

# Skeptic roots out the flaws in today's pseudo-sciences

By JIM KERSHNER  
Staff Reporter

You wouldn't call Michael Dennett a ghost buster. He's more like a psychic buster.

Dennett, 36, of Federal Way is chairman of Northwest Skeptics, part of a national group dedicated to researching and debunking the claims of psychics, UFO enthusiasts, quacks and charlatans. Dennett, who makes his living selling elevators for the Schindler Houghton Elevator Corp., has published debunking articles on everything from firewalking to Bigfoot. He gets no pay for his skeptical hobby, but he gets other rewards.

"Some of the time it's fun," he said. "You get to learn things. I enjoy digging out answers, and finding the real science behind the pseudo-science. Also, a lot of people are profiting from fake science. Somebody has to stand up and point out that they are charlatans and sloppy researchers."

That's what he did with his most recent article in the fall issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Dennett paid \$60 to attend a firewalking seminar. The instructors touted firewalking as a powerful mind-over-matter experience, designed to increase self-confidence.

"(The instructor) told my class that at 1,300-degrees farenheit, we would be burned instantly unless we could control our fear," wrote Dennett.

Dennett successfully walked barefoot over a bed of burning coals — but it wasn't because he controlled his fear. It was a matter of simple physics, according to his article and another accompanying article.

According to the laws of physics, the temperature of an object is not as important as its heat conductivity and the amount of time in contact with the skin, according to UCLA plasma physicist Bernard Leikind.

Copper and aluminum are "literally thousands of times more conductive than wood," said Dennett. If a person tried to walk across a copper sheet at the same temperature, his feet would be severely burned. Few people realize this except physicists who understand heat transfer, and magicians who have used firewalking tricks for centuries.

Also, the average time spent walking across the coals is less than two seconds. Heat transfer is minimal, just like when you pass your finger quickly through a candle flame. The beds are usually about 8 to 10 feet long. Several years ago, Dennett reported, an Iowa woman spent seven seconds on the coals during a firewalking seminar in Renton, and collapsed with severe burns

The instructor said her burns were the result of her "loss of faith," said Dennett. Her lack of mobility may also have had something to do with it. She was handicapped, and was firewalking with canes.

Dennett also wrote a story about Rent Mullens, 86, a retired logger from Toledo, Wash., who claims to have started the entire Bigfoot phenomenon. Mullens said in 1924, he and a friend rolled some rocks onto a cabin as a practical joke. This "may have been responsible for Fred Beck's legendary Bigfoot encounter," said Dennett.

Then in 1930, Mullens and some friends decided to play a practical joke on some huckleberry pickers. He carved a pair of huge feet out of alder wood, and stamped the "prints" into the mud around the picker's cars.

In all, Mullens made eight sets of feet, which "bore a striking resemblance" to the plaster casts of tracks made by Bigfoot proponents.

Dennett interviewed him for the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine after seeing wire stories about him.

The firewalking articles resulted in several radio interviews for Dennett, and a story in the *Wall Street Journal*. That kind of publicity is one of the goals for the Northwest Skeptic and its national organization, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The committee includes such well-known scientists and writers as Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Stephen Jay Gould and B.F. Skinner.

Dennett has been known to tackle smaller projects also, such as the time he deflated his secretary's belief in tea-leaf reading. He told her that he would do a personal horoscope for a friend of hers whom he had never met. Given only her name and birthdate, Dennett promised at least a 70 percent accuracy rate, the same as the tea-leaf reader.

Dennett went to work researching the woman's background. When he completed his work, he handed over his "psychic" predictions and analysis.

"She gave me a 100 percent score," said Dennett. "That was interesting, because I didn't really get everything right. I had found out she had purchased a VW through the Multnomah County Credit Union, so I said, 'I see you driving a small foreign car, wondering how you will pay for it. I see you did not pay for it through a bank. I see you have worked for a governmental authority, but not state or federal.' Turns out, she hadn't borrowed the money from the credit union. Her mother had, and she borrowed the money from her mother. But she gave me a hit on that, because she hadn't

borrowed it through a bank. And she hadn't worked for the county, but at one time apparently she had worked for the city of Kirkland."

Dennett said good psychics do extensive research on clients. A high school yearbook contains enough information to "flabbergast" someone.

These kind of small operators are "just laughable" and not worth getting too serious about, said Dennett. Dennett also doesn't vent wrath at UFO proponents, many of whom he says are simply self-deluded and looking for attention.

On the other hand, the medical quackery field is much more serious, he said. Dennett has researched a "healing" operator who does "psychic" surgery. He claims to be able to cure all 100 types of cancer, plus diseases such as multiple sclerosis.

"To me, that's really bad," said Dennett. "He'll fleece a parent who has a 3-year-old daughter with cancer. What if you had a 3-year-old daughter with cancer? You'd grasp at anything. You can't say that kind of operator is self-deluded. It's a major magic trick. These people are 100 percent false."

Dennett says that skeptics still don't get nearly the publicity that psychics and charlatans do. But when they do get publicity, it's more effective.

"People might hear lots of charlatans, but when people hear the truth once, they say, 'That's it,' and write it off," said Dennett.

Dennett is accustomed to being called "close-minded," but he doesn't buy it.

"After all," he said, "there's a difference between being open-minded and being credulous."

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