, Emmanuel College**

SESSION 1

8.00 – 8.45

Registration (tea and coffee available)

8.45 – 9.15

Opening and welcome, announcement of the 2009 Australian Skeptics awards

9.15 – 10.00

Dr Karl Kruszelnicki – “Great moments in misconceptions”

10.00 – 10.45

Barry Williams – “A life in scepticism”

10.45 – 11.15 Morning tea (provided)

SESSION 2

11.15 – 12.00

Peter Macinnis – “If Darwin did not exist, would it have been necessary to invent him?”

12.- 12.45

Pete Griffith – “Life, death and the anti-vaccination cult”

12.45 - 1.30 Lunch (provided)

SESSION 3

1.30 – 2.15

Loretta Marron – “Undercover for cancer”

2.15 – 3.00

Geraldine Moses – “The challenge of providing evidence-based medicine to the general public – notes from the Medicines Line”

3.00 – 3.30 Afternoon tea (provided)

SESSION 4

3.30 – 4.15

Rachael Dunlop – “She’s a 21st century skeptic”

4.15 – 5.00

Jim Allan – “Why skeptics are dinner party nightmares”

Sunday 29th November Conference Day 2

Venue: **Riverview Room, Emmanuel College**

SESSION 5

8.00 – 9.00

Registration (tea and coffee available)

9.00 – 9.15

Opening and welcome

9.15 – 10.00

Tony Taylor – “The art and craft of pseudohistory”

10.00 – 10.45

Bob Lingard – “Testing times in education”

10.45 – 11.15

Morning tea (provided)

SESSION 6

11.15 – 12.00

Krissy Wilson – “The psychology of belief”

12.- 12.45

Peter Bowditch – “Risk awareness”

12.45 - 1.30 Lunch (provided)

SESSION 7

1.30 – 2.15

Peter Ellerton – “The fourth R – reasoning in education”

2.15 – 3.00

Rosemary Aird – “Mental health and belief”

3.00 – 3.30

Afternoon tea (provided)

SESSION 8

3.30 – 4.15

Martin Bridgstock – “Skepticism, science and the paranormal”

4.15 – 5.00

Theo Clark – “Bah, that’s humbug: spotting errors in reasoning!”

Saturday 28th November
CONVENTION
DINNER

6.30 - Pre dinner drinks @ UQ Club. **7.00 – 10.30** - Convention dinner.
Venue: **Kathleen Room, University of Queensland Club**. Pre-paid ticketed event.
Presentation of the 2009 Skeptical Awards: Bent Spoon, Skeptic of the Year and Skeptical Prize for Critical Thinking.

DISCLAIMER: While all the people listed on this program have agreed to speak at the convention, the schedule is still in draft form and is subject to change. Some guest speaker arrangements remain to be finalised. These will be added to the program as they are confirmed

Singh in Australia

Dr Peter Arnold reports on an evening well spent – Simon Singh’s lecture on alternative medicine to an (almost unanimously) enthusiastic crowd.

The British science journalist Simon Singh - who has become a cause célèbre since being sued by chiropractors for having the temerity to question the evidence base for their practices - visited Australia in July to lecture at various sites on alternative medicine.

He was in Australia as a guest of the Adelaide Festival of Ideas and The Royal Institution of Australia, and The Skeptic Zone and Australian Skeptics prevailed upon him to visit Sydney, where he gave a talk at the Seymour Centre on July 14, under the auspices of Sydney University’s Sydney Ideas program.

It turned out to be a huge success, with 341 people attending and, of this number, 94 Skeptics who took up a special discount organised by the Australian Skeptics.

With the exception of an unhappy homeopath, the audience at the Centre gave Simon an enthusiastic reception – not to mention making the Sydney Ideas organisers thrilled.

Singh’s latest book, *Trick or Treatment: Alternative Medicine on Trial*, co-written with Professor Edzard Ernst, Chair of Complementary Medicine at Exeter University, was in short supply at the lecture – a presumed surplus of copies destined for the Sydney event had been snapped up by his Adelaide audience. This left book-buyers in the Sydney audience having to make do with Simon’s previous books, including *Fermat’s Last Theorem* and *Big Bang*, all highly recommended in any case.

Singh took the audience on a trip from the exposure of Chinese heart surgery - as promoted on a TV documentary allegedly done “under acupuncture anaesthesia” though in fact using various

traditional anaesthetics - through a discussion of the rationale of controlled trials of purported remedies, whether ‘natural’ or discovered by pharmaceutical companies.

Reviewing the history of homeopathy, he demonstrated the need for properly conducted trials, even of the seemingly craziest theories. He illustrated one of these by referring to Fritz Zwicky, thought to be a real ‘nutter’ when he suggested the existence of dark matter, but since proven to have been correct.

Singh argued strongly against giving patients with serious illnesses false hope about possible cures, when the remedies were totally unproven. He argued forcefully for the same rigorous testing to be applied to any proposed remedy, regardless of its source.

He then explained the background to his being sued by the British Chiropractic Association. Unfortunately for all of us, even here in Australia, it seems that a libel action could be mounted in the UK for what we say or write ‘down under’ – the British courts have a global jurisdiction in these matters. And the onus of proof is on the defendant!

Simon alluded to the campaign being mounted in the UK – www.senseaboutscience.org - to have the law changed.

He concluded the evening answering questions about the practice of alternative therapies by some registered medical practitioners, justifying themselves on the grounds that it can’t hurt the patient and might just work. The irony that people in the UK must be trained as vets to treat animals, but need not be trained as doctors to treat humans was not lost on the audience.

Our lonely homeopath, initially cheered on for her courage in coming forward, clearly had no understanding of the meaning of the concept of ‘meta-analysis’. Quite failing to comprehend what this entails, she finally earned the derision of the audience as her ignorance unfolded through her interminable ‘question’ to Simon.

Chairman Professor David Day, Dean of Science at Sydney University, thankfully stepped up to the mike and put a stop to the rowdy exchange that had ensued.

The meeting concluded with (almost) unanimous acclamation for Simon, followed by a regulation visit to a local pub for further discussion and a viewing of the ritual of the State of Origin league match (NSW won, alternative medicine lost).

Simon visited Melbourne later in the month for another lecture. ■

The bulk of this article first appeared on the Croakey health blog section of www.crikey.com.au. Additional material from Tim Mendham



Attack in Calabar

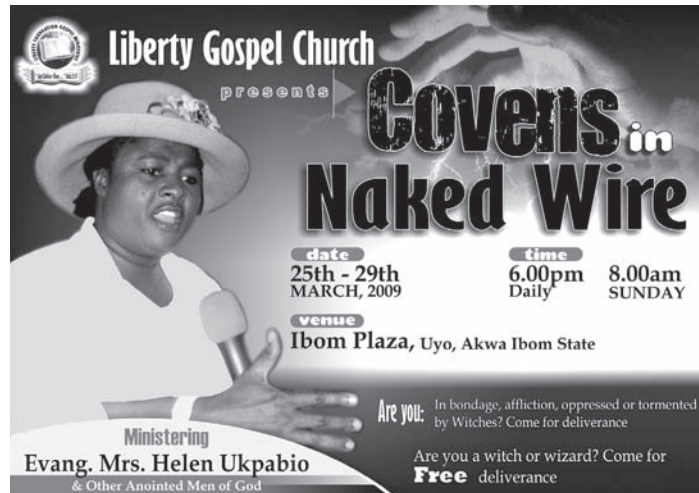
Leo Igwe reports from the front line of religious extremism, where standing up for skepticism can put you in real danger.

Around 11.30 am on Wednesday, July 29 2009, a mob of about 200 people from the Liberty Gospel Church invaded the Cultural Center in Calabar Cross River State. The Cultural Center was the venue of a public symposium on witchcraft and child rights, organised by the Nigerian Humanist Movement and Stepping Stones Nigeria.

Most of the mob arrived at the venue in buses wearing orange T-shirts while others donned plain clothes to hide their identity. As we were about to start, some of them stormed the conference hall, stamping their feet on the ground and chanting slogans critical of the event and the organisers.

I tried to calm them down without success - they were determined to disrupt the event and ensure that the program was not held. The representative of the Commissioner of Police in Cross River State, Anthony Placid was there. He tried calling them to order but they rebuffed him. At one point, I walked up to one of the cameramen who were videoing the whole chaos and pandemonium and asked who authorised him to cover the event. I held onto the camera and around ten people came and started dragging the camera and me with it. They said the camera had broken and consequently all of them pounced on me and started hitting me on the head and my back. They snatched my bag containing my digital camera, conference papers and some cash. They destroyed my eyeglasses and made away with my mobile phone.

The mob went away with some of our conference banners and some anti-witchcraft T-shirts and caps that we had given to participants. Some friends who tried to rescue me from these idiots were also beaten. The representative of the Commissioner of Police called and had



some police officers sent to the scene; they brought the situation under control. The police dispersed the thugs and arrested one of the pastors, Jeffrey Bassey. In his statement at the police station, Bassey told the police that they were instructed by Evangelist Helen Ukpabio to disrupt the event. He was detained and was later released on bail.

The attack by the Liberty Gospel Church happened coincidentally at a time the Nigerian police and the army were doing battle with an Islamic sect called Boko Haram in Bornu State in Northern Nigeria. This fanatical group had declared a war against the state. They attacked and beheaded police officers and civilians in a violent campaign to foist their own version of sharia law on the country.

It is unfortunate that Helen Ukpabio has turned her Liberty Gospel Church into a fundamentalist sect in Calabar. She has been heavily criticised for fueling witchcraft accusations and persecution through her ministry. She claims to be a former witch and to have powers to exorcise witchcraft. She organises witch testing, witch screening and witch deliverance sessions. She has written books and articles, produced films and published newsletters detailing the characteristics of witches and how a witch can be delivered. But Helen

and her ragtag ministry are not alone in this shameful scheme. Many pastors in Nigeria are into the business of witch exorcism for which they charge a lot of money. The activities of Helen, the Liberty Gospel Church and other unscrupulous pentecostal pastors are largely to be blamed for the tragic phenomenon of witch children.

Witchcraft accusations against children have caused many problems for families and communities across Nigeria. Today, many states in Nigeria are grappling with the problem of street children, and many of the kids involved are those who have been abandoned, driven to the streets or displaced due to 'witchcraft'. Some witch children have been tortured or killed by their own parents or family

members, others by pastors during exorcism. But this charlatan called Helen Ukpabio has taken criticism in bad faith. And instead of shifting the focus off her misguided ministry, this evangelical throwback had turned into a monster and a terrorist. She has turned her church members into tools to attack, destroy and terrorise any individual, group, government or gathering that opposes or criticises her activities. Recently, she sent police officers who raided the Center where child victims are kept in Eket in Akwa Ibom state. They beat up some of the children, injuring two of them.

In fact, Helen Ukpabio has transformed the Liberty Gospel Church into another Boko Haram in Calabar and is currently waging a vicious war against the Nigerian state, in particular the governments of Cross River and Akwa Ibom, or any individual or group working or campaigning to tackle and eradicate witchcraft-related abuses. That was why she could send her thugs to invade the conference in Calabar, attack the organisers in the presence of the representative of the Commissioner of Police and other representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations. The Nigerian authorities should take action against this moron and her terrorist group before it is too late. ■

Anti-vaxers get the point

Tim Mendham reports on the Anti – sorry, the Australian Vaccination Network’s feeling the sharp end of criticism.

The anti-vaccination brigade faced a trying few weeks in July and August, with campaigns waged on several fronts against their brand of scare-mongering and misinformation.

Early in August, the ironically titled Australian Vaccination Network (whose motto “Never inject them” indicates a less-than-pro-choice approach) was served with a complaint to the NSW Health Care Complaints Commission.

The complaint, authored by a concerned individual, was “not intended to enter into the debate about the risks and benefits or otherwise of vaccination or any particular vaccine. This complaint is intended to prove that the Australian Vaccination Network engages in misleading and deceptive conduct to dissuade people from vaccinating themselves and their children, and that consequently the AVN is a danger to public health and safety.”

The AVN was cited in the complaint on the grounds that it was a health care provider which, according to the 1993 Act that established the HCCC, included any person or organisation that provided community health service [“item f”], health education service [“item g”] and services provided in other alternative health care fields [“item k”].

Meryl Dorey, president of the AVN, reportedly told an ABC journalist that “We are not health professionals and we are not health educators so, at this point in time, we are an information service and I don’t believe that the HCCC has jurisdiction under [sic] us.” In line with the AVN’s usual standard of information, Ms Dorey also incorrectly attributed the HCCC complaint to Australian Skeptics – the complaint is clearly authored by Ken McLeod alone. Mr McLeod is a subscriber to *The Skeptic*,



but is not a member of any Skeptics committee nor an office bearer.

Australian Skeptics Inc was, however, responsible for an advertisement placed in *The Australian* newspaper on August 6, a few days after the HCCC complaint was lodged. The concurrence of these events was purely coincidental.

The placement of the advertisement was prompted by Dick Smith and paid for by his organisation, Dick Smith Foods. The text for it was prepared by a number of Australian Skeptics, and was based on an earlier information notice, as published in the previous issue of *The Skeptic* (see opposite for the most recent version of the advertisement).

At the same time, the Australian Skeptics issued a press release, which was subsequently picked up by a number of media outlets. Initially coverage was strongest in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, where the AVN is located (as well as the family of Dana McCaffery, the four-week-old baby who died of Whooping Cough earlier this year), but it then was increasingly covered by media in other areas.

Ms Dorey was apparently upset that Dick Smith, for whom she said she had “the greatest respect”, was involved

in the campaign. She suggested that he had been misled, and invited him – both on air and in later correspondence – to meet with her to discuss the issues.

Mr Smith responded to her entreaties to get together: “Whilst I appreciate your suggestion that we meet, the reality is that it is simply not possible for us to each hold ‘valid, scientifically-based opinions on the safety and effectiveness of vaccination’ given our widely differing views. One of us must be wrong!”

“My suggestion is that you talk to either the State Health Minister or the Federal Health Minister, and if you can convince one of them that your views are correct, I will become a supporter.

“By the way, rather than using the caption, ‘Empowering people to make informed choices’ on your website, why don’t you declare unambiguously that you take a position which is anti-vaccination? Readers of your magazine and other publications would also benefit by a similar statement of your position.

“I strongly uphold your right to propagate your beliefs, however I also take the view that those beliefs should be disseminated with appropriate transparency, particularly considering the vulnerability of parents when making important decisions in the welfare of their children.”

We will keep you informed of future developments. Regular updates can be found at the Skeptics’ newly redesigned website, www.skeptics.com.au.

For what it’s worth, the advertisement – which featured prominently in the newspaper – became a short-lived *cause célèbre* as supporters photographed themselves holding it. And for those who discussed it at great length, the font used at the top of the ad is Chalkboard Bold, and was chosen because it is an ad about kids, and because that font differentiated the ad from the serif faces used on the adjacent news story headlines ... very effectively. No-one missed it! Not even the AVN. ■

Immunisation GET THE FACTS

An Open Letter to the Parents of Australia

Immunisation is one of the greatest achievements of medical science. Since the humble observations about cowpox made by Edward Jenner in the 1700s, vaccination programs have saved millions of lives and dramatically decreased child mortality and suffering. Diseases such as smallpox are now consigned to history, while polio has virtually disappeared.

But sadly there are some people who are vehemently opposed to vaccinations. While they will tell you they are 'pro-choice' not 'anti-vaccination', their actions indicate otherwise – almost as if they want to remove your choice to have your children live in a disease-free society.

In Australia, the deceptively titled 'Australian Vaccination Network' (AVN) spreads misinformation about the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. They incorrectly claim that vaccines contain toxic quantities of heavy metals such as mercury as well as aluminium, anti-freeze and formaldehyde. Further, they will tell you that vaccines cause diseases such as autism, despite the fact that, as a result of concerted scientific research, a link between vaccines and autism has been unequivocally dismissed.

In addition to discouraging parents from vaccinating their children, the AVN provides incorrect information about the risks and complications from contracting childhood illnesses. They have stated that whooping cough is "just a bad cough" but in reality, children can suffer from collapsed lungs, cracked ribs, brain damage from lack of oxygen, convulsions, and about 1 in 200 will develop pneumonia and die. Even those who survive may have persistent symptoms.

Ultimately, the decision to vaccinate or not lies with you, the parent. Before you make your choice we urge you to seek out unbiased, accurate advice from reputable medical sources. The Australian Vaccination Network is no such source.

**Talk to your GP or visit these reliable sources
for vaccination information on the web**

Immunise Australia Program: www.immunise.health.gov.au

Australian Childhood Immunisation Register:
www.medicareaustralia.gov.au/public/services/acir/index.jsp

The Australian Immunisation Handbook:
www.immunise.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/Content/Handbook-home

Immunisation myths and realities – responding to arguments against immunisation:
www.health.gov.au/internet/immunise/publishing.nsf/content/uci-myths-guideprov

National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance: www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au

Quackwatch: www.quackwatch.org/03HealthPromotion/immu/immu00.html

Skeptics in



Eran Segev seemed to spend as much time partying as learning when he visited Las Vegas for the 7th – or was it the 8th – Amaz!ng Meeting.

The Amaz!ng Meeting 7 was held in the South Point Hotel in Las Vegas on July 9-12 2009, with more than 1000 skeptics from all over the world enjoying the largest networking opportunity the skeptical movement offers. They also enjoyed listening to talks about topics as varied as genetic research, science communication, magic and even failure by an impressive line of speakers, both from within the skeptical community and outside of it. Speakers included Jamy Ian Swiss, Michael Shermer, Joe Nickell, Penn & Teller, Steve Novella, Ray Hyman, Adam Savage, Harriet Hall, DJ Grothe, Phil Plait and many more.

And, of course, the list would not be complete (and the meeting wouldn't be Amaz!ng) without a few appearances by the truly Amazing James Randi. At

81 years of age and frail due to recent surgery, he looked and sounded just as full of fighting spirit as ever.

The formal part of the event started on Thursday afternoon, but the bars of the hotel were packed with skeptics as early as Wednesday morning, and continued to be so whenever there were no talks, and well into the early hours of each morning. A couple of years ago Randi described how Vegas event organisers were pleased to have such a large convention, only to get many hundreds of skeptics who don't gamble. While the gambling revenue from the 1000 skeptics at TAM7 was probably very small, the alcohol bill probably made up for that deficiency.

Between drinks, the main theme of the meeting was communication. Bill Prady, executive producer of the very

funny and very successful TV show *The Big Bang*

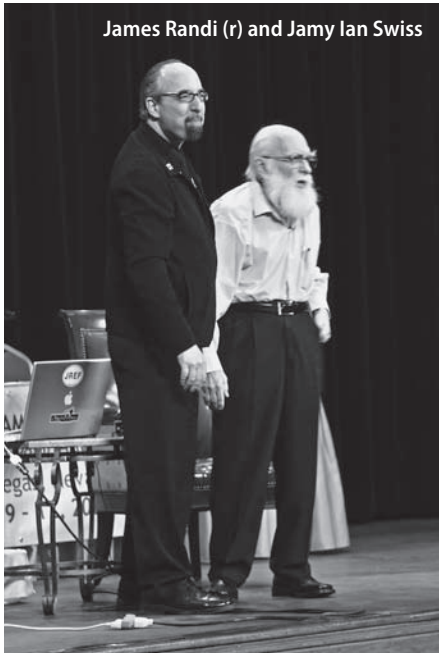
Theory, was the keynote speaker, and he spoke about portraying science and scientists in a program that is first and foremost about entertainment. The show is lucky to have UCLA physicist David Saltzberg as a consultant, and Prady gave a few examples of how his input not only ensures the science is accurate but also enhanced the story by providing an angle the writers wouldn't have thought of.

Jennifer Ouellette, a science writer and director of the newly established Science and Entertainment Exchange, spoke about her own experience of how scientists can help writers write more exciting stories while not straying too far from scientific reality.

Before Jennifer gave her talk, James Randi and Jamy Ian Swiss engaged in an on-stage conversation about Randi's history which was accompanied by videos of Randi performing feats of



Spot the Aussies - just some of the Australian contingent at TAM7, including Eran Segev and Richard Saunders hiding their light at rear on the right.



James Randi (r) and Jamy Ian Swiss

escape and participating in the Alice Cooper world tour.

An anti-anti-vax panel with Steve Novella, Joe Albiets, Harriett Hall and Michael Goudeau (juggler and executive producer of Penn & Teller's show *Bullshit!*) discussed the dangers of the anti-vaccination movement, their technique of using celebrities to enter the minds of the uncritical masses, and how they may be stopped. This panel was of particular interest to Australian Skeptics, as we were already in the midst of planning our own campaign against the equivalent groups in Australia.

Adam Savage, of *MythBusters* fame, gave a talk about failure. He gave two examples of cases where he had failed completely, in the process hurting people, losing friends and money, and disappointing himself and others. I was fortunate to later interview Adam for the *Skeptic Zone* podcast, and he explained that to him realising that you are fallible and not always right is at the core of being a skeptic.

More than a few tears were shed when Robert Lancaster, who created the stopsylva.com web site (among other things) and who is now in a wheelchair after suffering a stroke last year, came on stage to be awarded the First Annual Citizen Skeptic Award.

The evenings were marked by partying. On Friday, many skeptics attended the play *The Nigerian Spam Scam Scam* by and with Dean Cameron, which was followed by George Hrab with his selection of

The Amazing History of the Amazing Meetings

The Amazing Meeting 1

Jan 31-Feb 2, 2003
Renaissance Hotel
Ft Lauderdale, Florida

The Amazing Meeting 2

Jan 15-18, 2004
Tuscany Casino
Las Vegas

The Amazing Meeting 3

Jan 13-16, 2005
Stardust Casino
Las Vegas

The Amazing Meeting 4

Jan 26-29, 2006
Stardust Casino
Las Vegas

The Amazing Meeting 5

Jan 18-27, 2007
Riviera Casino and Resort
Las Vegas

The Amazing Meeting 5.5

Jan 25-27, 2008
Plantation Hotel
Plantation, Florida

The Amazing Meeting 6

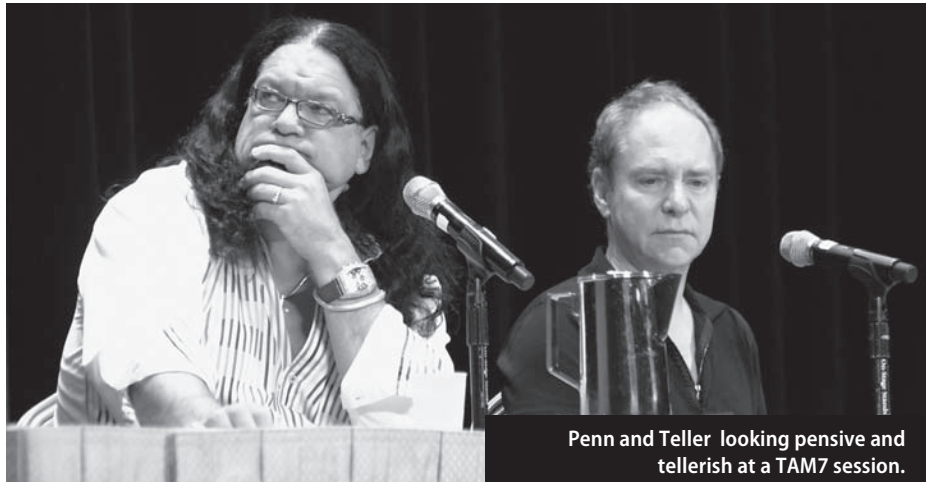
June 19-22, 2008
Las Vegas
(but which hotel?)

The Amazing Meeting 7

July 9-12, 2009
South Point Hotel
Las Vegas

The Amazing Meeting 8

July 8-11, 2010
South Point Hotel
Las Vegas



Penn and Teller looking pensive and tellerish at a TAM7 session.

songs for the chemical elements. On Saturday, a talent show MC'd by the ubiquitous Hrab and co-judged by our own Richard Saunders, successfully presented the case that skeptics might not be just a bunch of nerds who talk about science.

On Sunday afternoon, after the close of the formal proceedings of TAM, the JREF conducted its first public test for its Million Dollar Challenge. Danish woman Connie Sonne was tested to see whether she could – as she claimed – divine the location of cards sealed in envelopes using a pendulum. For Sonne to succeed she had to be correct in three out of three attempts. Unfortunately, she was incorrect in all three attempts. About 500 spectators in the main hall were so quiet that the thousands of people who watched the test as it was streamed live on the internet thought there was no audience; no-one wanted to give Ms Sonne an

excuse in case she failed.

One additional surprise awaited those who woke up early enough on Saturday morning to be present at the second live recording of the *Skeptics Guide to the Universe* podcast. While taking questions from the audience, one Sid Rodriguez from London Skeptics proposed to Rebecca Watson, who feigned surprise. Within a few minutes the stage was set for a wedding with a bridal party, the bride's family, a celebrant, a cake and a cameo by Adam Savage who provided the rings. That's Vegas for you!

Despite the name, this was the 8th Amazing Meeting, and it was easy to tell that the JREF staff knew what they were doing. Organising an event with so many speakers, events and attendees with so few hitches is a remarkable achievement. But beyond anything else, it was a lot of fun, and I can't wait to attend next year's meeting. ■

BUNKER AT WORK

Michael Wolloghan interviews one of the leading lights in the world of Scientology investigators – Mark Bunker, the Wise Beard Man

Scientology has certainly been feeling the heat recently. Allegations of civil rights abuses, criminal conduct and financial fraud constantly plague the controversial religion. Currently, in both Belgium and France, the Church of Scientology is being criminally prosecuted. In Germany, Scientology is perceived by the government as a dangerous totalitarian group. Global pickets and protests against the movement passionately continue. Is the final decline and fall of this ‘religion’ imminent?

Mark Bunker, an acclaimed Emmy winning TV journalist and founder of XenuTV.com is one of the best known critics of Scientology. Affectionately nicknamed ‘Wise Beard Man’, Bunker has been reporting, researching and responding to the problems posed by this controversial group.

His invaluable websites and ongoing efforts help educate people all over the world about the disturbing nature of this group. It was my great pleasure to interview Mark Bunker about his past, his future and some recent developments about Scientology.

Q *Firstly, when and why did you become a critic of Scientology?*

A In 1998, I was living in a home in the Los Feliz hills area of Los Angeles and the woman who lived there before me was a Scientologist. She apparently skipped town without giving Scientology a forwarding address

so I kept getting her junk mail. I’d be reading through various Scientology magazines, filled with all sorts of Scientology jargon. It all seemed rather silly.

I remembered the shows 60 Minutes did in the 1980s about Scientology attacking former members and critics like Paulette Cooper and about the takeover of Clearwater, Florida. I had found those shows to be amazing but at the time, there wasn’t any place else to go for further info. Now, I could hop on this new thing called the internet and do a search.

The first thing I discovered was OTIII and the story of Xenu, the intergalactic overlord who blew us up in volcanoes 75 million years ago, causing all of our problems. Well, that’s good for a chuckle so I kept researching and found out about the various crimes of Scientology such as Operation Snow White which sent Hubbard’s wife and ten other top Scientology officials to prison.

The more I read, the more I was fascinated. I started dropping by their buildings. I went to the Celebrity Center, took the personality test, played with an e-meter and watched their uproariously bad Orientation video. I visited the L. Ron Hubbard Life Exhibition on Hollywood Blvd with its audio-animatronics figures of Terl and Johnny Goodboy Tyler reenacting a scene from Battlefield Earth. It’s like a Disneyland of Lies and a must see when in Hollywood.

And I started reading the newsgroup

alt.religion.scientology where critics and former members shared stories, documents and more. I saw that people were taking to the streets and protesting against Scientology but I didn’t have the nerve to do that myself.

What I did have was video editing equipment, which at the time was fairly rare. So I started capturing video of TV broadcasts about Scientology, converting them to the first workable streaming video standard for the net, RealPlayer, and sending them to other people to put on their sites. Next, people started sending me the videos they shot at pickets and I would edit those together for the web adding my narration.

Then critics Bob Minton and Stacy Brooks announced they were joining the board of FACTnet, a website which was being sued by Scientology for releasing copyrighted Scientology material. Bob and Stacy negotiated with Scientology’s attorneys and kept the website running. I emailed them my support and told them I’d be happy to help in any way I could with video stuff. Almost as soon as I sent the email, they called me and invited me to a cult convention in Stamford, Connecticut. I met them and was supplied with a better camera and editing setup and devoted most of my spare time in 1999 to shooting video about Scientology and getting it onto the web.

Before long, two Scientologists came to my house to picket me. I decided then, since they knew who I was, I might as well start my own website



Mark Bunker, TV journalist and Scientology investigator

which is how XENU TV came about.

In December of 1999, I moved to Clearwater, Florida and lived there for two years working for Bob and Stacy at the Lisa McPherson Trust right down the block from Scientology's headquarters. It was the most fascinating time of my life.

After the Trust closed, I moved back to California and I've been working in TV news and have had far less time to devote to Scientology.

Q *What are your three main concerns about Scientology?*

A I don't like bullies, and Scientology has thrived for decades by intimidating former members, critics and the press. They've used the courts, as Hubbard commanded, not just to win but to destroy. However, they've finally met their match in the internet. This is an enemy they can't frighten, and a fight they can't win.

I don't like fraud, especially religious-based fraud from TV preachers or cult leaders, exploiting people often at their most vulnerable moments in life.

I don't like the abuses built into Scientology such as disconnection, forced abortions, billion year service contracts, the Rehabilitation Project Force [set up to rehabilitate members who had violated or not lived up to

'Church' expectations] and so on. All of these abuses are meant to keep the organisation moving with little concern about the impact on the members being hurt.

Q *What are your thoughts on the controversial founder of the 'religion', L. Ron Hubbard?*

A Hubbard was a tubby, lunatic charlatan. All you need to know about Hubbard you can read in his Admissions, at www.lermanet.com/reference/Admissions.pdf.

He lied about virtually every aspect of his life and Scientology continues those lies. They say he used his vast fortune as a pulp writer to finance his research into the human mind but Hubbard wrote for a penny a word and came out of the war a pauper, begging for help from the Veterans' Administration for extra money in his pension and seeking psychiatric care. The documents are all on the web - www.spaink.net/cos/LRH-bio/lrhpaper.htm.

He cobbled Dianetics together from the works of others and was astonished to see he had an audience he could bilk when it got published. Here was the first money he ever made and he was not about to let it end. He skipped out on partner after partner, letting the people who believed in him holding the bills as he hop-scotched across the country, staying one step ahead of the law.

In 1953 he turned Dianetics into the religion of Scientology for tax purposes and as a shield from the law. It was the smartest move he ever made. That single move has given Scientology the protection it needed to exist through all its various scandals. As he cabled a partner in an early 50s telegram, "How's it going on the religion angle? If we can get it approved, I know I can make it stick." Stick it did.

He had a string of failed marriages and let his last wife take the fall for him as he hid from the law in the desert, never once writing or calling her while she sat in prison for his crimes against the government. Yet he claimed to have the perfect 'tech' on marriage.

He had one son who committed

suicide because he was gay, and Dad and his church didn't approve. Another son denounced him in court testimony and changed his name to avoid the stigma of being L. Ron Hubbard Jr, yet Hubbard claimed he had the perfect 'tech' on raising kids.

If Hubbard's tech didn't work for him, why would it work for anyone else?

Ultimately, he was a power-mad egomaniac who exploited and abused people who worshiped him as a god. How he could live with himself, I don't know.

Q *The Church of Scientology is known to intimidate and threaten critics – can you cite examples of this happening to you?*

A I've been followed by private investigators, and I've been arrested twice. Once I stood trial in Chicago for 'trespassing' on a public sidewalk as I tried to interview two dentists defrauded by Scientology. A jury found me not guilty in 25 minutes, and the dentists got \$100,000 back from Scientology (www.xenutv.com/blog/?cat=225).

The other arrest was a citizen's arrest by Scientology's PR woman. It was quickly dropped by the DA for being groundless (www.xenutv.wordpress.com/2009/02/24/how-was-your-day and www.xenutv.com/blog/?p=1663).

Oh, and a guy came after me with a hammer (www.xenutv.com/blog/?cat=192).

I've seen my friends hounded and dragged into court, testified on some of their behalves and watched a global campaign of intimidation run against Bob Minton (www.xenutv.com/blog/?page_id=39).

Q *Since 2008, there have been successive world-wide protests and pickets of the Churches of Scientology by 'Anonymous'. What impact do you think they have had?*

A They've had an enormous impact. They have given former members the courage to come forward and tell their stories and the press the courage to cover Scientology more aggressively again.

BUNKER AT WORK *Continued...*

I don't think it's any accident that more people are speaking up, more lawsuits are being launched against Scientology and more former execs are coming forward to speak.

It just takes one person with a picket sign to shut down an entire Scientology Org. I've heard from people who were members in Clearwater during the Trust years. They have told me what it was like to be barricaded in the buildings by management because they were afraid someone might hear what we had to say. It made the staff question why Scientology management couldn't handle this problem. Why are the most powerful people on the planet, fueled by Hubbard's perfect tech, unable to confront a single person with a sign?

Now there are people in front of almost every Org on the planet. And videos flooding YouTube. And more and more terrific websites being built every day.

The internet is here. Time for David Miscavige to pack his bags.

Q *The St Petersburg Times recently did a special report on Scientology. In the report ex-church executives alleged that Scientology leader David Miscavige physically beat his staff members. What effects do you think this report had?*

A If it is not yet the journalistic equivalent of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, then at least it has created a massive series of cracks that have made that wall unstable. David Miscavige was damaged enormously by those articles and his reign may well soon come to an end. I hear there are more threats to that wall's stability coming soon but I have no details.

The Scientology public was ordered not to read those articles but they didn't listen. Hubbard was beloved by his followers because he gave them "the tech." Miscavige does not have their affection. The more they see Miscavige has hurt the organisation, the harder it will be for him to keep control.

Perhaps someone new can actually reform Scientology and stop the lies and abuses. We will never get reform from Miscavige. People who practice Scientology outside the Orgs in the [independent]Freezone believe the same stuff as those who are inside but they do so without the abuses.

No one has any problem with the Freezone, except David Miscavige.

Q *The US government opposes global terrorism but do you think it will do anything about the domestic conduct of Scientology?*

A Nope. I've about given up hope. We've got too many very serious problems to tackle right now. We've got to fix the economy, get out of two wars, fix health care; move to clean energy ... Scientology is not

on the government's radar.

But it's on my radar. And it's on Anonymous' radar. And everyone else who has stood up to be counted with or without a Guy Fawkes mask. The net is going to do what the government won't. We're going to give people facts, we're going to expose lies and stop abuses and give people a voice who didn't think anyone would care about how their families were torn apart or their bank accounts emptied. And we're not going away.

Q *What does the future hold for Mark Bunker and Xenu TV?*

A The site will be finally fully revamped for this 10th anniversary year. It's almost ready to debut. The next step I've talked about for a long time, but I feel certain a feature film will happen someday soon.

After that, who knows?

I have been thinking about moving back to Clearwater at some point. I had the great honour of meeting and getting to know the late Mayor Gabe Cazares who fearlessly took on Scientology when they snuck into his town in the 1970s.

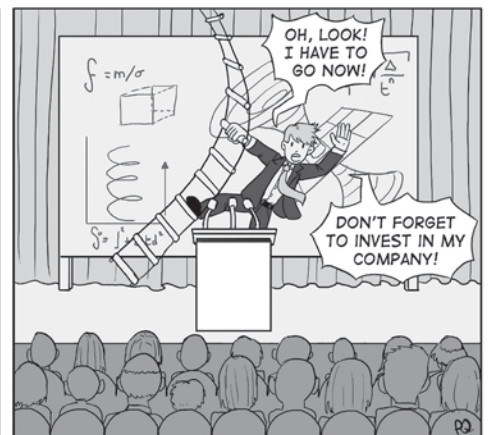
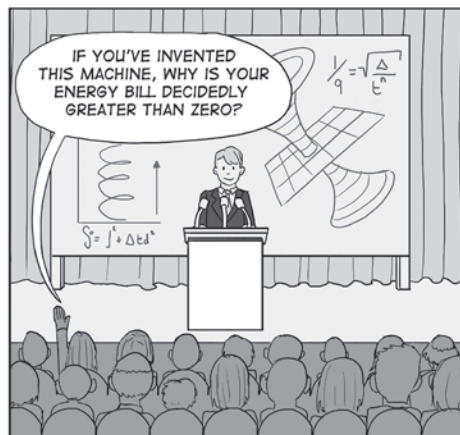
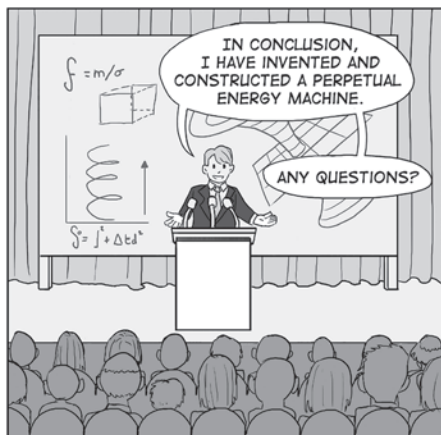
Mayor Bunker. I kind of like the sound of that. ■



About the interviewer

Michael Wolloghan is a member of the NSW committee of Australian Skeptics, a reporter for The Skeptic Zone podcast and an investigator of cults and strange religions.

QUIMBY'S QUILL



Seeking the SYDNEY

Bret Christian reveals how the mystery of Australia's greatest maritime disaster could have been solved years ago, if only we hadn't trusted the paranormal.

When Australia's greatest maritime mystery was solved last year with the discovery and exploration of two wartime shipwrecks, few people realised that the long search had previously been derailed and tragically delayed by paranormal claims.

The discovery off the Western Australian coast of the wrecks of *HMAS Sydney* and the German raider that sank her, *HSK Kormoran*, brought a measure of peace to hundreds, if not thousands, of grieving relatives of Australian and German servicemen who sacrificed their lives all those years ago. But psychic mumbo-jumbo, pseudo science and poor historical research that for many years drowned out rigorous scientific work, conspired to increase the grief of relatives left behind.

A criticism of the work of Skeptics is that we make an unnecessary fuss over what is, after all, just a bit of harmless fun. But the pages of *The Skeptic* reveal the untold grief clairvoyants, paranormalists and their ilk have brought to the families and victims of all

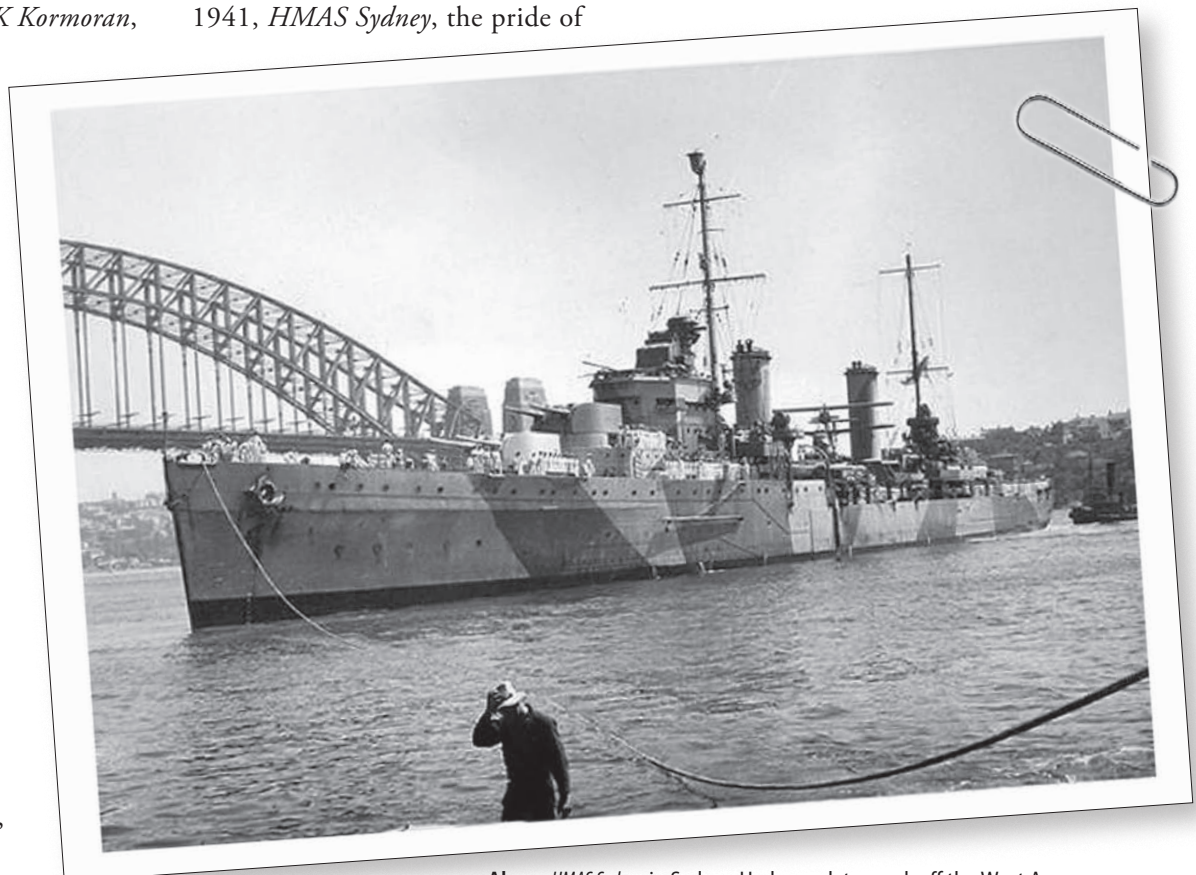
sorts of pseudoscientific claims.

More unnecessary grief – all of ten years worth – was caused by belief in the paranormal as various individuals and groups wrestled with the problem of where the *HMAS Sydney* and the *HSK Kormoran* sank during World War II.

More than 26 books have been dedicated to the mystery, with more in the works. On November 19, 1941, *HMAS Sydney*, the pride of

Australia's warship fleet, was sunk off the West Australian coast in a surprise attack by the German warship. *Kormoran* was a converted freighter, armed to the teeth, disguised as the neutral Dutch ship *Straat Malacca*. The two ships fought each-other to a standstill 120 nautical miles west of isolated Shark Bay.

HMAS Sydney was based in Fremantle, but her crew of 645



Above *HMAS Sydney* in Sydney Harbour - later sunk off the West Australian coast, November 19, 1941

Seeking the Sydney *Continued...*

was drawn from virtually every city and large town and country area in Australia. The loss of each sailor and airman, for she carried a seaplane crewed by RAAF personnel, spread in shock waves through each man's home town.

The unimaginable sinking of the *Sydney*, pride of our World War II fleet, sparked a round of speculation that has lasted until now.

There is plenty of evidence that the mystery of what befell the *Sydney* has plagued the surviving relatives ever since the vessel went down. No more so than the widows and fiancées, young women who, in the heat of whirlwind wartime romances, married or promised to marry sailors from *HMAS Sydney*.

Typical was Betty Bell, a nurse at Royal Perth Hospital who married Fred Schoch, an officer engineer from the *Sydney*. The ceremony at her local church, followed by a sitting for a single photo, took place just days before Fred's ship sailed from Fremantle on its final voyage.

Although Betty re-married after the war, her anguish at not knowing what had really happened to her first husband's ship or where it rested was palpable. Her greatest wish, repeated over and over again, was that the ship be found in her lifetime so that her mind could be set at rest.

On March 17 last year, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that the wreck of *HMAS Sydney* had been located. There was unbridled joy mixed with waves of sadness for those who had been waiting, and anticipation about the truths the wreck would reveal.

What just a handful of people in Western Australia knew at the time was that the discovery could easily have been made at least 10 years earlier, had it not been for some wacky paranormal claims, coupled with questionable historical research. In that 10 year interval, many of those waiting so fervently for

answers to their questions and fears had died.

EFFORTS THWARTED

Back in 1991, a group of men met in a Perth coffee shop and discussed all the unsuccessful efforts that had been made to locate the wreck of *HMAS Sydney*. They decided to have one last serious crack at the job themselves, figuring that theirs might be the last generation to care enough. After all, the *Titanic* had been located 4000 metres below the ocean's surface using 1985 technology, and it was at almost twice the depth that the *Sydney* was eventually found.

“ Psychic mumbo-jumbo, pseudoscience and poor historical research drowned out rigorous scientific work ”

One man at that coffee morning was Ted Graham, a marine surveyor with a deep interest in maritime history. Another was Kim Kirsner, a professor of cognitive science at the University of Western Australia. Also present was Sam Hughes, a search and rescue expert. Their quest was ultimately successful.

Using the technique of hind-casting and Hughes' expertise, the group, armed with records of recovered flotsam, attempted to track the floating material back to its points of origin – the two sinkings. Debris such as life jackets, life rafts and a dog's kennel had been picked up by allied ships searching for survivors after the battle, and their co-ordinates and time of retrieval were recorded.

Working on records and estimates of currents, wind strength and direction at the time, the points of origin of the flotsam were calculated. But the researchers worried that small inaccuracies in the source data could throw the conclusions off by many nautical miles. Nevertheless, a general area about 120 nautical miles off Shark Bay was identified.

Meanwhile, Kirsner and Associate Professor John Dunn were utilising cognitive science, applying mathematical tests to the 100 plus statements and written reports of the battle given by the surviving Germans from the *Kormoran*.

Key questions were: Who on the German ship was in a position to witness the battle? Who knew the correct co-ordinates of the battle? Did they recall the positions correctly? Were they doing their best to tell the truth?

Crew-members had been interrogated by Australian intelligence officers at the first opportunity after making their way to shore in lifeboats or being picked up at sea by search ships. The two researchers found that a core group of 10 carried more information as a group than they did individually. By analysing the language they used and cross-checking various statements made during and well after the war, some vital information was revealed.

More importantly, the scientists were able to conclude that the normally secretive Captain Detmers, master of the *Kormoran*, had shared with his crew after the battle the most accurate co-ordinates that he knew for their sinking ship. At that stage, the *Kormoran* was all but gone, mortally wounded by shellfire from the *Sydney*, and the Germans were in a perilous situation, far from land in the open sea in overloaded life-boats and rafts. Knowledge of their location was essential to their survival.

An extraordinarily diverse number of statements from the *Kormoran* personnel, with errors eliminated, and complex mathematical models applied, added up to a remarkably consistent location for the battle. Far from being a search for a needle in a haystack where the location of the haystack was unknown, as was later claimed, a relatively small 'search box' was identified.

The information approximately cross-checked with the earlier hind-casting work.

By 1997, the original volunteers who formed the core of what would

later became known as the Finding Sydney Foundation had narrowed the search to the point where a relatively inexpensive search at that time would have located both wrecks. By the early 2000s, they had virtually pinpointed the *Kormoran*.

But could they persuade the Navy or the Australian government to use its survey ships to take a look? Not a chance. Psychic forces were at work to derail a successful search.

THE WRONG PLACE

The complication was that the Navy had already looked in the wrong places, fully 200 nautical miles (370km) away. The Navy had been badly led astray by a combination of pseudo-science and an unscientific mis-reading of so-called eye-witness accounts of the battle from land. One of these leads was given by a man named Warren Whittaker.

“Warren Whittaker is one of those extraordinary people with lots of charisma, who speaks beautifully, dresses beautifully and has a wonderful history,” Dr Michael McCarthy informed the Cole inquiry into the sinking of *HMAS Sydney* during its sittings in Perth in February this year.

McCarthy, curator of maritime archeology at the Western Australian Maritime Museum, is responsible for shipwrecks off the WA coast. He has been filtering information and diplomatically fielding an eclectic and often difficult group of amateur and professional *Sydney* enthusiasts since the early 1980s. The Cole Commission regarded him as a valuable expert witness.

Warren Whittaker had been an RAAF navigator, and he held a belief in map dowsing. The dowser in question was his friend Lindsay Knight, who waved his hand over a map of the seas off the West Australian coast, identifying, he said, the position of the *Kormoran* when it had been on the surface.

Whittaker had said: “I am satisfied that the map dowsed positions are an excellent guide to locate the existence and approximate positions of these

wrecks.”

Knight took to the air in a light aircraft to pinpoint the wrecks using his own invention, a black box powered by torch batteries, that he supported on his lap while criss-crossing his dowsed search area. From the little Cessna flying at 1000 feet, he claimed not only to have found shipwrecks, but said he could see samurai swords and human bones.

The ‘discoveries’ made front page news, and the reaction of bereaved relatives of the lost *Sydney*’s crewmen can well be imagined.

McCarthy was forced to go public with scientific evidence from University of Western Australia physicist Andrew Lockwood, who said that to penetrate 2000 metres of salt water, the low-powered black box would have to emit so much energy that it would certainly expose anything on the ocean floor – it would have boiled the ocean dry. Not to mention what it would have done to



Above The Waiting Woman - a statue of a wife or mother gazes out to sea, part of the *HMAS Sydney* memorial at Geraldton, Western Australia

Mr Knight’s reproductive system.

That large numbers of people continued to believe this nonsense in the face of the contrary evidence is testament to the appetite by some for pseudoscience. The damage was done. The focus of the search had been shifted to the wrong area, 200 nautical miles south of where the two wrecks were finally found last year.

Many otherwise sensible people, desperate for the wreck to be located, continued to cling to the belief that there must be something in the dowsing and black box sonar claims. They called themselves the ‘southerners’ – passionate and immovable believers in a southern location for the famous battle

Enter Glenys McDonald, another powerful personality and an amateur historian who interviewed war-time residents of the tiny fishing hamlet of Port Gregory, also near the southern location. Her witnesses claimed to have seen and heard flashes, gunfire and explosions out to sea, at a time which the author said coincided with the *Sydney-Kormoran* battle.

Her location also coincided roughly with the Knight-Whittaker site. The eye-witness accounts, as reported in McDonald’s book on the *Sydney* sinking, seemed compelling.

McDonald had a direct line to Navy personnel and her erroneous research was reinforced in the public mind when she starred in a mid-1990s half hour ABC documentary about the Port Gregory sightings.

But as the subsequent discovery of the wrecks confirmed, it would have been impossible to see or hear anything of the battle from Port Gregory. It was well over the horizon and far, far away.

Despite the Navy being told of the ocean-boiling opinion of Andrew Lockwood, and its failure to confirm the McDonald research, Whittaker’s navigation arguments were now accepted.

The armed service mounted two secret and expensive searches in the wrong area in the early 2000s. One was by an Orion aircraft flown from Queensland, and the Navy launched

Seeking the Sydney *Continued...*

searches in the area using two mine-hunters equipped with sophisticated sonar gear.

This was despite the fact that the Navy had collected evidence itself, along with RAAF intelligence officers, from the German survivors 60 years earlier. These interrogation results pointed to a totally different area.

The searchers came back empty-handed, having wasted around \$1 million.

Glenys McDonald dismissed her critics. The believers continued to believe, some going so far as to suggest that the Navy had found the *Sydney* but was keeping its location secret.

Apart from the cost, the effect of all this waste was to derail any proper search that could easily have located the ships.

By that time Kirsner and his colleague Dunn had further refined their work and come up with what turned out to be a bullseye, given the vast expanse of ocean.

But it was too late. The wrecks were not to be located and photographed until 2008, years after cognitive science had pinpointed their correct positions.

In contrast to the hit and miss methods of amateur searchers, the academic work was done using scientific methodology. Kirsner and Dunn minutely examined the recollections of the German crew members from the times they were most likely to recall accurately – closest to the event. They also had to determine whether some or all of the Germans were attempting to deceive their interrogators.

Kirsner concluded that what the sincere but incorrect Port Gregory witnesses had seen was a documented series of United States Navy and Air Force exercises off the coast five months after the *Sydney-Kormoran* battle, and possibly some electrical storms. In contrast, the German survivors were seafarers operating within their domain or zone of knowledge. They had the

within reach of a search at that date. By 2004 they had narrowed the search area to within three nautical miles of where the *Kormoran* was eventually found.

But the Navy and the government had been burnt by the expensive wild goose chases influenced by the map dowsers, black-box operators and the faulty recollections of the Port Gregory residents.

Oddly, the Kirsner-Dunn research was used in successful applications for funds to mount the final physical search. But the Howard government would not sanction and fund a search without the endorsement of the Navy, and the Navy, after its previous experience, wanted the credibility of an outside expert. The years ticked by.

ENTER THE WRECK-HUNTER

The authorities settled on David Mearns, an American wreck-hunter who had acquired a worldwide reputation for locating and photographing up to 50 shipwrecks.

He met the Finding Sydney Foundation members in 2004, and Kirsner shared with him his up-to-date conclusions. Mearns commenced his own research, relying heavily on the records of the *Kormoran*'s captain, Theodore Detmers.

But Captain Detmers was the most unreliable source,

Kirsner says. Six different positions are attributed to him, but Mearns, hired by the Finding Sydney Foundation and funded by the federal government to the tune of \$5 million to find the ship, felt the captain held the key.

Mearns said that 'ground zero' for the correct search was a coded diary recorded by Detmers in a prison camp at Warburton in Victoria.

Kirsner says there is a *prima facie*



Kim Kirsner, professor of cognitive science at the University of Western Australia

best motive – survival – for accurately recalling their position of origin.

The researchers concluded that the German survivors' statements were inconsistent with their rehearsing a single fictitious position.

But the Finding Sydney Foundation had to struggle to get government funding to search the spot they had identified. By 1998 this was just 10 nautical miles from the *Kormoran*, well

case that Detmers and the ship's navigator, Myers, were the only two survivors to deliberately provide false information – wrong positions perpetuated in the Detmers diary.

A phenomenon known as the “great man in history” induced both Mearns and Glenys McDonald to ignore a great wealth of information from other people in a position to know, Kirsner said in a submission to the Cole Commission. The “great man” theory led Mearns to focus on Detmers, an approach that led to Mearns identifying an inefficient search box of 1600 square nautical miles, at a budgeted search cost of \$5 million, Prof Kirsner's submission said.

The Kirsner-Dunn search box was 400 square nautical miles.

It was common ground that the shortest cut to finding the *Sydney* was to locate the *Kormoran* first, then look for the *Sydney* nearby. The Germans said their last view of the *Sydney* was of the Australian ship, stricken and on fire, steaming slowly to the south-east before it suddenly disappeared. The Germans' own burning ship drifted north before its captain used timed explosives to blow it up.

In March 2008, Mearns, after allocating a month for the sub-sea search, extended his search box to include the search box advocated by Kirsner and Dunn, the Cole Commission submission says. Mearns and the Finding Sydney Foundation team aboard the *SV Geosounder* started their search in this area and found the wreck of the *Kormoran* in 64 hours. It was just three nautical miles from where the cognitive scientists said it would be – a bullseye.

The wreck of *HMAS Sydney* was found 12 nautical miles to the south-east, just where it was expected to be found, after just a further 67 hours of searching.

HMAS Sydney is sitting upright and is remarkably well-preserved, under incredibly high pressure but subject to no light and little oxygen. There is no possibility of bones remaining except in the unlikely event they are in some sort of preservative, such as mud. But unfortunately we will never know – both ships are war graves and can

be photographed externally but not disturbed.

Most of the *Sydney's* crew would have gone down with the suddenly sinking ship, naval experts have concluded after the wreck was located. The rest would have had no chance of survival, and no signs would be left of the bodies of the few on deck who survived the battle.

For professors Kirsner and Dunn, it was a sad but satisfying and extremely rare opportunity to prove that cognitive science works in real life situations, outside the laboratory. They started with a genuinely unknown location for the wrecks, plus a mess of conflicting evidence and theories. By applying their scientific expertise they winnowed the evidence until they came up with the correct answer – one that has now been absolutely verified.

As recently as February this year, in

“ The Navy had been burnt by the wild goose chases influenced by the map dowers and black-box operators ”

evidence before the Cole Commission, Fremantle Maritime Museum's Dr McCarthy acknowledged their work and lamented the delays and the lost opportunities. Had the nation been predisposed to believe the Germans, said Dr McCarthy, and taken more notice of the locations provided by Kim Kirsner and John Dunn, “David Mearns would have had the smallest search box in his illustrious career.”

The Commission's final report, released in August, accepted the German account of the battle.

No-one regretted those delays more than Betty Bell. She had continued to follow the accelerating search for the wreck with increasing anticipation.

“I don't know any wreck that has left such a legacy of pain,” she said in 2007, a few months before *HMAS Sydney* was located. “The longer we have been kept in the dark, the more hurtful it has become.”

Admitted to hospital with a routine ailment a week before her 88th birthday, and after nearly a lifetime of waiting, Betty Bell told her friend and *HMAS Sydney* researcher John Doohan of her growing excitement as she read that preparations for the physical search for the *Sydney* were reaching its final stages. She said: ‘John, we're getting close to the truth. It won't be long now.’

The next day she died unexpectedly, one more relative whose wish was unfulfilled. ■

References

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About the author

Bret Christian is proprietor, publisher and founding editor of the *POST* suburban newspapers in Perth, Western Australia.



The NICKELL approach

Richard Saunders interviews one of scepticism's leading investigators – from the Shroud of Turin to the Ripper's diary, Joe Nickell has been there.

Joe Nickell has been called “the modern Sherlock Holmes,” the “real-life Scully” (from the *X-Files*), among other appellations. He is well into his fourth decade as an investigator of historical, paranormal and forensic mysteries, myths and hoaxes. In contrast to mystery-mongers on the one hand and so-called debunkers on the other, he believes that mysteries should be actively investigated with a view toward solving them. Richard Saunders interviewed Nickell for *The Skeptic Zone* at the recent The Amazing Meeting – TAM 7 – in Las Vegas.

Q *You've gone to amazing places around the world to do your investigations of claims of the paranormal, including Australia.*

A Yes, great, great time in 2000 in Australia and travelled around trying to eat one of each of your animals and investigating such mysteries as the Mahogany Ship and spiritualism and the fabled Yowie and other mysteries and had just the best time and hope to be invited back. But I've also been to South America, to Brazil and to Argentina, to Peru, so I've travelled quite extensively throughout North America, Europe, part of Asia, North Africa.

Q *I was at your talk yesterday, which was very well received, about what you do and your philosophy and your approach. You had some very good advice, especially for the younger skeptics out there, or the less experienced might*

we say, because as you and I both know a lot of people out there call themselves skeptics, but they're simply nay-sayers, which does our side of the equation no end of damage, doesn't it?

A Yes it does, if we're going to fault the so-called true believers for beginning with the answer and working backward to the evidence, we have to be equally critical of skeptics doing the same thing. We must not start with the answer that we like or believe and then look for the evidence. We need to first be looking for good evidence in a case and then letting that evidence lead us to an answer and then believe that whether we like it or not. The skeptic who dismisses ghosts or monsters is probably more likely to be correct than the true believer who readily embraces them, but it's really a dishonest habit of mind to dismiss something in advance of inquiring into it.

You might say, “How many haunted houses do you have to go into before you realise there aren't any ghosts there?” I would phrase the question a little differently. I would say, “The question whether there are ghosts or aren't, that might be a reasonable attitude, but I don't think that's the question.” And people look at me like, “You've lost your mind, of course that's the issue, are there ghosts or are there are not?” and I say, “No, for me the issue is do people in huge numbers believe there are ghosts?” Well, yes they do. Well then, if that's the case it behoves us to pay attention to that issue and if they have some mystery that concerns them we should try to explain

it, not just dismiss it. Otherwise, why are we bothering at all?

So I'm inclined to think that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. If there's a haunted house, a Bigfoot report or flying saucer that's getting a lot of attention, then I say, “Okay, let's give it some Skeptical attention.” Let's not just hoot at it, or dismiss it, or make fun of people. No, if there's a question, if it's an easy question to solve, well then by all means let us rush right in and solve it.

Even if we're not sure what's going on, if it's rather puzzling and we've not seen something quite like it – yes, maybe we don't think it's a miracle or we don't think it's a ghost, but let's just set that aside – the issue is: What is it? What's causing that phenomenon? And once we explain it, I'm confident that if we can actually explain the mystery, any needed debunking will take care of itself.

Q *Yes, sort of automatically, more or less ...*

A You don't have to set out to debunk.

Q *A lot of people – and I've certainly encountered this – when you come along to investigate or whatever, a lot of people have their minds made up about you before you set your foot in the door. “This man, this Mr Skeptic is coming here to ...”*

A To debunk.

Q *To debunk. To say, “I don't care what you say, I know this isn't real. I'm gonna prove it to you that that's not*

real.” Now I’m happy to say that in your case, and I try in my case, to show that that’s not true. We really do go in with “Well, let’s see what’s happening here”, but I’m sure it’s hard to get that through to people. Have you found that?

A Absolutely. It’s very difficult. People have their sense of things and it’s very hard to convince them otherwise, but I think when we skeptics are at our best we do listen and we look for the best evidence and we let that evidence lead us to an answer and that – when we can – we respect people. That’s not to say that the fraud artist, the phony, I won’t kick in the teeth. I will.

Q *But you don’t like using the word “fraud”, especially.*

A We know fraud exists and we know there’s fraud in the paranormal in specific cases. But we have to be careful about using the word “fraud” because historically, you know, there were cases where a skeptic would accuse a fortune teller of being a fraud. Well, what he meant was, maybe, “I don’t think she can really tell fortunes, and so she’s not genuine.” But that’s not what fraud means in law. It means deliberately and knowingly being deceptive for the purpose of money, and a lot of fortune tellers may sincerely believe that they have special powers.

Q *That’s my take. The angle I take is that most of them I’ve encountered, judging by my ability, are sincere.*

A They are sincere. I joke sometimes, I’ll say there are two types of psychics. Those who have no psychic power but who believe they do, and we call them ‘fantasiers’. The other type also has no psychic power. They know they don’t and we call them, you know, charlatans. But knowing which is which is not so glib, is not so easy to say.

Q *Absolutely, no.*

A I’m not a human lie detector, so whenever I can I give people the benefit of the doubt. It’s much more useful for us, rather than trying to show what’s in that person’s mind, we say: “Look, I can

show you they are not psychic or they’re not seeing the future.”

That’s why sometimes, as you know, I wear disguises or I create false personas, and if the person is unable to penetrate my falsehood then I can see they’re not very psychic. They should be saying, “Oh, I’m getting bad vibes here. I’m seeing the name ‘Nickell’. I’m ...”, and so forth. But in fact when they buy my persona and start giving me readings that would apply to the false persona and not the real me I know that they’re not really psychic.

Now, I may not know that they’re deliberately trying to hoodwink me, but that doesn’t really matter. The main thing is to show that they’re not successful.

I’ve spent much of my life going to fortune tellers from the sixties to today – certainly forty years of doing this – and for me, now, one of the poignant things I’m looking back on with all this is in 2003 I learned I had, all these years from 1967, I had a daughter I didn’t know about, and not one fortune teller, astrologer, psychic, diviner, clairvoyant, not one of them ever said, “You know, you need to be aware that you have a daughter you don’t know about and her name is ‘such and such’ and she is ‘so and so’.”

Wouldn’t that have been wonderful! And wouldn’t that have been convincing? No, they didn’t know it because I didn’t know it. They know what you know. And they’re cleverly able to fish out information and interpret it and get you to play that game, and they may not do it shrewdly and deceptively, they may believe, and they say a lot of things and some of it sticks.

Q *When you say they cleverly do it, I agree. There are some out there I’ve seen myself who can do it very cleverly. But I must say there are a lot of psychics, or fortune tellers or what have you, who do it in a very clumsy manner but still get good results.*

A They do. I remember once a psychic that my old colleague Dr Robert Baker and I investigated. Robert’s now passed on, but he was a great ghost hunter and skeptic. We did a book together, and we were great friends and colleagues

for many years. We had decided on this particular psychic who was getting a lot of attention in our area and we thought, “Well, we’ll just take him out to lunch some day if he’ll agree to go out with us, buy him a nice lunch and chat with him.” So we thought that was a great idea, and the psychic agreed, and we took him out, had a nice lunch, and nice conversation, and I asked the psychic at one point, I said, “Would you be willing to have your abilities tested?” “Oh, no,” he said, “I don’t test well.”

Well, I mean, without being impolite, I sort of smiled and I said, “But you see the problem now, because if you say you don’t test well then I’m going have to ask why you think you’re a psychic.” In other words, if you can’t actually show that you have this ability, why do you think you have it? And he said, “Oh, that’s simple. People tell me how accurate I am.” And so it’s easy to see there that you could just believe that you have some psychic ability – you just say whatever comes into your mind and you may be subconsciously assessing the client’s manner of dress and some little cues, and things that they said. Maybe you met them ten minutes ago,



Joe Nickell, skeptical investigator

The NICKELL approach *Continued...*

and they made some comment that would indicate that they're a bachelor or something. Consciously you're not aware of all this, but you're just saying what comes into your mind. You seem to know these things, kind of using your intuition, and that's probably a little better than pure guessing. You probably are picking up some cues and clues and things without being aware of it. And so, however crudely and unartfully you may be doing it, you are kind of putting out some information for people and they may respond to it, and if they're a believer they pick and choose. If you say something mistaken they may say ... they may challenge you on it, "No, I don't have a sister", and then you may say "No, but I feel there's someone who's like a sister to you." And they will take whatever you say, picking and choosing and interpreting, and make it fit them.

Q *Absolutely.*

A It's well known that people do this. Skeptics have given such readings and with good results, so you don't have to be a deliberate charlatan shrewdly manipulating people to come to believe that you have psychic powers and do readings and people tell you how accurate you are.

Q *I give a talk sometimes about this and I've come up with something I call the 'Fishy Cycle'. When someone catches a fish and it's that big and on the retelling the fish is this big, and finally the fish is really big, which is fun and who cares, that's great fun. I thought to myself maybe I can adapt this and I'll call this the 'Fishy Cycle' where, when somebody comes to see a fortune teller or a psychic they're usually sold before they set foot in the door, they're sold on the person they're coming to see. And you're right, they will distort and manipulate and twist things in the mind to make it all fit. Now, they'll go away and tell their friends what a great psychic this was, and their friends come back and the original client will come back and tell the psychic, "You were so*

wonderful last time." Reinforcement, reinforcement.

A Absolutely.

Q *So, of course I can't blame someone for absolutely believing.*

A Yeah, that's right, and that makes our work even more difficult because it would be so easy if they were all fakes and charlatans and we could just catch them at their tricks and expose them.

Q *Well that's another point. The good ones out there – the good charlatans, let's call them – have learnt, and maybe some of them have learnt from the Peter Popoff episode, you don't have to use gimmicks or tricks.*

A Right, better that you don't. When you look back at the history of spiritualism – the latter part of the 19th century into the early 20th century there were lots of trance mediums who did physical phenomena – and there would be spirit materialisations and dark room séances. Spirits would write on slates and produce magical spirit writing and objects would be 'apported', they would appear at séance tables out of nowhere – flowers and other 'apports' and myriad other phenomena, physical phenomena. The problem with these physical phenomena was that you could be caught doing what were basically magic tricks in the dark.

Someone like Houdini might whip out a flashlight, someone might grab their hand, but my point is spiritualists used to do these physical manifestations, what's called 'physical mediumship', and the problem with it was they could be caught red-handed. Someone would grab their hand or turn on a light and catch them faking the phenomenon.

Nowadays we have this 'mental mediumship' where certain practitioners can do readings under the bright lights of television, they no longer need the dark rooms and they're just playing mind games. They're fishing for information, throwing out things, hoping you will pick and choose, and interpret things to fit you, and they get by with this and they cannot be caught ... basically cannot be caught doing the actual tricks.

Now I was working with *Dateline* NBC and we did catch John Edward, the famous guy, we caught him revealing information at a reading that, in fact, we know he had learned earlier in the day. We know that he got that information from a person, and sat on it for a while and that's clear, so I think we caught him cheating. He's tried to wriggle out of it but not very successfully. But by and large the mental mediumship is safer.

Q *It's a very interesting situation for us when we're trying to put our point of view to the general public, cause there's nothing for them, now, to latch on to. If I cut this string it falls down. "Oh! It's a trick." And you can explain that very simply. Or if it's someone with a pole in the dark with these things that appear or disappear. When we're talking now about the flow of cold reading, for example, you can't just nail that in one quick sentence.*

A No, that's true

Q *And that's where they have a big advantage.*

A They do.

Q *I can't come on and say, "They're doing this", and the person says, "Oh, I understand that now."*

A What I'm trying to do with a lot of phenomena now is to explain to people how we all are fooled by illusions. At my first haunted house, in Mackenzie House in Toronto, people were hearing footsteps on the stairs late at night. It turned out they were actually hearing footsteps on a staircase next door that was just a few inches away. There was actually a small passageway between the two buildings, but close enough to resonate and make the sounds. Or people seeing a long-necked undulating serpentine creature on a lake like Lake Okanagan in British Columbia, or Newfoundland's Lake Crescent, and realising that that is in some cases two, three or four otters swimming in a line, creating this illusion of one long creature slithering through the water. Or any of a number of other things.

Even psychics doing this trick of retrofitting, that is, saying when

someone's missing they say, "I see water, I see the number seven", and so forth, and then after the person, the missing person's body is found they interpret the information to fit, so they say, "Water, I mentioned water, there was a creek, a lake, a pond", et cetera. And so I think is very important for skeptics to be able to show how these sorts of illusions and these techniques work. Understanding and realising that we also are capable of being fooled, and trying to explain either the trick of mind or the assumption, that sort of thing, and seeing that we're all vulnerable.

Q *I'm in the interesting position, like yourself, of encountering these things and trying to explain these things. It's an interesting life, it really is. I enjoy it, too.*

A It is. I thoroughly enjoy this work.

Q *If our readers want to find out more about you - you write for the Skeptical Inquirer?*

A *The Skeptical Inquirer*. And they can go to my personal website, www.JoeNickell.com, and you can check out my blogs and you can see some of the many personas that I've had over the years.

Q *How can people get a hold of your books?*

A They can go to my website, see the various ... I don't know, twenty-five or thirty books I've written, and click on the names and that'll take you to a place where you can buy the books. I'm happy to say all my books are still in print - only one of my books went out of print and it's back.

Q *Well, Joe Nickell, it's been an absolute pleasure to meet you. And thanks for appearing on the Skeptic Zone.*

A My pleasure. ■

About the interviewer
Richard Saunders is vice-president of the NSW committee of Australian Skeptics, and a presenter for The Skeptic Zone podcasts.



THE MANY PERSONAS OF JOE NICKELL

Joe Nickell's career has covered a range of activities. He describes himself as an "undercover detective, teacher, draft dodger, river boat manager, carnival promoter, magician and spokesperson," but that list doesn't include poet, sign painter, illustrator, carousel operator, security guard, children's author, coffee-house proprietor, advertising copywriter, civil rights activist, stuntman, antique dealer and newspaper stringer. As an author, he says it is only fitting that he tries on many 'costumes' or personas – his website lists over 450 of them. But he's probably best known as a paranormal investigator – ghost-hunter, UFOlogist, cryptozoologist. You name it, as possibly the world's only full-time salaried professional paranormal investigator, he's done it.

Among his early paranormal and pseudoscientific investigations were: observer of a séance to contact the spirit of Houdini (1969); investigating Toronto's Mackenzie House haunting (1972); dowsing for gold in the Yukon (1976); the Shroud of Turin investigation (1977 and ongoing); and recreating the giant Nazca condor drawing of Peru (early 1980s).

He has also investigated crop circles (England), the Oak Island mystery (Nova Scotia, Canada), the fabled Yowie (Australia), a weeping icon (Russia), an 'alien hybrid' (Saxony, Germany), Christian relics (Italy), Chupacabra 'goat sucker' attacks (Argentina), 'ancient astronauts' (Peru), medical quackery (Mexico), werewolves (Austria), the 'Holy Blood of Christ' (Belgium), a Marian visionary (Netherlands) and a saint's legend (Spain).

Among his literary investigations are the supposed working copy of Lincoln's Gettysburg address; Jack the Ripper's diary; and a purported identification card of former Nazi death-camp guard Ivan 'John' Demjanjuk.

"I hold that mysteries should neither be fostered nor dismissed," he says. "Instead, they should be carefully investigated with a view toward solving them. I have spent my life trying to do just that – whether the mysteries were paranormal or historical or forensic or literary or whatever their nature." And whatever persona was required.



Blowing in the Wind

Mark Lawson investigates the contribution wind power can make to the world's energy requirements, and finds it less than promised.

Whether you believe there is a need to reduce carbon emissions or have grave doubts about the science behind the present obsession with carbon, perhaps the most bizarre part of this often very strange public debate is that one of the most heavily favoured solutions to reduce emissions will have very little effect.

These are the proposals to use renewable energy sources such as wind farms and wave energy generators and the like to produce clean, green electricity. The image is, admittedly, a seductive one - picture windmills set among green fields harnessing the wind to fulfill our energy needs. In Australia, support for green electricity has resulted in the Rudd Government's Renewable Energy (Electricity) Amendment Bill. Recently passed in both houses, the bill requires generators to source 20 per cent of their electricity from renewable sources by 2020. As of the last revision to this article in early July the bill was still before Parliament.

But there is now considerable evidence from generators overseas that these sources of energy are far less effective than is generally supposed. This point is, in fact, made time and time again by those who have to accommodate renewables on power networks: they are an expensive way not to reduce emissions. Another comment often made is that they are an expensive symbol - a way governments can be seen to be doing something about reducing emissions.

This is not to entirely write off



renewables in general, or wind energy in particular. They may still make a contribution - albeit a much smaller contribution than the green lobby hopes - if we learn from the problems encountered overseas. The green lobby has also put forward a range of counter-arguments and suggestions.

THE MAIN PROBLEM

But first the problem, set out in an attachment to a submission to the draft version of the bill by a group called the Carbon Sense Coalition, which is definitely not sympathetic to the push for renewables or the rationale behind it. The attachment is an analysis of

the usefulness of wind energy by a retired power engineer of considerable experience, Peter Lang, which says that the main problem with wind farms is that the energy they supply is so variable and unpredictable.

A very big wind farm may be generating, say, 100 megawatts for several hours to make several hundred megawatt hours for sale to a power company. Then the wind dies away and the power grid is suddenly short 100 megawatts of power. The grid managers will have to start up conventional power stations to cover the shortfall, but those stations are not like car engines - they take time to get up to

full speed. Coal stations take hours; certain types of gas turbines can power up and down within minutes, provided they are already operating. Hydro power is the most responsive but is limited in Australia. Storing power on power station scale is not feasible and forecasting when the wind might fail is difficult. So unless the power company wants unpredictable brown-outs in part of its grid, the only answer is to have nearly the same amount of generating capacity on standby – as a so-called ‘spinning reserve’ – as the wind generators are producing.

In other words, the wind farms are not replacing 100 megawatts of

Windfarm in SouthPoint Ka Lae-Ka’u, Hawaii
Photo by Donnie MacGowan



capacity at any given moment in the grid, but an amount much less than that. Further, Lang notes that the use of renewables will dictate a mix of plants - coal, gas, hydro - required to power the network that is, overall, far less efficient than if the wind farms were not in the grid at all. If more capacity has to be powered up quickly, the generator has to build more of the less efficient but easier to power up open-cycle gas turbines, as opposed to the more efficient closed cycle turbines.

Those who wish to brush aside such inconvenient technical issues may well try various political arguments, such as pointing to Lang’s experience in the

nuclear industry. Unfortunately for those arguments, very similar points about wind power have been made in at least three other, major reports. A 2004 report by the German power company E.ON Netz GmbH, which has considerable wind farm capacity on its network, said that it had to maintain ‘shadow power stations’ at 80 per cent of the installed wind farm capacity. (www.wind-watch.org/documents/wind-report-2004)

MAXIMUM OUTPUT

The 2005 report (www.wind-watch.org/documents/eon-netz-wind-report-2005/) is a little softer but notes that the output of wind farms on the network was at its maximum at 6024 megawatts on Christmas Eve and then fell to below 2000 megawatts within only 10 hours, a difference of over 4000 megawatts. The report notes that this corresponds to a capacity of eight coal-fired power plants.

“Handling such significant difference to feed-in levels poses a major challenge to grid operators,” the report notes.

A July 2005 report titled *Security Assessment of Future UK Electricity Scenarios* (www.raeng.org.uk/news/publications/list/reports/Cost_Generation_Commentary.pdf) produced by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research (the centre is associated with that green bastion, the University of East Anglia), came to very similar conclusions. It notes that wind energy’s contribution to future power generation will be of largely symbolic importance. As in the German report, the UK study notes that a common winter weather pattern is for periods of intense cold to coincide with little or no wind. Forecasting changes in the wind is also very difficult.

Another study by PB Power for the UK’s Royal Academy of Engineering titled *The Cost of Generating Electricity* produced last year notes that the cost of renewable energy is increased because “additional, fast response, standby generating plant may have to be provided to maintain system security as the energy source fluctuates”. The report estimates that the requirement for standby generating capacity adds

46 per cent to the cost of onshore wind farms (offshore are more expensive again).

There is plenty of similar material for those who are hunting for it, but you get the picture. The use of wind as a replacement for any electricity capacity is much less effective than is generally realised.

Faced with this problem, green groups such as the Clean Energy Council (which merged with the Australian Wind Energy Association in 2007) says that if wind farms are spread all over Australia then some wind farms must be operating somewhere. Also, European power companies have developed sophisticated wind forecasting software which removes some of the problems of variations in

“ Wind energy’s contribution to future power generation will be of largely symbolic importance. ”

wind power. Perhaps. This software is mentioned approvingly in more recent publications by E.ON but very little information is available on how effective it is in Europe, let alone in Australia. Forecasting wind direction and strength reliably even a few hours in advance has proved difficult in the past, and it would have to be very reliable indeed before the electricity generators stop backing up wind with conventional power. The National Electricity Market Management Company (NEMMCO) says it is monitoring the performance of software connected with wind energy.

Individuals have made various suggestions ranging from the odd – make electrical appliances to run on a wide range of power supply outputs – through to using wind only for off-peak power for hot water systems, which is at least feasible. Another very common suggestion is to use a pumped hydro storage facility. This requires two lakes reasonably close to one another but with one perhaps 700 metres higher than the other. Wind turbines

Blowing in the Wind *Continued...*

can be used to pump water from the lower lake into the higher one, so that the water can be allowed to run into the lower lake to produce hydro-electricity as and when required. The lakes and hydroelectric turbines are then a very expensive form of battery. Conventional networks use energy from coal-powered plants to pump water uphill when the energy is not required for the grid, but this does not seem to be done anywhere with wind energy.

Whatever engineers might make of the above suggestions – and they are just suggestions – it is obvious that wind and renewables have substantial problems. Some of these problems might be overcome with considerably more work, and some careful planning. Instead of looking for windy sites, network planners should look for an optimal spread of sites, to smooth out some of the variations in renewable power, and combine geographically diverse networks with improved wind

forecasting. Perhaps hooking those sites up to a spread of wave power generators, solar concentrators (where the sun's energy is concentrated on a single tube to make the water or oil in it very hot) and photovoltaic sites, and combining them all with pumped hydro in the Snowy might achieve something. But nothing like that is being planned and, if it were, generating a genuine 20 per cent from renewables would seem to be an all but impossible figure. A five per cent genuine contribution is probably more achievable, albeit at considerable expense.

This is something the green lobby does not want to hear and, to judge by the way wind farms are being built overseas, governments and power authorities seem to regard such generators as a token concession to the increasingly green-conscious consumer.

There are other problems with wind farms, which this article will not discuss, including complaints over the noise they generate, the

number of birds killed by the spinning blades, and that they clutter up the landscape.

NOMINAL RENEWABLES

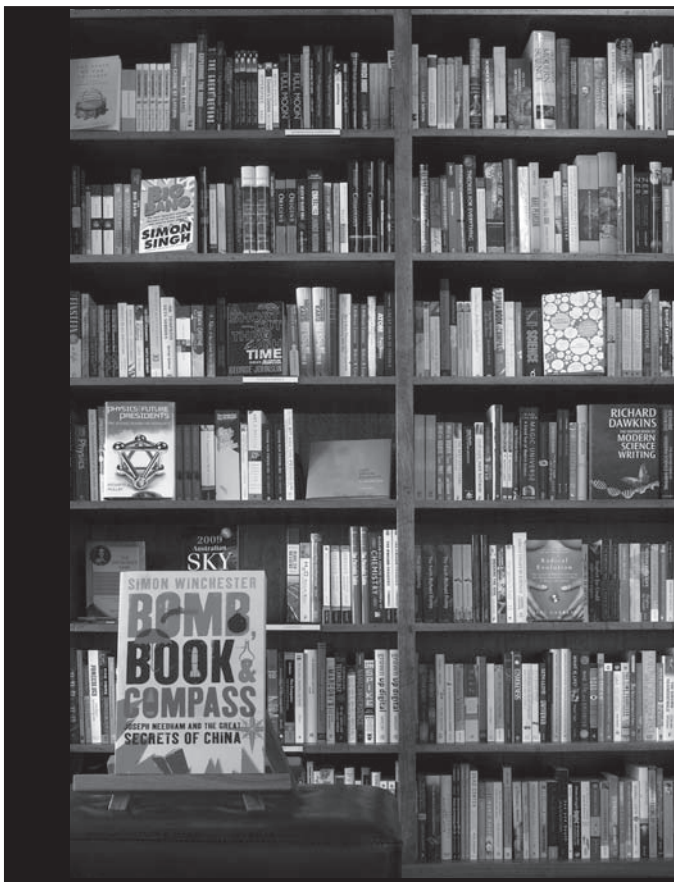
As matters now stand, if power generating companies are required to buy 20 per cent of their power from renewable sources by 2020, then they will do so, and pass the cost onto the consumers. The problem is that it will be a nominal 20 per cent. The power stations will still be operating at almost the same capacity as they would be if the renewables were not there at all, and the network will be overall less efficient. The sole function of wind farms and other projects will be simply to make voters think that the government has done something

about emissions. They will be an expensive symbol, and a symbol for which consumers will pay. ■



About the author

Mark Lawson is a senior journalist with the Australian Financial Review, and previously a science writer.



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What critical thinking boils down to is the means to construct and to understand, a reasoned argument and - especially important - to recognize a fallacious or fraudulent argument. The question is not whether we like the conclusion that emerges out of a train of reasoning, but whether the conclusion follows from the premise or starting point and whether that premise is true.

– Carl Sagan

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An Encounter with Men

Martin Bridgstock finally learns the details of an attempted con played on him several decades ago – and draws some conclusions for skeptics.

Last year, prominent skeptic Richard Saunders made a presentation to Griffith University's Gold Coast campus. Early in his talk, he put a slide up which simply said "I am human, therefore I can be fooled." It's a simple proposition, and obviously true. However, for people who truly grasp its importance, Saunders' proposition can be life-changing.

Clearly, Saunders is right and so it seems to follow logically that all of us have to work out how to minimise the degree to which we are fooled – by dishonest people, by misguided people, and by deceptive events. The catch, of course, is that we all have only limited time and resources. We cannot check every proposition that comes our way, so we need some way of focusing upon those most likely to fool us. It's also useful to know our own weaknesses, the ways in which we are most likely to be led into error.

For skeptics, concerned about the prevalence of paranormal beliefs, this means keeping an eye open for weird claims and being prepared to question them when they occur. However, Saunders' proposition applies more widely than the paranormal, and it helps illuminate an almost-forgotten incident that happened to me decades ago.

My story starts in September 1969 in



a bus station in El Paso, Texas. Imagine me as a fairly unworldly British student, travelling around the United States on Greyhound Buses. Time passes slowly when you're waiting for buses, and I was used to meeting interesting people.

As the hours ticked by, a likeable gentleman came to sit next to me. I fell into conversation with him. He was much older than me – maybe sixty – and was neatly dressed in shirt and slacks. I never knew his true name, so let's call him New Friend. He revealed that he was going to the same place as me – New Orleans – and patted his ticket folder in a shirt pocket. He told me that his wife came from the same part of the world as me, and that when

we got to New Orleans I was invited to stay with them. He'd show me some of the sights. We talked about what I'd been doing, how I'd worked as a garbageman in Rochester, New York for a time, and had saved up enough cash to journey round the USA.

After some pleasant conversation, New Friend suggested that we should go for a little walk. There was plenty of time before the bus left. So we strolled around a block or two and, at an intersection, encountered an old gentleman in a good deal of distress. Let's call him Old Geezer. Old Geezer told us that he'd been visiting a prostitute. Her bill had been fifty dollars, but he'd only had a hundred dollar

note on him. She'd gone off with his money to get some change, and hadn't come back. What, Old Geezer asked plaintively, should he do? Clearly, this was a very gullible guy.

New Friend was sympathetic to Old Geezer, but told him that that wasn't the way to handle matters. No, he should have double-or-quit her. He took out a couple of coins and demonstrated. Each person shows a coin at the same moment, with heads or tails up. If the coins match, the lady gets to keep the large note. If they don't match, Old Geezer gets a free experience. Easy. Games were played with matching coins, New Friend continued, and little

An Encounter with Con Men

Continued...

wagers could be made.

Then New Friend had an idea. We could play a game with coins. We could each have a coin, match heads or tails and wager a little money. He took me on side, and told me that we could get some money off this guy. All we had to do was . . .

I didn't like this. I smelled a large rat, though I couldn't see exactly what it was. So I reacted strongly "No," I said firmly, "I don't gamble!"¹ There was a tiny pause, then New Friend said to me "All right. Now you go on back to the bus station and I'll give our friend here some directions."

I walked back to the bus station, slowly coming to conclusion. "I think they were con-men. I think they were trying to lure me into a crooked gambling game."

Of course, New Friend did not turn up to board the bus with me. He must have been giving Old Geezer some very lengthy directions. I headed for New Orleans, feeling that I'd won a minor victory. After all, my money was intact, and I had had an interesting experience. I completed my trip round the USA and returned home to Britain.

For a few decades, that was it. I knew vaguely that a couple of con-men had tried to sucker me into a crooked gambling game, but I didn't know the details. Now I do know. I can see exactly what would have happened if I'd played along. At my local library, I recently found a book on con games and swindles (Sifakis 2001). I was mainly interested in paranormal-related cons, but there are only a few of those. There are long descriptions of many non-paranormal swindles. Some are elaborate 'big-store' operations, requiring many people and much preparation. Others are known as 'short games' which can yield money very fast². Mine was one of the latter.

The game is called the smack game³, and it's very simple. Three people agree on a wager, expose coins at the same moment, and call out 'Heads' or 'Tails'.

Usually, there is an odd head or tail, and that is the winner. The person with the odd call collects from the other two. In the case of three heads or tails, the coins are flipped again.

Played straight, it's a fair but somewhat boring gambling game. The three players will win or lose money, depending on chance. The con works like this. Before the game starts, New Friend and I agree that we are going

“ It's sometimes said that you cannot con an honest person. I disagree. Some simply make use of people's gullibility. ”

to fleece Old Geezer. We will do it by calling different results from our coin flips. So if New Friend calls heads, I go tails⁴. It doesn't matter what Old Geezer calls, he never has the odd head or tail, and he always loses.

Cunning, eh? Between us, New Friend and I have the prospect of relieving Old Geezer of a great deal of money. So we start to play. But there's a catch. As the game progresses, with repeated wagers and calls, Old Geezer loses steadily. However, his calls seem to match mine far more than New Friend's, especially on the larger wagers. So both Old Geezer's money and mine flow steadily to New Friend. I am not too worried about this, of course, because we are friends, and have agreed to meet at the bus station later to split the money. After all, he's a friend and a fellow traveller, right?

Eventually Old Geezer becomes suspicious. He accuses New Friend and me of defrauding him. We deny this vigorously, but the game is clearly over. An angry Old Geezer demands that we walk off in opposite directions, to demonstrate that we are not working together. I head off happily back to the bus station, looking forward to meeting up with New Friend again and splitting the loot.

I suspect the worst time would have been sitting in the bus station as time went by, gradually realising that New Friend was not coming, and that I had

been swindled. Eventually I would have boarded the bus alone, sadder, poorer and perhaps wiser.

Before going on with the story, let's note two neat little features of the smack game, both of which ensure that I have no come-back once I am playing. Once I am in the game, even if I want to reverse my losses, there is no strategy that can bring my money back. One alternative strategy is to match New Friend's calls. However, if I do this, I may actually make things worse. I stop losing money to New Friend all right – but both of us begin losing to Old Geezer. I could also alternate matching and differing from New Friend, in which case I lose money to both men. Because the two con artists are collaborating against me, there is no way that I can win.

I might think about breaking off the game, storming away and finding a cop. The problem then is that I am complaining that New Friend and Old Geezer are doing to me exactly what I agreed to do to Old Geezer! I am guilty of attempting to defraud someone, and if I complain, am confessing to a crime.

This is pure guesswork, but I would think that the con-men were used to people baulking at their game. Probably they shrugged their shoulders when I walked away. I would also guess that, ten minutes after I left on my bus, New Friend would re-enter the bus station looking for his next victim⁵. Still, I came out ahead. I had an interesting experience, and it cost me nothing. They lost some of their time, and gained nothing.

So what can we learn from this? Quite a lot, I think. Several important points emerge from what happened.

First, it's sometimes said that you cannot con an honest person. I disagree. This con certainly depended on my dishonesty, but others in the book simply make use of people's gullibility. They think they see a wonderful bargain, and lay their money down to be taken. All the same, many cons do depend upon the dishonesty of the target. A rigorous refusal to take part in shady activities is probably a reasonable protection against over half the swindles that may be tried.

Second, note how chillingly easy

it was for New Friend to insert himself into my life, and to acquire a considerable status. In about fifteen minutes of chatting he found out who I was, and that I was carrying worthwhile amounts of money on me. He also established himself in my consciousness as being a fellow traveller with whom I had a good deal in common, as someone who bore me goodwill, and who was going to help me. Yet it was all false. In reality, New Friend simply regarded me as a potential mug, a sheep waiting to be fleeced. He would have left me broke and alone, thousands of kilometres from home⁶.

The ability of dishonest people to insinuate themselves into our trust is a large part of the problem of handling con-men. As Richard Saunders pointed out in his talk, however, many of the people – especially in the paranormal area – who may fool us are not dishonest. They believe exactly what they say.

We skeptics should remember that the clients of paranormal claimants often put similar trust in their practitioners. They believe that their clairvoyant, astrologer or homoeopath is there to help them, and has their interests at heart. What's more, the practitioners often regard themselves in exactly the same way! One can argue about whether being paid for providing worthless services – in which one truly believes – can be regarded as a con or not. It is certainly pernicious.

Perhaps it is important for skeptics to learn these impression management skills. Some media professionals regard the skeptics' image as being so unfortunate that we should stop calling ourselves skeptics. The image of grumpy old naysayers may be so entrenched in the public consciousness that it cannot be shifted. And we may be digging the hole even deeper. Have a look in *The Skeptical Inquirer* at Karla McLaren's account of how she ceased to be a New Ager. Her initial contacts with skepticism horrified her, and it was only after prolonged consideration that she realised that the skeptical message was a good one.

In a very real sense, we skeptics have the opposite

problem to New Friend and the paranormalists. We have a good product to offer – a set of intellectual skills which can cut away clouds of balderdash to reveal the truth. They have appalling products, which they market so skilfully that they obtain massive acceptance. The answer, of course, is obvious: we have to offer our product as skilfully as they offer theirs.

Notes

1. I actually have no deep-rooted objection to gambling. I simply have never seen its attraction.
2. The 1970s film *The Sting* shows a short con at the beginning, and a big store con at the end. Neither resembles what happened to me.
3. The game has no overtones of either hard drugs or sado-masochism. I think it gets its name from the high-five my New Friend and I would give each other at the end. That is before we head off to 'split the loot'.
4. Among sophisticated con artists, some sort of simple signalling system would be needed.
5. I suspect that Old Geezer would have been watching covertly from some obscure corner of the bus station as New Friend started chatting to me. Then he would hurry away to take up his place on the intersection.
6. Both con men are almost certainly dead now. In my nastier moments, I dream that they are in a very hot place where blokes with horns on their heads play *The Complete Reprimands of Gordon Ramsay* non-stop at headache-inducing volume. For ever. ■

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About the author

Martin Bridgstock is a senior lecturer in the School of Biomolecular and Physical Sciences at Griffith University. He is a Life Member of the Australian Skeptics.



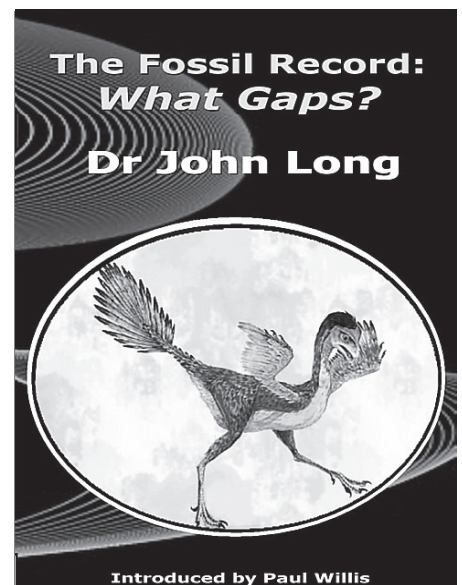
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POWER to the

Jon Donniss tells the lamentable tale of the bad psychic, Joe Power, a celebrity in his own mind.

In recent times a 'psychic' by the name of Joe Power has come into the media eye. In fact, we have covered the last few years of his professional career in some detail on our site www.badpsychics.co.uk. But how has a psychic such as this manipulated his position in life to that of a 'wannabe celebrity' psychic. For that we must go back to the beginning ... well, not *the* beginning, but let's say 2006 instead.

In April of 2006, Joe Power caused controversy when he made it public that he was going to contact the spirit of John Lennon. As you can imagine this caused a lot of discussion – even Yoko Ono had her representatives release a statement calling the stunt “exploitative”, but of course this is exactly what Joe Power wanted, media attention. A US TV station had apparently found someone who would be willing to partake in this stunt and for what? A pay-per-view TV special. Oh, how very spiritual, and only \$9.95, that's a good \$5 cheaper than the Princess Diana séance from a few years earlier.

So what did John Lennon have to say for himself? Well, the ground breaking message from the dead Lennon was “Peace ... the message is peace.” Now, if that isn't worth \$9.95 then I don't know what is.

Despite appearing on this American special, things were still not going great for Joe. He was having to cancel shows on a regular basis due to poor ticket sales. When you can't sell out small hotel function rooms then you know that a new stunt is in order, especially



Joe Power with the mother of missing child Shannon Matthews - whoops!

since the Lennon séance did nothing for his career.

One of the claims Joe has made over the years is one that many psychics use - that they have helped the police solve crimes. You hear this all the time, but with Joe Power we decided to dig deeper. He claimed to have helped Southport, Merseyside, Police in the Lynsey Quay murder case, yet when we asked Detective Superintendent Geoff Sloan, he made the following statement:

“I wish to state, categorically, that as senior investigating officer on the Lynsey Quay murder, I made a policy decision not to use psychics on the investigation. Joe Power has allegedly made claims that he assisted the enquiry but this is not the case.”

So, like most if not all psychics, Joe Power was simply making claims that were not true. But this would not stop him from using such claims in the future, claims we would show were

PEOPLE?

untrue time after time after time.

Joe also claimed “through one of his astonishing spirit links” to have known the killer of model Sally Anne Bowman and that he informed the police that the killer was a ‘Stephen’ or ‘Stephan White’, aged between 24 and 26 and was a delivery driver. Yet following DNA evidence the police arrested and charged 36-year-old chef Mark Dixie who is now serving a life sentence in prison. Yet again, Joe was wrong. Yet he keeps telling people how he helps the police.

So, despite cancelling 44 per cent of his publicised shows in 2005, 2006 and 2007, Joe Power was still hungry for ‘power’ and fame. In 2008 he made an astounding public statement when he said “TV mediums are ripping people off. The place is saturated with fake mediums getting away with playing on people’s emotions.” This, the same man who did a tacky pay-per-view TV special in America contacting John Lennon, despite the objections of the Lennon estate and Yoko Ono.

Throughout 2008 things just got worse for Joe - of 65 advertised shows, at least 51 were cancelled due to poor sales.

But in 2009 Joe saw an opportunity to get himself on the front page of every newspaper in the country, and he took it. This was at the time when the Madeleine McCann story had become worldwide news. Another child by the name of Shannon Matthews had gone missing in similar circumstances. Interest in this story would be front page news. Joe visited Shannon’s mother Karen Matthews and her partner Craig Meehan. He gave them a reading which would even be quoted in the *Sunday People* newspaper. Suddenly he found himself in the papers, in a photograph

standing next to Karen Matthews. This was exactly what Joe wanted, media attention.

Unfortunately, despite claiming to be clairvoyant, clairaudient, and clairsentient, and despite spending a lot of time with the family of Shannon Matthews, Joe seemed to have missed one tiny detail, that being that Karen

“ TV mediums are ripping people off. The place is saturated with fake mediums getting away with playing on people’s emotions. ”

- Joe Power

Matthews had actually been behind the fake kidnap of her 9-year-old daughter. Karen Matthews is now serving time in prison, and has shown no remorse for her crimes. This is the woman who Joe Power happily had his photo taken with, and who he gave readings to.

As you would expect this was not the kind of thing that Joe had hoped that would happen - he now found himself in the position of failed psychic once again.

Joe Power claims he has helped the police solve crimes. We know this is not true; in fact, from the very mouths of the police, he has not helped them at all. The one case where he truly put himself on the line, he failed miserably.

We now find ourselves bang up to date, many tacky stunts, failed tours and cancelled shows later. Yet still Joe Power manages to find himself a book

publisher, although when a member of Bad Psychics went along to one of his signings, all that could be found was a lonely figure of Joe sat at a table on his own, no line of people, no crowds scrambling for his photo, nothing. Maybe this is all that is left for this man, or maybe he has already planned his next stunt, only time will tell.

But Joe would have one last dig at those who dare to doubt him.

I will quote from my good friend, Bad Psychics member and Merseyside skeptic Michael Marshall, co-host of the skeptical podcast, *Righteous Indignation*. Marsh recently met Joe Power, and handed him an application form for the JREF Million Dollar challenge.

Joe replied:

“The thing about you skeptics, is that you sit there, festering in front of your computers at 3am, thinking up ways to get at people. What if I were to sit in front of your house and tell people you’re a paedophile?”

“Because you’re there festering, at 3am, plotting to get at me, in the same way that paedophiles fester and plot to interfere with children – you both have to be sick in the head to do what you do.

“I think most skeptics probably are paedophiles. I mean, you’re sat around at 3am, plotting, aren’t you? Do you deny that?”

And people wonder why Joe is disliked by so many people, why he has to cancel show after show, and why no one turns up to his book signings.

Joe Power’s career should be a warning to any wannabe celebrity psychic out there. Don’t make claims you can’t back up, because the one annoying thing about skeptics is that we simply don’t take things on faith, we investigate, we search, and we find out the truth. Of course, Joe did a pretty good job of undermining his claims all on his own, as well. ■



About the author

Birmingham-based **Jon Donniss** is the owner of the Bad Psychics website (www.badpsychics.com) as well as similar sites devoted to religion, ghosts and homeopathy. He would like to thank Forum member Lester for their help in preparing this article.

Getting **OUT** OF Cults

We already have cult exit counselling from religious people, but is this the pot calling the kettle black? John Perkins suggests an alternative.

Sects and cults of various kinds are known for the emotional pressure they impose on members to remain within the group. This can lead to great distress if family members suffer separation and banishment due to disagreements over membership of the cult. The psychological support given to those wishing to recover from immersion in a cult is called 'exit counselling' or 'cult counselling'. The strange thing about this kind of counselling is that it is predominantly provided by people who are themselves religious.

Although it must be done carefully, it would seem obvious to freethinkers that one of the ways that victims of cults can be assisted would be to help them understand that they need not be bound by the beliefs of the cult, because the beliefs are not actually true. Statements like "How could you possibly believe all that crap?" is not the type of counselling victims need or would respond to. Seeking to encourage more rational cognitions would seem to be one way of providing assistance. In this area at least, exit counsellors with religious convictions of their own would seem to have a more limited capacity than those who have not.

Cults thrive on making newcomers feel very welcome, frequently employing the practice of 'love-bombing' – deliberate showering of affection and support to win over new recruits. Vulnerable people who are at a low point due to other issues in their lives are particularly susceptible to this form



of initiation. They also suggest that they have inside knowledge, providing happiness and salvation, and often cultivate a belief in the infallibility of the cult leader and an aversion to non-believers. Social pressures are used to enlist and maintain membership.

Most people are completely unaware of the power of the psychological coercion that is used on them. Cult members may say how much they feel their life has been transformed for the better. Often the best that can be done in this case is to let them know of your concern that they have been manipulated and give some gentle dissuasion. They need to discover for themselves the nature of their situation.

RELIGIOUS CULT COUNSELLORS

Are counsellors who are themselves religious best able to provide this kind of emotional support? They

can hardly allude to the essentially irrational nature of cult beliefs, because mainstream religious beliefs are almost equally irrational. Religious counsellors may have a legitimate humanitarian concern for the welfare of cult victims, but there may be a hidden agenda in that they may seek recruitment to their own religion. Basic religious beliefs, which cult beliefs largely incorporate, do not make rational sense. Religion-based counsellors will be unable to give this advice, however gently. For professional reasons, even professional psychologists may also have this constraint. So who will give sound rational advice? Atheists can.

It may be considered contentious that cults, sects and religions are all equally irrational in their beliefs. Minority cult beliefs may seem more irrational than mainstream religious beliefs, but this is mainly because

mainstream beliefs are more familiar and have achieved social respectability. Cults and sects differ from religions mainly in the degree of coercion they exert on members. The essential feature of religious belief is that it is not rational.

The most obvious way that this is apparent is blindness to contradictions. Religious faiths contradict reason and evidence, as well as other faiths. Contradictory beliefs cannot all be true, but can and may well all be false. Believers are aware of at least some contradictions, but they generally lack curiosity about the basis for authenticity of their own beliefs. They have an aversion to issues that may challenge their faith. This blindness of faith is why religious beliefs are characteristically delusional, and are not merely mistaken beliefs.

Those who suffer from delusions lack insight into their own perspective. Atheists do not suffer from this lack of insight. This may sound arrogant, but it is not. No one has perfect knowledge. However, those who seek to rely on reason and evidence, facts rather than faith, will necessarily achieve a higher level of belief authenticity. Facts cannot be arrogant.

Which religion is true, and why? When challenged to back up their assertions with testable evidence, believers are unable to do so¹. Instead, challenges to belief often lead to denial and to deeper resort to faith. This is the cognitive dissonance response, the uncomfortable feeling caused by holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously.

ATHEIST CULT COUNSELLORS

In view of all this, an atheist group has been motivated to provide a counselling service, to cater not just for the victims of sects and cults, but for victims of mainstream religions as well. In its initial form at least, this will take the form of a website and an email answering service. A couple of things motivated this particular step.

The first was an email received by the Atheist Foundation of Australia, which offers a team of people to answer any email question and receives a wide range in response, ranging from the

abusive to descriptions of heartrending situations of family religious conflict. One email was from a distressed ex-Muslim who had become an atheist. Despite this, he had to go to the

“ When challenged to back up their assertions with testable evidence, believers are unable to do so.”

mosque and pretend to pray five times a day and observe all the religious customs. The stigma, if not the danger, of being an open non-believer was too great². The pressure in Islam for families to conform is in many ways more like that used by a cult than by a religion. This is a major reason why exit counselling should be provided for religions as well as cults.

The second motivation for setting up an atheist counselling service was that in our local Atheist Meetup Group, discussion arose over the proposition that our bank had a grant program for community service organisations. How could an atheist group provide a community service and apply for a grant? The idea of a counselling service arose, an organisation was set up and a grant was applied for. Needless to say, perhaps, the grant application failed. However, Atheist Exit Counselling Support Australia was created.

A team of volunteers has been assembled to answer emails sent to the ‘atheist helper’ address on the website. If a distressed refugee from a cult or religion would like to meet atheists in person, they can attend an Atheist Meetup Group event. The idea arose within the Melbourne group, and so far both the Sydney and Brisbane groups have agreed to co-operate in this way. The service was launched in April 2009 with a media release that read as follows:

“The Melbourne Atheist Meetup Group has launched a new service. This is a counselling service for believers who need help and counselling due to the stress

and mental trauma of religion.

“It is not just sects and cults that traumatise believers - religions do too. Yet most cult counselling is performed by religious believers.

“Melbourne Atheists are now providing a valuable community service. Anyone can send an email to our team of Atheist Helpers. We will not attempt to convert sufferers to atheism, although we do see that as beneficial. We just want to provide sincere advice, free from any kind of religious bias.

“This is the first time in the world that any group has launched a service specifically aimed not just at helping those with misplaced belief in sects and cults, but at helping to address the problem of religious delusion in general.”

It would be fair to say that, so far, the response has not been overwhelming. Perhaps most people, on hearing about it, may wonder if it is a joke. It is certainly not a joke. It may well have crossed our minds that if nothing else, it will serve as a public relations exercise for atheism. “Atheists providing a positive contribution to the community”, as the website says. Hopefully, it will at least help overcome some of the negative perceptions that the word “atheism” often seems to evoke. ■

The Atheist Exit Counselling Support Australia can be contacted at www.aecsa.org.au, or PO Box 6004, Melbourne, Victoria 8008; telephone 0411 143 744.

1. In October 2007, I issued the following challenge: “Provide any proof that any religion is the true religion. Reward A\$100,000.” There has so far been no response to my challenge. See <http://challenge.theatheist.net>.
2. The text of the email is on the AECSA web site at www.aecsa.org.au, in the section on Islam.



About the author

John L Perkins is a mathematical modeller and economist, and is a founding member of the Secular Party of Australia.

Prophets & Psychics

past & present time travellers

William Harwood looks at the conundrum of prophetic information – how does it reach us from the future when time travel is impossible?

Most people, despite seeing time travel presented favorably on *Star Trek* and other fantasy shows, are aware that time travel is impossible. But while practically nobody believes that physical objects can move backward in time, enormous numbers believe that information can travel backward in time, as it would have to do to implant itself in the minds of ‘prophets’ or ‘psychics’.

It is widely proclaimed, even by persons who should know better, that it is impossible to prove a negative. For example, apologists for the God hypothesis consistently quote that generalisation in support of the contention that the nonexistence of God cannot be proven. They thereby sidestep Victor Stenger’s irrefutable proof (*God: The Failed Hypothesis*) that ‘God’, as opposed to gods as a class, does not exist. Stenger’s methodology was to show that the definition of ‘God’ included qualities that are mutually exclusive, and therefore an entity that combined those qualities cannot exist.

Time travel cannot exist. While that statement might seem untestable since it cannot be shown that time travel’s definitive qualities are self-contradictory, it can in fact be tested. There is a technique used by mathematicians to prove negative hypotheses, called *reductio ad absurdum*. The method involves assuming that a hypothesis is correct, and then following that assumption to see whether it leads to a logical impossibility.

The assumption that time travel is possible indeed leads to an absurdity.

Suppose that a time traveler went back into the past and killed his father before he met his mother. The time traveler would then not be born and therefore could not go back in time. He consequently could not prevent his own conception and therefore would be born. He would then be enabled to go back and kill his father and The assumption that time travel is possible leads to a reality in which the time traveler is simultaneously born and not born. Since that is an absurdity, time travel is therefore shown to be an absurdity.

Matter cannot travel backward in time. Proving that information cannot travel backward in time requires a slightly different approach. Suppose a method were discovered tomorrow, or next century, of sending a message back. Does it not logically follow that someone would send back the necessary information to prevent World War Two? The argument that WWII is part of our current reality because the method has not yet been found to prevent it retroactively does not stand up. That the past has not already been changed means that it can never be changed, because if it could be it would have already happened, and we would remember a history with no WWII, and an Indian Ocean tsunami that killed no one because the entire population had been evacuated before it happened. In addition, a Standard Terran language would already have won official recognition by the United Nations, because the creators of Esperanto would have been warned to base it on English,

since an artificial language based on the Romanic languages had proven to be useless.

Gullible believers argue that psychics do receive messages from the future. To this day believers in the psychic humbug (tautology) Jeane Dixon continue to swallow her Big Lie that she predicted the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as indeed she did—after it had happened. I can do that too. I hereby prophesise that America will elect its first Black president in 2008. Now was I right or was I right?

Every January, professional psychics make predictions for the coming year that are published in *National Inquirer* and elsewhere. A year later, *Skeptical Inquirer* reprints those prophecies and draws attention to the fact that no intrinsically improbable prophecy has ever been fulfilled, and those for which a degree of success could be claimed were deliberately kept vague so that almost any outcome could be claimed as a hit. As an obvious example of the latter: “There will be a disastrous earthquake in 2010.” Since there is an earthquake somewhere on earth every day, and ‘disastrous’ can be interpreted to include a single death, such prophecies require as much knowledge of the future as a prediction that the sun will rise tomorrow. A similar kind of prophecy is one that is neither specific nor predicted to occur within a specified time limit. While it can never be shown to have failed, an infinite number of future events could be interpreted by believers as fulfillments. The archetype for that

kind of prophecy was the quatrains of Nostradamus.

What no psychic ever predicted was the World Trade Center atrocity of September 11, 2001, the 2009 Australian bushfires, the collapse of the Soviet Union and East European communism, or anything that was not a logical consequence of events already in progress. Indeed, some would say that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a logical consequence of events already in progress, yet no psychic was able to deduce that it was predictable.

Asked if he believes that information can travel backward in time, virtually every person with a functioning human brain will answer, “No”. Yet many of those same persons accept the existence of real psychics, as opposed to cranks and humbugs who falsely claim to be psychics, without any awareness that they are expressing simultaneous belief and disbelief in a single phenomenon.

Public figures in occupations not requiring scientific literacy are notorious for believing that the future can be foreknown. Among the political figures who allowed themselves to be influenced by paranormal advisers who claimed to have access to information that had traveled backward in time was Ronald Reagan, whose belief in a geocentric universe revolving around an immobile earth was an embarrassment even to other creationists. As for tabloid TV, programs routinely report the psychic and analogous beliefs of show business personalities, as if a claim to have conversed with a dead former spouse had as much credibility as a claim to have been on George W. Bush's enemies list. The question of whether the perpetrators are gullible simpletons who cannot separate fact from fantasy, or amoral story tellers to whom ‘truth’ is whatever the rubes will swallow, is best answered: probably both. Indeed, unless the gossip media are deliberately publicising the weirdos and ignoring a rational majority, one is justified in concluding that practically everybody in the Vast Wasteland, on both sides of the camera, is a gullible simpleton.

Psychics are humbugs. A year-long study of claims of psychic crime solving led to the conclusion (*Psychic Sleuths*, Joe Nickell, ed, 1994, p. 173) that, “careful

examination reveals no successful crime solving, but instead only tangled webs of misinformation, generalisation, opportunistic credit-taking, and, in some instances, probable deceit”.

No psychic has ever given police useful information about a crime (*Skeptical Inquirer*, 17:2:159-165). Television's ongoing pretence to the contrary can be attributed to that medium's unwillingness to place truth ahead of ratings. In the words of



“ Liberal theologians of all persuasions concede that their sacred writings were compiled by fallible human authors”

entertainer Peter Reveen, who spent forty years presenting simulated psychic phenomena in his performances and seeking for persons who could replicate his demonstrations without resorting to magicians' tricks: “I am forced to conclude that there is no such thing as a psychic ... and in all my years of touring the world I have never met anyone who does have such powers” (*Hypnotism Then and Now*, 2002, p. 114).

There are two reasons why tabloid addicts believe in psychics. The first is their inability to grasp that, for psychics to have foreknowledge of the future, that knowledge must have traveled backward in time. The second is that, if they acknowledge the impossibility

of psychics receiving information from the future, they would then have to acknowledge that what is impossible for psychics would have been equally impossible for biblical prophets.

While religious fundamentalists disagree, liberal theologians of all persuasions concede that their sacred writings were compiled by fallible human authors whose ability to tell the truth as they saw it was limited by their scientific literacy and cultural background. All but the most unsophisticated pseudo-scholars have allowed themselves to recognise that their bibles contain only two kinds of prophecy: those that failed, and those that were already fulfilled at the time of writing. Even prophecies of events that appeared to be on the verge of fulfillment, such as those of Haggai and Zechariah, invariably failed.

Shortly after the death of King Solomon, a Jewish mythologist put into the mouth of his god Yahweh a promise to the patriarch Abraham that the god was going to give Abraham's descendants all of the territory that constituted the nations of Israel and Judah. Since the Jews and Israelites already occupied all of the ‘promised land’ at the time the prophecy was composed, the probability of the mythologist being proven wrong was minimal, to say the least. To believers who are not unteachable, the retroactive nature of such prophecies is not a problem. But to the intestinally challenged, belief in the literal truth of a bible that promises them eternal life is the only thing that suppresses their terror of death and gets them through the day without having to be institutionalised and diapered.

The promised land was not, of course, the Bible's only retroactive prophecy. One of the authors of the Book of Daniel wrote the apocalypse that even mythologists recognise as a retroactive prophecy of the rise and fall of Antiokhos IV and the establishment of the Hasmonean dictatorship that evolved into a monarchy. Accepting an earlier author's erroneous claim that the Jewish world (as part of the Babylonian empire) had once been ruled by the Medes, he ‘prophesised’ that Nebuchadnezzar's monarchy would be succeeded by four world empires. “My

Prophets & Psychics

past & present
time travellers

Continued...

god can lick your god” fanatics continue to interpret Daniel’s retroactive prophecy as referring to Imperial Rome, Islam, the Papacy, and various other post-Maccabee organisations. Since the fourth empire can be identified beyond dispute as the Macedonian, founded by Alexander and continued by the Seleukids, the first three can only have been the Babylonian empire of Nabonidus (that did exist), the Median empire of a mythical ‘Darius’ (that did not exist), and the Persian empire of Kyros and his successors. Following the collapse of the fourth empire on the death of Antiokhos IV, the Jews would establish a kingdom of saints, independent of foreign overlordship, which would last forever. The Maccabees indeed established such a kingdom, but it lasted only a century. In 63 BCE Jewish independence was terminated by the world’s new superpower, Rome, not to be regained until 1948 CE.

Virtually every biblical prophet gave his ultimately failed predictions a spurious credibility by pretending to have written years earlier than the time he actually lived, and by preceding his guesses about the future with ‘prophecies’ of events that had already happened. The reason the prophetic section of Daniel can be so precisely dated is that all events prior to 163 BCE were “prophesised” correctly, while no event later than that date was accurately foreseen.

Not all biblical prophets were content to write books from which they could not personally benefit. Richard Friedman, a professor of religion at the University of California, San Diego, presents convincing evidence (*Who Wrote the Bible?*, 1987) that the Book of Deuteronomy, discovered during the renovation of the Jerusalem temple in 621 BCE, was written by the prophet Jeremiah. And Deuteronomy contained a detailed prophecy put into the mouth of Moses (Deut. 18:15-19) that there would one day be a new prophet who would be Moses’ successor and equal. At the time Deuteronomy was written, the

only person who could have plausibly claimed to be that prophet was Jeremiah himself. Unfortunately for Jeremiah, his attempt at self-glorification failed. The Jewish king imprisoned him as a Babylonian collaborator, and the Babylonian king eventually forced him to flee to Egypt, from where he never returned.

As reported in the book bearing his own name, Jeremiah prophesised, correctly as it turned out, that Jerusalem would fall to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. But like all prophets before and since, he pushed his luck too far when he stopped prophesising events in the process of happening and started prophesising the future (Jer. 50:1-3): “The sermon that Yahweh spoke ... against Babylon. ... Babylon is captured. Bel is humiliated. Marduk is smashed to pieces. ... For out of the north an infidel is going to march against her ... to make her land desolate.”

Jeremiah’s prophecy was a declaration that Babylon would fall to a revived Assyria. Assyria never revived. Babylon was in fact captured in 538 BCE, ending the Jewish captivity after forty-eight rather than the seventy years Jeremiah had predicted, by a conqueror from the opposite direction from the one Jeremiah had forecast, King Kyros of Persia. An interpolator’s prophecy that the Jews would be slaves for Nebuchadnezzar “and his son and his son’s son” (Jer. 27:7) also failed. Nebuchadnezzar’s son’s son was never king.

Of the Bible’s countless failed prophecies, the most notable is the one put into the mouth of Jesus by the anonymous author of the gospel known as Mark (9:1): “There are some standing here who are not going to experience death until they have seen God’s theocracy established by force.” Since Jesus died in 30 CE, and his hearers could have included children capable of living a further ninety years, we can calculate that he promised to overthrow the Roman empire and be crowned king of an independent Judea no later than 120 CE, early in the reign of the emperor Hadrian. He seems to have been delayed. What neither the Jesus of history nor the reconstructed Jesus of Mark ever

prophesised was that his triumph would happen only after an intervening death and ‘second coming’.

The best known other failed prophecy is to be found in the Book of Revelation. Revelation’s inclusion in Christian bibles is supremely ironic, since neither of its authors was a Christian. The first author, writing between the Roman occupation of the Jerusalem temple courtyard in July 70 CE and the razing of the temple in August 70 CE, was an Essene Jew who viewed the Nazirites – Jews who regarded Jesus as their messiah – as apostates from true Essene philosophy. The final redactor, John of Patmos, was a Nazirite, a Jesus-Jew who regarded the Christians as, “those who call themselves Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of the Satan” (Rev. 2:9).

The earlier author, the Essene, promised the Jews fighting for independence from Rome that the final battle of the war would take place at Armageddon, north of Jerusalem, and the Jews would win. As any historian can confirm, the final battle took place at Masada, south of Jerusalem, and the Jews lost.

The future cannot be foreknown, even by a god – unless the future is predetermined and there is no such thing as free will. Anyone who agrees with psychologist B. F. Skinner that genetic programming, whether implanted by a god or by blind chance, determines whether an individual becomes a philanthropist or a serial killer, and that free choice plays no part in his decision, can expect to be condemned by the religious and the rational both. But if, in contrast, the future depends on decisions not yet made and accidents not yet caused, then foreknowledge of the future is by definition impossible. To believe otherwise is to believe that an effect (knowledge of an event) can precede its cause (the event foreknown). It follows that there is no such thing as a prophet or a psychic and never will be. ■



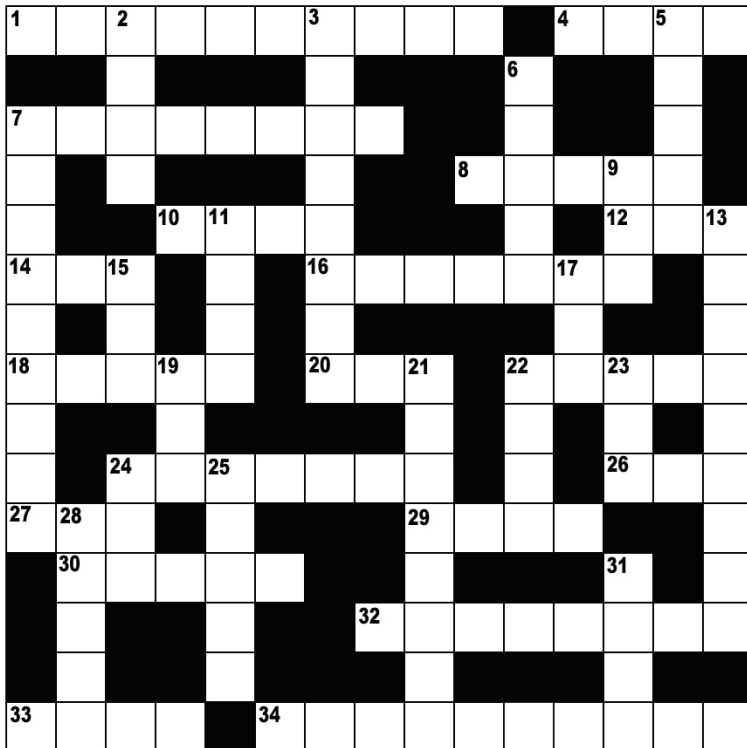
About the author

Dr William Harwood is editor/translator of *The Fully Translated Bible* (from which all quotations are taken). His latest book is *God, Jesus and the Bible: The Origin and Evolution of Religion*.



Brain testers

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD no 4



Geoff & Richard Saunders

CODE BREAKERS

1. Substitution puzzle

S wgfme k: wupn wgqcm cste re csbe st
nueke weke fg uyignuensopc lsnqpnsgfl?

2. Easy transposition: 91 characters

Yyai.trooncb.iuudkupe.r..tinc.yy.cdafooyk'n
ruuo.s.i.ruy.pec..oninancuocdnoarsks.sn.e..pe'f!

3. Mixed column transposition: 136 characters

iwooIhshghn..a.aeo.fdtwsd.aoo.i.
.hnr.ttitudgnhhnos.ooe.t..i.t.se
bent.senenthfandldeeemseiolieeed
ewlrl...vee..Gruedcuoes..tsbda.
tu.el.st

Answers on page 47

ACROSS

1. Anzac chronicler, or Atkinson act? (6, 4)
4. On track to the med lab? (4)
8. Rode the horse badly, then took it back. (8)
9. Chaotic anger over grazing land. (5)
10. Singer was heard to be a short man! (4)
12. Callow lout hides wise bird. (3)
14. Crazy computer or Will's royal roisterer? (3)
16. Cult leader was an axis poet. (7)
18. Sounds like the upper house sings praises. (5)
20. American fuel returns to lose shape. (3)
22. Singer loses final heat result. (5)
24. The Browns consumed 16 ac's spirits. (7)
- 26.. French and English articles found in a meadow. (3)
27. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Who knows? (3)
29. Break a leg, but not break wind. (29)
30. Beer left befuddled a Confederate. (5)
32. A dry barn makes an imperfect animal enclosure. (8)
33. Cost confused a Caledonian. (4)
34. Get to know diners, I hear, but not a group of vegans! (4, 6)

DOWN

2. Carbon set becomes religious movement. (4)
3. Her beast scrambles and expires. (8)
5. Hurlled through by the sound of it. (5)
6. Outside broadcast with doctors' group president. (5)
7. The French affluent stand in place of the French cardinal. (9)
9. Deity urged the 500 to proceed. (3)
11. Bogus ESP has inner purposes. (4)
13. Geared, but I'm not in evil geared mess. (9)
15. Bud's buddy sounds like John? (3)
17. Pain from overwork? Sir, you are confused!
19. Homeric utterance a modern classic. (3)
21. Gallium's Goliath, by Jupiter! (3, 5)
22. Sol and I hit the dirt! (4)
23. Endless African river leads to nothing. (3)
24. To begin, the Old English form of an appendage. (3)
25. Choose bewildered eastern Celt. (5)
28. Football club takes in Aussie sailors to make money. (5)
31. Hammer Arkansas into iron replica. (4)

The happy news on grimoires

Grimoires: A History of Magic Books

By Owen Davies

Oxford University Press, A\$59.95

If you thought you were outside the realm of magic, think again. There has been *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on television, for instance, with magic books central to some of the plots. When the program was popular, Owen Davies used to get e-mails from teenage girls asking about specifics of casting spells. “They had seen my personal website,” writes Davies, “presenting my historical studies on witchcraft and magic and assumed I was a practitioner.” Who knows if some of those inquiries were from your neighbourhood teens with queries against you in particular? And

even if Davies couldn’t help the petitioners, and even if magic is all bogus and never works, it is still intimately associated with orthodox religions and has been since those religions began. In *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books*, Davies gives a full and authoritative look at magic books, their origin, and their influence. There is plenty of history here, but magic continues into the current day. Grimoires still cast their spell.

You can go back to Saint Paul to be reminded how residents of Ephesus, a centre renowned for magic instruction, gathered all their magic books together in a big bonfire. There seems

to have been enough of them that they weren’t the possessions of a few professional magicians or learned men, but were held within ordinary households. Such burnings have gone on ever since, and the church has always officially opposed the magic arts, but one of the lessons in Davies’s book is that magic has often gone hand-in-hand with the church.

Grimoires included plenty of religion. There were spells to protect from harm, spells cast

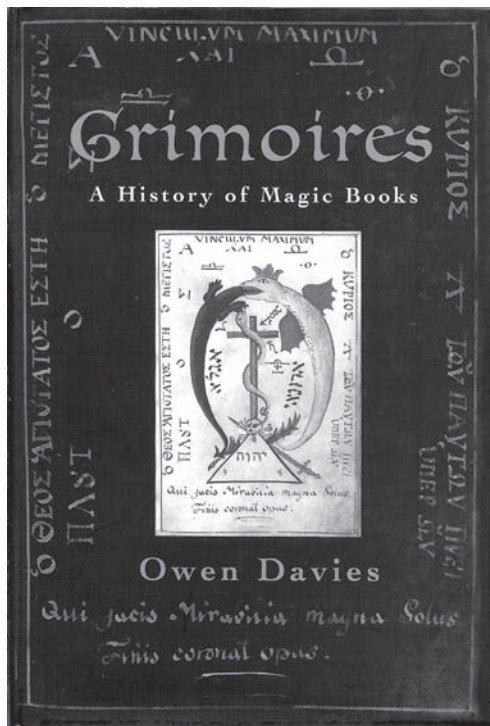
specifically to Jesus or to Mary. Recipes for making magic included using the sign of the Cross or holy water. From the early years of Christianity, scholarly priests and even bishops were under suspicion for practicing magic. Pope Silvester II who died in 1003 was rumoured to dabble in magic, and could call up spirits from hell. Pope Boniface VIII who died in 1303 was put on trial posthumously for having three demons under his control, and sacrificing a cock within a magic circle in his garden, all the while reading out a spell from his grimoire.

“What does this tell us?” asks Davies, and answers, “That ordination, piety, and power were no safeguards against the suspicions and jealousies generated by successful career advancement, wealth, and political influence.” Whether or not the suspicions had grounds, medieval clergy were the main practitioners of magic, and monastery libraries were important repositories of grimoires. Some popes were branded with authorship of grimoires. Parisian magicians of the late 1600s circulated the *Grimoire de Pape Honorius*, which Honorius III did not write, although it gave advice on how to obtain visions of God and of hell.

Magic had plenty of specific uses beyond bringing blessings or curses. One was treasure hunting. You could go out and dig for treasure, and there wasn’t anything heretical about that, but some treasures were kept hidden by ghosts and demons. “Who were you going to call?” jokes Davies. “Why, the priests and monks who had access to the grimoires which instructed on how to conjure, exorcise, and control them.” (This was the sort of work that Joseph Smith and his father did, using seer stones, magic circles, and talismans to find treasure, until Smith used some different sort of magic to be given the golden plates from which he could translate the *Book of Mormon*.)

Sexual magic was popular, whether to help in a sexual conquest or to improve sexual performance. Magic was also used for medical treatments, often jointly with religious healing. Exorcisms of illness demons could be combined with ordinary prayer as well as with using charms that might or might not be Christian versions of pagan amulets. Doctors might have recommended such remedies.

Davies shows that although grimoires and magic lore were used by clerics and doctors, when the Renaissance came, and printed books became widespread, anyone who was literate could follow a grimoire’s recipe. But you didn’t have to be literate to get a grimoire’s benefit; just owning it could help you. *The Long Lost Friend*, printed in America in 1856, showed the blend of magic and Christianity when it proclaimed, “Whoever carries this book with him, is safe from all his enemies, visible or



invisible; and whoever has this book with him cannot die without the holy corpse of Jesus Christ nor drowned in any water, nor burn up in any fire, nor can any unjust sentence be passed upon him.”

The Bible itself is no grimoire, but has often been held to be full of magic properties. Putting it under one’s pillow would protect one from spirits, or using a written passage from it as an amulet might promote health. When Europeans started their colonies, the indigenous people (and this has been reported around the globe) were convinced that the power of the white people was coming not just from the Bible, but from the secret magic of the true Bible, whose potent parts were not revealed to those in subjugation.

The strangest story here of the transcultural power of magic is that of William Delaurence, born in Ohio in 1868. He was a railroad flagman, and then a door-to-door salesman, selling books on hypnotism. He eventually became America’s most influential occultist. For a time he was a leader of the Order of the Black Rose, a magic cult “which apparently worshipped at the feet of a perfumed, wooden cigar-store Indian” and initiated women into the cult by having sex with them. He set up his own publishing firm to put out texts like *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, which he plagiarised from older texts. These became part of the foundation for popular religious movements in Nigeria or Ghana. Anthropologists found copies of Delaurence’s books in shrines there. The books also became part of religious practice in Jamaica, where books from Delaurence’s company are still prohibited from import. That doesn’t keep them from being

influential; Jamaican practitioners of Delaurence’s ‘science’ teach that spirits can be summoned from Chicago, Delaurence’s home, and if you have not paid the practitioner’s fee, the spirits will shred your clothes with razor blades or cause stones to fall on your house.

Grimoires is no grimoire, but it does include samples of wisdom from many books of magic and descriptions of magic practice. For instance, a monk in France in the 16th century was sentenced to life imprisonment after being tortured to confess that he had exerted control over women by offering to the Devil wax puppets that contained his saliva and the blood of toads. A skeptical modern reader will be amazed that this sort of nonsense was ever thought to have any power. We have Viagra now, and we have metal detectors for finding treasure, and we have antibiotics, but still the call to understand the universe by means of the supernatural seems overwhelming for many.

Magic, often yoked to better-accepted religions, never seems to go away. Incense, for instance, has for centuries been used for magical purposes, and certain types were marketed for certain spells. For people concerned about incense smoke setting off their smoke detectors, aerosol sprays with the same magic potency are now manufactured for ritual use. You can get the latest on how to conjure up a demon on the internet.

Davies’s review is big and entertaining, and will serve up a good dose of dismay for those who think we are done with the silliness of the supernatural.

- Reviewed by Rob Hardy

A Christian view of science ... or a scientist’s view of Creation

Creation or Evolution – Do we have to choose?

By Denis R. Alexander

Monarch Line, A\$24.95

Skeptics are likely to be a bit apprehensive about this book. I was when I picked it up in a Christian bookshop in Glen Innes, NSW. It turns out that the author is a perfectly genuine scientist. He is a biochemist who spent many years working at places like the Imperial Cancer Research Laboratories in London. He is also a very strong Christian believer, and the first sentence of the book is: “I have written this book

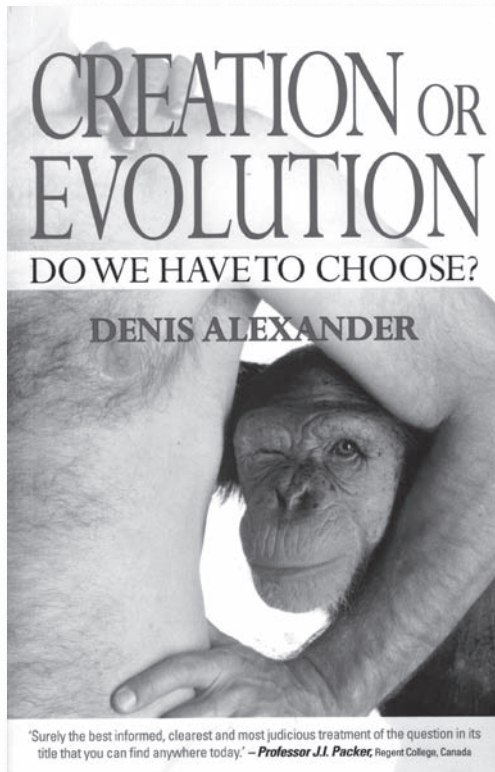
mainly for people who believe, as I do, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God from cover to cover.”

From bitter experience, many of us are likely to expect the usual farrago of creationist distortions in the rest of the book. But that isn’t what we get at all. A large part of the book is taken up with outlining the processes of evolution and refuting some of the common creationist objections. These accounts impressed me, and acquainted me with a great deal of relevant science that I did not know. Alexander makes it perfectly clear that he regards the evidence for evolution as quite overwhelming.

A Christian view of science ... or a scientist's view of creation

Continued...

The author makes the important point that the idea of evolution sets many people's teeth on edge because of the way it has been appropriated and abused for other purposes. Darwinian evolution, and its more recent manifestations, is



a purely scientific theory which tells us a great deal about how and why life developed as it has. However, it has been used to justify extreme harsh capitalism, nationalism and racism. These associations prejudice many people against the scientific theory, even though there is no logical connection.

So what about the clashes of science with the Bible, six-day creation and all that? Alexander is a strong Christian, and he regards the Bible as completely inspired by God. However, he also argues that it is wrong to take the Bible as history or as a scientific text. Different parts of the Bible have different aims

and contexts, and none of them are scientific. Genesis I, for example, is a stunning rebuke to non-Jews of the time, who embraced a polytheistic world, with squabbling and amoral gods. Dig out a Bible, read the chapter with that in mind and its impact is awesome.

Adam and Eve, in Alexander's interpretation, were neither the first nor the only humans in the world. They were the first people to be given awareness of God, and of course they messed things up badly.

We are all familiar with the fundamentalist God of Genesis, who created the entire universe in six days. That must have been a lot of work. However, the fundamentalists' God looks positively lazy beside Alexander's. For Alexander, God is constantly maintaining the orderly processes of the universe, and without him they would not exist. So if scientists discover that $E=MC^2$, or that DNA is a double helix, or that there is a new form of galaxy in the universe, they are simply revealing God's ongoing handiwork.

Evolution, from this view, is actually a divine process.

As I read the book, a couple of strong objections to Alexander's view occurred to me. One is that this God is appallingly cruel. For hundreds of millions of years animals have suffered and died in order, in the fairly recent past, to produce ourselves. The sheer amount of suffering involved in this process is quite abominable, and I wonder whether anyone could worship a God who caused it. In addition, the process is highly inefficient. It took billions of years to produce humans, and we live in a universe in which, for immense distances in all directions, there appears to be no other life.

Alexander is aware of these objections, and does try to answer them. For him, life is a package deal: if you are going to live, then you will suffer and you will die. And, he argues, given God's infinite resources, talk of wastefulness is rather absurd. Personally, these arguments don't convince me. All those animals – and the early humans – never accepted God's 'package deal.' They lived, they suffered and they died, by the countless billions. That's cruel. And while God may be able to afford such a monstrous waste of time and resources, it strikes me as simply pointless.

As I read through this book, I uttered occasional exclamations of enthusiasm, and my wife became quite concerned. Was I, she wondered, getting religion? It could happen. After all, if Barry Williams can become a Russian Orthodox patriarch (see *The Skeptic* June 2009 p7), surely Bridgstock might eventually see the light. Well no, that didn't happen. I do, however, regard the book as well worth reading for a number of reasons.

First, it gives a good, clear account of the processes of evolution and the range of evidence supporting it. Second, it gives an interpretation, from the viewpoint of a devout Biblical Christian, of how science and religion can be reconciled. As Alexander points out, the fundamentalists are so noisy that many non-believers equate religion with fundamentalism, which is simply wrong. Third, the book makes some useful points about the ways that Darwinian evolution has been hijacked and abused by political and ideological zealots.

If reading a religious argument – and this book is by a Christian, for other Christians – irritates you, then don't bother. But if you want to see how a thoughtful, intelligent person looks at the issues of creation and evolution, then you may enjoy this book.

- Reviewed by Martin Bridgstock

Snap happy spirits

The Strange Case of William Mumler,
Spirit Photographer By *Louis Kaplan*

Monarch Books, A\$24.95

Everyone likes a good ghost story, and everyone has a curiosity about ghosts; some are ready to be astonished at accounts of visits from the spirit world, others to be astonished at the credulity of those who believe such accounts. William Mumler gave a good dose of astonishment for both sides.

Mumler, who was active in the 1860s, photographed spirits for the benefit of the bereaved, and his photos fit into the Spiritualist thinking of the time. In *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (University of Minnesota Press), Louis Kaplan, an associate professor of history and theory of photography, has given the history of Mumler's work, and for the most part the history speaks for itself. He reprints Mumler's own account of his experiences with spirit photography, P.T. Barnum's thoughts on the issue, the argument of the counsel attempting to prosecute Mumler for fraud, and best of all the verbatim press reports about Mumler's career and trial. To read the original documents is to come to a close understanding of the largely American, largely 19th century craze for communicating with the dead.

Kaplan points out that Mumler could not have flourished "without the intellectual and spiritual support and patronage of the religious movement known as Spiritualism". The New England Spiritualists' Association, for instance, had a short credo: "Our creed is simple. Spirits do communicate with man - that is the creed." Like most religions, Spiritualism gave its believers some way to deal with the ephemerality of life. Kaplan writes, "Spiritualists were driven by an otherworldly desire to deny death and to abolish the limits of

human finitude and, as we shall see, they looked to both old and new communications technologies by which to achieve these ends." Spiritualists borrowed from the age's enthusiasm for science. Scientists worked in their labs, and Spiritualists used séances as their labs. The electric telegraph could send messages in an invisible fashion, and so could spooks. Eadward Muybridge could use photographs to show us processes that our eyes could not see, and this is what spirit photographers did. Of course, skeptics insisted on scientific evaluation of spiritualist claims and never were satisfied that such evaluation proved positive.

Mumler had worked as an engraver, and took photographs as a hobby. He claimed that he was completely surprised when shadow images showed up on his plates, hovering over the overt subjects of his portraits. He did believe in Spiritualism, and his wife was a medium. His own writing tells of going to séances in which spirits would dispense advice like, "Have no fears for the future. This is a beautiful place," or reassurance from a loved one, "I am always with you." The spirits also played popular tunes on the accordion, he said, "as sweetly as they could possibly be executed on that instrument by mortal fingers". He was happy to have his photos stand as scientific evidence that family members who had crossed to the other side were still with us, and for the most part, the Spiritualists were happy, too. Spiritualist journals like *The Banner of Light* tended to gush about his photographic successes, but in 1863 it published an accusatory statement from a Dr Gardner who had evidence of deception within Mumler's studio. Tellingly, Dr Garner maintained nonetheless that Mumler's mediumship had produced genuine spirit likenesses. It isn't the only occasion here of a believer wanting to believe against evidence.

Another such instance is given in the chapter by P.T. Barnum, from his 1866 book *Humbugs of the World*. He tells the story of a woman who learned that her brother had been killed in the Civil War, so she went to a spirit photographer (not identified as Mumler in Barnum's account, but Mumler was the prime practitioner), emerging with a tolerable likeness that pleased her. She afterwards learned that her brother had not died. "But this did not shake her faith in the least," writes Barnum. "She simply remarked that some evil spirit had assumed her brother's form in order to deceive her." Barnum also wondered at another woman who got a spirit picture of her brother who had died five years previously. She said she recognised the image for he had on the same pattern of cravat he used to wear. "Can human credulity go further than to suppose that the departed still appear in the old clo' of their earthly wardrobe?"

Below Master Herrod was a young medium from Bridgewater, Massachusetts photographed by Mumler in about 1872.



Snap happy spirits

Continued...

Barnum was one of the witnesses called for the prosecution when Mumler was brought before Judge John Dowling in April and May 1869, to see if the charges of fraud (in the form of felony and misdemeanor) ought to be presented to the grand jury. Barnum, on the stand, admitted that he had not talked with Mumler but had, nonetheless, “devoted a portion of my life to the detection of humbugs,” and he put Mumler’s photographs in that category. There were also witnesses to testify that the spirit photographs were genuine manifestations of real spirits. Both sides drew upon the Bible’s accounts of spirits to show respectively that they indubitably existed but on the other hand that they existed in an unphotographable form.

The prosecutor explained, “Man is naturally both credulous and superstitious, and in all ages of the world imposters and cheats have taken advantage of this credulous and superstitious nature to impose upon their fellows less sharp in intellect than themselves.”

He listed nine methods by which such photographs could be faked, but the actual process used by Mumler was never found; the prosecutor did mention that the more carefully Mumler’s processing of the photograph was watched, the less likely it was to have any extra images, or clear ones. The judge’s decision hinged on this; though Mumler had boasted of his mediumistic power, during the trial he averred that he never knew and never claimed to know how the spirits were arranging to show up for their portraits. Since no one had actually caught him doctoring the plates, the judge let Mumler go. The headline in *The New York World* was, “The Triumph of the Ghosts”. *The Herald* said such a decision was linked to the general breakdown of social order and a rush of society into bedlam.

Kaplan’s volume reproduces many of Mumler’s photos, including his most famous, the ghostly image of Lincoln over the shoulder of his widow who had come in for just such a photo. For being so full of joy on ‘the other side’, none of these spirits smile - they all have the same dour expressions as the living subjects



Above “For being so full of joy on ‘the other side’, none of these spirits smile - they all have the same dour expressions as the living subjects” - Rob Hardy

of photographs of the period. Some only show up as disembodied hands. Some thrust crosses into the hands of the sitters. One strums a guitar that a real woman holds. Some shower flowers. It is a great shame that there seems to be no explanation of how the “Spirits of Europe, Africa, and America” showed up behind a Master Herrod, for they are something other than spooks of the departed. Every photo looks like some sort of double exposure, and it is hard to understand how people could have fastened so firmly on them as being evidence of spirits rather than evidence of gullibility.

It is fun to see the pictures and ‘judge for yourself’, and it is fun to read what Mumler’s contemporaries were making of this new religious manifestation. It would be nice to say we are all less likely to be taken in now, but while we don’t do Spiritualism the way they did a hundred and fifty years ago, there are still people who think double-exposed photos are evidence of departed spirits. Kaplan even tells of a website devoted to contemporary works of this kind, but in the interest of the promotion of sanity, I will refrain from telling you where it is.

- Reviewed by Rob Hardy

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD SOLUTION



CODE BREAKERS SOLUTION

1. Solution

I wonder: what would life be like if there were no hypothetical situations?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
promethusabcdfgijklngvwxyz

2. Solution

You can pick your friends and you can pick your nose but you can't pick your friend's nose!

3. Solution

Columns taken in order 24681357

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect, has intended us to forgo their use



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Psychiatry gets a bashing

In which is discussed youth suicides, medication, statistics and the resort to authority



If there's one thing that really gets up my nose, it's people who claim to be skeptics because they believe only what they're told by respectable people.

Case in point. In *The Skeptic* (29:1; p22-23) Dr Harriet Hall, self-titled the Skepdoc, lays into critics of psychiatry. While much of the criticism of the discipline is justified, she says some critics make the mistake of dismissing even the possibility that psychiatry could be scientific.

Well, that could be an arguable position. It's probably the one that I hold, if it's conceded that dealing with self-referential entities like people rather than frankly predictable entities like protons is a complicated business and may require a rather more complicated definition of 'science' than the usual clichés.

In practice, though, this is as far into the article as skepticism is allowed to get. After that, it's a matter of putting the boot into Thomas Szasz and the Scientologists, not respectable people at all, not at all the kind of people whose words Skepdoc would believe uncritically.

Which is why Skepdoc is setting us such a horrible example. When she is looking at the work of respectable people, then, instead of checking the data or even looking at the articles themselves, she simply regurgitates what is basically editorial copy.

Let's take, for example, her section on SSRIs and suicide.

She says: "In 2004 warnings inundated the media: studies had indicated an increase in suicidal ideation (from 2 per cent to 4 per cent) in children taking SSRIs for depression. These studies were flawed, and there was no increase in actual suicide rates, only in reported ideation. There were other clear data showing that SSRIs reduced suicide rates in depressed children. Nevertheless, the scare caused prescription rates to fall by 18-20 per cent, and suicide rates promptly increased by 18 per cent. The misguided attempt to prevent suicide instead led to an increase in suicides."

The reference given is to *Suicide and SSRI Medications in Children and Adolescents: An Update*, by Dr Steven Cuffe.

Let's concede for the sake of argument that publication in refereed scientific journals is the best available way to establish facts. There are

known problems – publication bias towards positive findings, for example – but provided we don't confuse 'best available' with 'best possible', that's a good working assumption.

Psychiatry, however, has particular problems with its publication systems. Conflicts of interest abound, and declarations of interest generally run to half a page of small print. There is an enormous number of journals in the field, and almost any opinion can find a sympathetic editor somewhere. The placebo effect – and it's worth pointing out that none of the hard sciences have anything remotely resembling a placebo effect – is enormously and incalculably influential. Outcomes are influenced by constantly shifting and varying cultural, social, and political effects. Most observations hover at the edge of statistical significance. In a nutshell, any study and any finding need to be handled with extreme care.

It is thus rather surprising, at the outset, that the reference Skepdoc relies upon was not published in any of the refereed journals generally insisted on but rather in *The DevelopMentor*, the web-based newsletter and publicity organ of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP).

Cuffe says: "It has now been almost three years since the FDA issued the ... warning for all antidepressants due to elevation of suicide ideation and behavior. The data showed a small increase in suicidal thought and behaviors, from 2 per cent in the placebo groups to 4 per cent in the medication groups, when data from all trials for all indications were combined. There were no completed suicides in any of the studies conducted on antidepressant medications. The FDA issued the warning despite evidence that increasing prescriptions for SSRI antidepressant medications was clearly correlated with decreasing rates of actual suicide, and use of antidepressant medications was not associated with suicide in any prior studies. ..."

"Nemeroff *et al*, in April 2007 reported on the impact of the ... warning on prescription rates of antidepressant medication. They found prescription rates decreased 18-20 per cent in the aftermath of the FDA actions. They also found a shift in care from 'generalists' to psychiatric specialists. Family medicine physicians and pediatricians were less likely to prescribe antidepressant medications. The fears of the Assembly appear to have been justified. But what happened to the suicide rate in 2004? The rate of suicide in children and adolescents up to age 19 increased 18 per cent, from 2.2 to 2.6 per 100,000 (Hamilton *et al*, 2007). This is the first increase in over 10 years. This does not necessarily mean the decrease in antidepressant prescriptions caused the increase ..."

Here we have a natural experiment. The prescription of SSRIs went down by 18 per cent, and the suicide rate goes up by 18 per cent. What could be neater than that?

My first reaction was that this is making a mountain out of a coincidence. Put this way, there's obviously a suggestion that there's a close dose-response-related correlation, but a moment's thought would tell us that this couldn't possibly be true. If instead of going down by 18 per cent the prescription rate had gone down by 100 per cent this would give us no grounds for supposing that the suicide rate would go up by 100 per cent; even more certainly, we can say that if the prescription rate had instead gone up by 100 per cent the suicide rate would not have gone down by 100 per cent, to zero. Looking at the previous year, for example, we can see that prescriptions went up by 9.2 per cent and suicides fell by 4.3 per cent; moving in the same direction, but not identical.

An even-handed skeptic, reading this, might also ask a number of other questions. Given that the rate of suicide in this age group was 2.6 per 100,000, for example, how many suicides in the study population of 4400* would one expect if the risk had in fact increased? To be fair, the 2.6 rate covers everybody from babies (who seldom commit suicide) up, and the rate among the age groups tested would be higher. To be even fairer, the test population is obviously that of children and adolescents with problems, and the risk would rise again. Let's say that those factors together multiply the risk about four times to 10 per 100,000. If the risk under medication doubled that again, say, to 20 per 100,000, that would still mean that there'd only be a sixty per cent chance of an actual suicide showing up in an N of that size. To put it another way, to be 95 per cent sure that a suicide would show up if the risk had actually doubled you'd need to survey not 4,400 people but 15,000. Given that, how confident can we be that the absence of actual suicides is a strong argument for the safety of the drug? Not very, surely.

This is a general problem with drugs, by the way; side effects may well be extremely rare, but the company has every intention of having their drugs prescribed for millions of people, at which point any problem might finally start showing its teeth.

Still, Cuffe gives us his references, and we can look at the data ourselves. Table 1 indicates the figures for youth suicide, taken from the same recurrent review that gave us the 18 per cent increase figure (note that when we're talking about suicide in the 1-19 year range we're in practice talking about suicide in the 14-19 age group, the

figures in other brackets being pretty negligible; to get the actual rate in the group we're interested in these figures thus need to be multiplied approximately four times).

Table 1: Youth suicides

| Rate 1-19 yr | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|---------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 2.5 | 2.6 | 2.5 | 2.3 | 2.2 | 2.6 |
| Intentional self-harm (suicide) | | | | | | |

What stands out like a sore thumb, in any case, is that the increase in 2004 isn't the first increase in ten years. It's the first increase in four years. Across that period the rate went down three times and up twice. Cuffe and Skepdoc are obviously and unarguably wrong about an absolutely central element in their argument.

It's difficult to say which is most disgraceful – for Cuffe to be so inexcusably careless about his data in the first place, or for Skepdoc to quote the error without checking. Yes, the most recent increase is obviously larger, and yes, taken over that ten years the rate has gone fairly consistently down. That's not the point.

Cuffe, to his credit, does say that correlation does not prove causation, a quibble ignored by Skepdoc. Even so, the correlation is plainly significant. So how does the prescribing rate map on to the suicide rate? Figure 1 gives the time series in Nemeroff, "Antidepressant prescribing trend among those from birth to the age of 17 years".

From this we can see that Cuffe is engaging in some pretty shoddy apples-and-oranges work. He says "prescription rates decreased 18-20 per cent ... The rate of suicide ... increased 18 per cent." For the first of those – the decrease in prescription rates – he's taking month-on-month comparisons, comparing January 2004 to January 2005. For the second he's comparing the average rate for the whole of 2004 to the average rate for the whole of 2005. If he'd compared like to like, the average fall in prescription rates would be not 18 per cent but 11 per cent, which wouldn't have fitted nearly so neatly.

The next problem is that the prescription rate in 2004, after the dropoff, is approximately at the level it was at back in 2002. Which raises another problem. In 2002, 68 million prescriptions led to a suicide rate of 2.3/100,000; in 2004, to a rate of 2.6. The obvious deduction is that some other cause was operating – some other cause, moreover, that was several times as powerful as the medication effect. If anything, the data suggests that going off the medication is dangerous – that SSRIs may create some form of dependency that leads to powerful withdrawal symptoms that increase the risk of suicide. To make any progress with this hypothesis, however, one would need

* <http://www.fda.gov/CDER/Drug/antidepressants/SSRIPHA200410.htm>

Psychiatry gets a bashing

Continued...

to investigate the degree of overlap between the approximately 80 million prescriptions for SSRIs each year and the approximately 2000 young people committing suicide.

These are large numbers, and it's worth noting that even if everything Cuffe's article said was absolutely true, a back-of-the-envelope calculation would suggest that you'd need to hand out something like 26,000 prescriptions to avert one suicide, and there might be more effective ways to do it.

I am not claiming that SSRIs are not (or are) useful. I have nothing against antidepressants. I am simply irritated that the apparatus of skepticism is being used to package the public relations efforts of the learned professions.

This matter, in fact, raises larger issues of professional status. We begin with the situation that government regulators raising concerns about SSRIs have started a fuss, caused bad publicity, and raised threats to the power of medical practitioners to prescribe whatever they want to. Faced with this threat, Cuffe does a quick review of the literature and comes up with an argument to disregard previous studies. The AACAP publishes it. Nobody examines the argument too closely, if at all, or questions the data; they are all too glad to be able to return to the status quo where they could always be confident that they were in the right. The unexamined life is much less complicated.

It is exactly at this point that we need a skeptic – someone who is prepared to look as closely at the evidence for official statements as they are at the evidence for alternative therapies.

It's here, frankly, that I lose patience with Skepdoc. If all she wants to do is to point us to what is virtually a press release by the pediatric profession, just give the link. When you're writing an actual article on the damn thing, you surely have an obligation to check the bloody references and do the bloody maths.

POSTSCRIPT

I should say, too, that in the preparation of this article I sent an earlier draft to Skepdoc and asked for her comments. She kindly replied with a detailed response to my criticisms. She pointed out one significant error I had made, which I have removed, and commented also that: "I accept part of your criticism.

"(1) I plead guilty to quoting secondary sources. Never a good policy, even though they were all I had access to.

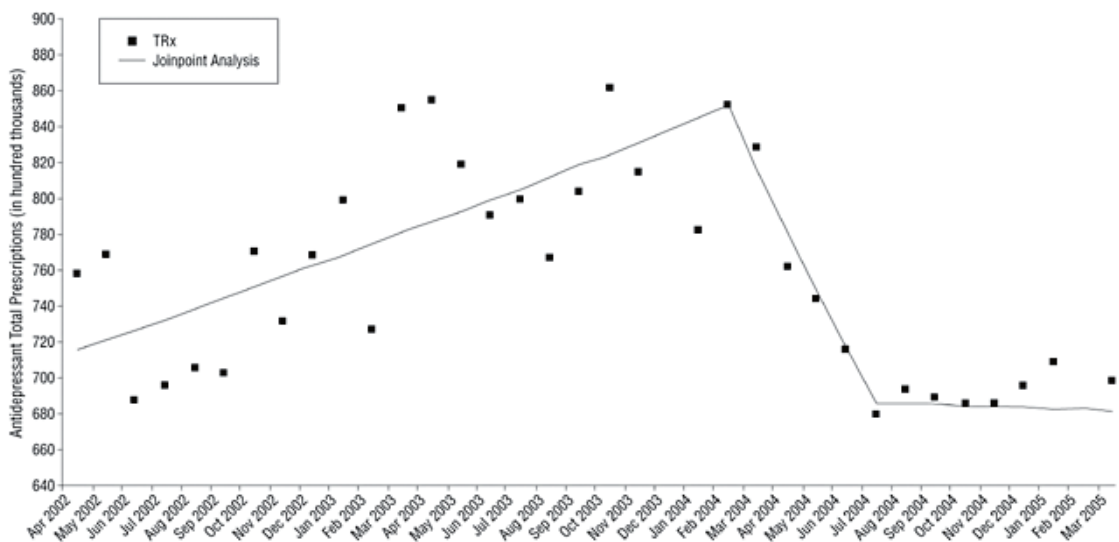
"(2) Of course, correlation does not prove causation, and I should have pointed that out in my article. We cannot know for sure that the decrease in SSRI prescriptions caused an increase in suicides, and I should have said so. But we do know that SSRIs prevent suicides so a rise in suicides when prescriptions are withheld is just what one would expect."

My point, such as it is, is exactly that: skepticism that is applied only to things that we do not 'know' or 'expect' is not skepticism at all.

"My point did not hinge on the number or cause of suicides, but on the fact that withdrawing SSRIs to prevent suicide did not prevent suicide and was not based on science. There was never any evidence that they were associated with suicidal behavior, only ideation."

As I suggest above, to detect a raised risk of actual suicides would require a much larger

Figure 1



study (I would estimate at least three times the 4,400 actually surveyed). To say that the warnings on SSRIs were not based on science is entirely unfounded; they were based on a meta-analysis by the FDA of 24 entirely scientific studies. The conclusions may, in retrospect, seem less cogent (although I am not particularly convinced of this by Cuffe's analysis) but to label the process unscientific is simply an example of the cast of mind that takes 'science' to mean 'things I agree with'.

"I admit the flaws in that one small section of my article (SSRIs and Suicide, a six sentence paragraph of which I am willing to retract the last two sentences), but I stand by the rest of the article."

Here, I am afraid, I must call on the authority of the clock striking thirteen; not only inaccurate in itself, but casting doubt upon all its other utterances. I haven't got time to go through all the evidence for the other assertions made in the original article. That's exactly why I read such articles in the first place – because I'm glad that someone else has put in the hard work of applying a skeptical perspective to technical details. Which is exactly why I get pissed off when it turns out that in fact they haven't.

"I have no brief for or against psychiatry or SSRIs. You might be interested to read the five part series Dr Steven Novella did on this subject, starting with www.theness.com/neurologicablog/?p=168. I don't think anyone could accuse him of being a Flackdoc or a poor skeptic, and he fully agrees with me."

As I say, the argument here (by which I mean "in the pages of *The Skeptic*") is not about whether SSRIs work or not. For us skeptics, it's about the level of scrutiny being given to the quality of the evidence being put forward in their defence.

"I am not in any way trying to 'package professional public relations'. I simply think science is applicable to mental illness and the trend of psychiatry-bashing is irrational and misguided.

"I think it is unfair of you to conclude that I am unsuited to be a skeptic."

I don't expect much out of life, but I do expect that anyone writing articles on medical topics has taken the trouble to read the original texts from a viewpoint of informed common sense. I'm sure Dr Hall is a very nice woman, and her responses are strong evidence for that proposition, but she simply does not comprehend what being a skeptic entails.

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Chris Borthwick
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Dr Hall responds:

I admitted that I relied on a secondary source for my statistics and I should have specified that if real, a rise in suicides would not necessarily indicate an effect of decreased antidepressant prescriptions. I appreciate Borthwick's explanation of the statistics. I don't appreciate the *ad hominem* attack.

Borthwick picks on one small point that was not essential to my overall argument, amounting to two sentences out of a long article, and he wants to take my skeptic credentials away even after I retracted the part he criticises. He says "I haven't got time to go through all the evidence for the other assertions made in the original article" yet he is willing to reject them because he found one error. This amounts to "poisoning the well" – a subcategory of the *ad hominem* logical fallacy.

I'd like to emphasise once more that the FDA's decision to issue warnings for adolescents was based on reports of suicidal ideation, not actual suicides, and that the drugs have been shown to prevent actual suicides. If the drugs had been causing suicides, the rate of suicides should have dropped when the number of prescriptions dropped, but they didn't. My point remains valid even if the numbers I cited were inaccurate. Borthwick points out that larger studies might be needed to detect an increase in suicides, but since larger studies had not been done, my point stands: the warning was not based on good evidence, but on the precautionary principle.

The benefit:risk ratio of antidepressants for children and adolescents is difficult to tease out, since depression itself causes suicides. It is still being hotly debated in the medical literature, with some concluding that prescribing should be severely restricted¹ and others saying the benefit:risk ratio is clearly positive². One study concluded that in moderate-severe depression the risk of suicide if antidepressants are not used may outweigh any risk of self-harm associated with them³. Another study says:

Psychiatry gets a bashing

Continued...

“Although in the past there were objections against the use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for the treatment of depression in children and adolescents, recent studies have shown that SSRIs, in particular fluoxetine, are effective against depression in this age group. Cognitive behavioural therapy has a questionable effect in children and adolescents with severe depression. Other unequivocally effective treatment options are not available. More suicidal behaviour was reported in children and adolescents using sertraline or venlafaxine, but fluoxetine did not clearly enhance this behaviour. Children with severe depression or a depression not responding to psychological therapy can be treated with SSRIs. Fluoxetine is the treatment of first choice.”⁴

Borthwick says, “the data suggests that going off the medication is dangerous – that SSRIs may create some form of dependency that leads to powerful withdrawal symptoms that increase the risk of suicide.” This is mere speculation and the evidence we have indicates that it is probably wrong. A recent review article on antidepressant discontinuation syndrome lists 30 symptoms found in patients going off medication, and suicidal ideation is not on the list⁵.

I agree with Borthwick that skeptics should not rely on secondary sources and should be very careful not to confuse correlation with causation. I don't accept his assertion that I “simply don't comprehend what being a skeptic entails.” If it entails absolute perfection and never making a mistake, there cannot be many skeptics in this world. And he's obviously not one either, since he admits that I pointed out a significant error of his own that he had to correct.

Dr Harriet Hall
The Skepdoc

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Religion & Jesus' policy statements...

In which we look at Jesus' sayings, his link to Mosaic law, and whether he existed at all

It's not often that analysis of a single sentence discloses three errors and a surprise revelation. Yet David Goss has managed to produce such a sentence in his contribution to the Forum (*The Skeptic*, June 2009). The sentence is: “But Jesus was not endorsing the pre-Prophetic injunctions of the Hebrews' tribal God – that would contradict the thrust of everything else Jesus is recorded as saying.” Each of the three errors in the sentence and then the revelation will be discussed in turn.

ERROR 1

“But Jesus was not endorsing the pre-prophetic injunctions ...”

Goss is displeased with Jesus' demand that his followers comply with the Jewish laws and traditions given to Moses by God (the Mosaic law). Who could blame Goss? Compliance with these laws is a matter of rigour. The dietary demands alone are severely restricting and who would willingly undergo circumcision? Goss prefers to believe that Jesus did not endorse the pre-prophetic injunctions of the tribal God. Goss, however, is wrong. Jesus not only instructed his followers to comply with these laws but insisted on complete obedience in this matter. It may not be good news but Jesus was adamant. He even spelt out the punishment for miscreants (see below). I have dealt with Goss's more 'convenient' interpretation of this matter previously (*Skeptic*, 29:2), as the same claim was also made by Butler. The audacity of this claim, however, necessitates a repeat rebuttal with further elaboration.

“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matt 5:17). Jesus is clearly stating that his followers must adhere to the law, i.e. the Mosaic law of the Old Testament. This includes the dietary laws.

Jesus emphasises that the laws of Moses are to apply forever and again states that the law is not to be altered in the slightest way: “For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” (Matt 5:18)

A man asked Jesus what was required of him to obtain eternal life. Jesus replied that he had to keep the ten commandments, ie Mosaic law. (Matt 19:16,18,19)

Jesus belabours the same point when he orders his followers to comply with the instructions of the Pharisees, those devout followers of the Mosaic law: “All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do...” (Matt 23:3).

In a nutshell, Jesus repeatedly stresses that his followers must comply with the Mosaic laws.

Punishment for miscreants is serious: “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:19); “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:20)

In further elaboration, Jesus endorsed not only the Mosaic law but also the Old Testament. Jesus vouched for Moses saying “have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him [Moses] saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?” (Mark 12:26). Jesus is vouching for the authenticity of Moses’ record of the burning bush, quoting from Exodus 3:6.

As McKinsey (1995) points out, “Jesus risks his reputation as Saviour upon the authority of Moses, Jesus says: ‘And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.’ (John 3:14-15) As Moses, so Christ. If Moses’ authority is questionable, so is Jesus’.” McKinsey continues, stressing the “all conclusive, incontrovertible words of Christ as to the authority of Moses”.

“Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?” (John 7:19) “And for had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” (John 5:46,47)

McKinsey says: “We see then that Jesus endorsed the writings of Moses. He attached to them as much authority as to his own words. Since Jesus endorses the authority of Moses, He stakes His own claim of authority upon this fact.” Can Jesus make the point more clearly?

Paul also endorsed the Mosaic law: “For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.” (Rom 10:5)

ERROR 2

“... *that would contradict the thrust of everything else ...*”

Goss does not elaborate on what else Jesus contradicts by insisting his followers adhere to the Mosaic law. I think Goss means that this would contradict everything else that he, Goss, likes to believe. Goss seems not to appreciate that it was quite usual for Jesus to contradict his own words. McKinsey devotes entire chapters in his Encyclopedia to contradictions in the Bible. Many of these contradictions emanate from Jesus. Here are just a few such contradictory statements for consideration.

“I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” (Matt 28-20) as against “... ye have the poor with you: but me ye have not always.” (Matt 26:11)

“For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother.” (Matt 15:4) versus “If any man come to me and hate not his father, mother, and wife, and children and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you”. (Matt 5:44) against “I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.” (Matt 10:35)

ERROR 3

“... *Jesus is recorded as saying.*”

Who does Goss think recorded the words of Jesus? There is no historical record of the existence of the character of Jesus. How can there be a record of anyone recording the words of Jesus when the words said to be those of Jesus were written in a country and language foreign to Jesus, by people who had never met Jesus, approximately 70 years after Jesus had died?. I addressed this matter in the previous *Skeptic* (June 2009) but once again don't take my word for it. Refer to the authority: McKinsey.



Religious & Jesus' policy statements ... *Continued...*

AND THE REVELATION ...

"... the Hebrews' tribal God ..."

Who is this tribal God of the Hebrews? Goss gives the impression that the tribal God is distinct from the God of the Christians. It is understandable that liberal Christians desire to dissociate themselves from the God of the Old Testament. Goss describes this God as "originally a tribal God, located in a physical place who demanded obedience, rituals and sacrifices, who helped his tribe and harmed their enemies, and who showed little or no compassion".

Goss considers this tribal God to be the harsh and jealous God of the limerick:

*"There was an old man with a beard,
Who said I want to be feared,
And just call me God,
And love me, you sod,
And Man did just that, which was weird."*

Goss, however, fails to recognise the identity of this tribal God. A brief examination of the early portion of Genesis and the first three verses in John 1 provides the answer.

The tribal God of the Hebrews created the situation in the Garden of Eden that resulted in Adam defying orders and eating the apple. Christians believe that Adam's 'sin' resulted in the punishment of eternal damnation for all future humans. This required Jesus to come to earth 4000 years later in order to be sacrificed. In this way future believers in Jesus, and this event, could be saved from eternity in hell. (Just an oddity, but there is no record in Genesis – or the entire OT – of the tribal God sentencing all post-Adam humans to eternal damnation.)

The most liberal of Christians cannot deny the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, and the sin of man, without casting doubt on the need for Jesus to sacrifice himself on the cross. It is accepted that it was "the tribal God of the Hebrews" who created the earth and Adam and Eve.

Yet a cursory examination of the first few verses of John, so favoured by ministers of Christianity, makes clear the true identity, dual or otherwise, of the tribal God of the Hebrews.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made." (John

1:1,2,3). "He was in the world, and the world was made by him [Jesus]." (John 1:10). Christian theologians tell us this means that Jesus was present at the beginning, as or with God, and inseparable from God. The "Word" is Jesus. If these verses in John are true, and the theologians assure us they are true, then Jesus is the same entity as the God of the Hebrews who created the universe (with the earth at its centre!). It is therefore Jesus, himself, who is Goss's tribal God of the Hebrews.

It was therefore also Jesus who gave the law ("pre-prophetic injunctions") to Moses. Little wonder Jesus ordered his followers to obey these laws.

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Mike Meyerson
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... AND ON THE OTHER HAND

In the Forum pages of *The Skeptic* (29:2, p52-55), with contributions from three writers, I did feel as if I was Daniel among the lions.

I doubt my ability to make adequate response to such a lot of material, but will touch on a few matters.

Mike Meyerson refers to Matt 5:17-20 to maintain that Jesus taught that the laws of Moses are to apply for ever. But the important words are "till all be fulfilled". "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." The law remains valid until it reaches its intended culmination. The law is unalterable, but that does not justify its application beyond the purpose for which it is intended. Elsewhere, "Christ is the end of the law." (Rom 10:4.) Matt 5:20 teaches that what is required is a greater righteousness, a relationship of love and obedience to God, which is more than a literal observance of regulations.

The view that every Old Testament regulation is eternally valid is not found in the New Testament, which consistently sees Jesus as introducing a new situation - which greatly upset the law-keeping Jews. Mark 7:11-14 has Jesus teaching that dietary laws no longer apply. I note David Goss's comment.

I don't think Mike Meyerson needs to speak of contradiction when he quotes Matt 15:4 and Luke 14:26. To hate one's parents as such would be monstrous. Jesus is speaking about a choice to be made between natural affection and loyalty to Christ. As so often, Jesus states the principle in a startling and categorical manner and leaves the hearers to work out the practice. I know of

several who have gone overseas to work among needy people who have faced severe opposition from parents.

Mike Meyerson quotes McKinsey as an authority as well as some other writers. Dr Griffith refers to Tom Harper as a specialist as opposed to John Lennox. Many authors can be lined up on both sides of most debates. The book by John Lennox, *God's Undertaker – Has Science Buried God*, includes a comment from Alan Emery, Emeritus Professor of Human Genetics, University of Edinburgh: “As an agnostic in the true sense of the word as ‘not knowing’, I found John Lennox’s book intriguing and providing much food for thought ... This is a well-written and thought-provoking book and will contribute to a reasoned discussion on a fundamental question.”

John Lennox and Richard Dawkins are both professors at Oxford University and know each other well. There is a DVD which contains the “God Delusion Debate” - both eminent men putting before an audience their respective convictions. There may have been no winner but there are clearly two sides (at least) to the question. I believe God and science are unnatural enemies.

Dr Francis Collins is head of the Human Genome Project, and works at understanding DNA, the code of life. He believes faith in God and faith in science are not enemies and in his book *The Language of God*, (Free Press - Simon & Schuster 2006), he makes his case for God and for science. He can refute arguments against faith from scientists and also counter the needless rejection of scientific truth by some people of faith.

Dr Pete Griffith refers to the Jesus Seminar. This gathering of several dozen mostly American scholars adopted a system of voting with coloured beads in order to decide the relative probability of Jesus’ sayings being authentic, in order to form some data to determine who Jesus was. 85 per cent were voted as not spoken by Jesus. If that’s all that remains of the authentic words of Jesus, there is next to nothing of interest in what Jesus actually said. It is astonishing that anyone ever took notice of him or troubled to crucify him.

I am not a fan of Hillsong, and the attempt of some Creation Scientists to maintain their view of a young earth is often clutching at invisible straws.

There is much in the article by David Goss with which I agree. However, re the twin sayings - Proverbs 26:4-5 - they could appear inconsistent if they had not occurred together. But they bring out the dilemma of reasoning with the unreasonable. You may need to appear foolish to talk with a fool. If you don’t answer, you confirm him in his folly. There are the popular proverbs - “Look before you leap” and “He who hesitates is lost” - each true in different situations.

Meyerson refers to McKinsey and others debunking the attempt of some to find evidence for an historical Jesus in 1st and 2nd century writings.

Tacitus in his *Annals* refers to Christus and writes of his home, his date and his execution by order of the Roman governor, but it is acknowledged that he doesn’t tell us anything about Jesus himself. The same may be said of the incident of Pliny the Younger and his query to the Emperor Trajan concerning those who were willing to face death because they would not curse Christ and refused to invoke the gods and make an offering to the emperor’s statue. Pliny refers to these people as a “perverse religious cult, carried to extremes”, but does not speak of Jesus himself.

What is clear however is that someone existed who had a considerable following of men and women, some of whom were prepared to be crucified upside down, executed or smeared with oil and then burnt alive in Nero’s garden as human torches.

The real historical puzzle is how a first century Galilean spawned such a rapidly expanding international movement. Those who suspect the historicity of the gospels on the grounds that there are so few early non-Christian references to him, must surely, by the same argument, be even more sceptical as to whether the Christian church even existed in the first century!

The Gospels, these Memoirs of the Apostles as Justin Martyr wrote, were written after Jesus’ message had met with a good deal of success and were meant to ‘ground’ the message the early Christians believed and were proclaiming, in the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

It is foolish to ignore the writings of those who knew him best. We cannot find the real Jesus by ignoring his portrait in the gospels. Once the gospel portrait is set aside the puzzle solving as to who Jesus was begins.

Admittedly, if the views of the Jesus Seminar are accepted there is little common ground as a basis for discussion.

Some time ago I glanced at someone else’s copy of *The Skeptic* and wrote a comment about an article to the editor, who kindly sent me a copy. Subsequently I took out a subscription. I am sure there are many views and claims and beliefs about which we can be rightly skeptical. I would endorse some of the skepticism referred to in this journal. But I continue to hold the view that there is sufficient historical evidence for the Christian faith.

Global Warming, Hamm, Plimer, etc

In which we return to carbon dioxide levels, Ian Plimer's book and Rubber Bibles(!)



A short response to the letter from Jack Hamm (*The Skeptic*, 29:2, p58) roughly in the order of his points or questions follows.

There is no saturation effect *per se* - just standard absorption of electromagnetic energy following an exponential law. CO₂ has three absorption peaks. One is too high in frequency and also overlaps a water vapour absorption peak so it has very little energy to absorb, the next absorbs nearly all the energy in that band so it does not change as CO₂ level changes and the third is quite close to the energy peak of the terrestrial radiation. This is the one that makes the major contribution to CO₂ driven warming and it will continue to do so even with CO₂ levels three times higher than the present.

The ice ages are driven exogenously by the sun and by terrestrial orbit oscillations, not by CO₂. CO₂ is a follower in this case and may increase or decrease the heating/cooling effects depending on the phasing of the CO₂ concentration variations with respect to the solar/orbital variations. CO₂ is only one of several factors that contribute to global warming/cooling. It just happens to be the one driving the deviation from the present equilibrium position.

I think there is some confusion in the letter about latent heat and radiated heat, as ice has a lot less sensible heat than the same mass of water or water vapour. The thermal stability of the terrestrial system derives from the stability of the solar radiation, typically better than +/-0.1 per cent over 100 year periods, the high thermal inertia of the earth's system and the fact that a 1 per cent change in net radiation flows is stabilised by a 0.25 per cent change in average global temperature. Thus a stability of 0.3 per cent in temperature over a 100 year period is not unexpected.

The total heat energy due to Man and all his machinations on an annual basis is about 0.01 per cent of that radiated by the earth and only about 2 per cent of the extra heat energy contributed by the extra 100ppmv of CO₂ put in the atmosphere over the last 100 years, so it is effectively insignificant.

Details on the above claims and the underlying mathematics and analyses are available in an article from the author if anyone is interested (john.ness@emsolutions.com.au).

John Ness
Yeronga Qld

Jack Hamm wrote of Mark Lawson's comment (*The Skeptic*, Vol 29:1, p64): "Isn't it the mark of a good skeptic that he gives documentary proof of his stated facts?"

Mark tried to deploy the 'CO₂ saturation' canard. The concept is that the heat trapping ability of CO₂ plateaus at a relatively low concentration - in the region of current interest in the low-to-mid hundreds of parts per million. Therefore it doesn't matter if CO₂ levels are allowed to rise, because it won't cause more warming. Mark's wrong again.

In reality there is linear response initially (below 100ppm), then it becomes logarithmic as concentrations rise - until very high partial pressures are attained, beyond even the highest levels seen in Earth's early history.

A useful reference discussing how the role of CO₂ in climate was discovered and quantified can be found at www.aip.org/history/climate/co2.htm.

It is part of Dr Spencer Weart's excellent book *The Discovery Of Global Warming*, which can be read on-line at the American Institute of Physics website. This is a well-referenced general overview of the science which I recommend highly.

With regard to "Can greenhouse proponents explain how the last Ice Age ended without any man-made CO₂ in the atmosphere to accelerate the process?", the proposed answer is at the previously posted link. To recap, orbital influences (the Milankovitch cycles) are important triggers - then changes to the composition of the atmosphere act as an accelerator as carbon dioxide bubbles out of warming oceans, carbon dioxide and methane out of warming tundra, etc. Other contributors include changes in the intensity of sunlight reaching the earth. No people required.

Human activity perturbs the carbon cycle. Jack, you acknowledge this in your comment about reinjecting fossil carbon back into the system. Human activity doesn't replace all the other natural processes that have regulated climate since the earth formed - it adds another variable to the system.

To infer that "global warming proponents" ignore the role of natural influences is creating a strawman to argue against." Using the Kelvin scale it does sound much hotter, and that might suit the global warmers."

Context is important. What's the impact on the biosphere? The key thing to think about is the magnitude and rate of change to average global temperature.

The last Ice Age (last glacial maximum, 20,000 years ago) was about five degrees Celsius cooler than now, for example see ref [1].

'Recent' past episodes of warming spiked at about six degrees above current temperature (eg the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, 55 million

years ago)[ref 2]. The temperature rose over about 20,000 years. The current climate experiment may well cause a similar rise in temperature over a century.

Lesser increases of 2-4 degrees C would produce climate regimes not seen for millions of years (the Miocene, Oligocene and Eocene epochs 10-50 million years ago.[ref 3].

“Here is a whacky hypothesis for some knowledgeable person to destroy.” Human heat production is a minute part of the terrestrial energy budget:

- Solar input: average 250W per square metre, for a total of about 1.7×10^{17} W (derived from figures at www.acrim.com)
- Geothermal energy: 3.8×10^{12} W [ref 4]
- Tidal energy: 3×10^{12} W [ref 5]
- Human heat production from fossil sources (80-90 per cent of global energy consumption): 1.6×10^{13} W [ref 6]

So human activity exceeds that of geothermal and tidal sources, but is about 1/10,000 the solar input. Yes, the hypothesis is whacky.

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Chris Guest’s review of Ian Plimer’s *Heaven and Earth* would appear to be a masterpiece of wilful misunderstanding, at best. His main point is that Plimer “misrepresents the AGW case as a denial of prior temperature variations” after earlier stating “I don’t want to delve into the issues of the debate” over Michael Mann’s 1000-year temperature reconstruction. This ‘hockey stick’ graph was later proved fraudulent by the Wegman Commission, as explained in great detail in Plimer’s book. If Mann

had been a medical researcher, like our own Dr William McBride, he would have been struck off.

Mann used tree ring data that had been collected and presented in a 1993 paper “Detecting the Aerial Fertilization Effect of Atmospheric CO₂ Enrichment in Tree Ring Chronologies”[Graybill & Idso, *Global Biogeochemical Cycles* 7 1993 81-95] in which the authors and researchers pointed out that the growth spurt was purely due to CO₂ fertilisation, and that neither local nor regional temperature changes could account for the twentieth century growth spurt in those already mature bristle cone pine trees. Mann’s ‘hockey stick’ was the central plank of the IPCC, which in their 2001 report used it prominently in four different places, in an attempt to, once and for all, paper over the pesky fact that it was warmer in the medieval warm period than it is currently. And, of course, in spite of all the evidence in peer reviewed journals that the medieval warm period was global in nature and about 2 degrees warmer than the twentieth century, the journalists and the public lapped it up.

Did Guest need Plimer to list the “hundreds of studies”? That just shows that Guest hasn’t done his homework, unless he believes that researching it on Gavin’s Realclimate is the ultimate truth. The Realclimate Wiki’s bias may improve now that they have managed to ban one of their own editors, another former climate modeller by the name of William Connelly, who is also a regular contributor at RC. Oh, the web is indeed a funny place, and the writer Michael Crichton’s predictions of a “net war” are only too true.

But back to Mr Guest. The instances you have raised do “seem like nitpicking” and “there certainly are valid reasons for criticising the IPCC approach to summarising the scientific approach to climate change” as you so rightly say. Some of the science produced in the body of the full IPCC report is very good science. That is not so with the IPCC summaries, which you state you read. They are not scientific summaries. They are political summaries, for policy makers. I, for one, believe this book review to be a very inaccurate and an extremely biased summary, unlike Plimer’s summary of our current scientific understanding. Take the time to read this book. You will learn a lot about the planet ... and AGW politics.

PS: If Mr Guest is too lazy to look up the peer-reviewed studies on the medieval warm period, he could start with R.D. Tkachuk “The Little Ice Age,” *Origins* 10 1983 51-65, Y. Tagami “Climate change reconstructed from historical data in Japan”, *IGBP* 1993 720-729, and H.H. Lamb *Climate, History and the Modern World* (Methuen, 1997).

Global warming, Hamm, Plimer etc. *Continued...*

In science journalism, there is a general and foolish tendency to denigrate the back-of-the-envelope calculation. Rough calculations are dismissed as being worthless while vague and unquantified assertions are published. Now, when I was lad in north of England, the Northern Universities Joint Matriculation Board (NUJMB) used to set back-of-the-envelope problems in the physics examination papers. The syllabus called them 'estimation exercises' and practice in answering them gave insights into the subject obtainable in no other way.

When confronted with a bit of scientific obfuscation, I urge skeptics to dust off their high school physics, sharpen an HB pencil and fish out a DL-sized envelope from the waste paper basket. The sort with a little window in front will do. A slide-rule is useful: the yoyo of today don't believe it but analogue is faster than digital. Similarly, reference to a Rubber Bible¹ is a bit quicker than googling for information.

There are some pitfalls to avoid. When using constants be aware of their units; there are constants and concepts that have failed to make the transition from the centimetre-gram-second to the metre-kilogram-second system. Always check that the dimensions of mass (M), length (L) and time (T) balance on each side of an equation. Energy has the dimensions of $M.L^2/T^2$ for example (think of $E = MC^2$). When estimating errors, know when to sum errors and when to use root-mean-square. Of course mistakes, even howlers, will be made. When in doubt, check with your friendly neighbourhood physicist, statistician, chemist, economist, geophysical fluid dynamicist or whatever. Well, perhaps not the economist.

Jack Hamm (*The Skeptic* 29:2) proposes the hypothesis that energy released directly as heat could have a greater impact than the CO₂ greenhouse effect. In self-deprecation he says it is a whacky hypothesis. It isn't. It is exactly the sort of question the NUJMB asked their 'A' level General Certificate of Education candidates 50 years ago. So, turn the envelope over and let's have a go ...

The first thing to observe is that the greenhouse effect is on-going whereas the heat from burning a certain amount of coal is a one-off event. So the problem is: when a fixed amount of coal is burnt to generate a corresponding quantity of CO₂, will the CO₂ be around long enough for its greenhouse effect to equal the heat of combustion? The second thing to do is to decide how much coal (carbon) we should work with. The answer is 12 grams which is the molecular amount, equal to the atomic weight

of carbon. This amount will generate Avogadro's number of CO₂ molecules and, as we schoolkids were expected to know, this equals 6×10^{23} . Now I was never strong in thermodynamics so I tried to look up the heat energy of burning carbon and all I could find was the heat energy of various sorts of coal, so I had to interpolate. I estimate that burning carbon releases 3.8×10^6 joules/kg. So burning 12 grams will convert 4.6×10^4 joules of chemical energy into heat. This is not an accurate number, but it should be well within the ball-park which is all that matters on the envelope back.

Now for the greenhouse effect. I dare say we have all heard a general outline of this effect. Probably *ad nauseam*. However, not everyone is familiar with the nitty-gritty of the process which deals with the interaction of the photon with the vibrational levels of the molecule. Molecules consist of tiny nuclei set in a diffuse cloud of electrons. Some electrons orbit just one nucleus, others orbit part or all of the molecule and form the chemical bonds. A molecule is not rigid, the nuclei move relative to each other as if connected by springs and are in a constant state of vibration and the more atoms there are in a molecule, the more modes of vibration are possible. The energy levels for each mode of vibration are quantised (oh dear, they would be) which means that a fixed amount of energy is required to change from one vibrational level to another. Google 'vibrational energies carbon dioxide' and you will get more information than you want, including sites which animate the CO₂ molecule.

Photons are the carriers of electromagnetic energy and can be thought of as little energy packets humming along with some fixed frequency at the speed of light. If an infra-red photon gets near enough to a CO₂ molecule and the energy of the photon happens to resonate with the vibrational energy levels then energy from the photon is transferred to the molecule. The mechanism is much the same as when a tuning fork causes resonance in a violin string. The photon must have an energy greater or equal to the vibrational energy. If the energy is exactly the same there is a 100 per cent chance of a reaction. This probability falls away exponentially as the difference in energy increases. The excited molecule soon calms down after colliding with another molecule or atom and then energy is converted to more rapid motion. Which is a roundabout way of saying that things get hotter. If the photon happens to be out of phase with the vibration of the molecule, then it can be reflected downwards towards the surface of the Earth and things still get hotter.

OK. Well, the energy of a photon equals its frequency times Planck's constant. Max Planck was the genius who developed quantum theory over 100 years ago and his eponymous constant is 6.6×10^{-34}

joules-second. My rubber bible lists Planck's constant as $6.6254 \pm .0002 \times 10^{-27}$ erg-sec: I think I've got it right in joules-sec. This is a woefully small number but never mind. Vibrational frequencies are very large, so large that wave numbers and wavelengths for vibrational spectra get listed instead. Frequency is just the speed of light divided by the wavelength, and one of the main vibrational wavelengths for CO_2 is 4.2×10^{-6} metres.

Actually, just knowing that the greenhouse effect occurs in the infra-red part of the spectrum and picking some mid-range value like 5×10^{-6} metres would do. The speed of light is 3×10^8 metres/sec so we're dealing with a frequency of 7.1×10^{13} /second. Multiply by Planck's constant and we get 4.7×10^{-20} joules. Multiply this by Avogadro's number and we end up with 2.8×10^4 joules.

So if every molecule of CO_2 interacted with a photon just once then the effect would be a bit more than half the heat of combustion. Now, the average time the CO_2 molecule spends in the atmosphere before being used for photosynthesis or reacting chemically in some other way is supposed to be more than 50 years. This sounds a long time but CO_2 is a very stable molecule and it is difficult to get it to react chemically at ambient atmospheric conditions. However it will twang away happily with any passing photon of a suitable energy.

I really don't know how to attempt to estimate how often an interaction takes place; *soddez cela pour une alouette*, if you'll pardon the franglais. I feel the NUJMB breathing down my neck and examination time is passing rapidly so it is time for some lateral thinking. Well, my eyes can discern if something flickers at ten times a second or less and when I look around nothing seems to be flickering whatever the colour may be. Thus photon-matter interactions are occurring in the visible part of the spectrum at least ten times a second within my small ambit of vision. And yes, I am aware that I should define flickering in terms of change in photon flux: I'm only trying to establish a limit of the order of magnitude. If each CO_2 molecule interacted ten times a second for 50 years the effect would be 9.6×10^9 times that of the combustion which generated the molecule in the first place. At one reaction a day it would be 1.1×10^4 times. The NUJMB would give me a grudging pass for the above; my friendly neighbourhood physicist told me so (no names, no pack drill). But that is good enough. The conclusion is clear: heat of combustion is not significant to global warming. Certainly, it is a question that had to be asked.

In the greater scheme of things, what is the significance of the greenhouse effect of CO_2 ? Climate is influenced by a heap of phenomena but by far the most important continuous influence is the balance of photons going in by day and the greater number of lower energy photons radiating

out by night. There are discontinuities to the climate pattern when a large volcanic eruption occurs, but the ripples caused by these events die down in less than 10 years. There are long term variations in the input of photons as the Earth's orbit fluctuates: these variations cause the 105 year cycle of ice-ages. There is also the 9-14 year cycle which is short enough to be almost unnoticeable. The climate change debate is restricted to a time frame of a few hundred years. The industrial revolution, and increase in CO_2 levels, started about 250 years ago and few people are concerned with more than three or four generations into the future.

Jack Hamm observes that the climate is actually well controlled. He points out that fluctuations in temperature look much smaller when the Y-axis is set to absolute zero. The fluctuations are largely caused by water vapour as the sea evaporates, the atmosphere saturates, clouds form and rain falls. Water vapour varies in concentration from nearly zero in the Antarctic night or at the summit of Everest to nearly 2 per cent (2×10^4 parts per million or ppm) in the humid tropics at sea level. Water vapour has a similar greenhouse gas effect as CO_2 , H-O-H is a triatomic molecule and so is O=C=O. How then can the current increase in CO_2 of 1.8ppm per year weigh against a typical H_2O content of something like 5000ppm? Well, it can because it is an increase whereas the water vapour is pretty constant over time. Most of the world is covered by oceans which give a sufficient buffer to maintain water vapour at a constant equilibrium level.

The problem is, how long will it be before the effect of CO_2 can be discerned through the fluctuations caused by all phenomena? To answer this question and the many more which spring to mind, reach out for the envelope, pencil and slide-rule. Try "do clouds reflect more heat by day than they retain by night?" - I can't get much headway on that one. I suppose I could cheat and look at the answer in the back of the book².

Nick Ware
O'Connor ACT

References

1. *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, The Chemical Rubber Publishing Company. Early editions were bound just like Bibles. My 43rd edition (1962) was purloined from the laboratory in 1970.
2. Some answers are to be found in Charney et al (1979) "Carbon dioxide and climate: A scientific assessment." Available at: www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12181. If you have difficulty, google "Charney Arakawa Carbon Dioxide" and you'll get the PDF version. This is the report commissioned by the US National Academy of Sciences which started the political ball-game going. It is quite short and readable.

What you think ...

Conned!

At the moment I am a tad angry, because I don't have anywhere to vent. But maybe now I have. I have a little story to tell you, and to warn other people if I can.

I really wanted to give up smoking, for all the usual reasons, and there was an ad on TV, complete with a bloke who hits a ball, I think he may have been a cricketer, I didn't really notice, I just took down the phone number.

It turned out to be cold laser treatment, something I had never heard of, but the bloke, an acupuncturist, (I know, I know, how stupid was I) talked me into a cold laser treatment, all for the miniscule cost of \$495, paid up front, when one makes the appointment. If you don't pay up, you don't get a treatment.

That should have been my first warning. To cut a long story short, it didn't work.

I just had to think about it, and come to my own conclusion that it could not possibly work, this was sheer quackery, but I didn't. I am usually a skeptic. As with this sort of thing, your brains go out the window, and you really want to believe that maybe it could possibly work, which is what they rely on - desperate, gullible, and dare I say, stupid people. I do include myself in this. I could kick myself for being soooo stupid.

The practitioner just keeps telling you "This will work - this will work".

The practitioner puts a very weak laser light on ears, hands, ankles, and knees - that's it. It is supposed to raise one's endorphins, which reduce or alleviate the cravings for nicotine. It is absolute codswallop. If someone wants to waste a lot of money, this is the way to do it. It is completely a placebo effect. If you really believe it works, it just might.

I haven't seen anything on any skeptics' sites about cold laser treatment, but it is the new multi-million dollar business growing all over the world, judging by the ads and glowing testimonials on the internet.

I want to expose these frauds, and couldn't find any sites that do this. Maybe you could point me to a site where I can tell this story to warn other people.

I am not an academic, and I wish I could, but I couldn't write a formal paper on this cold laser treatment.

Suzanne Olson-Hyde
Willoughby NSW

Challenges

Australians enter more competitions per capita than most countries, but it seems there's one competition that nobody wants to enter. Media personality Philip Adams, entrepreneur Dick Smith and the Australian Skeptics have collectively put up \$100,000 to anybody who can prove that they have psychic or paranormal powers. You know, things like ESP, telepathy, clairvoyancy, even feng shui.

Surely there must be someone in Australia who can enter this competition. You only have to tune into the radio on a Saturday or Sunday night and there's a psychic talking to callers. Open a newspaper and there's an astrology column predicting everyone's future. Open up a magazine and you get bombarded with a plethora of predictors. Astrologists, psychics, face readers, stargazers, feng shui consultants, psychic astrologers and lucky number guessers. And that's just in one magazine alone!

I mean, can they really guess your future from your face? And can they really guess your lucky lotto numbers? I'm sure if it were for real they would have been contracted to the NSW Lotteries Commission in a massive "shut up" campaign lest prize winnings for players get too low because everyone's winning. And what about the fact that each star sign has different "lucky" lotto numbers? Since there are only two lotto draws each week, why would each star sign get different lucky numbers if they're supposed to be the "winning

numbers" anyway? And if they do know the numbers, why are they even telling people? Shouldn't they be winning up big with Lotto themselves so that they can retire and lie on the beach all day? This is even more important since none of them came away with the million-dollar prize in the "Deal or No Deal Test of the Psychics".

And have you ever noticed that all the magazine advertisements are for the services of copious instances of "the world's best psychic", that are all being charged at, quite fittingly, astronomical rates. How there can be more than one "world's best" in anything is beyond me.

But maybe we should believe these people, since apparently it's very easy to unearth the psychic powers within. After all, the local evening college has a course in Tarot cards. For a small investment of only \$99 and a six-and-a-half hour session you can learn, quite literally, to awaken your psychic ability and do readings for friends. Even become a professional.

Maybe a course like this will bring out the hidden abilities in people and they'll be lining up to take on Phil and Dick's challenge. But somehow I don't think so. I think that up until now nobody's taken up the challenge because they know they won't win. Either they know that they're cheats, or they can actually foresee the future and the fact that they won't be winning the challenge. I'll let you decide which it is.

Sue Vanni
Sydney NSW

Editor's note: We do regularly receive claims against the challenge, and our challenge committee springs into action with the information we require to proceed: details of the claim; contact details for a person who has witnessed the action being claimed; how the claimant suggests the claim should be tested; and what they think would constitute a success or failure of that test. This is before any testing is undertaken. Most claimants do not move past this stage when they discover that they actually have to prove their claim and that we do not simply hand over a cheque. Those we have tested in the past include numerous diviners/dowsers, as well as others with various 'psychic' powers.

Breastfeeding & expert opinion

Thanks for the excellent article on the need to educate our society about breastfeeding (*The Skeptic*, Vol 29:2, p18), but one of the problems is headlines such as “Breast is Best”. Mothers who fall by the wayside because of poor advice or lack of support strive to give their baby what’s ‘best’ but then are reassured when they fall back on infant formula because it’s seen as almost as good. ‘Best’ is not always something that is easily attainable. Most parents would love their child to attend the best school in the state, but if they can’t afford it, are satisfied to know that their child will receive a good education at the school down the road.

Breast is not best – it’s just normal mammal nutrition. All breastmilk substitutes should be seen as sub-par, rather than ‘second best’. If a baby cannot be breastfed by its mother, and the mother’s milk is not available to be given to the baby by bottle or spoon, then second best is another woman’s milk, or pooled donor milk.

In this country, the ideal would be for all expectant mothers and fathers to attend breastfeeding education classes early in pregnancy, when they are most receptive to taking in this information, and not so focused on the birth. Research has shown that the father’s support can be vital for successful breastfeeding. All new parents should at least be armed with the number of the Australian Breastfeeding Association’s national Helpline: 1800 686 2 686 (1800 mum 2 mum).

Another misconception in our society is that people have a right to object to a woman breastfeeding in public; actually, those who complain are breaking the law.

Lesley McBurney
Wavell Heights Qld

I have written several letters in the last two years voicing my concerns about the approach the Skeptics are taking regarding the magazine. I have had no letter published and only one reply, which side-stepped my suggestions completely.

I have a new concern on top of the old ones now. I am concerned that “we don’t want dry academic articles - this is

not a peer reviewed academic journal”. I agree we don’t need to have dry articles, but why is there a problem using the highest level of scientific writing (peer-reviewed research) in *The Skeptic*? This statement worries me greatly. I am a professional medical editor and general practitioner and I am quite sure that if you wish to dumb down the Skeptics, this ignorant approach is all that is needed. I do hope it wasn’t meant the way it sounds, especially for a journal that is meant to favour science over personal opinion.

It seems to me that more recently the same authors are writing the same sorts of things over and over (eg ghost hauntings). It particularly disturbs me that *The Skeptic* allows unqualified people to write about medical issues that are complex such as circumcision and breastfeeding. An article can be no better than the author’s experience.

There is no question that breastfeeding is best – that is proven. Why is such an article in *The Skeptic*? It is preaching to the converted. My particular concern about this article is that it is not balanced. Just like the Australian Breastfeeding Association (who never did me the courtesy of returning my email suggestion re their website) the author writes in such a way as to alienate all those women who for medical and personal reasons could not manage to breastfeed. There is a large number of these women. An article pro-breastfeeding will not be balanced unless it specifies examples (many and blameless there are) where women are unable to breastfeed. I feel particularly strongly about this as I subspecialise in psychiatry and see a lot of postnatal depression and extreme guilt in women who cannot breastfeed. This was the point I made to the Australian Breastfeeding Association, but it was completely ignored. This article should not, in my opinion, have been written by a layperson who has a personal interest in the topic. The article is also inappropriate for *The Skeptic* – it is a public health message that in our society is not controversial at all.

I have also repeatedly voiced concern about the extreme rudeness that is written about ignorant people who are sucked into scams and who believe things because they don’t have the IQ or education to assess something impartially

or scientifically. An excellent example is “Barnett’s Blunders” by Theo Clark (*The Skeptic*, Vol 29:2, p26) and I quote:

“She is standing in a field with a herd of like-minded anti-vaxer sheep - *bovinæ stupidcretinus*.”

He then wastes a paragraph discussing his decision to use the insulting term in italics. ‘Cretin’ is a medical term for a child born with inadequate maternal thyroid hormone during pregnancy. It is just as insulting to such people as ‘stupid spastic’, ‘stupid Mongol’, etc and should not have been allowed to go to print. Apart from this, it lets down the author and the journal because it is just a gratuitous insult with no point attached to it and certainly it is not humorous to me. If *The Skeptic* wishes to be accepted into libraries and general public readership, the journal and some of the authors need to seriously raise their quality of work.

I have offered to write an article about the psychology of why people continue with alternative medicines that flout science, but this was ignored with no explanation. I would have thought approaching the reasons why people believe in unscientific stuff would be crucial to persuading the next generation to use logic and scientific approaches, but obviously I am wrong. If we want to prevent the proliferation of this twaddle and to get the journal into mainstream society, we need a different approach to the condescending, insulting and rude articles and letters that often appear in the journal.

I am extremely busy and yet have bothered to take the time to write this letter today because I am so concerned about the public appearance and the evolution of *The Skeptic* journal. A better job can be done with this journal and the tone of the articles needs to change from mocking, condescending and supercilious. The journal should be able to effortlessly convince people its information is correct and not alienate those we should be trying to convert who have less education than us. Please could I have a reply to this letter?

Dr Vivienne Miller
Sydney NSW

Editor’s note: We have replied to Dr Miller, and have invited her to submit an article on the psychology of belief.

More on Critical Thinking

Dr Paul Jewell's letter to the editor (*The Skeptic*, Vol 29:2, p57) headed "Critical Thinking" has stimulated me into a reply questioning his basic tenet that it is acceptable to base decision making on "reasonable reflective thinking on what people believe or do". The style of thinking appropriate to a discussion depends on the subject matter being discussed. An engineer designing a bridge does not start with a belief system; instead he consults tables of building materials and their strengths, that is to say if the topic is of a scientific or technological kind, hard facts are required.

However, most of the affairs of mankind are social or political and there are few facts to assist decision making. Dr Jewell's "reasonable reflective thinking" is relevant here as we have nothing else that we can use. In social matters, opinion masquerades as evidence and we live under a mixture of social convention and legal enforcement.

It would be nice to resolve our non-technical problems with "reasonable reflective thinking" but what is reasonable? Attempts by psychology, sociology and economics to determine predictable human behaviour have yet to be very successful so attempts to apply critical thinking to these areas when there are few established facts seems to me futile and time wasting.

Robert A. Backhouse
Brisbane Qld

As a retiree, I check out various adult education offerings from groups such as WEA, Sydney Uni, etc. Usually I look for popular science topics but find that these are few and far between, whereas new age, wellness and mysticism topics are in abundance. For example, the winter offerings from WEA include tarot reading, numerology, and something called "The Psychic Pathway" where we can learn about our angel and spirit guides. For good measure, throw in the "God Conversations" where we can learn whether he still speaks today

and whether it is possible to hear his voice. The sole science topic in the catalogue is "Stars & Galaxies". Previous science offerings include mystical topics such as the "Quantum Mind". While I understand that these courses are based on perceived demand, surely the Skeptics' critical thinking skills would be an ideal adult education offering. It could easily be promoted as a 'scambuster', starting with internet scams and moving to more general application (including evaluating claims of 'alternative' therapies). Definitely would improve the financial wellness of retirees!

Kevin Yeats,
Lindfield NSW

The Bible & Judaism

A sensible person can find it hard to accept the Bible as the inerrant word of God because of the inconsistencies, errors and stupidities within it. Fundamentalists and Creationists, however, believe every word to the extent of a Jehovah Witness denying family blood transfusions and a Creationist not accepting an Earth billions of years old. In this belief they are bolstered by the immense number of studies done on the Bible and 2000 years of acceptance of its story as the work of God.

Judaism is based on the Old Testament (strictly the first five books, or the Torah) and "the Oral Law" (which derived from analyses and interpretations of the verses of the Torah over several centuries), combined as the Talmud. One system of Old Testament analysis has four steps, each deeper than the previous; the first being the simple (P'shat in Hebrew), which is examining the words and their meanings and context, eg no eating of meat with blood in it (Lev 17:10). Next comes hint (Remez) taking an implied meaning, an allusion or covert interpretation, eg in Genesis 'days' were really millennia. The third level is concept (D'rash), the combining of two or more passages to give an additional meaning, eg perhaps David and Goliath. The last is the hidden meaning (Sud), the mystical meaning. Thus a sensible person,

such as a Skeptic, in debate on the Bible with a believer, is always the loser as the passages can be made to mean anything. To complicate further, there are about 3000 versions of the Bible in English, presumably each a more exact translation than the others.

For Jews there are some 700 prohibitions on behaviour in the Old Testament ranging from not killing to not weaving a cloth with different fibres. My best is when two men are having a fight with each other and the wife of one, possibly to help her husband, grabs hold of the genitals of the other man with the result that her hand has to be cut off (Deut 25:11). As I understand it, the Rabbis at Synagogues advise on these prohibitions and generally, nowadays, life rules. Thus if a Jew needed a heart valve replacement and a pig's valve was the only option then it would be approved. Synagogues in large Jewish communities, eg St Kilda and Bondi, have the 'eruv' system where a wire/line is strung up on the street poles going for kilometres from the Synagogue and back to enclose a large area of Jewish homes. Within this eruv, by Rabbinical approval, Sabbath laws – tearing toilet paper, using switches, carrying food, etc – are lifted. Jewish land must be left cropland every seventh year (Exod 23:10). To overcome this loss of production Shmita is used, whereby the land is sold to a non-Jew for a nominal amount on the basis of its return at the year's end. These are not regarded as sharp practices in Judaism, but the use of the brain that God gave us in order to circumvent his strictures.

Given God's propensity, amply detailed in the Bible, to kill Jew and Gentile for the least cause, perhaps the sixth commandment should be changed to "Thou shall not murder". Israel did hang Eichmann. It may be the time for a new set of secular commandments along the lines of:

"Thou shall protect the planet Earth your only home in the universe."

"Thou shall nurture the physical and biological systems that sustain you and your descendants."

"Thou shall not allow the numbers of mankind to exceed four billion."

And so on.

Ken Newton
Nunawading Vic

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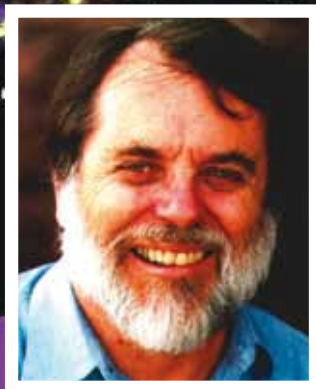
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