

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

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Electronic Version

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In This Issue

From the Editor -- Bob Ladendorf

From the Chairman -- David Bloomberg

A Challenge to Federal & State Agencies -- James Randi

Alternative Medicine: Entertainment vs. News at NBC -- David Bloomberg

Scooby Doo, Where Are You? -- Tim Madigan

Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe- science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

Board of Directors: Chairman, David Bloomberg; Assistant Chairman, Prof. Ron Larkin; Secretary-Treasurer, Kevin Brown; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Wally Hartshorn, and Frank Mazo.

Editorial Board: Bob Ladendorf (Newsletter Editor), David Bloomberg (electronic version editor), (one vacancy).

REALL

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The views expressed in these articles are the views of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of REALL.

From the Editor

-- Bob Ladendorf

One of our more unusual pieces published in this newsletter is this month's Scooby Doo article by Tim Madigan, which is reprinted from CSICOP's Skeptical Briefs. I remember watching the cartoon years ago with my oldest son and

mocking the cracked voice of Scooby. Now, after thinking back on Scooby after reading Tim's article, I was struck by the skepticism Scooby displayed. If only all the kids growing up today were as critical. Thanks, Tim, for reminding us of the fact that there are more ways than the written word to teach skepticism.

Our feature article by author James Randi is a wonderful summary of pseudoscientific claims and a questioning of governmental indifference to scientific testing of them. Randi's article is an excellent follow-up to the videotape we showed at July's meeting. His efforts to question explanations of and beliefs in pseudoscientific and paranormal phenomena have won him wide acclaim. Currently, he continues to lecture on the subject, punctuating his talks with wonderful magic tricks, and writes a regular column for the Skeptic magazine.

REALL Chairman David Bloomberg takes on a TV network in a REALLity Check Special article on alternative medicine. As he points out, though, that same network also can broadcast critical pieces of the same subject matter!

We hope you enjoy our challenging articles this month, and be sure to send us your comments and any clips of interest to REALL.

/s/ Bob Ladendorf  
From the Chairman  
-- David Bloomberg

Last month, we saw a video presentation of James "The Amazing" Randi from the Skeptics' Lecture Series at CalTech. This month, we will see another one from the series. REALL bought these tapes from the Skeptics Society, and almost half of the cost of the first one was paid for by donations given at the meeting. We would like to show more of these videos, and need your suggestions. Below is a list of the videos currently available. If you would like to see any of these, please let us know. Additionally, if you would like to contribute to the cost of getting these tapes (\$14.95 each when we buy three or more), let us know if you'd like that donation to go to a specific tape or to any we get.

These tapes will become part of REALL's "library." We will soon work out a policy for borrowing of these tapes from REALL. Watch this space for more info!

In addition, CSICOP has graciously made the "Beyond Belief" video available to us.

Here is the videotape list:

- The Origins of Skepticism and the JFK Assassination, by Dr. Richard Popkin, UCLA.
- Mathemagics: How To Look Like A Genius Without Really Trying, by Dr. Arthur Benjamin, Harvey Mudd College.
- Repressed Memories, False Memories, & Therapy Cults, by Dr. John Hochman, Forensic Psychiatrist.
- Can Science Cheat Death? Cryonics and Life Extension, by Mike Darwin, Alcor Life Extension Foundation.
- Mysterious and Amazing Atmospheric Phenomena, by Dr. Bernard Leikind, Plasma Physicist, General Atomics.
- Facilitated Communication: Mental Miracle or Slight of Hand? by Dr. Gina Green, Director of Research, New England Center for Autism.
- The Use and Abuse of Statistics in "The Real World," by Dr. Judith Grabiner, CSU, San Bernadino.
- Witches, Spirits, and Science in History, by Dr. Richard Olson, Harvey Mudd College.
- The Evolution of Human Creativity and Language, by Dr. Jared Diamon, Physiologist, UCLA Medical School.
- Skeptical Magic & Awards Night, with Penn & Teller and James "The Amazing" Randi.
- Altered States and the Quest for Transcendence, by Dr. Michael Shermer, Director, Skeptics Society, Science Historian.
- Evolution and Creationism: How to Debate a Creationist, by Dr. Michael Shermer (Special 4.5 hour seminar).
- Magic and the Psychology of the Psychic and the Believer, by mentalist Mark Edward.
- The Devil Made Me Do It! The Decline of Personal Responsibility, by Dr. Laura Schlessinger, Radio Psychologist.
- Is E.T. Out There? The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence, by Dr. Thomas McDonough, CalTech and SETI.
- Pseudoscience, Witch Crazes, & Chaos of Mass Hysterias, by Dr. Michael Shermer, Director, Skeptics Society, Science Historian.
- Afrocentrism, Racism, and other Myths, by Dr. Yahudi Webster, CSU, Los Angeles.

A Skeptical Seance: Magic & the Paranormal in Honor of Houdini & Halloween, by mentalist Mark Edward.  
Science Fair and Firewalk: The Physics Behind the Psychics, with Dr. Bernard Leikind, Ron Ebert, Mark Helmlinger.  
Pseudohistory: Holocaust Revisionism, by Dr. Michael Shermer, Director, Skeptics Society, Science Historian.

Also, remember folks that we still have the 20% discount available on Prometheus Books! A new one has just come out about "psychic detectives," and even has a chapter on Greta Alexander! We only need a few more books to send in our order, so hurry up and get your order to us ASAP!

/s/ David Bloomberg  
A Challenge to Federal & State Agencies  
by James Randi  
Animal Magnetism

Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a Viennese medical doctor who had written his dissertation on the effects of the planets on the health of the human body after seeing a healing demonstration by a priest named Hell, formed the belief that magnets could induce healing powers in those who held them. He displayed the procedure, which he called animal magnetism, during popular sessions that he held for French society, beginning in 1778. The phenomenon soon was dubbed Mesmerism.

His soirees were theatrical rather than therapeutic, and the creme of French aristocracy elbowed one another aside for the privilege of seeing customers sitting around a huge vat of acid (called a baquet), holding on to iron devices immersed in the solution, while the master, dressed in a trailing lilac-colored robe of gold-flowered silk, gestured with his ivory wand at entranced socialites who gurgled, sighed, and moaned when they weren't screaming in ecstasy at this, their latest very expensive diversion.

An investigation of Mesmer in 1784 by the French Academy of Sciences, in the company of U.S. ambassador Benjamin Franklin, brought the conclusion that Mesmer was merely using suggestion and that the clients were the usual silly segment of the populace who support such fads. The test of Mesmer's claims was simple, direct, inexpensive and effective.

Rays from Nancy

Then in 1903, Professor Prosper Ren Blondlot, a distinguished physicist of the city of Nancy, France, announced his discovery of strange radiations that he said emanated from every substance - except green wood and pieces of metal that had been "anesthetized" by dipping them into chloroform or ether. The apparent existence of these rays was soon confirmed by dozens of scientists around the world through scientific papers submitted to science journals. However, the majority of physicists declined to take Blondlot's claims seriously, and waited for the "discovery" to be revealed as a grave error of an otherwise competent scientist.

A single physicist, American Robert Wood, was sent in to Blondlot's lab by the British Association of Scientists and after a simple procedure to test the claim without alerting the French scientists, reported his results to Nature magazine (then, as now, one of the leading science journals). Wood showed the French savants that not only were their experimental processes faulty, but their "rays" were totally imaginary.

Mystery Rays from Germany

The disastrous affair of the "N-rays" thoroughly embarrassed the French -- and the scientific world. It provides us with the single most effective and important example of scientific error through experimenter bias and expectation, an example which might well be improved upon by the present German fascination with the equally imaginary E- rays in Germany, where the idea originated, as "Erdestrahlen" or "earth rays." They are said to be radiations that are emitted from unknown sources deep in the ground, giving rise to "hot spots," and causing cancer. These rays, say believers, cannot be detected by any sort of instruments, but are believed to exist because dowzers (those strange folks with forked sticks) -- and only dowzers -- can sense them.

In Germany, these invisible rays and hot spots are accepted by almost everyone, even governmental agencies, who pay dowzers to indicate to them how to relocate the desks of federal employees away from the positions where E-rays can

intercept them; hospital beds are similarly moved about to protect patients from cancer.

Professors H. L. Konig and H. D. Betz of Munich, two German authors of a highly supportive 1989 book on the German government tests, refused to identify any of the dowzers they tested in preparing their book, or even to put the dowzers in touch with other researchers. Their reasons for this lack of cooperation are not clear.

#### Magic Water

In the "alternate healing" modality known as homeopathy we find an excellent example of an attempt to make sympathetic magic work. Its founder, Samuel Hahnemann (1775- 1843), believed that all illnesses develop from only three sources: syphilis, venereal warts, and what he called "the itch."

The motto of homeopathy is *Similia similibus curantur* ("Like cures like"). It claims that doses of substances that produce certain symptoms will relieve those symptoms; however, the "doses" are extremely attenuated solutions or mixtures, so attenuated that not a single molecule of the original substance remains. In fact, the homeopathic corrective is actually pure water, nothing more. The theory is that the vibrations or "effect" of the diluted-out substance are still present and work on the patient. Currently, researchers in homeopathy are examining a new notion that water can be magnetized and can transmit its medicinal powers by means of a copper wire.

The royal family of England adopted homeopathy at its very beginning and have retained a homeopathic physician on staff ever since.

The only concern of homeopaths is to treat the symptoms of disease, rather than the basic causes, which they do not recognize. Thus homeopathy correctly falls into the category of magic.

In 1988, a team (including the author) organized by Nature magazine visited France to examine the claims of a scientist there who had carried out what appeared to be correctly implemented, properly designed tests of a basic homeopathic claim, with a sufficiently large data base from which to draw the conclusion that the claim was genuine. He also asserted that his results had been independently replicated by other labs. A simple three-day examination of his methods and results showed that there was much to be desired in them, and a subsequent attempted replication by another laboratory indicated that this claim of homeopathy was invalid.

#### Hot Interest in Cold Fusion

We are currently still toying with the idea that the notion of "cold fusion," a system which is claimed to be able to produce massive amounts of atomic energy cleanly, cheaply and effectively endlessly, may be valid, largely because of the millions of dollars that various agencies and other sponsors have poured into it, in spite of the careful appraisal of the scientific world that has rejected it as poor science.

#### Perpetual Emotion, Again

A Mississippi man named Joe W. Newman actually obtained signatures from 30 scientists who said his "free energy" machine -- which is in actuality a huge direct-current motor powered by a massive stack of batteries -- is a valid invention. The Mississippi Board of Energy & Transport invested several million dollars in Mr. Newman's device. Newman, who holds other valid patents for ideas that really do work -- one is a cigarette-making machine, thus showing another of his contributions to mankind -- refuses to accept the "perpetual motion" label for his design, insisting that it is a "free energy" idea. However, if the output of his machine is simply connected to the input, he should have an ever-running system. This he has apparently never managed -- or tried -- to do.

#### \*\*\* The Burning Question \*\*\*

These few examples, from many such available, give rise to this simple question: why is it such a difficult matter to convince any federal agencies in this country to perform simple, inexpensive tests of such matters as homeopathy, chiropractic, perpetual motion, dowsing, polygraphs, graphology, astrology, Christian Science healing and other easily tested notions that add to the public's confusion and distraction, as well as causing irreparable financial, physical and emotional damage?

The National Institutes of Health, given \$3,000,000 by an eager congressman, has frittered away that funding by doling

out more than thirty grants to practitioners of various forms of quackery and very doubtful science -- not to test the basic claims of their specialties, but to examine various applications and parameters of totally unsubstantiated methodologies. What's needed are uncomplicated tests of the methodologies themselves, not their corollaries. One does not examine the Santa Claus myth by measuring chimneys to find out if a fat man in a red suit can squeeze down them.

If Ben Franklin could do this simple task so effectively more than two centuries ago, surely we can do it today? And if we don't, what is the reason?

[This article was transmitted over the Internet by Mr. Randi on June 27, 1994.]

Alternative Medicine: Entertainment vs. News at NBC

A REALLity Check Special

by David Bloomberg

NBC aired another in its series of supposed documentaries in the form of Cured! Secrets of Alternative Healing (7/5). This was a documentary in the same sense those CBS/Sun Pictures shows were documentaries -- for those of you new to The REALL News, this is NOT a compliment.

Essentially, this show was the same as we have come to expect: Get some quotes from a skeptic, then bash him around with anecdotal stories and bad acting of scenes which "really happened." Anybody who has followed the claims of alternative medicine can guess the types of stories they had. The show claimed, among other things: the bubonic plague was cured with homeopathy (they claimed three times as many people treated this way survived, but cited no source); "qi" as used in ancient Chinese "medicine" has been proven to be valid (to the contrary, it's been shown to have no effect in every scientific study); homeopathy for your pet works, and always remember that you must take into account your dog's personality when prescribing homeopathic "medicine" for him.

James "The Amazing" Randi sent out two notes about this schlockumentary via the Internet. Among his comments:

"[Olympia] Dukakis, the actress, was the host guru, proclaiming that everyone has a right to choose alternative, cheaper modes of medical treatment. Ok, I accept that. BUT THEY ALSO HAVE THE RIGHT NOT TO BE LIED TO." (Emphasis in original.)

"It was the expected load of misinformation, wild claims about totally unproven 'ancient wisdom' and 'alternative therapies.'"

"How is it that NBC can choose to poison the intellectual community to sell sponsor time? ... The skeptics who did appear were edited beyond effectiveness."

It almost goes without saying that I am in total agreement.

However, if there is an amusing side to this (and it's difficult to find one when a major network broadcasts an irresponsible show which can lead those in need of medical aid to useless treatments), it is the show that aired after this one: Dateline NBC. They had a story about a specific claim relating to alternative medicine and, frankly, they skewered the practitioner (rightly so).

Lucas Bovier (I'm guessing on the spelling here) resides in the Dominican Republic and practices "ozone therapy" on sick people. Why does he live there? Because he's wanted in the U.S. for practicing medicine without a license. Where did he get his M.D.? He didn't. He got his engineering degree at a military school and is a former Green Beret. That is his medical background.

He claims his ozone therapy can cure pretty much anything, ranging from the common cold to cancer and AIDS. He claims to have a 90 percent success rate, yet when he provided a list of "successes" to Dateline, they could not find a single one among them. Instead, they found that several were dead, several still very sick, and three in remission from cancer. However, those three had undergone conventional treatment for their cancer, and their doctors said it was probably in remission before the ozone therapy.

So how does this therapy supposedly work? Well, in the case of cancer, the ozone is given through an IV, through the skin, vaginally, anally, etc. Then the ozone (which is a reactive form of oxygen) supposedly attacks the cancer cells. Why does it only attack the cancer cells and not healthy ones? Because healthy cells need oxygen and so absorb the ozone, whereas cancer cells don't. Why don't they? Because cancer cells are actually plant cells. How does he prove that the ozone works? He shoots ozone onto a rubber glove and the glove breaks up. Have you gotten all of that? When Dateline showed the film and interview to an officer of the National Council Against Health Fraud, he almost fell out of his chair laughing. I mean, where does one begin when a guy claims cancer is a plant and that because a gas attacks a rubber glove it can cure diseases?

But Bovier says he doesn't need to do scientific studies. He won't go to the medical establishment with his wondrous discovery because they have lots of money and he doesn't. Makes perfect sense, right? Wait, there's more. He claims Magic Johnson's doctors came to him and learned ozone therapy so they could cure him. Then they went back and used the therapy on Johnson for two months, curing him of HIV. Johnson's staff say no such thing ever occurred and, unfortunately, Johnson is still HIV-positive. But wait, there's more.

Dateline discussed the case of a woman who had terminal cancer, and conventional medicine had done all they could and lost the battle. So she gathered \$12,000 and went to Bovier. Her sister and mother, who went with her, started to notice severe problems. When they pointed out these problems (one allegation is that he didn't even use sterile needles), they were asked to leave, at gunpoint, according to the sister. They finally got their sick relative out of the therapy -- with the help of the U.S. Embassy -- and back to a Miami hospital, where she died shortly after. Did the cancer kill her? Nope, it was blood poisoning. Remember the allegations of non-sterile needles?

So what did Bovier have to say about this? He said the woman was "sacrificed" in order to try to convince the Dominican government to extradite him back to the U.S. He claimed that she was sent to die under his care as part of a government plot against him.

Funny how this guy didn't make it onto that show earlier in the evening. Of course, that show was likely put on by the entertainment division of NBC, while Dateline is a news division production (with the entertainment division strictly out of any sort of input, ever since the GM truck fiasco). The timing of the Dateline show makes me wonder if there isn't a small feud going on between the entertainment and news divisions, or if it was just a happy coincidence. Considering that this was Dateline's third investigation into alternative medicine claims, hopefully, news will win out. But considering the ratings Cured! probably got, I'm not counting on it.

Randi also encouraged everybody to write to NBC and let them know what we think of this nonsense being portrayed as a "documentary". I would like to second that. Here is the address:

NBC  
30 Rockefeller Plaza  
New York, NY 10112

I would further suggest that somebody do a bit of research and get a list of the advertisers, and then we can send letters to them. Any takers?

Scooby Doo, Where Are You?  
by Tim Madigan

While in Winter Park, Florida, in April, temporarily escaping the Buffalo snows, I met a Skeptical Inquirer reader named John Clements. In the midst of a highly esoteric conversation ranging from the origins of war to the possibility of controlling human genetic evolution, he mentioned in passing some information I found highly disturbing: Scooby Doo is back on the air. My hair nearly stood on end as I contemplated the return of a Saturday morning cartoon I thought had met its natural end decades ago. Visions of myself watching this inane and long-forgotten show during my prepubescent years flashed through my head. Perhaps this is what some psychologists have called "repressed memories."

But John cut short my withering comments with a strong defense of the show. He reminded me -- for I must admit I had

no real recollection of anything other than its maddeningly incessant theme song, Scooby-Doobie-Doo, Where are You? -- that the cartoon actually espoused a skeptical message. The title character, a talking dog with a speech impediment, and his human colleagues Fred, Daphne, Velma, and Shaggy (the last-named being a sort of poor man's Maynard G. Krebs), were members of Mystery, Inc., an organization that investigated supposed paranormal happenings. And they always came up with a rational explanation at the end of each episode.

After this enlightening conversation, I visited a Winter Park used book store and chanced upon a copy of Scooby Doo in the Haunted House, which I promptly bought for a quarter, along with a copy of Plato's Republic and a book on idiot savants. An eclectic collection, but only the Scooby Doo book had pictures. It detailed the adventures of Scooby and his friends (including his nephew, Scrappy Doo) as they investigate a house supposedly haunted by the ghost of a long-dead pirate. The gang does some exploring of the old house, which is near the site of a soon-to-be-opened superhighway. They discover that the owner's sister is trying to scare him into selling his beloved home so that she can make a big profit. She had lured him away from the mansion for two weeks, and in that time hired a sound and light crew to install an elaborate set-up to trick him. The whole affair is discovered when the cowardly Scooby accidentally falls through a fake chimney and lands on the computer that had created the ghostly happenings.

After reading this story, I gained a new-found respect for Scooby Doo and began to wonder if my own skeptical attitude was not nurtured at the font of this cartoon from my youth. Perhaps those Saturday mornings in front of the television were not spent in vain. This was a cartoon with a message.

Alas, John had given me a sad piece of information. The revised Scooby Doo, he said, has deviated from its original theme, and become nothing more than a pale version of Ghost Busters. The goblins and demons are treated as real now, and there are no more rational denouements. Scooby Doo is only a shell of his former self.

Are we skeptics going to stand for such a bastardization of a television classic? I say we rally to the cause, demand the return of the original episodes, and appoint the chief canine of Mystery, Inc. the official mascot of Skeptical Briefs. Now, more than ever, Scooby-Doobie-Doo, we need you.

{Tim Madigan is president of the Western New York Skeptics.}

[This article originally appeared in the June 1994 issue of Skeptical Briefs, the newsletter of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. It has been reprinted with permission.]

[The paper copy also featured a picture of the cover of the Scooby Doo book. Subscribe to The REALL News to make sure you don't miss any further graphics!]

A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. Patron members are those giving \$50 or more. To become a patron of REALL, please see the membership form below. Patron members are:

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Letters to the Editor

We at REALL encourage letters to the editor about any article or topic covered in The REALL News. We want to make this a forum for all our members. (Letters may be edited if too long. Name, address and phone number must be included with the letter.)

Predictions for Future Issues

Looking into the Sun -- and other tabloids

Cancer Clusters

Loch Ness Hoax  
The Panicky Guy

## Skeptics Online

If you have a computer and a modem, you owe it to yourself to participate in the skeptic message areas on the computer BBS networks. Here in Springfield, call The Temples of Syrinx at (217) 787-9101. David Bloomberg operates this BBS, which carries the FidoNet SKEPTIC, EVOLUTION and UFO conferences, internationally distributed message areas for discussing topics of interest to skeptics. He is also carrying ParaNet conferences, all dedicated to UFO and paranormal topics. You can also find a wide variety of skeptic, scientific, UFO, evolution/creation, and urban legend text files.

The Temples of Syrinx -- (217) 787-9101  
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