

Be Wary of "Alternative" Health Methods

by Stephen Barrett, M.D.

"Alternative medicine" has become the politically correct term for questionable practices formerly labeled quack and fraudulent. During the past few years, most media reports have contained no critical evaluation and have featured the views of proponents and their satisfied clients. These happenings are part of a general societal trend toward rejection of science as a method of determining truths.

To avoid confusion, "alternative" methods should be classified as genuine, experimental, or questionable. Genuine alternatives are comparable methods that have met science-based criteria for safety and effectiveness. Experimental alternatives are unproven but have a plausible rationale and are undergoing responsible investigation. The most noteworthy is use of a 10%-fat diet for treating coronary heart disease. Questionable alternatives are groundless and lack a scientifically plausible rationale. The archetype is homeopathy, which claims that "remedies" so dilute that they contain no active ingredient can exert powerful therapeutic effects. Blurring these distinctions enables promoters of quackery to argue that because some practices labeled "alternative" have merit, the rest deserve equal consideration and respect. Enough is known, however, to conclude that most questionable "alternatives" are worthless.

The "alternative movement" is part of a general societal trend toward rejection of science as a method of determining truths. This movement embraces the postmodernist doctrine that science is not necessarily more valid than pseudoscience. In line with this philosophy, "alternative" proponents assert that scientific medicine (which they mislabel as allopathic, conventional, or traditional medicine) is but one of a vast array of health-care options. Instead of subjecting their work to scientific standards, they would like to change the rules by which they are judged and regulated.

Under the rules of science, people who make the claims bear the burden of proof. It is their responsibility to conduct suitable studies and report them in sufficient detail to permit evaluation and confirmation by others. Instead of subjecting their work to scientific standards, promoters of questionable "alternatives" would like to change the rules by which they are judged. Instead of conducting scientific studies, they use anecdotes and testimonials to promote their practices and political maneuvering to keep regulatory agencies at bay.

When someone feels better after having used a product or procedure, it is natural to credit whatever was done. This is unwise, however, because most ailments resolve by themselves and those that persist can have variable symptoms. Even serious conditions can have sufficient day-to-day variation to enable useless methods to gain large followings. In addition, taking action often produces temporary relief of symptoms due to a placebo effect. This effect is a beneficial change in a person's condition that occurs in response to a treatment but is not due to the pharmacologic or physical aspects of the treatment. Belief in the treatment is not essential, but the placebo effect may be enhanced by such factors as faith, sympathetic attention, sensational claims, testimonials, and the use of scientific-looking charts, devices, and terminology. Another drawback of individual success stories is that they don't indicate how many failures might occur for each success. People who are not aware of these facts tend to give undeserved credit to "alternative" methods.

The fact that an alternative method may exert a placebo effect that relieves symptoms is not sufficient reason to justify its use. Therapy should be based on the ability to alter abnormal physiology and not on the ability to elicit a less predictable placebo effect. Placebo therapy is inherently misleading and can make patients believe something is effective when it is not. Without controlled clinical trials, any treatment that is used could receive credit for the body's natural recuperative ability.

A British study has demonstrated how belief in an ineffective treatment can lead people to overestimate its effectiveness. In 1986 personnel at Bristol Cancer Help Center felt a need to validate their program of counseling, "healing," a vegetarian diet, homeopathy, acupuncture, and various other therapies they believed would enhance quality of life and foster a positive attitude. At their invitation, a research team compared the course of 334 of the center's breast

cancer patients and 461 similar patients treated at mainstream hospitals during a 16-month period. Survival times and metastasis-free periods were significantly shorter among the center's patients.

Many "alternative" approaches are rooted in vitalism, the concept that bodily functions are due to a vital principle or "life force" distinct from the physical forces explainable by the laws of physics and chemistry and detectable by scientific instrumentation. Practitioners whose methods are based on vitalistic philosophy maintain that diseases should be treated by "stimulating the body's ability to heal itself" rather than by "treating symptoms." Homeopaths, for example, claim that illness is due to a disturbance of the body's "vital force," which they can correct with special remedies, while many acupuncturists claim that disease is due to imbalance in the flow of "life energy" (chi or Qi), which they can balance by twirling needles in the skin. Many chiropractors claim to assist the body's "Innate Intelligence" by adjusting the patient's spine. Naturopaths speak of "Vis Medicatrix Naturae." Ayurvedic physicians refer to "prana." And so on. The "energies" postulated by vitalists cannot be measured by scientific methods.

Although vitalists often pretend to be scientific, they really reject the scientific method with its basic assumptions of material reality, mechanisms of cause and effect, and testability of hypotheses. They regard personal experience, subjective judgment, and emotional satisfaction as preferable to objectivity and hard evidence.

"Alternative" practitioners often claim that their approaches promote general health and are cost-effective against chronic health problems. However, there is no published evidence that they are more likely than mainstream physicians to persuade their patients to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Nor have any vitalistic approaches been proven effective or cost-effective against any disease.

During the past few years, the news media have publicized "alternative" methods in ways that are causing great public confusion. Most of these reports have contained no critical evaluation and have featured the views of proponents and their satisfied clients. Many have exaggerated the significance of the National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s recently opened Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM). Creation of this office was spearheaded by promoters of questionable cancer therapies who wanted more attention paid to their methods. Most of OAM's advisory panel members have been promoters of "alternative" methods, and none of its publications have criticized any method. In 1994, the OAM's first director resigned, charging that political interference had hampered his ability to carry out OAM's mission in a scientific manner. The OAM has funded about 50 studies related to "alternative" methods. However, it remains to be seen whether such research will yield useful results. Even if it does, the benefit is unlikely to outweigh the publicity bonanza given to questionable methods.

Quackwatch Home Page: www.quackwatch.com

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From the Editor

This month, we feature an article by Stephen Barrett, MD, warning readers about alternative health methods. With the proliferation of products crowding the market, consumers will need to carefully separate the effective medicines and methods from the unproven. We will look into different subject areas that may be of interest to our readers and will reprint articles about these in the future.

Chairman David is back with his wry look at the media's treatment of pseudoscientific and paranormal topics in his "REALLity Check." I also have included some additional sources of information in this newsletter that may be of interest to you.

Don't miss May's REALL meeting featuring Dr. Michael Shermer, director of the Skeptics Society and publisher of Skeptic magazine talking about peoples' beliefs in "weird things." (For more information about the talk, see the announcement on the back of the newsletter.) We look forward to seeing you at the special meeting.

From the Chairman

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." James Randi's words echoed through my mind when I heard about the Heaven's Gate mass suicide. My first instinct was to call Editor Bob and ask him to bump our planned cover story for something on this UFO cult. But as the days after the suicide went by, the media actually did quite a thorough job in covering the story -- to the point that I don't think there is much for us to add.

I'm sure that Skeptics Society Director Michael Shermer will have his own take on the suicide, and you can come hear what he has to say at our special meeting at noon on Saturday, May 10, at the Barnes & Noble store in Springfield. Shermer is in the area promoting his new book, *Why People Believe Weird Things*. Indeed, his timing is rather appropriate. I hope to see a large crowd of REALL members at this meeting.

Speaking of our meetings, I'd like to thank Doug Pokorski for providing us with a great presentation for our April meeting, the first in a planned series of media lectures. If you missed this meeting, you missed a terrific discussion of how critical thinking works (and sometimes doesn't work) in the press, not just relating to paranormal and fringe science topics, but to claims of all types. Thanks again, Doug!

I'd like to add a thanks to all of you who have recently renewed your membership in REALL, especially the Patron Members. We're here because of all of you, and we hope to grow more and get a wider variety of stories into the pages of this newsletter in the upcoming months. Indeed, this month's cover story is an example, as we have not had very much on alternative medicine in past issues. Stephen Barrett has graciously let us reprint this article, and we hope to see more along these lines as the year goes on. We also have several new members who have expressed interest in writing articles for us (watch for an upcoming article on suburban shamans). If there's a topic that you feel we haven't been covering enough of, please feel free to let us know (or, better yet, write up an article about it)! We always want to hear from our members!

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

It's been a few months since my last column here, so I'm going to select the best of the best (or the worst of the worst) that's been in the media since my last one.
Amazing!

I have to start with what must be labeled as the most amazing, extraordinary, astonishing, and remarkable piece: A skeptical article in the Chicago Tribune's Tempo section!

Long-time readers of this column know that the Tempo section has a habit of featuring the worst possible articles in terms of skeptical viewpoint, and, indeed, I often use them as a point of comparison against other papers. However, on April 23, they actually printed an article suggesting that alien abductions might not be real! This is made all the more astounding because the author links it to false memories of childhood abuse, which is what skeptics have been saying for years. What makes it so important here is that this is the same newspaper that was talking scientifically about false memories in light of the accusation against Cardinal Bernardin a couple years ago and then publishing a horrible Tempo article completely ignoring that information and buying into claims of huge satanic conspiracies -- all the "memories" of which were "recovered" by patients of a therapist in the Chicago area.

This article quotes well-known skeptical psychologists in the memory field, such as Richard Ofshe and Elizabeth Loftus, and discusses how therapists can create false memories through hypnosis.

An added twist comes from University of Illinois, Chicago, psychologist Len Newman, who says that the abduction tales these people often come up with -- such as being strapped to a table, probed in various places, etc. -- "sounds a lot like the stories people tell when they're weaving masochistic fantasies." Indeed, he further notes that "Believers in the 'abductions' often ask why anyone would make up such stories. But, hey, there are people who pay a lot of money to have experiences very close to this."

Personally, I think he may just be reading a little too much into it, as the therapist-induced false memories theory does seem to explain the vast majority of these cases. What he seems to be saying is that these people have masochistic tendencies and just happened to go to therapists who induce false memories; that seems a bit coincidental. It also would indicate that "normal" people who went to these therapists would not have such false memories implanted, and I've seen no evidence to suggest such a case.

Loftus had an interesting side note at the end of the article. She said that alien abduction stories might be preferable to "recovered memories" of abuse. "Whatever need this is filling, it might be better to do it with alien abduction memories instead of 'Daddy did it and so did Uncle and Grandpa.' At least fewer families will be destroyed in the process." A good point, but I think we'd all prefer if none of these false memories were implanted at all.

Haunting All In The Head?

Long-time REALL member Tim Harte was featured in the Illinois Times (4/10) recently with his "ghost" hunting materials.

According to the article, Harte, following the lead of Michael Persinger, thinks that electromagnetic fields can disrupt the proper functioning of the brain's temporal lobe and cause people to feel that they have experienced a "supernatural" event.

Harte's equipment measured the electromagnetic field in an area (such as a house) to see if perhaps that could be the cause of "ghost" sightings. According to this article, all of the "haunted" places that Harte has tested have had strong electromagnetic fields. Unfortunately, he has not had time to compare these to "non-haunted" places (he took readings in his own office at UIS, but has not had a chance to review the data), and he does understand that the information he has to date does not prove that Persinger's theory is correct, but it is somewhat interesting.

Personally, I would like to see more in the way of a double-blind study. For example, the article leads off with a description of a boy who was having regular nightmares that a girl hanged herself in his closet. Harte found a strong electromagnetic field in the room and, when the boy was moved, the nightmares ended. However, we have to remember that we are dealing with subjective phenomena here, and, in this case, with the perceptions of a child. After all, a child may sometimes think there is a monster under the bed; once an adult tells him that everything is okay, that is often enough to soothe the child. Similarly, in this case we don't really know if the change in room -- and thus removal of the electromagnetic field -- was the cure, or if it was merely that the boy was told this would cure his nightmares. In other words, I wonder if this could be an extension of the placebo effect.

As I said, this possible explanation is interesting and, unlike the purveyors of most ghost stories, at least it doesn't involve any "supernatural" or "paranormal" forces. Perhaps Mr. Harte can come and give us a talk sometime soon. Energy or Hogwash?

On the flip side, there was an article in the State Journal-Register's Sunday A.M. section that I wouldn't have been surprised to see in the Tribune's Tempo section. You may recall that the Illinois Times had an article last year about Feng Shui, a mystical oriental way to pay somebody money to reorganize your home. Well, on April 13, the SJR covered it and didn't do any better.

Throughout both the article and its sidebar, the author, Julie Cellini, kept talking about "energy." We read about how the organization of one's house helps in "the proper flow of energy," how mirrors "reflect energy," mountains have "chaotic" energy, round tables "slow down the energy and help patrons relax," sharp corners "pierce the energy field," etc. Unfortunately, Ms. Cellini doesn't seem at all interested in telling us just what this mysterious energy is or how it can be measured. Indeed, anything even remotely scientific is completely left out of the article. The closest anybody

gets to even acknowledging that perhaps everything isn't as clear-cut as it seems is when a Feng Shui consultant is quoted as saying, "There's a 4,000-year-old track record that says Feng Shui works for many, many people. I'm not interested in convincing anyone." In other words: To heck with evidence!

The author notes, "Cynics may consider it as reliable as a newspaper horoscope, but in places such as Hong Kong, it is taken very seriously." So only "cynics" will consider this to be nonsense? How about just rational people? Unfortunately, no such people were interviewed for this story, as is so often true of "fluff" pieces.

Perhaps the most ironic quote comes from Mark Burnett, owner of Sebastian's Restaurant. He said, "I'm not into cosmic stuff. In fact, I think most of it is hogwash." Yet a good portion of the article talks about how he is buying into this particular brand of hogwash and how he plans to change the layout of his restaurant accordingly. Meanwhile, the Feng Shui consultants are laughing all the way to the bank.

By the Book

Speaking of laughing all the way to the bank, the Chicago Sun-Times had an article about one "fortune-teller" who has done just that (4/6). This scam could have come right out of a book on fortune-teller con games and went down exactly the way REALL's longtime friend Investigator Bruce Walstad has described so many times. Indeed, Walstad was interviewed for this article.

The short version of the story is as follows: A 67-year-old woman died of a heart attack. In going through her belongings, her son, Paul Kubiak, found that she may have spent as much as \$150,000 on a fortune-teller. In her purse he found strange rocks and a torn dollar bill held together with needles in the shape of a cross. She kept financial records chronicling her trips to the fortune-teller, including payments of cash, a Rolex watch, a new car, plane tickets, etc. According to Kubiak, "My mom ... was shopping at Nordstrom's for this woman, and we [didn't] even have a dress to bury her in." He has filed a complaint with the Cook County state's attorney, but since the only witness is dead, there isn't much chance of a successful prosecution.

Within the story, Walstad is quoted several times with information about the way these scams operate. The "psychic" starts with a cold reading -- telling the client general things that can apply to just about anybody. She gets more specific as she gets cues from the client and suddenly she seems to know all about the client. If the con artist thinks she has a good target, she then talks about curses and cures and asks the client to do all sorts of strange things. If the client complies, the "psychic" knows she will be coming into some money soon -- at the client's expense! These sorts of things explain the torn dollar bill and strange rocks in Mrs. Kubiak's purse.

It was nice to see this entire scam outlined in one of Chicago's major newspapers. Maybe, just maybe, somebody who is currently being targeted by a "fortune-teller" will see it and pull out before it's too late.

In Short

Sources of Information

"Sybil -- The Making of a Disease: An Interview with Dr. Herbert Spiegel." Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. The New York Review of Books, April 24, 1997, pp. 60-64. Presents medical doctor's assertions that the famous "Sybil" did not have multiple personality disorder (MPD). Selected quote: "Highly suggestible people will of course respond in a way that can please the doctors, especially if there is a good rapport between them. That is why I think it is an illusion to believe that we can establish a valid causation for multiple personality, or for almost any kind of psychiatric illness."

"Council for Media Integrity Blasts Networks for Distorted Treatments of Science." Kendrick Frazier, Editor. Skeptical Inquirer, May/June 1997, pp. 9-12. CSICOP's new council, established last year, launches criticism of pseudoscientific specials. Selected quote: " 'We believe that the media have presented a distorted view of science,' [CSICOP founder and chairman Paul] Kurtz said, and that they have a responsibility; to provide a more balanced view of what is real science and what is pseudoscience.

'We are asking only for some balance. We are asking TV not to dramatize pseudoscience as real science.' "

Upcoming

May 10 -- Special REALL meeting featuring Michael Shermer, founder and director of the Skeptics Society on "Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time," Barnes & Noble, noon.

May 17-18 -- Center for Inquiry Workshop, "Secrets of the Supernatural," Ramada Plaza Hotel O'Hare, Chicago. Call 1-800-634-1610 for registration and information.

May 23-24 -- Skeptics Society 1997 Conference, "The Science Gap," Los Angeles, California. Call (818) 794-3119 for registration and information. Web site: www.skeptic.com

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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.

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