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Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group which shares a common philosophy with the national organization CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), and seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry as the most reliable means to gather knowledge of the world and universe. Like CSICOP, Georgia Skeptics encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and helps disseminate the results of such inquiries.

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Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

MYSTERY OF THE GOLDEN DOOR: SOLVED!

by Dale Heatherington, Georgia Skeptics

On the 13th of each month hundreds of people flock to the home of Nancy Fowler in Conyers, Georgia in hope of seeing apparitions of the Virgin Mary. Many bring cameras to photograph any miracles which may occur. One popular activity of the believers is to stare into the sun until they see the illusion of the sun pulsating or spinning. How much eye damage has resulted from this activity is unknown. They often take photos of the sun. Many of those photos show spurious bright lines, streaks and arcs near the sun which were not seen by the naked eye. These are interpreted to be of supernatural origin by the believers. Some even claim to see the Virgin Mary in these sparkling lines and curves.

One very common allegedly supernatural pattern is the so called "Golden Door". Although it has only been seen on Polaroid "instant" photographs, some believers think it's the door referenced in Revelations 4:1, which says:

"After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter."

Is this pattern really the door to heaven or just reflections and distortions in the optics of the believers cameras? To find out, I went to the Roswell K Mart and bought the cheapest Polaroid camera they had. It's a \$29.95 Polaroid One Step. I took it to my home several miles northwest of Roswell and took a few pictures of the sun. In spite of the facts that I'm a skeptic, I was 40 miles from Conyers, the date was February 29th (not the 13th) and the camera had never been blessed by Nancy Fowler, I got excellent photos of the "Golden Door". I took several pictures in an effort to find out what conditions cause the Golden Door to appear. I even photographed a 50 watt halogen spot light in a dark room.

Here is what I discovered.

1. The camera doesn't have to be in Conyers.
2. The sun must be centered in the viewfinder.
3. The sun can't be obscured by clouds.
4. The Golden Door will appear upright regardless of the rotation of the camera.
5. The Golden Door will appear when photographing any bright point source of light, not just the sun.

Clearly, due to conditions 4 and 5, the Golden Door is created inside the camera and is unlikely to be the doorway to heaven.

Just what causes it? A major clue can be found by looking into the lens opening in the camera. The iris is shaped like the Golden Door.

To verify that the iris shape is related to the Golden Door, I calculated the ratio of height to width of the Golden Door in the photographs and the height to width ratio of the camera's iris opening. They are both the same. The height is 1.9 times the width. The top and bottom are curved. It seems that through some quirk in the Polaroid One Step camera optics, an image of the iris is projected onto the film when a bright point source of light is centered in the field of view. Although I don't know exactly why this happens, I have come to the conclusion that the Golden Door is generated by physical means inside the camera. It's actually the doorway into the camera, not heaven. It's unlikely that any laws of physics are being violated and I see no reason to believe a miracle has occurred. As always, alternative theories are welcome.

Dale Heatherington is the cofounder of Hayes Microcomputer Products and inventor of the Hayes Smartmodem (TM). He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Georgia Skeptics

MARIAN APPARITIONS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By Dr. Michael Dean Murphy, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama

Although I have not yet had an opportunity to visit Conyers myself (and I hope to rectify that shortly), what I have learned from the literature the Conyers people have begun to generate--and the wonderful material sent to me by the Georgia Skeptics--suggests that the events there conform in many respects to well-known patterns of Marian visions, shrine development and pilgrimages.

As an anthropologist, I am not terribly concerned with determining the truth or falsity of the apparitions themselves. My experience with visionaries and devotees of the miraculous suggests that most are neither suffering from some sort of mental disorder nor engaging in chicanery. Whether these experiences are somehow "real" or not is just not something I focus upon. I am very interested, however, in how psychological, social and cultural forces converge to lift the extraordinary personal experiences of some individuals out of obscurity. How do the vivid religious experiences of the individual succeed in capturing the imagination and focusing the devotion of hundreds, thousands, even millions of their co-religionists? Why do some seers "catch on" while others are quickly dismissed or disattended?

It might be helpful to consider that what is happening in Conyers is, in part at least, the intersection of three great traditions in the Roman Catholic Church: (1) Apparitions; (2) Marianism; (3) Pilgrimage.

Apparitions: Both the Old and the New Testaments are loaded with examples of supernatural beings (God the Father, the Holy Spirit, Angels, Satan, etc.) manifesting themselves to mortals in various ways. This tradition has continued throughout the history of the Catholic Church in which all manner of spiritual beings (especially Christ, certain saints and the Virgin Mary) are believed to interact with ordinary, even humble, human beings.

A supernatural manifestation is considered an apparition if the being appears to be physically present. Sometimes the apparition is limited to a strictly visual presence; sometimes it is also able to touch or be touched; sometimes it communicates through vocalizations. In short, the apparition (unlike the imaginative and intellection "visions" also identified by the Church) appears to be a corporeal visitation. Very often the apparitions are discernible only by one or a handful of seers who then communicate their experiences to those who have not been given the gift (charism) of directly apprehending the supernatural.

It is not at all unusual that the principal or primary apparition (or series of apparitions as is usually the case) is accompanied by other miraculous signs of the authenticity of the phenomena. The "Miracle of the Sun" is a very common event at apparitional shrines. It can also be dangerous if people stare at the sun for any length of time. Other common miracles reported at the sites of apparitions include the transformation of rosaries from silver to gold, or vice versa. Devotees may also experience strange physical sensations (a holy object may be perceived to glow or to radiate heat; the scent of roses may fill the air; etc.) As the vision site becomes a magnet for pilgrims, there will often be claims of both physical and psychological cures and it is typical for the shrine keepers to solicit and record testimonies of miraculous claims.

Michael Carroll, in his *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1986), classifies apparitions into two categories: hallucinations and illusions. He identified as hallucinations those visions in which outside observers report no physical evidence of anything extraordinary: only the seer or seers see or hear anything unusual. The apparitions at Lourdes, Fatima, Medjugorje, and it would seem, Conyers, are of this type. The apparitions that I have studied in central California are of the second type because they involve the play of light and shadow on the wall of a house. So is the appearance of Christ's image in the spaghetti billboard. These are classified as illusions because there is some physical stimulus available for all to see (often some sort of funny light) although not all see the same thing or come to the same conclusions about exactly what the illusion means. The famous Marian apparition at Zeitoun, Egypt some years ago is another excellent example of this sort of phenomenon.

Although to the outsider observer, especially the skeptical observer, it may appear that the followers of visionaries are completely bereft of any critical judgment about the phenomena in question, the fact is that there has developed over the centuries both the notion that sometimes apparitions are not what they seem (i.e., they are inauthentic or false) and that believers must be alert to the possibility of psychopathology, trickery, or even diabolical deception. Perhaps, this helps to explain why these events tend to follow fairly standard scenarios. Do not overlook the fact that devotees

are constantly engaging in a critical dialogue about whether one or another manifestation is truly supernatural in origin. What may appear to onlookers as "mass hysteria" may actually be the excitement of people producing a convergence or consensus of opinion about what is going on. In other words, expect to find a culturally patterned skepticism among the true believers.

Marianism: Since about the 11th century the Virgin Mary has been far and away the most frequently identified apparition among the Roman Catholics of Europe and, later, the Americas. Carroll describes well the emergence and development of the cult of Mary (so does Zimdars-Swartz, 1991) although you can take or leave his psychoanalytic analysis of its attraction. One thing to keep in mind is that the prominent place that the Virgin Mary occupies in both official and folk Catholicism is perhaps the greatest single source of distinction between them and Protestants. Therefore, it is interesting when Marian apparitions occur in unlikely places like Georgia. Is there a big pocket of Catholics around Conyers? What do the local Protestants make of the whole thing?

Another interesting feature of the Conyers apparitions is that Nancy Fowler first experienced a vision of Jesus Christ. My understanding, and I could well be wrong about this, is that now she mainly experiences the Virgin Mary.

An important element of those apparitions which also happen to be Marian, is that very frequently they involve messages to the faithful. Typically, some of the messages are made public but others are kept secret. The public messages tend to be quite general and innocuous, as has been noted with respect to Conyers. This is understandable if you consider that most seers want to remain in the good graces of the ecclesiastical authorities. Wild or dramatic prophecies attributed to the Virgin Mary do not endear visionaries to priests and bishops.

Pilgrimage: As Sandra Zimdars-Swartz points out in her excellent book, *Encountering Mary*, modern Marian apparitions are distinguished from earlier ones by two features: they are public and they are serial in nature. That is, multiple apparitions occur in a sequence, sometimes over a very long period of time (e.g. the Medjugorje apparitions began in 1981 and they continue until this day) and the apparitions do not take place privately but rather in front of an audience. Both of these characteristics are conducive to the formation of a pilgrimage shrine.

Pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place undertaken for religious purposes. Some Catholics are attracted to the sites of apparitions because they want to personally experience the supernatural and, often, because they seek some specific supernatural intercession. One of the reasons that Mary is so popular is that she is the Mediatrix, a mediator between human beings and God. Hispanic Catholics are particularly given to seeking her intervention in times of trouble or necessity. Simply traveling to one of her shrines can be the fulfillment of a vow to her.

Once people start coming to the place of the apparitions a decision is gradually made about whether to accommodate them and thus promote pilgrimage or not. Often shrine construction begins and a core group of followers begin the task of normalizing the interaction between visionaries and pilgrims and, importantly, spreading the word about miraculous happenings. How

successfully this is done has a lot to do with how long the apparitions will last and how widely known they become. From what I can tell from video recordings and other sources, it would appear that quite a bit of organization has been put into place at the Conyers shrine. There also seems to have been a significant involvement of priests in the affairs of the shrine and that is always an important factor.

In their analysis of over 6,000 pilgrimage shrines in Western Europe, Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan (*Christian Pilgrimage in Modern Western Europe*) note that fully 65% of them are focused on the Virgin Mary. Although only a minority of these shrines originated with an apparition, virtually all of the great modern pilgrimage centers did (e.g. LaSalette, Paris, Lourdes, Knock, Fatima, Medjugorje). Estimates vary about how many pilgrims visit Marian shrines every year, but I think that the Nolans are conservative in claiming that over 100 million pilgrims and religious tourists visit the Marian shrines of Europe each year. Although the grand apparitional shrines like Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe, Medjugorje, El Rocío are impressive, it is worth keeping in mind that for every hugely successful apparition, there are countless numbers which either never enjoy public notice or do so for only a brief period of time before fading away.

I hope the forgoing helps provide some context for understanding the events of Conyers.

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"WHAT IS HYPNOSIS?": A LECTURE BY DR. ROBERT BAKER

By Anson Kennedy, Georgia Skeptics

Dr. Robert A. Baker, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Kentucky and the author of *They Call It Hypnosis* and *Hidden Memories* (both published by Prometheus Books), spoke at the March meeting of the Georgia Skeptics. The topic was hypnosis, its history, what it is and what it isn't.

Dr. Baker began with a brief (but effective) demonstration. He asked everyone in the room to sit up straight in their chairs. He then asked that we lift our right legs and hold them horizontal to the floor. Then our left legs. Then he had us outstretch our arms. Then raise them over our heads. Then, with our eyes closed, he had us tilt our heads back then open our mouths and make a strange noise.

Then Dr. Baker told everyone to open their eyes and look around. "Now, why did you all do that?" he asked as we saw a room full of people with their legs stuck out in front of them and their arms waving over their heads.

We did it because of social compliance, which is what stage hypnotists rely on for their shows. This, according to Dr. Baker, is the root of all hypnotism. When you meet someone and he holds out his hand, you automatically respond by grasping it and shaking hands. This is an automatic behavior, one which is learned at an early age and expected in society. It is social compliance. The same is true of hypnosis. Many popular myths surround hypnosis (Dr. Baker said a better term for it might be "relaxation therapy"), from the submission of the subject to the hypnotist's will, to the idea that people's memories improve under hypnosis (so-called hypnotic regression).

What hypnosis isn't is what everyone thinks it is. It is not an "altered state of consciousness." People "under hypnosis" do not enter an hypnotic trance. The famous mentalist the Amazing Kreskin is so sure of this that he offerers a large cash award for anyone who can prove an hypnotic trance state actually exists. He's been taken to court, but he still has his check. Dr. Baker explained many of the common misconceptions about hypnosis. One interesting myth is the Manchurian Candidate, named from the book and movie (starring Frank Sinatra). The premise of the movie is a squad of American soldiers was captured by the Chinese during the Korean War. They were put through intensive "brainwashing" sessions, during which one of them was "programmed" to be an assassin when he heard a trigger word. Years later, he was commanded to kill a presidential candidate. Dr. Baker described research by the C.I.A. in the sixties to accomplish just this feat. They wanted to

create a "Manchurian Candidate" to kill Castro, so they attempted to program Cubans living in the U.S. The most promising subject was given the trigger word "cigar." When it came time for the final test, he was told the word. His reply? "No thanks, I don't smoke." So hypnosis cannot be used to make someone do something he would not normally do.

In telling the history of hypnosis, Dr. Baker described the work of Franz Anton Mesmer, the inventor of "mesmerism" and "animal magnetism." Mesmer's work and extraordinary claims aroused so much concern that the French government, under Louis XVI, called for an investigation into animal magnetism. Headed by Benjamin Franklin, the commission tried a simple test. They told a number of people that some trees in a forest had been "magnetized" and the others were not. When the subjects approached a "magnetized" tree, they immediately fell into a "trance." "Unmagnetized" trees had no effect. Of course, none of the trees had been magnetized (who does one magnetize a tree, anyway?). What was demonstrated was social compliance.

So what does all this mean about hypnotism? Is it really useful for altering behavior, such as stopping smoking or losing weight? Yes, according to Dr. Baker, when coupled with direct efforts to change habits. For example, the smoker will not stop smoking just because a hypnotist gives him a suggestion. But if the hypnotist has the smoker substitute a behavior (say chewing gum) in place of smoking, then he stands a good chance of succeeding. What about regression to recover "lost" memories? Dr. Baker pointed out studies which show that memories recovered under hypnosis are actually less reliable than those recalled normally. This is because, under hypnosis, the subject wants to please the hypnotist and fills in gaps (this is called confabulation).

In conclusion, we are cautioned by Dr. Baker to remain skeptical of extreme claims made about hypnotism. Used properly, it can be a useful and beneficial therapeutic tool. Used improperly, it can mislead unwitting people into false conclusions, or worse.

EXPLAINING HAIRY BLOBS AND LEONARDO'S MIRROR WRITING

By Hugh Trotti, Georgia Skeptics

What do the odd hairy blobs that wash up on various coasts have in common with the way Leonardo da Vinci wrote? They both fall into the category of peculiar and mysterious things. Such things - things that seem to have no simple explanation - have this in common generally: the more "Mysterious" they are, the more they may be collected by those who believe in various views that are not broadly accepted, such as "ancient astronaut", "Atlantis", "remote viewing", etc.

It is a peculiarity that various puzzling and unexplained phenomena are often used as explanations and "proofs" themselves: the unknown supporting the unlikely.

HAIRY BLOBS EXPLAINED?

A few years ago, this writer gave a short talk to the Georgia Skeptics, touching upon various subjects. Among these topics, which included the crop-field circles and material on hoaxed footprints - was one not widely known by the general public. While circles in the grain in England had even made Time magazine at that time, the knowledge of "hairy blobs" was more or less restricted to those interested in the various studies taking place in the area called "Cryptozoology". (Cryptozoology includes many different levels of quality and scientific effort, and is not confined to such subjects as a possible "Bigfoot" or Loch Ness Monster", though those topics are certainly more well-known.)

Cryptozoology as a field is composed of both serious scientists, (some connected with prestigious institutions), and also amateurs, laymen, and adventurers of various sorts. The group issues both newsletters and yearly peer-reviewed journals, and is coordinated by J. R. Greenwell, who filmed an interesting Chinese expedition searching for a possible "Wildman" which was broadcast by public TV stations.

One of the oddities presented in a newsletter of the organization was an account of "blobs" washed up on coasts in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans - blobs covered with stringy material resembling hair, and composed of a tough, cartilaginous material. Was this a "new" life-form not heretofore discovered, whose living members lurked in the depths of the seas?

Perhaps the answer to the puzzle of "What could that be?" can be found in one of the works of author Daniel Cohen. In *The Encyclopedia of Monsters* (New York: Dorset Press, 1989, pp. 174-176), Cohen presents an interpretation of a curiosity that he calls "Pseudoplesiosaur". It seems that badly decomposed carasses of some odd creature are sometimes washed up on coasts and found by people who note the resemblance to the extinct marine reptile of long ago.

The body of the basking shark, sometimes being washed up on coasts, was presented by Cohen because of its resemblance to the extinct plesiosaur. The decomposition results in the loss of the gill structure with the jaws early on, and the dorsal fin goes quickly as well. The bottom lobe of the tail carries no skeletal structure, and so rots and falls away soon. The portion of the carcass remaining after these losses so resembles a possible "plesiosaur" that when it washes ashore it is often so identified. Cohen titles this section of his work "PSEUDOPLESIOSAUR". We might

remind our readers that some "Loch Ness Monster" buffs believe that a remnant non-extinct plesiosaur population is responsible for claimed sightings at Loch Ness.

Cohen's description also inspires us to apply it elsewhere, as a possible explanation of the "Hairy Blob" puzzle. We note particularly his description of the decomposition of muscle fibers in the basking shark carcass (p. 176):

"...when the shark's skin decomposes, the underlying muscle fibers begin to break up into whiskerlike fibers which tend to give the carcass the appearance of being covered with fur . . . "

Is it possible that this description applies to the "blob" problem as well as to the "Pseudoplesiosaur"? If so, the blob itself will represent the final stages of decay of some more "regular" denizen of the oceans, and the peculiar "hairy" or string-like structures surrounding it may represent the simple decomposition of muscle fibers.

We might also note as a final comment on this phenomenon that Marco Polo described the hairy body of a huge fish found on the bed of a river whose water had been diverted away. He stated that some who ate of it died. Could this be explained by the same decay processes cited by Cohen, that result in "hair"-like appearances? (For the Marco Polo account, cf. Polo Marco, *The Travels*, New York: Penguin Books, paperback, 1982, p. 228).

LEONARDO'S "MIRROR WRITING"

Leonardo da Vinci wrote "backwards" - from right to left. It has been said that only by the use of a mirror can his script be read. This is something that has puzzled many scholars, and that remains a mystery. It has been guessed that Leonardo wished to keep his written thoughts secret, so as to avoid possible danger or harassment from churchly authorities. While this "answer" seems likely on superficial examination, it surely will not do. Many people can not only read writing or printing backwards, but can read it both backwards and upside-down. A mirror is not needed to easily peruse "backward" writing. But, even if it were needed, the church authorities would not have lacked mirrors.

It is a further consideration that the mere appearance of trying to conceal what is written would be more likely to attract suspicion of heretical views. But then, what could possibly be the reason for such a non-standard writing style?

The answer may be so simple that it is difficult to conceive. I,

myself, am left-handed. It has long been one of my problems when I write with pen and ink, or even with pencil, that what I write smears - and sometimes soils my hand. Leonardo was, we remember, left-handed. Is it not likely that he wrote from right to left ("backwards") simply in order not to smear what he had written and avoid soiling his writing hand? This explanation is, unhappily, not very "mysterious", and is likely to be a "let-down" for those searching for the exotic, the odd, and the secretive.

CONCLUSION

So far as I know, Leonardo's habit of writing has not been clutched to the breast of any cult to support its beliefs. However, I believe that the "Blob" has been sometimes taken to represent some sort of alien life form from a UFO (not a hypothesis held by Cryptozoologists, who simply present it as a mystery of the sea). However, the Leonardo writing subject may well be an instance of "truth being duller than fiction".

Hugh H. Trotti is a member of the Georgia Skeptics Board of Directors. He is the author of *Beasts and Battles: Fact in Legend and History*, and the article "Nostradamus Unmasked", which appeared in the Fall 1991 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* (first published in *Georgia Skeptic*).

THE HIGHEST PRICE THAT QUACKERY CAN EXACT

By Dr. William Jarvis, President, National Council Against Health Fraud

(Reprinted with permission from the NCAHF Newsletter, Vol. 15, No. 2, March/April 1992)

On March 2, 1992, Sonja and Khachadour Atikian walked away from a Toronto courtroom free people. They had endured 5 weeks of a third criminal trial, having been charged with failing to provide the "necessaries of life" for 17-month-old Loreie who died of bronchial pneumonia complicated by severe malnutrition in 1987. The judge had acquitted them because the prosecution had failed to provide important information which supported their contention that they had honestly believed that they were providing the necessaries of life when they placed their trust in the health information being provided by health food store herbalist Gerhard Hanswille.

The Atikian's are just plain folks who bought the appealing philosophy and health practices advocated by Hanswille: We should not kill animals. We should not eat animal products. We should use environmentally friendly soap.

We should not poison the earth or our bodies with the unnatural products of modern living. True health is to be found in herbs. Herbs for food. Herbs for medicine. This is God's way. Immunization is putting poison into your body. Doctor's medicines are poisons. Choose who you will believe, Hanswille or the doctors. You can't have it both ways.

Sonja followed Hanswille's advice during pregnancy, even though she cheated and had a little fish once in a while. She delivered a healthy 8.2 pound daughter. The baby did all right at first. At 4.5 months she was still at the 75th percentile in weight, but at 11 months she was removed from her only source of animal food (mother's milk). Fed only fruits, vegetables and rice, she eventually stopped growing, slept more and more, and suffered from more and more infections. At death she weighed 11.25 pounds. As the baby went downhill Hanswille assured the parents that this was merely "the poisons coming out of her body" and that she would eventually become the super baby they desired. Hanswille zapped the failing tyke with his violet ray machine to energize her Life Force, which was part of his mystical naturalism (you know, the same vitalism that underlies homeopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, ayurveda, and other philosophical approaches to health care).

I was there to explain to the jury how trust could cause someone to believe such a thing in the face of apparently obvious adverse symptoms. I would have told them that accepting such interpretations from a trusted health care provider is no different than what a cancer patient must do whose hair is falling out, is unable to eat, and who had willingly submitted to mutilating surgery that these were merely side-effects of life-saving surgery. The difference is that cancer specialists are trustworthy, Hanswille was not. His only credentials were from a mail-order diploma in herbology from California's notorious diploma mill, Bernadean University. I would have told them of California's shameful laws that permit such institutions to exist either in the name of buccaneer free enterprise which is so sacred to its conservative freebooters, on one hand, and the libertine philosophy which accepts anything in the name of tolerance on the other. We have both extremes in the Golden State, and both favor quackery. The cancer specialists rely upon science. The free-booters say "let's have health freedom and let the marketplace decide." The anti-trust judges agree; free market competition can cure all societal ills. The libertines go along.

Nothing in Hanswille's teachings differed materially from the litany of the entire health foods industry which he represents (what is frightening are research findings that far more people hold such beliefs than act upon them). The main difference was the degree of commitment on the part of the Atikians. As they walked away from the courthouse, they looked like any ordinary couple headed home after a day of shopping. In fact, they had shopped years before. They had bought the appealing health foods philosophy that extols herbs, vegetarianism, animal rights and super health. They had paid the highest price that quackery can exact. They had unwittingly killed the baby they dearly loved. There was both sadness and relief in their demeanor as they walked away. It was a sight I'll never forget.

Postscript: Two days after the trial ended, the government ordered an inquest on the death of Loreie Atikian. This should result in establishing who was primarily at fault and the filing of charges in this needless tragedy. The conscience of Canadians may well go on trial when the issues

are made clear. What is at stake is whether a civilized society will permit pseudomedical health foods gurus such as Hanswille to flourish, or will they demand that people who market misinformation for profit, which can seriously affect health behavior, be held accountable for their misdeeds. Involved will be the most fundamental question of consumer protection which is: who is to bear the burden for the harm done by quacks; the victims or the purveyors?

IF IT SOUNDS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE . . .

by Mary Anne Long, Georgia Skeptics

Many people believe that certain state or federal government agencies protect the rights of citizens against deception, fraud, and dishonest claims for pseudo-medical devices, products, and services which at the least may be of no benefit and which at the worst may prove to be harmful. It is widely but erroneously assumed that promotional claims for products, nutritional "supplements", and various devices said to improve health and well-being must be thoroughly investigated and subjected to scientific scrutiny by these agencies. Many believe, for example, that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) diligently guards against quackery and false nutritional claims as well as ensures that no drug is placed on the market until it is thoroughly tested and approved or generally recognized as being safe and effective. Many consumers holding these beliefs and assumptions frequently are duped.

A study conducted by the FDA revealed surprisingly that 37% of persons surveyed, representing 50 million Americans over that age of 18, felt that advertisements relating to medications and health aids "must be true or they wouldn't be allowed to report them." This indicated that hucksters have become a major source of education for many consumers.

Health care fraud is thriving in America today. According to Consumer Reports, quackery in 1984 was a \$10 billion business and was growing rapidly. In 1991, U.S. Representative Marilyn Lloyd, who serves on the House Select Committee on Aging, stated that sick and elderly persons spent \$40 billion on disreputable health products and devices. Representative Lloyd cites a report by the American Medical Association which reveals that most victims of quackery spend between \$500 and \$1,000 a year. Obviously the health fraud business is very lucrative.

Why have millions of people chosen to ignore the countless scientific and technical achievements of society in favor of pseudomedical claims of unproven worth? A fragment of the population will believe anything, no matter how ridiculous. Aside from this there are many reasons for the boom in health fraud.

More people today than ever before are interested in wellness, fitness, and the prevention of health problems. Legitimate businesses and products address these well-founded interests; unfortunately, so do charlatans.

People are also fearful of environmental hazards over which they feel they have little control. Harmful chemicals such as pesticides, lead, radon, asbestos, and toxic wastes create much apprehension and misunderstanding on the part of the general public.

Public fears are often exacerbated by biased media reports and the zealous efforts of special interest groups.

Sickness is a basic problem of mankind and many seek to find remedies by searching for easy or miraculous cures. There are those who feel the medical professional has failed them and those who innately distrust physicians. The latter further tend to believe that orthodox medical care is unduly expensive and that the average doctor is impersonal, primarily profit-motivated, and not knowledgeable of the newest discoveries and secret remedies apparently so well known to a select few self-acclaimed experts.

Health chiselers are marketing their products more aggressively and in more high-tech ways than ever before. In addition, these hucksters have become expert in circumventing the law. By legal definition a drug is product "intended for use in the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment, or prevention of disease in man or other animals." But illegal claims can be made for products. These claims may not appear on the product labels but are more commonly made through the use of fliers, brochures, "fact sheets", or other types of printed matter given to the consumer as "bag stuffers" at the time of purchase. This practice is prevalent with products represented as "nutritional supplements" rather than drugs. Ironically, if no therapeutic claims are made for the product, it does not fit the legal definition of a drug and therefore does not have to be marketed as a drug.

Although the FDA is aware of numerous fraudulent practices, the enforcement of laws giving this agency the power to prosecute seems to have very low priority. Criminal prosecution is rarely pursued. Instead, the agency prefers to rely on consumer education, the bringing of civil action, and the seizure of products, maintaining that these actions constitute effective deterrents. However, some officials state that experienced quacks feel the chances of prosecution are very slim and they consider confiscation of their inventories or product seizure are merely part of the cost of doing business.

A report issued in 1984 by the House Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care was sharply critical of the FDA's enforcement policies, calling them minimal at best. And yet in 1988 only about one-half of one per cent of FDA's \$477 million budget was allocated to combat quackery. Therefore fraudulent and misleading health claims continue to be made. The wise consumer must review such claims with skepticism and with demands for scientific proof of both safety and effectiveness.

As the saying goes, "If it sounds too good to be true it probably is." The most common sources of praise for many miracle remedies and treatments are testimonials of anonymous persons, often supposedly friends or relatives, who "experienced" first hand the wonders to be wrought. The best defense against being victimized by these deceptive claims is common sense. Each individual must educate himself or herself on the many methods and tactics used by the medical hustlers and must always remain wary of claims which sound too good to be true.

If you think you have been a victim of a quack, contact:

National Council Against Health Fraud
Victim Redress Task Force
P.O. Box 33008
Kansas City, MO 64114

If you purchased a product that didn't provide the promised health benefits, or made you ill, write:

U. S. Food and Drug Administration Headquarters
HFE-88
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

OR

U. S. Food and Drug Administration
HFR-SE145
60 8th St. NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30309

If you believe advertising was misleading, contact:

Health Care Fraud
Bureau of Consumer Protection
Federal Trade Commissioner
Washington, DC 20580

If you desire information concerning a product or service that sounds too good to be true, send questions with \$1 and a business-size, stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

The Consumer Health Research Institute
3521 Broadway
Kansas City, MO 64111

If you received a questionable product or promotion through the mail, contact a postal inspector through your local postmaster or write:

Chief Postal Inspector
United States Post Office
Washington, D.C. 20260-2112

If you have questions concerning arthritis treatment claims, call:

Arthritis Foundation Information Line
1-800-283-7800

THE SECRET OF LULU HEARST

By Becky Long, Georgia Skeptics

The January/February, 1992, issue of the Georgia Skeptic newsletter described and account of "The Wonder Girl From Georgia," as documented in Charles Berlitz's book, World of the Odd and the Awesome.

For several years, Lulu Hearst entertained audiences as the "human magnet," mysteriously moving objects, producing strange rapping sounds, and exhibiting apparent super-human strength. In one very popular demonstration, she would easily overcome the strength of several men pushing on a stick, and even top-ple them onto the floor.

The solution to this mystery is found in Joe Nickell's new book, Wonderworkers! How They Perform the Impossible, from Prometheus Books. Although aimed at teaching young persons to critically examine wonderous claims, the book is a delight for persons of any age.

After entertaining audiences for several years, and growing wealthy in the process, Lulu Hearst decided to give up her act and confess her secrets! One of the reasons she expressed for leaving the stage was a concern over people's increasing superstition and delusion concerning her "Power."

Ms. Hurst explained that her poltergeist-type effects and the rapping sounds were merely tricks, and that her apparent superhuman strength arose from simply using leverage and balance to deflect the forces applied against her. For example, in the previously described demonstration in which Lulu Hurst overcame the strength of strong men pushing toward her on a stick, the arms of the men were extended. With a cleverly directed upward force, she was easily able to deflect their pushing into useless effort, and even send them tumbling.

Becky Long is the Executive Officer of the Georgia Skeptics. She is also a nuclear engineer.

UPCOMING MEETING: SATANIC CULTS

The May 1992 meeting of the Georgia Skeptics will be held on Sunday, May 17, at the Steak and Ale Restaurant on Savoy Drive in NE Atlanta.

The speaker will be Dr. William E. Gordon. As Regional Director of the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Dr. Gordon is responsible for investigating cult groups. His talk will address whether there is an extensive, organized Satanic underground operating in this country, examining the claims of so-called

experts and popular authors.

THE END