



# Ideas in Science

## Robert Ehrlich

Physicist Robert Ehrlich discusses the value of crazy ideas in the development of science, and explains criteria for sorting between more promising and less promising crazy ideas.

Robert Ehrlich is currently a professor of physics at George Mason University. He began his career after receiving a B.S. in Physics from Brooklyn College in 1959, and a Ph. D. in physics from Columbia University in 1964 in experimental particle physics, having worked on the Nobel Prize winning "two neutrino" experiment. Dr. Ehrlich has held positions at the University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers University, and the State University of New York College at New Paltz. He joined the physics department at George Mason University in 1976 as its chair, a position he held for 13 years. Dr. Ehrlich has authored or edited nineteen books and 79 articles in areas including particle physics, physics demonstrations, and nuclear arms control. His most recent book: ***Eight Preposterous Propositions***, was recently published by Princeton University Press.

**Saturday, December 11  
2-4pm**

**Montgomery County Library  
Bethesda Branch**  
7400 Arlington Road  
Bethesda, Maryland  
(A short walk from the Bethesda  
Metro station)



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# Shadow of a Doubt

THE MONTHLY CALENDAR OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA SKEPTICS

DECEMBER 2004

## Looking for April Fools in December

Actually, NCAS is planning an event for April 1, 2005 (a Friday) that could include the whole weekend. We don't have the actual event set, and we need adequate time to plan and set it up, so send any ideas you have no later than the end of December. Remember, the key is not only the theme but that it must actually be entertaining.

Send ideas by snail mail to:  
NCAS  
PO Box 8428  
Silver Spring, MD 20907

Or e-mail: [ncas@ncas.org](mailto:ncas@ncas.org)

and to get you in the mood, read about . . .

## Possibly the Greatest April Fools Prank in History

In the early 1700s, a cobbler named John Partridge published an almanac where he prophesied the future using astrology and not only claimed great success but also warned against other astrologers and dared them to match his success.

Then in February of 1708 an astrologer by the name of Isaac Bickerstaff, heretofore unknown, published an almanac where he predicted John Partridge's death. It was to take place that very year when Partridge "*....will infallibly die upon the 29<sup>th</sup> of March next, about eleven at Night, of a raging fever.*"

Needless to say, Partridge disagreed vehemently, but on March 30<sup>th</sup> a third *respectable* party wrote a letter

describing Partridge's last hours on March 29<sup>th</sup> with most effecting particulars. He referred to Bickerstaff's prophecy and how it had been accurate except for the exact hour of death.

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, elegies and obituaries of the almanac maker were hawked about London. His name was struck off the rolls at Stationers' Hall and many other things done that would have been done for a dead man. Partridge was obliged to issue a special issue of his almanac to assure the public that he was alive. He never could overcome the apparently accurate prediction of his death and all of the satirical sallies surrounding the events.

Both Isaac Bickerstaff and the author of the letter describing Partridge's death were in reality the great satirist Jonathan Swift. Swift had read all the prophetic and conspiratorial nonsense in Partridge's almanac and decided to give him a taste of his own medicine.

I have touched only on the main documents and events, there were some subsequent publications, basically satirical embellishments on the above. This is an elaborate and well thought out hoax.

For a full text of the documents involved look at the URL: <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/s/s97b/index.html>

Possibly Greatest April Fools Prank in History

## Time to Renew!

Check your mailing label. If the renewal date has passed, please send to the NCAS address below \$30 (for 1 person) or \$40 (for 2-member households) for a 1-year renewal, or you will be dropped as a member.



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