



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Tilton Claims TV AIDS Cure

NTS Medical Advisor Suggests Prosaic Explanation

By Mike Sullivan

Dallas televangelist Robert Tilton's *Success in Life* TV show recently aired a segment claiming that a viewer was cured of AIDS after touching his television screen during one of Tilton's "Miracle Prayer" acts. The segment was cablecast nationwide July 31 by the "New Inspirational Network" in Orlando.

Tilton introduced the segment, which he claimed as proof of the healing powers possible through faith and "prayer vows." Tilton said that the man had been cured of "full-blown AIDS," a 100% fatal disease for which there is no cure known today. In the report, a man identified only as "André" gave his account of what happened to him along with narration by *Success in Life* "reporter" Paul Batite in Los Angeles. André, a black male who appeared to be in his early 30s, said that he had been diagnosed as being HIV positive. André claimed that he suffered from diarrhea and loss of weight, dropping to 118 lbs. No mention was made of André's original weight or other possible causes of the diarrhea. The reporter then told how André tuned into Tilton's show one day, placed his hands on the TV screen as Tilton commanded, and prayed for healing from Jesus. Immediately afterward, André said, he called the hospital where he had had a second AIDS test performed *two months before he watched the Tilton show*. According to the reporter, the nurse at "Mercy Hospital," identified in the segment as Janet, told André that there was no indication of the HIV antibody in the second sample. The report went on to show quick shots of what looked like hospital records, with everything illegible except the hand-written words "NO AIDS" in large print. The report did not explain how a test sample *already in the lab* could be influenced by any claimed miracle cure.

Possible Explanation

According to NTS technical advisor Tim Gorski, M.D., being HIV positive simply means that antibodies against the AIDS virus are detectable in the blood.

"Actually, there are two tests for this," Dr. Gorski said, "the first being an enzyme-linked immunoabsorbent assay, or ELISA, which uses the kind of technology that over-the-counter pregnancy tests use. But a positive HIV antibody test using ELISA must be confirmed using a more definitive method called the Western Blot. Even then, being HIV positive isn't the same as having 'full-blown AIDS.'"

Dr. Gorski went on to say that André may simply have had a falsely- positive or weakly-positive ELISA test for the AIDS antibody which proved negative on the Western Blot. Dr. Gorski also noted that there continue to be cases reported of individuals testing HIV antibody negative who previously had been confirmed positive.

"Some of these have been people who seemed healthy," he said, "while others have been people with advanced AIDS whose immune systems are so damaged that they're unable even to make the antibody. If André is a member of this latter group, it wouldn't be the first time that a faith-healer claimed to cure a patient who actually succumbed."

"In any case," Dr. Gorski concluded, "no one has yet documented an AIDS cure. If Tilton can do it, it seems to me that he has a moral obligation to prove it instead of hiding such a stupendous claim under a bushel."

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that as many as 208,000 new AIDS cases will be reported by the end of 1992, and that 1.3 million Americans may be infected with the disease. 21,000 Americans died from AIDS in 1989, the last year for which official statistics have been published.

In numerous calls to Tilton's Dallas operation over a two-week period, I was unable to track down any precise details of this astonishing breakthrough in medical history.

Workers at Tilton's telephone boiler room wouldn't tell me how I could contact the patient, the reporter or the producer of the segment, and repeated calls to a member of Tilton's "TV Operations" staff were not returned. One phone staffer became quite abrupt when asked if she believed the claimed AIDS cure, saying that "Brother Tilton" would never lie about such things.

In other miracle-working news, Tilton has also apparently found a way to focus his faith-healing powers towards specific parts of the anatomy. Tilton's giant freeway billboards along I-35 announced that he will conduct a "Special Back Healing Miracle Service" on Sunday, August 18 at his Dallas TV studio/church. This "by-request" healing power complements his newly-found ability to "speak in tongues" at will, which he had previously claimed was completely involuntary.

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The fourth estate

Finding a copy of *The Skeptical Inquirer* on Dallas bookstore magazine racks is only a little more likely than finding a meteor has landed in a bucket in your backyard. Of all the booksellers I've visited in the Metroplex, only the Plano BookStop stocks the CSICOP quarterly, and then only occasionally. Thankfully, the popular press has begun to give credible coverage to rational inquiry.

The July 8 issue of *Forbes* magazine carried an excellent cover story titled, "Junk Science in the courtroom / How it costs consumers and business billions." Published as an excerpt from a new book by author Peter Huber, it details some of the wild pseudoscience claims made by "expert" witnesses in a variety of civil cases and the ridiculous judgements that follow.

Huber cites examples of what can happen when jurisprudence meets pseudoscience in several recent cases, all without any credible scientific evidence to support the plaintiff's claims.

The famous case of the alleged unexpected acceleration in the Audi 5000 caused Audi's U.S. sales to virtually cease, and found the company defending themselves against \$5 billion in lawsuits. Although Audi was completely vindicated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Canadian and Japanese auto safety agencies, the company was still hit with several large court judgements.

The scientific evidence showed that the only plausible cause for the acceleration in the Audi 5000 was the driver's foot on the wrong pedal, just as in any other car. That should have been then end of it, but it wasn't. Attorneys for several plaintiffs continued to try to find fault with Audi even where there was none. One case alone cost Audi \$3.7 million, based on the plaintiff's argument that Audi should have made their cars idiot-proof.

Huber tells of other cases where doctors are accused of causing cerebral palsy during delivery; of employers sued for tens of millions in compensation for worker's claimed ecological reactions to minuscule contaminants in the workplace; and of a Philadelphia jury that awarded a soothsayer \$1 million in damages after she claimed (and "expert" medical and police witnesses confirmed) that she had lost her psychic powers during a CAT scan.

Huber's article makes the point that an "expert witness" can be found somewhere to tell a jury almost anything a plaintiff's attorney desires, even though much of the testimony of these witnesses lies outside mainstream science, scientific consensus and peer review.

Huber's book, *Galileo's Revenge: Junk Science in the Courtroom*, to be published by Basic Books this month, should help cast a spotlight on how pseudoscience is not always a "victimless crime."

On a much lighter tone, the hilarious and irreverent *Spy* magazine's September issue (with a "pregnant" Bruce Willis on the cover), carried two stories of interest to skeptics on consecutive pages.

In "Profits of Doom," Deirdre Fanning profiles the three Feshbach brothers, quondam darlings of the Wall Street short-selling business and full-time zealots for L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology.

Fanning writes of the brothers' recent financial troubles after some fantastic blunders that left them and their partners holding the bag for over \$330 million (40% of their capital) in just six months. Unlike traditional stock deals where the investor's maximum potential loss is limited to the purchase price of the stock (it can't go below zero), the Feshbachs and other short-sellers of stocks face virtually unlimited losses if the stocks they buy because they think they will drop in value instead head for the stars.

The Feshbachs, Fanning reports, run their California investment firm strictly in accordance with the teachings of one of the greatest financial wizards of all time: L. Ron Hubbard. It was Hubbard, after all, who devised the masterstroke plan to make his science-fiction-based cult into a religion, thereby avoiding the IRS and all those messy taxes. Fanning's story gives some glimpses into just how bizarre Scientology can get when it forms the basis of a business philosophy.

It's worth the \$2.95 cover price for this *Spy* just for the photo in Fanning's article of Hubbard attaching his famous E-meter to a tomato plant, with the caption, "YOU SAY TOMATO, I SAY TRAVOLTA: L. Ron Hubbard, circa 1969, 'clears' salad fixings with an E-Meter. Eventually the star of Perfect was hooked up to the same gizmo."

The very next story in the September *Spy* was Henry Alford's "You'll Never Groom Dogs in This Town Again." Alford decided to try his hand at the official accreditation tests required for various professions, ranging from cement mason to dog groomer to CIA agent to cosmetologist to psychic. Yes, psychic.

You mean you didn't know there was an accreditation test for psychics? Alford found Dr. E. M. Sekunna of the Universal Centre in Cassadaga, Fla., who gives such a test. Alford told Sekunna over the phone that he was a psychic who had been giving readings for years.

Sekunna took his word for it, along with an impromptu "cold reading" over the phone, which Sekunna found quite convincing. Alford's nonsensical probing found their mark each time in Sekunna's receptive imagination:

"I'm sensing ... I'm sensing cheese," Alford said. "I'm not sure if it's a Roquefort or something from the Pyrenees -- but it's some kind of blue cheese."
"Well, I enjoy all kinds of cheese," Sekunna confessed. "It's what I think I shouldn't eat so much of."
Bingo.

After a few more rock-solid hits like that one on Sekunna's psyche, Alford was told that he was "very highly sensitive." Sekunna later told Alford that he should go to Florida for some palmistry lessons for \$100. If those went well, Sekunna said Alford could continue training for a month or two. Sekunna also told Alford that he could be bringing in \$400 or \$500 per week with the addition of some palmistry skills.

Poor Henry Alford: college educated and working as a contributing editor for a national magazine, but he failed the tests for CIA agent, Macy's salesperson, telephone maintainer, bridge-and-tunnel officer, sanitation worker, and scenic painter. Luckily, if the *Spy* thing doesn't work out, Dr. Sekunna has a position for him in Cassadaga.

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The third eye

by Pat Reeder

Summer being the season for reruns, I'll start off by bringing you up to date on some stories you've probably already heard about.

Last month, the great Voodoo Beer dispute was mercifully settled, before it led to all-out interstate warfare. As you'll recall, the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission had refused to allow Louisiana's Voodoo Beer to be sold in Texas because they claimed that voodoo is a religion, and Texas law forbids an alcoholic beverage from being named after a religion or a religious icon. In other words, there will be no Jesus Wine in Texas anytime soon, which is just as well, since it would probably taste like it was made out of water.

In retaliation, Louisiana's Alcoholic Beverage Commission began making noises about banning Lone Star Beer. Miraculously, our religious sensitivities were soothed! Much to the chagrin of Texas' powerful lobby of voodoo worshippers, Voodoo Beer will soon be available in Texas, and Lone Star will continue to be guzzled in Louisiana. It's a good thing this was settled before both states suffered a paralyzing epidemic of sobriety.

Also on the rerun front, ABC TV's *20/20* recently reran their report from a few months back on British crop circles. The original report was frighteningly credulous, and it left out some well-known facts that cast grave doubt on the supernatural origin of these increasingly elaborate wheat doodles. Unfortunately, the only updated information offered was the fact that farmers are now charging one pound per tourist to look at the circles. Perhaps this tells us more than *20/20* intended.

The program redeemed itself somewhat the following week with a repeat of a story on children's near-death experiences. While the story itself was highly credulous, an ABC reporter who is both a minister and a medical doctor was brought on to offer a final comment. He said that he felt these experiences were merely a physiological phenomenon brought on by chemicals in the brain, no more nor less ... yet believing this did not interfere in any way with his personal religious convictions. Hey, Barbara and Hugh, let's see more of this guy!

Speaking of old news and crop circles, the Associated Press reports that a Fargo, Oklahoma, woman who found three crop circles in her rye field two months ago now claims she saw a UFO hovering there ... thirty- four years ago! She says she kept the sighting secret for all these years because she was afraid people would laugh. But what with all this rye bending over sideways, I suppose it was time to go public.

I shall spare you the obvious joke on the word "rye," but I would like to point out the shocking discrepancies between American and British UFO crop circles. Over there, elaborate patterns are routinely formed overnight. Here, it takes thirty-four years just to get three ragged circles etched into a rye field. I think this says something about the decline of American workmanship ... to say nothing of penmanship.

August 16 was the anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, and the occasion for another syndicated special featuring Bill Bixby. This one focused on the theory that Elvis is still alive and in the witness relocation program. Poor Bill Bixby has certainly fallen a long way since he co-hosted that special on the supernatural with James Randi. Perhaps Bill should look into the witness relocation program. At the very least, he could have quoted the Memphis coroner, who once said of Elvis, "if he wasn't dead before I did the autopsy, he was sure dead when I finished."

Finally, be on the lookout for the hilarious new Duracell® battery commercial. In it, an "American Gothic"-type farm couple stand in front of a smoking crop circle, and explain that a flying saucer just landed. They had a nice visit with the Martians, and even took lots of pictures ... but Dang! the flash batteries were dead, so none of them came out! At the end, they call to their son, Junior, to verify the story. But Junior has mysteriously ... DISAPPEARED!

It's almost as funny as a Bill Bixby special.

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Letters to the editor

We welcome letters from our readers. Please make your comments brief and related to topics of interest to NTS members. Letters must be signed, and are subject to editing for space considerations. To the editor:

The stories concerning CSICOP's bankruptcy and uncertain future, Randi's resignation and personal financial plight, and Scientology's outrageous tactics in the July issue shared a frightening element: the vulnerability of good when evil can bankroll an onslaught of litigation.

Even Superman would have to give up fighting for truth and justice if he had to contend with the obscenity which is our legal system in this country. Even if he could afford it, he'd be spending all his time in court!

Sure, these lawsuits are meant to intimidate. But let's not pretend that they don't! Who is ready to pledge their all against the enormous incomes of those who are favored by a credulous media and have hordes of zombie followers with their wallets as open as their tiny brains?

Perhaps CSICOP should fold and cooperating local groups try to fill the void as best they can. Maybe the frauds would have a tougher time filing dozens of lawsuits in as many jurisdictions. Then again, maybe they would invoke the wonderful RICO laws against their critics.

What angers me most is that our financial contributions to CSICOP must be spent, not on its worthy cause, but on attorneys. At least Jim Bakker got something tangible, like an air-conditioned doghouse, from the contributions he diverted. But lawsuits, like the claims of the frauds, simply breed more of the same.

Certainly, CSICOP is not to blame. It and Randi and the targets of Scientology and many others who are sued frivolously and maliciously (or just for the chance of winning some cash from the defendant) every day in this country are the victims. The crime is not even so much as in those who file these lawsuits, but in the Orwellian system of "justice" that rewards them by habitually allowing what is wrong to destroy what is right. The attorneys, of course, not only make the laws but collect what bets no matter who "wins."

The solution to this perversity should be obvious. But it is about as much chance of happening as that John Catchings will prove his mettle as a "psychic detective."

Deborah A. Boak, Arlington

To the editor:

Further comments/questions on Mike Sullivan's article, "MUFON's Circular Reasoning." (The Skeptic, May-June 1991)

1. As far as I can tell, the precise origin of the circles and related patterns has not been identified, so what exactly is "circular" about the local MUFON group's "reasoning" in listening to two separate speakers who have visited many circle sites?
2. How does Mr. Sullivan square his statement "In fact, Wingfield is silent on any conclusions or even a theory of what or who causes these patterns" with his statement "I am also not making any extreme claims of their cause as Haddington and Wingfield are doing"? (Letters, July 1991)
3. As far as I know, neither Mr. Wingfield or Mr. Sullivan defined what they mean by "hoax." (If by "hoax" is meant a non-public failed attempt to emulate or replicate an existing pattern deemed "real" by circle investigators or even an attempt to create a new pattern with "real" circle characteristics, then yes, there have apparently been such attempts.) What does Mr. Sullivan mean by "hoax" and how would he distinguish it from the "real" thing as described by circle investigators?

4. If the "real" circles as defined by circle advocates are susceptible to replication by any other known means, why haven't any of them been replicated? Perhaps NTS could organize/sponsor a "crop circle manufacturing event" in a [Dallas]-area crop field to be witnessed by the news media. The 20/20 crew who went to England to investigate the circles would be appropriate observers.
5. Other than the careful investigations described in the book *The Crop Circle Enigma* (CCE) edited by Ralph Noyes and those scientific investigations ongoing and in proposal form, what further careful scientific investigations does NTS propose?
6. If the origin of the circles is not in fact atypical, why has Dr. Terrence Meaden (who has investigated "the crop circle problem for eleven years (CCE, p. 76) along with other qualified scientists, developed a plasma vortex explanation as the source of the circles? (See Dr. Meaden's 15-page contribution on this subject in CCE.) Dr. Meaden is Oxford educated, the longest standing researcher in the crop circle phenomenon and has published extensively in physics and meteorology, etc. (See p. 9, CCE.)
7. I attended the MUFON meeting and I don't recall Mr. Wingfield's being addressed as "professor." (See his credentials, p. 9, CCE.) Who claimed he's a professor and when during the meeting?
8. In CCE Dr. Meaden writes (p. 82) "Since 1988 I, too, have tried dowsing circles, and it seems that it "works." And on page 88: "We can say that the UFO movement has been monitoring a genuine physical effect all the time - one of which the scientific community was unaware, and which will be of greatest importance to the physical sciences in the future." On page 97: "A crop circle is a thing of beauty, laden with mystery and deserving of the interest it is attracting worldwide, both popular and scientific." To what degree do these statements by Dr. Meaden qualify him to be characterized as a member of "the UFO crowd" and accordingly, how far is his credibility therefore eroded with NTS?
9. As a skeptical member of the audience that night and since, according to Mr. Sullivan, "Not one question or comment from the group showed the slightest disbelief," perhaps Mr. Sullivan, Dr. Eve and Mr. Voelkerling would agree to formulate several "best" questions, arrange to have them mailed to Mr. Haddington and Mr. Wingfield and publish their answers in NTS. Unfortunately, only two questions (if I counted correctly) were asked by Mr. Sullivan in his 2,300 word story on the crop circle circus.
10. Mr. Sullivan states that "I am delighted that Mr. Davis only takes issue with these three points" but on the other hand the Letters to the Editor instructions ask "Please make your comments brief" What to do? Am I to apologize for raising 10 points (I have thought of many more) and then suffer editing on top of it?

Thank you for encouraging your readers to apply critical evaluation. I tried to do so at the MUFON presentation and I hope my comments and questions above are credible, fair and productive.

We will reply to Mr. Rager's letter in a future issue of The Skeptic - Editor

Ernest Rager, Dallas

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Skeptical outlook

A peek at the editor's in-box

By Mike Sullivan

Here is our monthly look ahead at stories we are researching now for publication in a future issue of *The Skeptic*. If you have any information on these subjects or have suggestions for topics you'd like to see covered by *The Skeptic*, please call or write at the address listed in the Letters column.

NTS Technical advisor Dr. Ray Eve reports that local psychic Ginger Larkin has been teaching a continuing-education adult learning course on psychic abilities in some local community colleges. Which colleges have these courses in their catalogs, and what do the deans of the departments say to justify the teaching of pseudoscience at taxpayer expense? Have any of our readers taken any of these courses or know people who have? What is taught and how is the performance of the students measured?

The item in this space last month about our look into SunRider's claims and business practices brought several calls from readers who are familiar with the firm and it's products. Our research continues and we will have a report in an issue later this fall. If you have information, videotapes or product brochures from SunRider that you think would be helpful in compiling our story, please send them to the address listed in our Letters column along with instructions for their return.

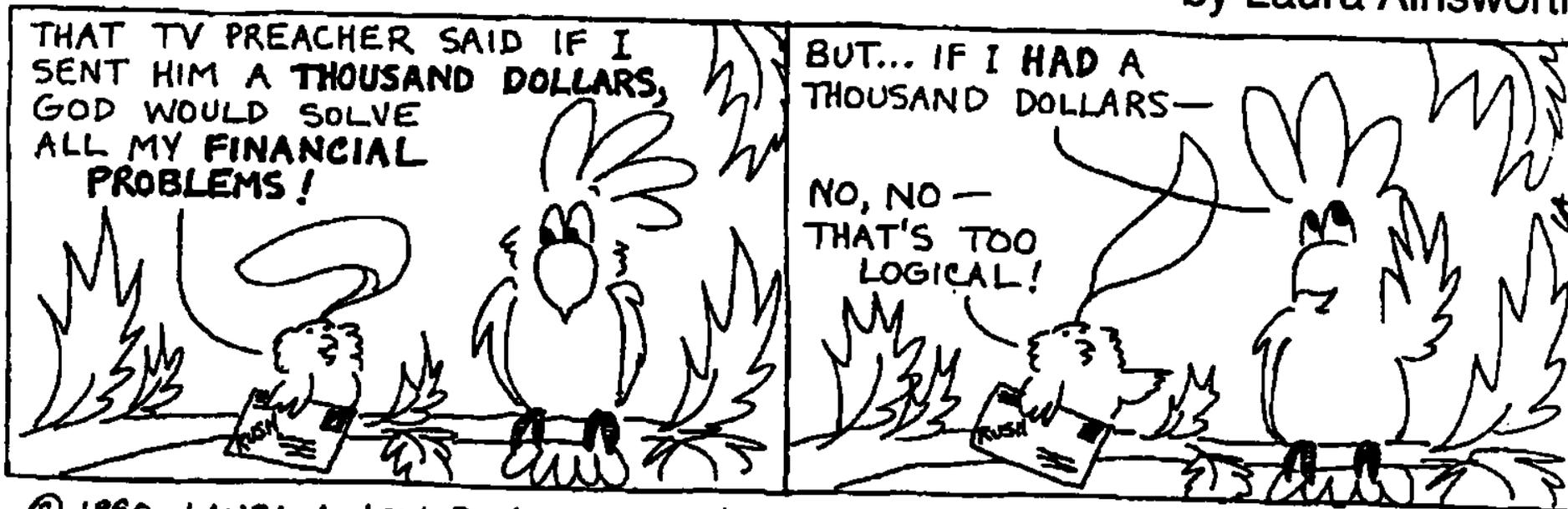
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Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth

UP A TREE

by Laura Ainsworth



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