



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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## In this month's issue:

- [Healthy Skepticism](#)
- [Letters from readers](#)
- [The third eye](#)
- [Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon](#)

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# Healthy skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

## It's A Conspiracy!

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) was signed into law in 1990, but has yet to apply to the vitamin and "nutritional" supplement industry. Last year, Utah Senator Orrin Hatch managed to get legislation passed that exempted this group from regulatory oversight, but that reprieve is due to expire at the end of the year. As previously reported here, the FDA has proposed implementing the NLEA in such a way that these vitamin and supplement products can continue to be sold, but the only claims that will be permitted will be those concerning which there is "significant agreement among qualified experts." The FDA has also been seeking safety information from manufacturers of these products so as to anticipate and avoid debacles such as the tryptophan tragedy and recurrent problems with various herbal remedies.

Misinformation of any sort enjoys some First Amendment protections, of course. The NLEA cannot stop quacks from writing books containing false and misleading claims. But it can throttle back the deception and fraud which is now rampant in the "health" food and supplement business by, for example, preventing such books and other materials from being referenced and/or quoted in product labeling and/or being sold alongside the various nostrums.

But even this isn't good enough for Utah's Senator Hatch and his House colleague from New Mexico, Representative Bill Richardson. They have introduced, respectively, S.B. 784 and H.R. 1709, which would permanently exempt the vitamin and supplement industry from the NLEA. The legislation's key language is that any claim would be allowed so long as it is supported by "scientific evidence, published or unpublished" [emphasis added]. When enshrined in public policy (as opposed to specific circumstances like articles in the press), this sort of terminology amounts to a frontal assault on the nature of scientific inquiry since the value of evidence and its usefulness in validating a claim is that it withstand public scrutiny. "Scientific evidence" that remains unpublished and unexamined, that cannot be replicated or compared to an existing body of evidence and integrated with it, is nothing of the kind.

The contrast between what the quacks say and what they do is noteworthy here. On the one hand, they habitually complain, for strategic reasons, of their supposed deliberate (even conspiracy-driven!) exclusion from the mainstream of medical science. But the merest hint of their claims being subjected to criteria of facts and reason sends them running

for federal legislation that would codify their excluded, or, as they prefer to say, "alternative" status as a law of the land.

Local Congressman Martin Frost is a cosponsor of H.R. 1709, which Congressmen Joe Barton and Dick Armey have also said they support. In the Senate, both Texas Senators Hutchison and Gramm have said they support the Hatch Bill. Meanwhile, as of this writing (November 21, 1993), the legislation has not yet been reported out of committee.

### "Fat-Burning" Skin Creams

In October of this year, researchers at Harbor-UCLA announced that they had achieved modest but measurable reductions in the size of deposits of fat in the thighs of women using a skin cream containing the anti-asthma drug aminophylline. This appears to have touched off another round of entrepreneurial activity in the lucrative business of weight-loss and "fat-burner" fraud.

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, for example, has been running a number of ads touting "miracle" weight loss creams, some of which state that they contain aminophylline. The paper also ran a feature article in mid-November concerning "Skinny Dip," an aminophylline-containing cream manufactured by Neways Inc. of Salem, Utah, and being promoted by a Mansfield couple as the "easy answer" to unwanted fat. The article included a helpful "1-800" number.

What's useful to keep in mind is that the single report which lies at the bottom of all the hype did not concern weight loss as such. In fact, the researchers made a point of stating that only fat deposits located in the thighs were affected and that the effect was only seen in women and not in men. Their work has also yet to be critically examined and validated. In addition, since aminophylline is commonly-used to control asthma, one would think that it would be an easy matter to compare a group of asthmatics using the drug to a matched control group with respect to their weight and the amount and distribution of body fat. No such study has been reported, though.

Add to all this the fact that aminophylline is far from a benign drug. It is one of a class of alkaloids known as methylxanthines, of which caffeine is also a member. All of these substances can cause increased irritability of the nervous system, including seizures, at higher doses. They can also cause heart arrhythmias and other problems among susceptible individuals. Meanwhile, the amount absorbed from a skin cream would tend to depend on a variety of factors including the other ingredients in the cream and the area of application.

An "easy answer" to weight loss? It seems unlikely, unless the unwanted bulk is in one's wallet. "Skinny Dip" costs \$24 (plus tax, shipping and handling) for a 4-ounce bottle.

### New Book: The Health Robbers

It seems that about half the books worth reading these days are coming out of Prometheus Press. Another one of their "must haves" is *The Health Robbers*. This is a 506-page tour-de-force of virtually every aspect of health fraud and quackery. It's up-to-date, too, describing some events which took place as recently as this past summer. Included are chapters on vitamins, herbal supplements, "organic foods," chiropractic, homeopathy, acupuncture, quack dentists and optometrists, and a whole lot more by 20 different experts in their fields. Renowned quack-busters Drs. Stephen Barrett and William T. Jarvis are the editors, with Barrett having written or contributed to 19 of the book's 36 chapters.

The book's only defects are that with so many subjects covered, there is much left unsaid. For example, the chapter on homeopathy is a bit scanty compared to the masterful debunking of this pseudoscience to be found in other works such as *Examining Holistic Medicine*, another Prometheus title. Also left unmentioned in the homeopathy chapter is the Benavides affair that played out in the pages of *Nature* a few years back. The result was much to the detriment of homeopaths (as was pointed out in the December 1992 *Skeptic*), but the original report is still cited by some as if it were proof of homeopathy's legitimacy.

Victor Herbert's chapter on "Vitamin Pushers and Food Quacks" was previously published in Stephen Barrett's newsletter *Nutrition Forum*, but otherwise the material appears to be original.

There is a pretty worthless chapter about cults entitled "The Mind Robbers." Whereas the rest of the book is quite specific about who the bad guys are, this waste of 4 pages is a restatement of the usual generalities about destructive cults with the obligatory references to Jim Jones and David Koresh. Here the reader learns, for example, that "cult members are expected to bend their will and yield control of their mind to the group and its leaders; failure to do so is

punished or corrected." Well, now this could apply to lots of religious groups and maybe some large corporate employers, could it not? "Banishment [excommunication? a pink slip?] is the ultimate sanction in some groups," the piece continues, "while in others it may be death" [emphasis added]. HUUHNNH? The startling conclusion reached is that "It is clear that the destructiveness of cults should be taken seriously and not condoned."

Despite its shortcomings, the book is well worth reading. There's nothing else like it in print that's all in one place and indexed. Just skip over Chapter 30.

*This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000. Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and a North Texas Skeptics Technical Advisor.*

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

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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.

### Writing for *The Skeptic*

Do you have something to say to other NTS members? Submit it for publication in *The Skeptic!* News clippings, original cartoons, articles, book reviews, letters, excerpts from technical journals on controversial topics, and any other materials related to rational inquiry are always welcome. You may contact us:

By US Mail : The Skeptic

c/o Editor  
P.O. Box 111794  
Carrollton, TX 75011-1794

By Telephone: 214-492-8998 evenings

By CompuServe: User ID 70205,1152

By Prodigy Service: Member ID KMPC52A

Original writing may be submitted on paper, on computer diskette or via modem. Please contact the editor for more information. Materials must be received by the editor no later than the 15th of each month for publication in the following month's issue. - Ed.

### Letters To the Editor:

Pat Reeder's diatribe on Political Correctness (PC) is full of blanket condemnations and anecdotal evidence. It is not convincing as a scientific argument. His is a political argument and is right-wing cynicism masquerading as skepticism.

The "scientific" core of the article is the attack on environmental groups. I agree with some of what Pat says here but I'm not sure what groups Pat is talking about. Is he trying to imply Greenpeace when he is talking about some smaller insignificant group? Using a large brush to tar everyone is a tool of people Pat professes to dislike.

Gloria Steinem blows her cool and Pat sees a PC conspiracy. I remember George Bush telling little old ladies to shut up at an American Legion meeting when the crowd asked questions about an MIA cover-up. Is that PC censorship also? (The POW-MIA issue would make a good skeptical inquiry column, but Pat probably believes that myth.) Anecdotal evidence of students being shouted down by teachers is not evidence of a PC conspiracy either. I was shouted down by a public school teacher for questioning his belief that dinosaurs and homo sapiens existed concurrently. That incident did

not permanently affect the halls of learning.

I remember "Black English" was a hot issues about ten years ago. Right-wing commentators argued that it inhibited the growth of a black middle class. Maybe so, but just last week I heard Louis Rukeyser of Wall Street Week ask, "What's the skinny on this stock?" I suspect I'll see Pat Reeder using the terms "differently-abled" and "companion animal" in the future.

**Gary Romero**  
**Dallas**

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

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## The third eye

**By Pat Reeder**

The holiday season is upon us, which means I have an earlier deadline than usual. Therefore, I shall dispense with the lengthy philosophizing and instead stuff your stuffing with lots of easy-to-read (and easy-to-write) random news items from around the world!

Let's begin with some really cheery holiday news which you might have missed: the world did NOT end on November 13th! The Great White Brotherhood, a religious cult in Ukraine, had been predicting the Apocalypse on that date for several months, and many of them gathered in the parks of Kiev to greet the Reaper. They had also predicted that upon that date, their god, Marina Tsvygun, would be resurrected at St. Sofia Cathedral, and 150,000 angels would fly through the air toward Heaven. None of their predictions came true. But November 13th did turn out to be a beautiful, sunny day (the Brotherhood must have predicted rain), so lots of people came out to shop, no doubt to take advantage of all the "Everything Must Go" sales. In what must rank as one of the most inspiring political speeches ever delivered, Ukrainian Deputy Interior Minister Valentyn Nedrehaylo told reporters, "The end of the world is hereby canceled."

Speaking of unusual religious beliefs, we turn next to San Francisco, where city officials are puzzled over what to do with a four-foot tall concrete traffic barrier that was dumped into Golden Gate Park by a lazy truck driver several years ago. The problem is not the unsightliness of the bullet-shaped lump of concrete, it's the crowd that it is drawing. Delinquents with spray paint? Nope. New agers, who have decided that the old traffic barrier is a shrine along the lines of Stonehenge, and who are gathering around the holy speed bump to pray, meditate and make offerings to it (what sort of offerings, I don't know ... new reflectors, maybe). City officials don't want a religious shrine in a public park, but they don't know how to get rid of it without suffering the wrath of the new agers. I suggest that they just go ahead and officially declare it a religious shrine, and the ACLU will get the courts to remove it for them.

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Next, we enter the realm of ectoplasm. It's been a busy month for ghosts, as evidenced by several recent news stories. The first report comes from Taiwan, where people traditionally burn paper "ghost money," which somehow reaches their dead ancestors, providing them with spending money in Heaven. But thanks to our huge balance of trade deficit, the Taiwanese apparently have so much money to burn that it is causing an air pollution problem.

So the city officials of Taipei came up with a brilliant alternative to ghost money. No doubt taking a cue from us Americans, who are experts in using credit cards to send our money up in smoke, they are now offering citizens a flammable "Kingdom of the Dead" credit card, which burns without creating pollution. A spokesman explained, "Like people, ghosts will find credit very convenient." Yes, they can now order their sheets direct from the *Home Shopping Network*! Frankly, when I heard about a government issuing a credit card that provides total security for your dead ancestors, I was incredulous. I couldn't believe that the Clintons hadn't thought of it first.

Our next ghost story comes from England, where a day-long prayer vigil was held in a London church to help exorcise the ghost of Thomas Howard from the Coutts Bank. Howard was beheaded by Queen Elizabeth I in 1572 for treason, and he has allegedly been appearing at the bank for the past 400 years, in Elizabethan costume and sans head (don't ask me how they know it's him ... perhaps they made him show proper I.D. before giving him any ghost money). The prayer vigil was organized by Howard's descendants, one of whom said that it was "the least we can do for poor Thomas" to help release him from his bank purgatory. And if you've ever stood in a bank line on Friday afternoon, you know exactly how he feels.

Lest you think that all ghosts are helpless victims, standing around with their hands out and their heads off, there are also stories about ghosts who have major attitude problems. In Hawaii, a woman was arrested while walking naked across a footbridge. She told police she had channeled the ghost of a 15th Century pirate who told her that if she walked across the bridge naked, it would cure her asthma. She was taken to a Honolulu hospital for observation, perhaps to see whether her asthma cleared up. My personal theory is that the pirate just wanted to see her naked. You can't trust those dead pirates, at least not on medical issues.

Another trouble making ghost has popped up in Newport, Kentucky, where a man named J.R. Costigan filed a lawsuit against Bobby Mackey's Music World Bar, claiming that he was attacked by a ghost in the men's room. It seems that the ghost is a legend in the bar. Costigan said he was walking around the men's room, daring the ghost to show himself, when the dark-haired apparition suddenly appeared, punched and kicked him, then disappeared. His lawsuit demanded \$1,000 in damages and a sign posted in the bar, warning of the pugnacious ghost's presence.

The club's lawyer, Robert Lotz, responded good-humoredly, pointing out that the only other witness to the fight was a ghost, and he didn't know how to serve a subpoena to him. He even offered his explanation to the court in verse ...

"But souls departed eschewing repose  
Prove difficult for us lawyers to depose,  
And the sheriff will greet with crude demeanor  
My request to serve a spook's subpoena."

Costigan apparently gave up the ghost himself and also filed a motion to dismiss the case. Perhaps his head cleared, and he realized he had just had a run-in with a poltergeist named Harvey Wallbanger.

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As mentioned here earlier, the Fox Network series *The X Files* has evolved into a pretty well-made horror/sci fi series, since it gave up the pretense of being "based on actual FBI files," and just went whole-hog into fantasyland. The producers no doubt came to the same realization that hit Paramount executives after they bought the rights to *Fire In The Sky*, i.e., that once you've heard one alien abduction tale, you've pretty much heard them all. Their identical dreary details have become so familiar to the public that any attempt to dramatize them requires major spicing up from professional screenwriters just to keep the audience awake. This is probably why you're hearing so little from the Bud Hopkins-Whitley Streiber camp these days: the national media are like a big furnace that requires constant stoking, and you can't keep burning the same lump of coal over and over.

Still, having complimented *The X Files* for choosing honest imagination over dishonest pseudoscience, I must offer the producers a warning: using up a different monster every week, the way they are now, is bound to lead to diminishing returns, or what I call the *Kolchak*, *The Night Stalker* syndrome. That old *Darrin McGavin* show started off in terrific style with a story of modern-day vampires. From there it was on to werewolves. By week 12, they had gotten down to doing shows about succubi (it's hard to be scared of something you have to look up in the dictionary) and Devil Dogs, with and without creamy filling.

Like *Kolchak*, *The X Files* is well on its way to using up every truly creepy creature there is. If they want to be on TV for the long haul, I suggest they adopt a *Dark Shadows* approach, and start stretching out the plotlines a bit. Remember how it used to take Barnabus Collins three weeks just to sink his teeth into some comely starlet's neck? Take a tip, Fox

Network, and pace yourselves. Or else by next fall, you'll be trying to scare us with investigations of Mothman or the Marfa lights.



Okay, let's wrap this up with some news from close to home.

A federal jury has convicted local spiritual guru and self-proclaimed psychic Terri Hoffman on 10 counts of bankruptcy fraud, for hiding various assets and contracts. Federal prosecutor Bob Webster said, "Mrs. Hoffman has been toying with the bankruptcy court and its trustees for over two years. It took a jury verdict on ten felony counts to put an end to the lying, the cheating, the deceiving and the concealing." Or perhaps the jury found it hard to believe that any psychic could really be broke. Sentencing is set for January 14, and she faces up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine on each count. But the saga is not yet over: Hoffman still faces lawsuits accusing her of using mind control to cause or benefit from the suicides or untimely deaths of ten of her associates, followers and husbands. Stay tuned ...

Continuing the subject of local spiritual leaders with legal problems, Robert Tilton has turned up in the newspapers again ... sort of. Last week, as I was reading the comics in *The Dallas Morning News* (purely for research purposes, of course), a familiar face jumped out at me from the "Judge Parker" strip. "Judge Parker" is a serious, soap opera-type strip drawn in realistic style, and the character I noticed was a greedy religious cult leader. His hair is white, and his expression sinister rather than goofy, but to me, there is no mistaking the facial features of our own Rev. Bob Tilton. If memory serves, the man who draws "Judge Parker" lives in the Dallas area. If so, he must be familiar with Tilton, but whether the caricature is intentional or subconscious, I can't say. Check it out for yourselves. Come to think of it, Rev. Tilton might want to consider moving into the comic strip medium, now that TV has been soured for him. I think he's a natural for "The Far Side."

Finally, I wrap up this column with some personal good news: Barry Karr, media director of CSICOP, for some reason likes this column. So last week, he contacted me and asked me to write a new column for CSICOP's national newsletter, *Skeptical Briefs*. Naturally, I accepted immediately. I'll be writing about the activities of local skeptics groups all around the world, and I can't wait to get started on it.

In closing, I'd just like to thank all the little people who are truly responsible for my success. I refer, of course, to the Martians.

Happy holidays!

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

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## Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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