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(If Quackery Is Wrong) I Don't Want To Be Right

by John Blanton and Daniel Barnett

Every man is a damn fool for at least five minutes every day; wisdom consists in not exceeding the limit. - Elbert Hubbard

Stephen Barrett, MD, is no stranger to controversy. As vice-president of the National Council Against Health Fraud and driving force behind the [Quackwatch](#) Web site, he has drawn the wrath of many professionals in the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) industry. When Barrett was interviewed by Ira Hadnot for *The Dallas Morning News*, a little negative feedback could be expected from some readers in the North Texas area.

The interview was published in the August 26, 2001 issue of the newspaper. Barrett discussed how cancer and multiple sclerosis are the two ailments most often targeted by medical quacks who peddle worthless "cures" and therapies. "The frauds usually go after diseases characterized by suffering and desperation," Barrett explained. "They like to assert that science doesn't have all the answers. But that has never been a claim of science, which is a rational process that can address many questions about whether a product or procedure is safe and effective for its intended purpose."

Sure enough, Candace Talmadge of Lancaster weighed in with a rebuttal to the interview with Barrett. Although her letter was not published in the print version of *The Dallas Morning News*, it was featured as a Cyberletter for August 29 on the newspaper's Web site. Talmadge stated that she encountered "this medical fundamentalist" a few years ago through her involvement with CAM news groups.

"Science is a belief system every bit as much as religion," Talmadge wrote. "The very foundation of the scientific method, objective reality, is as much a tenet of faith as adherence to the existence of a Creator." Declaring that she chose not to put her faith in science, she then told Barrett, "Butt out, fella. I am an adult and I don't want, need or appreciate your so-called protection against quackery."

More Than Meets the Eye

It all looks very simple. Seeming to take a stand against the oligarchy of modern science, Candace Talmadge speaks for the right of all to do as we please regarding matters of health and medical treatment: it's my life; therefore it's my choice. Is Talmadge a humble citizen speaking for the downtrodden? She's much too modest, we're sure.

When John did a little research on the Internet, however, he quickly discovered that Talmadge is much more involved in the business end of alternative medicine than she has allowed us to believe.

As it turns out, Talmadge is one of the co-founders of the Lancaster-based Sattva Institute, which offers various classes and therapies designed to integrate the analytical and creative aspects of its clients and to develop their psychic senses. In other words, the Sattva Institute seems to be another money-making enterprise with a heavy dose of alternative psychotherapy.

Talmadge is also a Sunan therapist, having learned the practice from Sattva Institute co-founder Jana Simons. Sunan therapy is supposed to liberate an individual from self-judgment, which is seen as the origin of disharmony and disease on all levels: mental, emotional, spiritual, and even physical. During a Sunan therapy session, the therapist supposedly channels the patient's "guides," better known as angels, and receives information about self-judgments from the guides.

For Talmadge, however, her professional life doesn't stop with metaphysical healing. She is also a public relations strategist for Cooksey Communications, Inc. in Irving and an associate for PRTek in Lewisville. Her professional writing career goes back to 1976, complete with an impressive resume that includes working for *Forbes*, *Adweek*, the *New York Times*, and the now-defunct *Dallas Times Herald*. Among other things, Talmadge manages publicity campaigns and implements strategic PR initiatives for public and private companies.

In short, Talmadge's letter to *The Dallas Morning News* was not her first rodeo.

A Matter of Trust

Some folks may call us skeptical, but we tend to take a second look at claims of righteous indignation when there is an associated monetary interest. We have no quarrel with Talmadge's extensive career as a journalist and PR guru, but if it was her intention to come across as just another CAM aficionado in her letter to *The Dallas Morning News*, we're not buying it.

Talmadge's motives may indeed be pure and her indignation sincere, but we encourage everyone to make the comparison with Barrett's position. Talmadge would have us dismiss Barrett as biased and oppressive. Ask yourself, "Who stands to profit in this case, and how?"

100 years ago, journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams was railing against the proliferation of quack medicines in a time when no Federal regulations existed to protect the patient from unscrupulous peddlers of worthless or even dangerous medical therapies. One such compound, Shiloh's Consumption Cure, claimed to cure tuberculosis, but its active ingredients were chloroform and hydrogen cyanide – neither of which were even listed on the bottle, let alone useful in treating tuberculosis.

Stephen Barrett is a friend of the skeptics' movement. In many ways, he has picked up where folks like Adams left off. Despite many improvements in health care and medical science, Barrett has demonstrated that there are still too many individuals out there looking to make a quick buck by promoting quack medicines.

When someone gets sick, he or she wants to get well as soon as possible, so that person usually puts a lot of trust in his or her doctor as well as the medicine that the doctor prescribes. Among other things, the patient should be confident that the doctor isn't prescribing a certain medicine because it's cheap, because it's trendy, or because the doctor has some financial stake in this particular pill. The doctor should prescribe the medicine because, to put it simply, it works.

It's your life, your health, and your choice. Think about it.

Some Web Links for Candace Talmadge:

<http://www.sunan.com/candace.htm>

<http://www.sunan.com/sattva.htm>

<http://www.cookseypr.com/candace.htm>

<http://www.writerfind.com/ctalmadge.htm>

<http://www.transsynergy.com/FatherDaughter.htm>

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Accreditation Commission Approves Astrology School

Amherst, NY (August 30, 2001)-Is the Astrological Institute in Scottsdale, Arizona, a Leo or a Virgo? The school received its new nationwide accreditation from the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCSCT) earlier this month-an apparent first in astrology.

The institute's founder, Joyce Jensen, is elated; science organizations like the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), however, see the recognition as a blow to the integrity of higher education.

The Astrological Institute offers full degrees in this ancient Babylonian art of divination, which is based on the premise that the positions of stars and planets affect people's personalities and fates. Belief in the practice persists despite the lack of any reliable scientific evidence that it actually works, according to Andrew Fraknoi, who is a CSICOP fellow and chair of the astronomy department at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California. "Although astrologers like to pretend such evidence does exist," says Fraknoi, "astrology has in fact been tested in dozens of excellent scientific trials, and it has consistently failed them. There's simply no evidence that astrology works-that it predicts anything or categorizes people in any way that can be used to help them." Commenting on the Astrological Institute's accreditation in a recent Associated Press story, Judith Eaton, who heads the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in Washington, DC, said that the accreditation does not validate astrology, but only recognizes that the school fulfills its promises to students.

Scientists like Dr. Fraknoi dispute Eaton's distinction between the validity of the subject taught and quality of service to students. "Accrediting a school for a technique which has no demonstrable basis in fact seems to be the very opposite of what accreditation should be about. The notion that accreditation 'only recognizes that the school fulfills what it promises its students' is patently absurd. If a school were to promise that it would teach techniques for flying by leaping off cliffs with no equipment, I doubt any accrediting agency would rush to give them official sanctions. There should be similar hesitation about accrediting a school of astrology, which cannot demonstrate the reality or efficacy of what it teaches."

In an August 28, 2001, interview with Robert Siegel, host of NPR's All Things Considered, Joyce Jensen stated her belief the accreditation does lend credibility to astrology. When Siegel asked how she thought it would do this, Jensen focused on the vocation, not the science: "Because, you know, we've gone through the same process that every other school has gone through. So we've proven our ability to provide a program where people can find employment." For Jensen the popular perception of astrology as a legitimate vocation trumps the question of scientific credibility.

The nationwide accreditation of the institute takes astrology out of the realm of evening workshops at the local high school and "entertainment" horoscopes. In practical terms, as Dr. Fraknoi fears, the recognition elevates the subject to the same level as any other program at any other college or university. Accreditation will open the doors to student financial aid and grants paid for by federal tax dollars. It will also professionalize a lucrative business where, according to Jensen, astrologers charge clients between \$100 and \$150 per visit. By seeking the stamp of approval for the teaching of a vocation, the Astrology Institute has deftly shifted the question away from the qualifications of astrology to the qualifications of the astrologer.

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The Bit and the Pendulum

by John Blanton

[*The Bit And The Pendulum; From Quantum Computing To M Theory—The New Physics of Information*](#)

By Tom Siegfried

ISBN: 0471321745 \$27.95 Hardcover, 288 pp. John Wiley & Sons

February 2000

The history of human civilization is a history of technology. In the 1300s in Western Europe the clock represented high technology of the time. Every town with more than one horse had a community clock. If you were tech savvy you knew clocks. Later steam engines took over this position in our lives. Comes the 21st century, and we now find ourselves gathered around the computer as the community campfire. The bit has superseded the pendulum.

Tom Siegfried explained all this at the August meeting in discussing his book, *The Bit And The Pendulum; From Quantum Computing To M Theory--The New Physics of Information*. Tom is science editor for *The Dallas Morning News*, and a contributor to the book [*A Field Guide for Science Writers*](#). He is also the recipient of the Westinghouse Award for science journalism from the American Association for the Advance of Science.



Tom Siegfried explains information and complexity. (photo by John Blanton)

At the time of its invention the mechanical clock gave us a new perspective of the world. Effect naturally followed cause in this view, replacing to some extent a reliance on fate and unseen forces as the world's pilot. We had to wait for Newton to solidify this view of the clockwork universe, a view that was to last until the 20th century.

Later Watt and Carnot were to give concrete meaning to the ideas of energy, and the Industrial Revolution exploited their concepts ruthlessly to construct the foundations for our modern society. In the mean time others, such as James Clerk Maxwell, spelled out the limitations of energy as a means of doing work and incidentally laid the foundations for the quantification of information.

Just as energy succeeded time, so information has now succeeded energy. Some would even say information is substance. Claude Shannon, working at Bell Labs in the 1940s explained how to quantify information. Information was coming closer to being recognized as a thing. Physicist John A. Wheeler is quoted as saying "...Everything is Information." His view of a black hole illustrates this idea. Information (and everything else) enters a black hole, and nothing comes out. However, the black hole keeps a record of what has gone in, and Wheeler has illustrated this record as the surface of a sphere covered with ones and zeroes representing the information that has been swallowed by the black hole. As the black hole consumes more it gets larger, and its larger surface records the additional information. From *The Bit and the Pendulum*:

Information has even invaded the realm of cosmology, where the ultimate questions involve the origin of space, time, and matter--in short, existence itself. As Wheeler's black hole drawing illustrates, information, in the most basic of contexts, is something physical, an essential part of the foundation of all reality.

Is the brain a computer? To my surprise some seem to doubt it. Furthermore, why can't a computer think like a brain? In his book [The Emperor's New Mind](#), physicist Roger Penrose alludes to special properties of the brain that can't be duplicated by a purely mechanical (made out of hardware) computer. A few years ago in a speech at UT Dallas Penrose reiterated this idea. There's something special about living thought processes. When asked directly whether he was trying to re-invoke the concept of vitalism he begged off. It's not that at all. But what, he did not say. The majority opinion finds Penrose's ideas a little off base.

The Chinese room is an experiment to test the thinking capabilities of a computer. Isolate in a room a person who does not know any Chinese language. He does, however, have a book of instructions (in English for example) and some cards with Chinese responses. The experimenter passes printed Chinese phrases to the person in the room, who responds according to his instruction book by sending out one or more of his response cards. Penrose, among others, insists this is the way a computer works but not the way a thinking person works. A thinking person will soon learn some Chinese and will be able to make voluntary responses. A computer, on the other hand, can only do what it has been programmed to do (except those running Windows, of course).

In his book [The Physics of Immortality](#), physicist Frank Tipler proposes to prove scientifically the existence of God. The book's subtitle is "Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead ." He states "The dead will be resurrected when the computer capacity of the universe is so large that the amount of capacity required to store all possible human simulations is an insignificant fraction of the entire capacity." In [The Anthropic Cosmological Principle](#) with John D. Barrow, Tipler discusses the idea that the universe is just right for people. One notion of the anthropic cosmological principle is that the reason the universe seems so comfortable for us is that if it weren't, we wouldn't be around to complain that it wasn't. A stronger version is (my take on this) that we are so important in the scheme of things that the universe just had to be created in a manner that it would accommodate us. From Amazon's review:

Ever since Copernicus, scientists have continually adjusted their view of human nature, moving it further and further from its ancient position at the center of Creation. But in recent years, a startling new concept has evolved that places it more firmly than ever in a special position. Known as the Anthropic Cosmological Principle, this collection of ideas holds that the existence of intelligent observers determines the fundamental structure of the Universe. In its most radical version, the Anthropic Principle asserts that "intelligent information-processing must come into existence in the Universe, and once it comes into existence, it will never die out."

In years gone by *Monty Python's Flying Circus* had a skit titled "Paraphrasing Proust." Problem was, Proust was virtually impossible to paraphrase, because it was hard to find a word you could leave out and keep the meaning intact. This is what is known as "information rich" content. In his book, Tom Siegfried touches on this idea and so many more that it is almost impossible to summarize. You're just going to have to read the book.

This book and all the others mentioned can be purchased through The North Texas Skeptics Web site. If you're reading this in the on-line version of the newsletter just click on the embedded links. Do we get a cut from Amazon when you do? Is Uri Geller a fake?

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What's New

by **Robert Park**

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Astrology: the stars were favorably aligned for accreditation.

In June, after being accredited by the state of Washington, Kepler College in Seattle boasted that it was the only degree granting institution in recent centuries to offer a course of study in astrology (WN 15 Jun 01). No longer. The Institute of Astrology in Scottsdale, Arizona, has just won accreditation from the federally recognized Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology. According to the Associated Press, this allows the Astrological Institute to seek approval from the Department of Education for its students to get federal grants and loans. Could this be true? For guidance, I turned to today's horoscope for Capricorn in the Washington Post: "You don't have the complete story. Deception involved." Just as I thought.

Acupuncture: British study finds it's safe.

A Reuters story yesterday says a British study found acupuncture to be safe when performed by skilled people, but does it work? The story only said acupuncture has been shown to relieve nausea. But were there any side effects? You guessed it: the most common side effect was nausea. WN had the same reaction to the story.

The August effect: millions played, there was no winner.

In addition to Condit/Levy, the huge coverage this week was Power Ball. WN suggests that would-be players just send us their dollar. The odds of winning are exactly the same to within eight significant figures.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

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Skeptical Ink

By **Prasad Golla and John Blanton**

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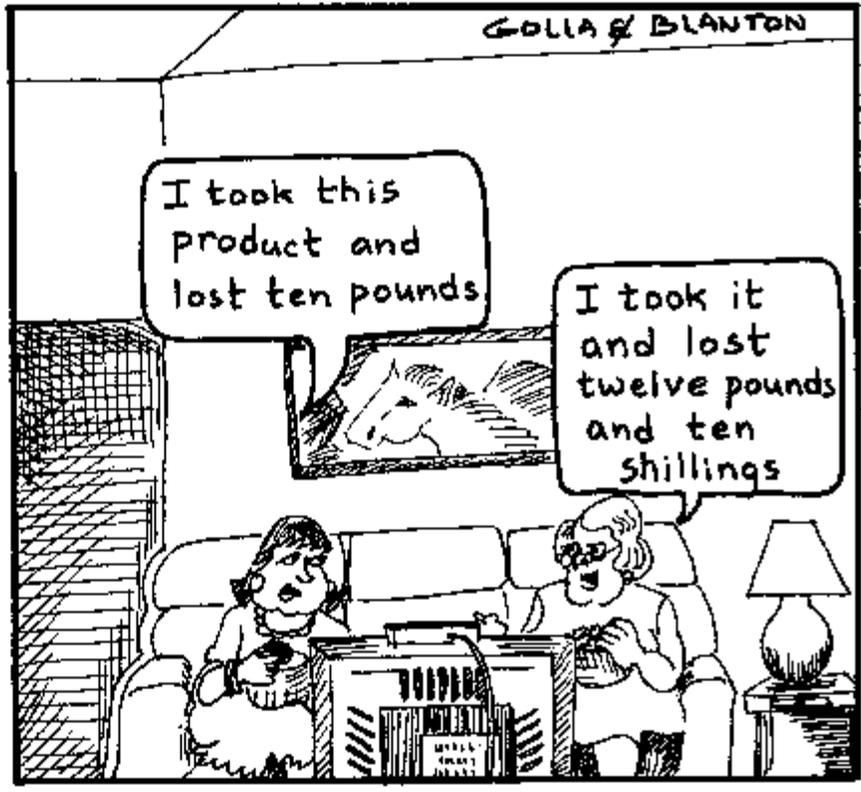
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