
January 1987 "BASIS", newsletter of the Bay Area Skeptics

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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Editor: Kent Harker

A CHALLENGE TO ALL PSYCHICS IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

We are Bay Area Skeptics (BAS), a group of people willing to test paranormal claims. We are committed to finding out the truth about so-called psychic powers, whatever that truth may be.

We hereby issue the following challenge to any and all psychics and psychic researchers in the Bay Area: Show us just one psychic power, of any kind, that can be demonstrated to be real under properly controlled scientific test conditions. Claims of psychic powers are abundant -- but we want to see somebody who can actually demonstrate a genuine ability at telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, paranormal healing, or any other alleged psychic power.

If you are psychic, it is to your advantage to accept this challenge: first, because of the monetary reward being offered, and second, because of the recognition and prestige you will achieve as the first person to successfully demonstrate such powers to a group of knowledgeable skeptics.

Various persons associated with Bay Area Skeptics have offered a total of \$11,000.00 to any person who can demonstrate any psychic power under properly controlled scientific test conditions. Furthermore, James "The Amazing" Randi, of Florida, has for decades offered \$10,000.00 for proof of any psychic power performed under properly controlled conditions. Bay Area Skeptics will promptly report to Randi anyone whose powers seem worthy of testing. In both cases, the conditions of the test will be arranged in advance with the person claiming psychic ability, and the test will not begin until all concerned parties agree to the arrangement.

Think of the enormous recognition that would be given to the first person to convince the world's most outspoken skeptics of the reality of psychic powers! Think also of the tremendous benefit to science and humanity if the existence of miraculous powers for healing and obtaining knowledge could at long last be proven!

There is probably no other place in the United States where the number of alleged psychics, and the degree of belief in psychic powers, is as high as here in the Bay Area. Psychic readers, healers, etc., abound in San Francisco, Berkeley, San Jose, and throughout the Bay Area. We challenge anyone to prove that the claims are scientifically valid.

If you believe you have genuine psychic powers, the advantages of accepting this challenge are considerable.

We may be reached at:
Bay Area Skeptics
Attn.: Challenge
Box 60
Concord, CA 94522.

If you are interested in being tested on your scientific claim, please submit a letter including the following:

A precise, clear statement of your claim.

Specifics of what you would do in a scientific test.

Specifics as to what you would consider to be scientific proof of your claims. Include methods and statistical requirements. Realize that what you do must be beyond chance expectations.

A statement that you understand and agree that all of the proceedings are to be considered on the record -- either side is free to publish what has transpired.

A statement that you understand and agree that the test must be agreed to in advance, in writing, by both parties, or there will be no test.

A statement that you understand and agree that failure to agree to the specifications of the test shall not constitute grounds for a legal claim for damages.

Your claim must be:

CLEAR. A statement such as "You might have had some heart trouble" is not clear.

UNDERSTANDABLE. A statement such as "You have to get more centered" is not understandable.

SPECIFIC. A statement such as "You have now or within the past three years had some involvement in a relationship or an investment" is too vague.

SCIENTIFIC. If you claim that "A" will happen, then if "A" does not happen, you have failed to prove your claim.

TESTABLE. A statement such as "You will be upset within the next three months" is not testable.

SIGNIFICANTLY ACCURATE. Your performance must be accurate beyond what would be expected by chance.

DEMONSTRABLY PSYCHIC OR PARANORMAL. For example, some claimed psychics predicted that the Democrats would run a woman for Vice President in 1984. Many political analysts made the same prediction.

We look forward to your reply.

JANUARY 26: MARS EFFECT PROBLEM: 15 YEARS OF CONTROVERSY.

Astrologers have long pointed to M. Gauquelin's statistical evidence for planetary influence on successful careers as "proof" there is something to astrology after all. BAS Board Member Lawrence Jerome disagrees, and will give a visually-aided talk explaining why he feels the "Mars Effect" on successful athletes is strictly a statistical effect with no basis in reality. Be prepared to have your mathematical imagination stretched to the breaking point! (if you find it difficult to mentally correlate the motion of Mars with the yearly and daily movements of the earth, don't worry, Jerome has a computer-simulation program that does the work for you; he will have his program up and running during the talk). DAY/DATE: Tuesday, January 27, 1987. TIME: 7:30 pm. PLACE: Saratoga Public Library, 13650 Saratoga Ave., Saratoga. Directions: From Route 280, take the Saratoga Avenue exit southbound toward Saratoga. Proceed 4 miles to the library, which is on the left.

C-FOR-ALL

You will have fewer colds, milder colds. All are familiar with this dictum, especially since the 1970 publication of Linus Pauling's book on everyman's vitamin, ascorbic acid (a.k.a., ascorbate, vitamin C, hexuronic acid, etc.). Seafarers bore the brunt of C deficiency: scurvy, the terrifying condition that usually brought agonizing death to its victims. Homo Sapiens is not capable of making its own C (vitamins are substances we must have in minute amounts but cannot make ourselves). Apparently C is so easily obtainable from a normal diet that it was not evolutionarily selective -- it is adaptively neutral -- for our bodies to make it. Most species make their own C, so it is not a vitamin for them.

Frank Levy, a disciple of the Pauling institute, author and advocate of the miracles of C stood opposite Wallace Sampson, MD, for the December meeting. Dr. Sampson, a Stanford U. oncologist and advisor to BAS has specifically followed the C controversy over the last 15 years and has the biological, biochemical, physiological, and pathogenic facts and direct experience. In a very loose debate style, the audience heard the evidence on both sides of this highly polarized subject.

Mr. Levy began with a catalogue of maladies and conditions that seemed to respond to mega (and I mean Mega) dosage of C: Colds, flu, pneumonia, general healing, many cancers, heart attack,

atherosclerosis, aging, skin color and texture, allergies, etc. The skeptical ear is already beginning to ring.

About 10-15 mg/day of C (a carefully cooked, unpeeled potato has about 25 mg) is required to keep us scurvy free, so nutritionists set about five times this amount in the recommended daily allowance (RDA) to ensure adequate coverage. It seems conventional wisdom works this way: If X (the RDA) is good, 2X is twice as good, so early "C-ees" reported wonders with 200-400 mg. This formula is easily extrapolated to factors of hundreds. We should conceivably have a "C-ration" bar (100% ascorbic) to munch on throughout the day.

Anecdotal stories come in, and limited investigations are conducted, often by unsophisticated groups unfamiliar with the rigors of formal epidemiological studies. Failed replication by skeptical researchers are more often faulted for using too small a dose. This, despite the fact that early studies conducted by believers obtained significance in the 300 mg. range when that was thought to be a large dose. The rainbow seems always to recede before cautious investigators. One institute does a double blind study with 250 mg/day for three months with no significance. By this time, the advocates are using 700 mg/day. New studies are done with 500 mg dosage and by the time they are finished inconclusively, C-people are up to 1100 mg. If the exponents are correct that successful results can be obtained only by using maximum-tolerance quantities, it is the only substance for which the body shows no "dosage sensitivity." All other compounds we take into our system seem to have this sensitivity, i.e., increased dosage will gradually increase the effect.

What is the current recommended dosage per the advocates? "Bowel tolerance(!)" In other words, keep pumping it in until your body finally reacts violently, as if to say, "Enough!" and sends you on a diarrhetic fit. Americans have not only the most expensive urine, it appears we are vying for all-conference stool. For the average person, "bowel tolerance" is around 20 grams -- 400 TIMES the RDA! This would require the ingestion of about 75 lbs. of potatoes per day, for example, to get that much C. Our good fortune must be that modern chemistry can synthesize and concentrate many of nature's products, thus relieving us of the necessity of eating bushels of foodstuffs every day to remain healthy. Whether one accepts creation or evolution, our inability to obtain 20 grams of C per day NATURALLY does not make much sense if indeed we require that much. The wonders of C we heard made me think it would probably make my car run better.

There is a downside, as one would expect, to high dosage. The body is not an inert container into which may be poured anything in any amounts. Literally anything is toxic at some level. Drinking enormous quantities of pure water can be fatal if the kidneys cannot handle it fast enough. For persons with renal difficulties, mega C can produce potentially dangerous stones and other complications.

Mr. Levy brought up the fact that some species which make their own C do it in very large quantities -- as much as 25 grams per day. Dr. Sampson countered that it is not enough to make such an observation, but to understand WHY a given animal does so. It is a mistake to make across-the-board comparisons between species, even closely related ones, and this is a case in point. Those species that do make such large amounts ARE ABLE TO USE IT FOR CELLULAR METABOLIC PROCESSES. Their body chemistries are able to reduce the ascorbic acid to molecules that can be "burned" as actual food in the cell. Our biochemical factories are not as efficient in this regard, for we cannot metabolize the C to a point where it is useful for oxidation in the cell -- we simply excrete what is not used in its vitamin function. So the comparison is totally invalid.

The long and short of the question is that the C advocates have not presented replicable, carefully conducted studies to make the case they claim. Of course, the burden of proof rests on the claimants, but they want the scientific community to "disprove" their (unfounded) statements. And their thesis is backed largely by anecdotal and personal observations; Mr. Levy's presentation was certainly no exception to this.

Alas, it seems we are left with the difficulty of eating properly. The conclusion Dr. Sampson left us with is that a normally healthy person in normal circumstances can cover his/her nutritional requirements quite nicely with a well-balanced diet. But, this takes more effort than popping pills.

"IT IS NOT SUPERFLUOUS TO POINT OUT THE OBVIOUS."
- Bob Steiner

FROM THE CHAIR
by Robert Sheaffer

Best Holiday wishes to everyone! Assuming everything goes according to plan, shortly before this issue reaches you, the Bay Area Skeptics will have released to the nation's news media our annual year-end review of "psychic predictions". Keep watching your local papers, TV, radio news and talk programs for coverage. If you ever ask yourself what good it does to have an organization like the Bay Area Skeptics, when you see news coverage we have generated, estimate the size of the audience being reached by the story you saw, multiply that by many times (as there are many other papers and stations carrying it), and I think you'll have your answer.

1986 was a typical bad year for the "psychics," as indeed was every year for which we have records. I won't go into the details here,

because we will bring you the complete text of our press release in a forthcoming issue. Let me give you my favorite, however, Jeane Dixon's prediction for the Philippines: Ferdinand Marcos would be a shoo-in for re-election!

With this issue we have a new editor, Kent Harker, previously our treasurer, and at least for the moment holding down both roles. I apologize for the delays and the uncertainty in bringing out BASIS to you, the subscriber. At the conclusion of Ray Spangenberg and Diane Moser's tenure as editors, we made arrangements with another editor, but those plans fell through. Kent, thank goodness, was willing to pick up the pieces, and take on this very important role, in a timely manner. Without his assistance, there would be even more delays in getting this newsletter to you. Ray and Diane, I should add, remain active in BAS, even though they are no longer editors. Many thanks, Ray and Diane, for the editing work you have done, and for the organizational and public contact work you continue to do. And many thanks to Kent, whose willingness to take on additional responsibility has kept things flowing smoothly.

Sometimes we are slow at times in getting things done, but if it is any consolation, BAS is actually in better shape than most local, and even many national, skeptics' groups. What all these groups have in common is, of course, that they are volunteer in nature. The \$15 yearly subscription revenues from a few hundred readers barely covers the cost of printing and mailing the newsletter. Many of our people are skilled professionals in various fields, and have relatively little free time. Their time is worth a lot of money, but they are donating it because they believe in the value of our work.

So when things sometimes seem to go a little slowly we hope your reaction will be patience and gratitude that these efforts are being made. Many other skeptics' groups are facing even more difficult struggles. Some of the biggest groups are sometimes quite irregular in their publishing schedules, and others have yet to put out anything, even after years of talking. We can be proud of our efforts, which have made the Bay Area Skeptics second to none among local groups. It is encouraging to see the local skeptics' movement continue to grow, despite the many obstacles.

I hear from CSICOP headquarters in Buffalo that the influence and success of the local groups has been so great that many new people are approaching them, asking about forming local associations in areas where none now exist. We of the Bay Area Skeptics can justifiably take pride in being pioneers in a movement which is growing so rapidly, and is beginning to exert influence in many areas.

Finally, let me give you a few news items from our sister organizations across the country:

The South Shore Skeptic (P.O. Box 5083, Cleveland, OH 44101) reports that their group hopes to be listed soon on the Cleveland

Free-Net, a free computer bulletin board for nationwide information exchange. They could thus become a valuable source of information for students, educators, and media representatives. I don't know if they can yet be reached in this way, but the number of the Free-Net is (216) 368-3888 (modems only, please -- no humans). If anyone succeeds in getting through to our skeptical friends in Ohio like this, please let BASIS know. (I have all but given up on bulletin boards. Most of them just laugh at my puny 300 baud modem when I try to log on. They kick sand in my face, and log me off.) BAS is interested in similar bulletin boards for BASIS subscribers, so if you are aware of any give us the information and we will print a listing.

From the world center of skepticism comes word of the Western New York Skeptics (3151 Bailey Ave., Buffalo, NY 14215). Their organization's first public meeting featured Mr. Amazing Randi speaking on "faith healing". That's what I call getting started off on the right foot! Barry Karr of CSICOP has been elected chairman. They have already investigated The Reverend Willard Fuller, who practices "psychic dentistry". He claims to effect miraculous filling of dental cavities. (No, I am not making this up!) The skeptics, accompanied by many reporters, attended his "healing session" but witnessed no miracles. Undaunted, the Reverend Fuller told his flock that "about 80% of the miracles occur after the meeting is over." Well, somebody must believe this, or he wouldn't keep at it!

WHAT IS A SKEPTIC?

"Say, what do you think about that, Mort?"

"Well, I'm skeptical. It seems there are a lot of other possibilities."

The setting is anytime, anywhere. Friends, associates, casual contacts -- the characters don't matter. The script, however, is pretty much the same, with responses varying from dismay to outright hostility. Skepticism seems to be associated with cynicism and bigotry in the public mind.

I don't think it would be a glib observation to say that most people will accept the assertions of others on the face of them. The world view of most is generally acquired by haphazard accretion without a great deal of conscious control over the input, e.g., anecdotal and TV, and I don't think that is an elitist statement. Expressed skepticism may represent an unconscious threat to that world view and may elicit strong opposition, even to the surprise of the interlocutor.

Perhaps "closed-mindedness", "narrow-minded" or the extreme of "bigotry" are the principal epithets nailed to our back whenever we express skepticism. Mention that you are affiliated with

skeptics in any formal sense, and you may find yourself alone at the water cooler. Group conversations may suddenly turn as amorphous as library paste when you join company.

"What do skeptics believe?" is a frequent inquiry after a declaration of skepticism. "Anything," I joyfully rejoin. "As long as it can be backed up by some sound reasons for believing. There is nothing sacred about whatever I believe -- I am ready to scrap any concept I have if it can be shown to be in error. There are assuredly things I accept as 'true,' or 'most likely' but that are false, and I would like to rid myself of them." This seems to parry the narrow-mindedness volley before it is served. And it is not just a polemic to "win" an argument, but a true skeptical position.

In fact, skepticism is penultimate open-mindedness. The skeptic is not committed to a particular viewpoint until the evidence is in. He/she is in the best possible position because he/she has no a priori position. The individual who is formally committed to an absolute stance has cut him/herself off from further inquiry. UFOs may be alien space craft, but there are many other possibilities one should not eliminate first.

And the world wants absolutes. The crystallization of epistemology and refinement of the scientific method seems to have produced a single absolute: There are no absolutes. It is comforting for some to believe that the control of their lives is extrinsic and fated. It is uncomfortable for many to live with the notion that almost anything we now accept may be wrong. But such is the tenuous nature of human knowledge. Of course, in practical terms we do not operate with such tenuousness -- we forge ahead with boldness and courage, facing life as though we are much more certain than we are, because we realize that much of the uncertainty is uncertainty in principle.

Most skeptics would be only too happy to learn how to transport their bodies from home to office through the astral plane. I'm sure Bob Steiner would give up sleight of hand if bending spoons with his mind really worked.

Caution is a virtue when it comes to accepting an idea, so the skeptic need not be apologetic about his/her position.

ON THE RAMPARTS

I would like to have a column for comments on newspaper articles submitted by BASIS readers. With the variety of newspapers BASIS subscribers read, I'm sure all would be interested in the happenings in the fringe world as reported in the various newspapers of the nation.

When you find articles touching on the areas of skeptical inquiry, clip, snip and mail them to BAS, attn.: Editor, or send them

directly to me, Kent Harker, P.O. Box 32451, San Jose, CA 95152. If you would like to add some comments please do. This column will be a brief overview of some of the more significant or bizarre happenings in the areas of our interest.

You are also encouraged to submit your own articles for publication in BASIS. If you have some pet theory or interesting observation about the world of psi please send it in. Submissions become the property of BASIS, and items will not be returned, so keep copies of your work for yourself. If you have computers, send the article unformatted on a disk or you may arrange for electronic file transfer. Your ideas are valuable to BAS, so share you knowledge and experience.

"S.F. CHRONICLE", 4/2/86: "Healing Thru Visualization"
"The power of the imagination is a great factor in medicine: it may produce diseases in man and it may cure them."

If we can become ill by our mental attitudes, cannot we undo the damage by reversing becoming positive? The "Chron." article says yes. Appears there are cassette tapes one can buy, seminars to attend, group therapy sessions and what have you. Clearly, if one's condition is psychosomatic, a positive mental attitude coupled with some form of "visualization" may well be effective. The nostrum ends there, however. It is well established that high stress may cause ulcers; once the damage has been done, will mental attitude heal the ulcer? Removal of the causative factor (stress) will allow the body to heal. Does this formula work with an invasive disease like cancer? Skeptical studies seem to indicate that the pathogens just don't know we are having good, positive thoughts.

From "The Union Democrat", subscriber Chris Baldo sends some coverage about the local color. The article is about a special group of dowzers: Map Dowzers. That's right. They don't need to do all that dirty field work. They bring the job to the comfort of home. The accompanying picture shows the intrepid group hard a work over the living room table covered with maps. They claim they are not limited to only finding water. They can find anything in the ground. If we ask them to be tested I'm afraid they will reduce their claim to one of finding dirt. For years the dowzers have claimed the force that moves their witching wands was the "water vein." That won't hold water now that they only need hold their wands over a map. So you good skeptics up there in Sonoma, contact some of these people and let's see if they will submit their claims to some rigorous testing!

TREASURER SPEAKS

I'm going over to the other side of the room, donning my treasurer's cap. Handling the money you send in for subscriptions is a simple and interesting task. We have subscribers from all parts of the nation and walks of life.

Robert Sheaffer's "From The Chair" article tells a little about the all-volunteer effort to make BAS work. I would like to add that the big volunteers are you out there; especially several who have donated amounts up to \$100! When I make out the checks to the printer (he, unfortunately, must be paid) we just squeak by, often only after a board member antes a little extra. There have been at least three months when the extra amount sent by some gracious donor saved us from the fire. You must have been psychic. Thank you very much for that extra effort and support.

EDITOR'S CORNER

"These new vitamins will do some things for you that you will not believe!" my glib entrepreneur announced.

His presentation was smooth, backed by a professional video featuring an M.D. who assured me that the product was the finest in the world and that some highly regarded medical people supported it 100%. The salesperson was nonplussed when I asked what evidence there was for some of the claims of glowing health and relief from chronic ailments he had mentioned. With genuine astonishment on his face he asked, "Didn't you just see the video and what the doctor said?"

I reminded him the good doctor had only said that the product was the finest in the world and that it was backed by a panel of scientific experts -- the only specific claims offered were those of the salesperson himself.

"But," he rejoined, "you should see what has happened to the people who have used this product!"

That was his case. When asked if he knew what an epidemiological study was he became irritated at my failure to understand the import of this miracle food supplement. "I'll have to move on to those who are TRULY interested in better health," he said.

This is a societal flaw, I think. And it comes from our unfulfilled magical thinking. As sophisticated as we think we are, we still seem to need magic. Nothing seems to grab the public eye faster than products that start their huckstering with "miracle," or "secret." Include an arcane formula and the backing of some famous name (even a famous LOCATION will do!) or highly respected group (M.D.'s if you can) and the product will seem to have some special magnetism.

The vitamin pusher said that a certain combination in his formula "almost negated the effects of smoking." So rather than a healthful, balanced regimen, regular exercise, proper rest, no smoking, etc., all you have to do is take his pill. It's magic.

The quick fix has an allure that is incredibly powerful. Forgive the personal references (they are the only ones I have), but when my physician told me twelve years ago I had a fully metastatic cancer and that the prognosis was not good at all, I thought very hard about laetrile as he and his staff were drawing pen lines on my neck and head for the areas they intended to surger. Radical, somewhat disfiguring surgery, with no guarantees -- or apricot pits. Like a fool, I opted for the knife, and the success of my case didn't get a big write up in the annals of anecdotal cures by laetrile.

The commonality in all this "secret" or "miraculous" seems to be the promise. The promise of instant wealth, instant health, instant joy and happiness; the secret of happiness, the secret of wealth. The real world offers no promises. All those things we desire so much require discipline, courage, effort; we would all rather have what we want in a box, book, or a capsule.

Opinions expressed in "BASIS" are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of BAS, its board or its advisors.

The above are selected articles from the January, 1987 issue of "BASIS", the monthly publication of Bay Area Skeptics. You can obtain a free sample copy by sending your name and address to BAY AREA SKEPTICS, 4030 Moraga, San Francisco, CA 94122-3928 or by leaving a message on "The Skeptic's Board" BBS (415-648-8944) or on the 415-LA-TRUTH (voice) hotline.

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