

by Randy Alley

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Dr. Kreider Speaks Out

Part 1: Introduction

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\*Michael Zimmerman Kreider (1803-1855) was an early skeptic. Kreider based his skepticism on science, as he understood science at the time. It is important to understand this distinction. Early science was often based upon observation and very limited testing. Much of the science conducted at this time was influenced by man's strong adherence to religious beliefs and customs. Sometimes these were beliefs that were personally held, other times these beliefs were forced by society. Man was free to be scientific as long as he bowed to religion. These precepts are apparent in Kreider's writings, and part of his discourse against phrenology is based upon his religious beliefs.

Michael Kreider began his course of medical lectures and internship under the tutelage of Dr. Samuel Pearsons, in Columbus, Ohio, during 1822. By 1825, he passed his physician's examination and was licensed as a doctor of medicine. He established his practice in central Ohio. Little is known of Dr. Kreider's medical practice, but he is described as one of the best physicians in the region.<sup>2</sup> From the records of the Ohio State Medical Society we know that Kreider was an active participant at Society meetings.

Dr. Kreider was also a member of the Philosophian Society of Wittenburg College, an organization that promoted science and literature. The Society's members met to discuss and debate important issues of current and past events. This activity provided Dr. Kreider with a forum for his views against malpractice and quackery.

While we know from the records of the Ohio State Medical Society that Dr. Kreider opposed quackery, what did he believe about specific issues? Why did he believe what he believed? From Dr. Kreider's writings, we know that he stood firmly against phrenology and mesmerism. Phrenology and mesmerism were widely believed practices that attracted thousands of followers at the time. In both Europe and in the United States it was considered quite fashionable to be phrenologized and mesmerized. Poor and wealthy, uneducated and educated, people from every field participated and believed in these pseudosciences. Characterizations of statesmen and scholars whom phrenologists analyzed during Kreider's lifetime appeared in the Phrenological Journal to make it appear as though these great men believed in phrenology. Of course, phrenologically speaking, these men were all superior.<sup>3</sup> Phrenology claimed that its use would bring equality among all people by allowing those who were weak to improve their condition. In France, the movers and shakers of French society flocked to Mesmer's salon for his treatment. Mesmerism claimed to cure the sick and injured and allow all people to achieve their full potential. Mesmerised plants would provide abundance, and man would be freed from labor. In the end, both phrenology and mesmerism were denounced as quackery by nearly everyone.

Dr. Kreider did not blame man for believing in quackery. Rather, he unequivocally believed that man is a "dupable animal."<sup>4</sup> He also thought that it humiliated a man's pride to be told that he was dupable. Kreider knew that throughout history, mankind had fallen prey to these types of frauds. Man was always seeking the new miracle cure. Kreider believed that those who proposed the miracle cures did so for their own reasons and not because they truly wished to help mankind. He clearly labeled these practitioners as frauds:

Every age has been marked with its humbugs, and every country has produced its mountebanks, who for a time was the wonder and admiration of the multitude. Each have announced themselves as the benefactor of human kind, and boldly declared that they alone possessed the key of knowledge and were able to unlock the areanum of nature and bring forth her hidden treasures. A gaping world has often been made to stand on tiptoe, in mute astonishment, trembling at the un-menacing jargon of a self-constituted philosopher, hoping to receive at his hands incalculable blessings. Among the whole tribe of pretenders, none have been more bold and unblushing than the Phrenologist and Mesmeriser. None have promised so much and done so little ...<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that Kreider believed that phrenologists and mesmerizers were frauds and quacks. They took advantage of the unknowing and unfortunate. More important, as shown by his actions as a member of the Ohio State Medical Society, Kreider was concerned that phrenology and mesmerism would lead people away from scientific medicine. People would believe in phrenology and mesmerism, and as a result would not seek the treatment they needed. This inaction would result in suffering and death.

#### Next Month: Kreider's Views on Phrenology

Randy Alley recently received his Masters Degree in History; this article is taken from a part of that thesis. Previous issues of The REALL News featured articles by Alley on Phrenology and Mesmerism.

According to Dr. James Young, author of *The Toadstool Millionaires*, the "Steam Confederation" was part of the therapeutic schemes proposed by Samuel Thomson. Thomson, called the "steam doctor," proposed a therapeutic system which emphasized "steam baths and 'hot' botanicals" to cure physical ailments. (Correspondence: James Harvey Young to Randall Alley, 9 April 1998.)

Ibid.

Madeleine B. Stern, ed., *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 358-362, 368-371, 394-399 and 303-304.

Michael Z. Kreider, *Kreider Manuscript of Phrenology and Mesmerism*, Randall Alley, ed., Folder 28-B, Michael Z. Kreider Papers, Pearson Med., Springfield, IL, p. 1.

Ibid., p.1.