



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

Volume 2 Number 2

www.ntskeptics.org

March/April 1988

In this month's issue:

- [NTS News](#)
- [NTS Goes to the Fair](#)
- [Oops!](#)
- [Meeting Schedule](#)
- [Questions Raised by the Psychic Fair](#)

NTS News

The election results are in, and we now have a new board. The voting Fellows have elected John Thomas as Chair, Mel Zemek as Co -chair , Eddie Vela as Secretary-Treasurer, and Tony Dousette has taken over the role of newsletter editor/production and liaison.

We look forward to 1988 as an eventful and active year. John Thomas has gotten us off to a good start with his confrontation with the Cystic Fibrosis Psychic Fair (See "NTS Goes to the Fair"). Our activities have, in fact, been well-received by the national foundation, They don't want the kind of association with Psychic activities that John Thomas has uncovered.

We've also started contacting the local media to provide an alternative to Pseudoscience. Letters have been written to *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Dallas Times-Herald*, and *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram* requesting that they run a disclaimer on their astrology columns. Our position is that newspapers have an obligation to give their readers an accurate picture of the world, as science understands it, and we point out that astrology has no empirical basis. We've suggested this disclaimer:

"The following astrological forecasts should be read for entertainment only. Such predictions have no reliable basis in scientific fact."

We'll publish any responses in the next issue of *The Skeptic*.

This newsletter may seem a bit early. Actually, we've decided to go from a quarterly to a bimonthly schedule. We'll need, though, your support. Articles, book reviews and letters are welcome. And if you've had any encounters with practitioners of the irrational arts, let us know about it. As long as we've got enough contributions, we'll continue to publish bimonthly. We do have one article for the May/June issue, but more are needed. Let us hear from you!

[\[Back to top\]](#)

NTS Goes to the Fair

The local chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation recently sponsored a psychic fair in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. After NTS raised questions about the propriety of such sponsorship, Martha Edens, executive director of the local chapter, announced that a planned psychic fair in Denton will be cancelled and that the Foundation will no longer sponsor such events. Ms. Edens said that, in any event, the fair had not raised the money hoped for.

NTS attended the fair held January 3rd at the Doubletree Inn in Dallas. It was a typical production, with about thirty psychics, astrologers, graphologists and card readers sitting before tables in a conference room. Also present were dealers in metaphysical books and crystal objects. Among the numerous books on display were many that dealt with healing and health. One, "Heal Your Body," by Louise L. Hay, claimed that Cystic fibrosis had a metaphysical cause and a similar cure. Another, "Crystal Healing" by Katarina Raphael, promoted healing by the use of crystal power, though without mentioning cystic fibrosis.

Persons in charge at the fair wore lapel stickers with the Foundation's name and logo, and promotional material stated that the fair was "presented" by the Foundation. Carol Belt, a director of the Tarrant County branch of the local chapter, was acting as cashier. She told us she saw no contradiction in a scientific research organization sponsoring such events, because the intent was to raise money. Notwithstanding the statement on the handouts available that All proceeds go directly to Cystic

Fibrosis Research", it appears that fair receipts were split evenly between the Foundation and the participating psychics. The psychics were selected by a screening committee of Foundation volunteers on the basis of whether or not they were "good at what they do." Ms. Belt did not believe they were tested to see if they could actually do what they claim: predict the future, predict personality traits, etc. When asked about the Hay book, she expressed surprise and said that she would look into the matter.

NTS followed up by contacting Dr. Robert Kramer, a medical consultant for the Foundation, and professor of pediatric medicine at the UT Health Science Center. It soon became apparent that there was a lack of communication between the Foundation's fund-raising and research activities. Dr. Kramer told us he was shocked to learn that the Foundation had sponsored a psychic fair. He saw a definite conflict between such events and the Foundation's scientific mission, characterizing the event as "a giant step backward." When asked about the Hay book and its claims about cystic fibrosis, Dr. Kramer said if such claims were true, then his twenty-five years of medical training and experience were "all wrong." He told us he would immediately express his opposition to such activities to the local foundation leadership.

Our contacts with the Foundation's national office in Maryland showed that the gap between science and money-raising also existed at that level. Mr. Rich Mattingly, vice-president for field operations, told us he saw no reason to disassociate the Foundation from a group because of a particular belief, as long as the group was legal and ethical. He said he was not a doctor and could not comment on the claims in the Hay book about cystic fibrosis, although he did state that the Foundation's work was based on scientific research. He expressed no opinion about whether or not there was any scientific validity to the claims of astrologers or psychics. After being told of Dr. Kramer's opposition to such activities, Mr. Mattingly shifted his position somewhat and said he would not want to lend the credibility of the Foundation to pseudoscience beliefs.

We interviewed Ms. Edens after she had conferred with Dr. Kramer. She told us she had approved the two fairs recently held, but that she had done so believing that they offered only entertainment. She is not a believer herself in the claims of psychics and astrologers. Ms. Edens said that the fund-raising staff does not generally have scientific or medical training, but all volunteers attend orientation sessions on the medical aspects of cystic fibrosis, and paid staff members attend annual training at the national headquarters.

NTS has sent a letter to the national headquarters of the Foundation, urging our opinion that its sponsorship of psychic fairs gives pseudoscience claims credibility with an unwary public and discounts the rational, scientific approach to the study of our world by implying that science and pseudoscience are equally valid.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Oops!

Our thanks to Mark Meyer for his work in designing our logo. We failed to credit him with his efforts in the last issue.

Readers may be interested in another newsletter published locally. This is On T.O.P. (On Those Opposed to Pseudoscience), edited by Dr. Raymond A. Eve of UTA. On T.O.P. aims to acquaint academics, administrators, policy makers and others dealing with pseudoscience with each other and to describe their respective interests. Those interested in such networking may write Dr. Eve at

The Department of Sociology
Anthropology Social Work Box 19599
285 University Hall
University of Texas at Arlington
Arlington, TX 76819.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Meeting Schedule

March 28: Dr. Arthur Babick will speak on "Researching with Psychics." Dr. Babick is assisting the North Texas Parapsychology Association with research on psychic ability. Hear from a man with feet in both camps.

April 17: Dr. Harry Reeder, professor of philosophy at UTA, will speak on critical thinking and the analysis of arguments. Critical thinking skills are the basic equipment every skeptic needs to separate fact from fiction. Can they be learned, or must we be born with them?

May 22: Hope Evans of the Cult Awareness Council will speak on "Cults in America." Destructive aspects of these cults, and their ability to feed on people's lack of skepticism, will be discussed.

All meetings will be at 2:00 p.m., Room 101, University Hall, University of Texas at Arlington (Corner of Cooper and Campus Drive.)

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Questions Raised by the Psychic Fair

The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation affair reported elsewhere in this issue raises some interesting questions. Why did the dedicated and intelligent people involved in fund-raising for this organization fail to recognize that most of the beliefs promoted by the psychic fair participants were inconsistent with the Foundation's research philosophy? Why did a vice-president of the national organization decline to give even an opinion about the claims of astrologers or psychics? Why, even though the Foundation's fund-raising staff is apparently given solid information about the medical aspects of cystic fibrosis and current research into its cause and cure? Somehow, this knowledge about medical research did not spill over and help its recipients better evaluate competing claims about health and healing.

The problem, I believe, is that most persons, including the Foundation's staffers, lack an understanding of how science

works. They do not understand the scientific method and how it gives reliable, public knowledge of the world. Scientific thinking is a prophylactic measure against various biases and errors in thinking that we are all susceptible to:

We all tend to make certain cognitive mistakes. We tend to generalize from personal experience -- what we know seems to be the general rule. We tend not to question the first plausible explanation for a phenomenon. We cannot estimate probabilities well, and we have a powerful bias against chance. We want to find patterns in random information, or seek explanations for coincidence, when there is nothing to be explained. (The latter tendency is the basis of most fortune-telling systems).

Social and cultural influences make some beliefs more attractive for us than others. Ideas about the world and about human behavior from our early socialization can be very hard to shake. Also, some pseudoscience beliefs put excitement into "dull" lives, or give us a comfortable feeling that we understand our lives and are in control.

We give uncritical acceptance to much of what we see in newspapers or on television. Personal testimonials are especially powerful. Sadly, many news writers and reporters take pseudoscience claims at face value. Outrageous claims are rarely challenged, and if they are debunked, the follow-up seems to be given much less play than the initial report. The news media tend to report stories about scientific research in a simple-minded manner. A new discovery is a "break through," when in reality it is almost always the culmination of a long series of studies, building on prior data and prior theories.

It is always important to teach the content of science, but a knowledge of content alone may only result in critical thinking in one area and general credulity in all others. The knowledge is simply handed down from on high, and the science consumer may have no better reason to believe it than that it came from some authoritative source. Refutation and debunking of pseudoscience claims is necessary, but debunking alone will not help us adequately evaluate competing claims and arrive at sound conclusions. Education in the scientific method and critical thinking is essential.

--John Thomas

[\[Back to top\]](#)
