

NCAS annual meeting attendees examine an FDA display of quack devices. (Photo by Peter Lins.)

Annual Meeting Exposes Medical Quackery

By Michael Hoffman

The focus of the 1988 NCAS annual meeting, held on Sunday, October 16, at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, was medical quackery. NCAS President Chip Denman opened the meeting by introducing the newly elected Board of Directors and thanking Fringe Medicine SIG Chairman Zev Remba for organizing the event. He then introduced the keynote speaker, Stephen Barrett, M.D.

Barrett, a psychiatrist, founded the Lehigh Valley Council Against Health Fraud and has written a number of books on medical quackery. He began by discussing what he considers one of the most widespread medical frauds, the largely successful attempt by drug companies to convince people that they need the "nutrition insurance" of regular vitamin supplements. Barrett noted that almost no one needs such supplements, since all but the most extreme diets provide adequate amounts of vitamins. (In response to objections from the audience, he conceded that many Americans eat unbalanced diets that contain too much saturated fat, but argued that such diets still provide plenty of vitamins.) No medical authority, and certainly no dean of a pharmacy school, believes that a person feeling tired or nervous should be given vitamins for that reason. But when Barrett sent people complaining of such symptoms to pharmacists in Allentown, PA, 90% of the pharmacists they visited sold them vitamins.

Another health fraud Barrett has investigated personally is "hair analysis," which was widely promoted in health-food stores a few years ago. If you sent a sample of your hair, together with a fee (typically \$40), to a "hair analysis" lab, you could receive a detailed analysis of your supposed illnesses and dietary deficiencies, together with suggestions (mainly nutritional) for treatment. Barrett prepared 26 hair samples from the hair of two healthy girls and sent two samples apiece to each of 13 labs. Mineral
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CSICOP Conference: Informative, Productive, and Fun

By Karen Gray

Having recently returned from CSICOP's 1988 conference in Chicago, I decided that CSICOP's effort to treat New Age phenomena in a conference format was a little like trying to get an overall picture of a state fair from atop a ferris wheel on the edge of the fairgrounds—one could never quite organize the images with which one was assaulted or escape the distraction of the sheer pleasure of the ride. Which is to say that whatever the weaknesses of the process, I found it a thoroughly enjoyable, informative, and productive three days.

The difficulties inherent in the subject were apparent from the first overview session with its four very diverse speakers, one or another of whom must have pleased or annoyed each person present. I found myself in sympathy with Maureen O'Hara's efforts to explain that to the believer, his or her system will seem to be coherent and informed from a rich cultural diversity, and that simply dismissing others' belief systems as ridiculous is both inappropriate and counter-
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National Capital
Area Skeptics

Statement of Purpose

NCAS encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public.

NCAS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather examines them objectively and carefully.

Signed articles represent the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCAS. Unsigned articles are the responsibility of the NCAS Newsletter Committee. Only articles clearly marked as such represent positions of the NCAS Board of Directors.

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Letters to the Editor:

Dear Editor:

The last issue of *Skeptical Eye* suggested ways for skeptics to write letters to the media. I have found another opportunity for NCAS members to share their skeptical views.

At the end of a recent PBS airing of *The Infinite Voyage—The Geometry of Life*, a show about the role of DNA in human development, a toll-free telephone number appeared on the screen—1 800 962-2962 with a request for viewers to call the "PBS Response Line." I suspected that PBS wanted to monitor viewer reaction to the program's solidly evolutionist theme, including possible creationist complaints.

I decided to call. After the usual Muzak interlude, I was greeted by a cheerful operator, who asked for my comments on the program, and which part of the country I was calling from. I shared my general approval of the program, except for a part of the film suggesting that an instance of seeming extrasensory perception in twins might be due to a common genetic makeup. I asked if she was checking my comments against a prepared list of positions, and she said no, that she was typing my comments more or less as I made them, for later review.

Since then, I have seen this "Response Line" featured after several other PBS programs on various topics. I encourage all skeptics to take advantage of this convenient way of contributing skeptical comments either against or in support of PBS programs involving issues of concern to us.

Gary Stone,
NCAS Board Member
Annapolis Junction, MD

Dear Editor:

I am pleased to have the addresses listed in the last issue's "Where to Write in Response" item. What about supplying the addresses for news services like the Associate Press? I have occasionally wished to respond directly to the source of one of their items.

Jeffry D. Mueller
Finksburg, MD

Here they are:

Associated Press
1825 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006

United Press International
1400 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005

Copley News Service
1100 National Press Building
Washington, DC 20045

Reuters News Agency
133 H Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005

—Editor

An Appeal for Science Fair Volunteers

This spring, NCAS will be offering prizes for science fair projects at science fairs throughout the Washington metropolitan area. These prizes will consist of a certificate, an attractive pen bearing the NCAS logo, and an appropriate book. They will be given for the projects that best exemplify the goals of NCAS. Because there are more than a dozen science fairs in the Washington metropolitan area, all taking place within the span of a few weeks, we desperately need NCAS members to volunteer to serve as judges. Volunteers would devote a few hours to evaluating science fair projects at countywide or regional science fairs. Even if you have never been a science fair judge before, even if you have no formal scientific training, you still can be a good judge. All you have to do is identify projects that promote critical thinking, examine the development of fringe beliefs, or analyze pseudoscientific claims.

If you are interested in becoming an NCAS science fair judge, please contact Walter Rowe, chairman of the Education-in-Skepticism Special Interest Group, at (202) 994-1469 (office) or (703) 494-2916 (home). □

Klass Presents China Video

Last spring, the editor of one of China's leading scientific newspapers invited the Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) to appraise the state of psychic research and the extent of paranormal belief in the People's Republic of China. NCAS Board Member Philip J. Klass, a leading investigator of UFO sightings and author of numerous books and articles on paranormal claims, was part of the CSICOP team. While in China, Klass videotaped many of the group's meetings and investigations. On December 3, he presented a one-hour video of the CSICOP journey through China to about 30 NCAS members and others at the Tysons Pimmit Regional Library in Falls Church.

Klass's video followed the CSICOP group (which included, in addition to Klass, CSICOP Fellows James Alcock, Kendrick Frazier, Paul Kurtz, and James Randi and *Skeptical Inquirer* Public Relations Director Barry Karr) through Beijing, Xian, and Shanghai. It showed the group's investigation of a Qigong master, who claimed that he could cause a patient in another room to move as a result of Qi power emanating from his fingertips, and of a group of "psychic" children. Especially memorable was James "The Amazing" Randi's walk *through* the Great Wall—with a little help from Klass's camera!

A complete report on the CSICOP investigation appears in the Summer 1988 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*—Julie D. Stern



NCAS Board Member Philip J. Klass responds to questions from the audience after presenting his *CSICOP in China* video. (Photo by Randy Lockwood.)

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President's Message

By D.W. "Chip" Denman

Thursday, November 3, Grace and I arrive in Chicago's O'Hare Airport. We eventually find the bus to the hotel where the CSICOP Annual Conference is about to begin. A haggard James Randi is already on the bus, alone. After greetings, Randi explains how this same bus had been avoiding him for the past hour. He whips out a notebook—ever the careful observer—and displays to one and all his extensive notes documenting the number of times the hotel bus had passed him without stopping. By now a busload of sympathetic travelers, many en route to the same conference, has heard Randi's tale of woe. As we reach the hotel, Randi finds new vigor. Buoyed by a sympathetic audience and flushed with the success of having at last found the right bus, Randi is ready for anything. Suitcases in hand, we stride into the modern, multilevel lobby, where a large sign directs registrants to the left. Grace and I dutifully move left. Poised for action and heedless of everything—especially the sign—Randi marches straight forward...and up. As the escalator carries him up to an unknown destiny, a tired voice calls down to us, "I fear I have taken the wrong vehicle again...."

CSICOP 1988 had begun.

The conference was a great personal experience. NCAS Board Member Karen Gray also attended, and writes about the conference elsewhere in this issue. I will simply say that Grace and I tremendously enjoyed meeting with skeptics from around the world. The formal presentations were of very high quality; the informal interactions between the speakers, the members of CSICOP, and other local-group representatives were even more stimulating.

A few weeks later, Mark Plummer, CSICOP's Executive Director, came to visit Washington. Mark and I toured a number of sites around town. Mark attended a meeting of the NCAS Board of Directors and shared ideas that have been successful for other local groups.

All of this means that it is with great pleasure that I can announce that NCAS will be hosting the next CSICOP Annual Conference in spring 1990. The exact date is still to be determined, but will likely be in late March. The next 14 months or so will be a busy time for NCAS, as we not only increase the frequency of our regular public events but also prepare for a national conference with perhaps more than 500 attendees. In

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analyses of the same girl's hair by different labs often disagreed, sometimes by a factor of 10. The medical diagnoses were even more variable—one lab responded with a list of 23 diseases! In fact, mineral analysis of hair is not a rational method of diagnosis, since levels of a mineral in hair need not reflect levels of that mineral elsewhere in the body.

Barrett also showed several examples of quack nostrums, as slickly packaged as they were medically worthless. In addition to making unsubstantiated claims of benefit—longevity, sexual potency, immune system improvement, and so forth—quacks also invent new diseases, for which they sell a “cure.” A recent example of the latter is hypersensitivity to yeast infection, a condition unknown to medical science. Barrett also commented briefly on some older forms of quackery: chiropractic, homeopathy, and acupuncture.

The next speaker, Gabe Merkin, M.D., discussed nutrition in detail. He listed the 46 essential nutrients, and explained that most Americans eat a diet that provides adequate amounts of these, though they also tend to eat too much fat, too many calories, and too much salt. He debunked the idea that sugar is intrinsically harmful, or that one kind of sugar is healthier than another, then moved on to a rapid-fire list of false claims about nutrition. Most, commented Merkin, can be refuted with a basic knowledge of nutrition and some common sense. If you understand, for example, that all proteins have to be broken into their constituent amino acids before you can use them, then you realize how silly it is to eat extracts of animal organs to strengthen your own.

Dentist Marvin “Chick” Schissel, D.D.S., the third speaker, shocked many of his colleagues some years ago when he wrote *Dentistry and its Victims*, which exposed some of the shoddy practices in his profession. Today, he said, quackery is an increasing problem in dentistry. He listed a number of quack treatments being practiced by dentists, including “auricular therapy” (acupuncture of the earlobe), “iridology” (diagnosis by examination of the eyeball), “reflexology” (treatment of bodily ailments by massaging the foot), and acupuncture of the mouth. He also discussed the controversy within the dental profession over the safety of mercury amalgam fillings, which some dentists have blamed for neurological diseases. Schissel argued that there is no evidence of this, and that the mechanically inferior plastic fillings inserted in place of the traditional metal ones can cause dental problems. Schissel also discussed a new and fashionable sort of quackery involving the manipulation of the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), pointing out that this joint “is to the TMJ quack what the spine is to chiropractors.” These quacks claim that TMJ manipulation is a cure for pain, vision and hearing loss, gynecological disorders, and even multiple sclerosis.

The fourth speaker, Grace Powers Monaco, is a lawyer who defends insurance companies against quack claims and who founded Candlelighters, an organization for children with cancer, after losing a child to that disease. The cure rate for pediatric cancer, she noted, has improved dramatically since she started Candlelighters in the 1960s, and now stands at 65% (and could be 80% if everyone got the best treatment). As the



Keynote speaker Dr. Stephen Barrett demonstrates the use of a well-known quack device. (Photo by Peter Lims.)

cure rate has risen, she cautioned, it has become more important to keep sick children from quacks who might divert them from life-saving therapy. Monaco noted that much medical advice doesn't suit the needs of people with a very sick child, and that parents are desperate to try anything that offers hope. Candlelighters tries to help by investigating unproven therapies, examining medical literature, case records, and medical data. The organization will critique any treatment, provided only that the fact of its investigation is not used to promote sales. Usually such a critique reveals a basis in obsolete, discredited therapy or inconsistencies in the rationale. Sometimes investigation has turned up therapies that improve the patient's quality of life without offering a cure (though membership in a support group is usually a cheaper and equally effective alternative). Monaco doesn't believe (as most quacks assert) that there is a conspiracy against new treatments. She warned that AIDS today is much like pediatric cancer was in the 1960s: with no orthodox treatment promising a cure, it is an attractive target for quacks. She feels that quackery will always be with us, and that those without knowledge of science or skepticism are most vulnerable.

Geoff Drucker, a consumer protection attorney for the U.S. Postal Service, spoke last. He told the audience that typical mail-order fraud cases involving medical quackery fall into three classes: treatments promising appearance enhancement (breast enlargers, hair tonics, and so on), cures targeted at painful, debilitating, and fatal conditions (typically arthritis, cancer, and AIDS), and weight loss products. Relatively few complaints come from defrauded consumers, since most are too embarrassed or afraid to complain. Instead, most enforcement actions are originated by postal inspectors who examine questionable product claims, or through liaison with private anti-quackery groups. Inspectors make test purchases and secure corporate records, but since they aren't medical experts they need help from doctors and academics.

Drucker discussed in detail the case of Kurt Donsbach, who styles himself “Chairman of the Board of the National Health Federation” and attacks the “pharmaceutical-medical com-

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productive. Convinced as I am that no single-theme analysis explains the complexity of something as vast as what comes under the term "New Age," I found myself disgusted by Jay Rosen's blithe attribution of widespread New Age beliefs and practices to a cultural narcissism.

During the remainder of the conference, I choose to attend sessions on "Channeling," "Graphology," and "Media Responsibility and the Paranormal." In the first, the most substantive presentation was that of Dr. Sarah Thomason, a linguist, whose analysis of the dialects of channeled entities showed that those she analyzed were not actual English dialects/accents. Dr. Graham Reed's psychological comments reeked of psychological jargon and reflected its limitations—particularly in his admission that it was not possible to determine if a channeler was deliberately lying or was self-deceptive. Dr. James Alcock, in his "history" of the phenomenon, did not link it to its many ancestral forms in other human traditions as a scholar of the history of religions might have, and consequently referred only to the European and American phenomenon that is rooted in 19th century spiritualism.

The graphology session was enlightening in that it demonstrated that this "discipline" has no generally agreed-upon methods and purposes. Those who spoke for it produced evidence that was highly anecdotal and easily subject to more than one interpretation. That many employers may be using graphology in the final stages of selecting applicants for important jobs was even more disquieting after the audience saw how little graphologists were able to agree among themselves either on what they were looking for, what it meant, or how it could or should be used. Much was made of the "Barnum effect" (the tendency of people presented with a purported description of their personality to agree with it) in this session.

The media session showed that good "skeptical" program-

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plex," promoting his own quack remedies, particularly the use of hydrogen peroxide as a cure for cancer and many other diseases. In his writings, Donsbach urged people to drink, bathe in, inject, and even give themselves douches and enemas with dilute hydrogen peroxide. He distributed his pro-peroxide propaganda together with order forms for hydrogen peroxide, though the order form itself contained no representations. The Postal Service filed for a preliminary injunction, arguing that his claims about hydrogen peroxide were linked to the order form. This argument was never tested, since Donsbach settled out of court by agreeing to halt mail-order sales of hydrogen peroxide. Drucker argued that an educated public is the best defense against quackery.

Those attending the meeting had several chances to examine and buy books on quackery and nutrition, and to explore a display of quack devices and anti-quackery literature presented by Bernie Simon of the FDA. At a wine-and-cheese reception after the meeting they also had a chance to talk to the speakers and to NCAS Board Members. □

ming can be done and is being done on a small and scattered scale, but also demonstrated that American media leaders and managers—from publishing to radio and television—do not, overall, see it as their responsibility to dig out the truth of questionable claims and see that books or news reports are classified and/or presented to the public according to their "truth content" from a rational or scientific point of view. Consequently, *Communion* is classified as nonfiction and a news report of a statue of the Virgin Mary with water on its face is described as "weeping." It seemed to me that an entire conference might be dedicated to this issue of media treatment of paranormal subject matter, as many issues central to an open society and unregulated media were continually exposed but never dealt with in-depth in this session.

The final Sunday morning session treated a variety of approaches to encouraging science and rationalism. This was quite fun, as magic, illusion, and creative activity all contributed to the presentations by Jerry Andrus, Jeff Mayhew, and Paul MacCready. Mayhew championed the use of audio-visual aids and "story-telling" techniques. A recurrent theme in this session was the ease with which our senses and even our patterns of thought and/or beliefs can lead us astray.

Friday night's keynote address by Douglas Hofstadter was a low key but enjoyable presentation of his efforts to understand how the brain forms concepts and then verbalizes them. He highlighted the immediate significance of these mental activities and their highly fallible and amorphous results with a catalog of New Age books that included his own! The next day, during the question-and-answer period at the end of the graphology session, he asserted that he was inclined to believe that handwriting might reveal deep personal patterns. He suggested to graphologists that they break handwriting down into its components and then design experiments to see if any of these correlate with recognizable personality and/or behavioral patterns or traits, rather than developing a theory about what given characteristics meant and then imputing them to persons whose handwriting showed those characteristics.

Conference attendees socialized eagerly and almost compulsively. Skepticism obviously attracts people who enjoy talking and thinking, arguing, joking, and lecturing. If there were any wall-flowers in attendance, they'd retreated so far into the woodwork as to be invisible. I was impressed by a greater diversity than I had expected in thought, age, and background. The conferees were however, overwhelmingly white and male.

The recurring sexist language was notable and, from Paul Kurtz's apology during the Sunday morning session, apparently of considerable concern to some of the women present. I was more troubled by the persistent denigration and trivialization of others' belief systems and the inability to acknowledge the seriousness of the subjectivity and relativity that reveals itself in human conceptual systems and processes. However thoroughly human skeptics may be, however, I found them a provocative and enjoyable bunch with whom it was satisfying to associate and be associated. □

A Skeptic's Response

By *Jamy Ian Swiss*

This is the second in a series of basic skeptical arguments in response to questions about common pseudoscientific beliefs. It is designed to provide skeptics who are questioned about their disbelief with brief, logical answers to these questions, and with sources for more detailed information. Has someone—a friend, co-worker, or family member—ever raised a question of this sort that you found yourself hard-pressed to answer? If so, send the question (or questions) to this column, and we'll attempt to provide "a skeptic's response."—Editor

For years, television and newspapers have featured psychics bending spoons and keys, stopping and starting watches, and driving around town blindfolded. It doesn't look like a magic trick. What's going on here?

The magic tricks and illusions in question don't "look like" magic because, among other reasons, they're not supposed to! These kinds of effects lack not only traditional "magical" processes (like magic words and wands, sleight-of-hand manipulations, and so forth), but also the trappings of traditional magic. No bright colors, no boxes with oriental decorations and the like. Thus the setting is important to the "psychic" event: it must appear to be an important, but non-theatrical, event. Consider: no theater audience would pay money to knowingly see a *magician* strain and struggle, only to eventually succeed in putting a slight kink in a spoon or a key. This is not good theater. In a non-theatrical setting, however, it can become excellent theater, although the "audience" may remain unaware of its unwitting role. Similarly, no audience would pay to knowingly see a magician fail from time to time; such a performer would be branded as an incompetent (Ka-mar notwithstanding, for you Letterman watchers). In a non-theatrical context, however, the failure lends credibility to the "psychic's" apparent legitimacy: "If he fails, how could he be a magician?" This is what James Randi has dubbed the "If he wins he wins and if he loses he wins" syndrome.

Have so-called "psychics" like Uri Geller ever been caught cheating?

Absolutely, positively, yes—but! Numerous witnesses have "caught" Geller bending spoons with the prosaic powers of his hand muscles. When he claimed to be able to expose the film inside a camera by psychic means, he tripped an antitampering device that had been put in place as a precaution; the result was a photograph of a definitely less than psychic nature. Countless other "psychics" have been exposed throughout the history of parapsychological research—which spans a period of more than 130 years—including virtually every notable spirit medium of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Interestingly, claims of physical phenomena as evidence of Spiritualism came to an all but complete halt following magician Harry Houdini's controversial exposure of the celebrated medium Margery, shortly before his death in 1926. Such things more or less remained dormant for the next half-century, until Uri Geller

arrived on the scene in the early 1970s, spoons and keys in hand.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned "but" requires some acknowledgement. Using Geller as just one example, his deceptions have been exposed and explained more often than he has actually been *caught* cheating. For example, the notorious experiments conducted with Geller at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) by Targ and Puthoff have been thoroughly discredited since their initial publication. (See, for example, *The Psychology of the Psychic*, by David Marks and *The Truth About Uri Geller*, by James Randi.)

The fact is, Geller has never allowed himself to be tested under proper conditions: he has refused further testing since the SRI events more than a decade ago. Strictly speaking, based upon actual research no definite statements can be made specifically about Geller's claims. However, the established assumptions of science must apply in the absence of any new and extraordinary evidence. And even if Geller were to submit to thorough testing, he also might not be "caught." It is quite likely that simply nothing at all would happen. This is exactly what occurred when Geller appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson back in the 1970s. Prior to that appearance, Carson consulted with James Randi, who briefed Carson on how to provide adequate controls against Geller's tricks. The result: absolutely nothing happened. Geller wasn't "caught" cheating, there was simply no result. It is not difficult to imagine a set of similar events occurring in a laboratory setting. The conclusion: Geller's claims would be found invalid, his powers nonexistent—and the question of being caught would thus be reduced to a non-issue.

Geller is not the first to be so careful. Few "psychics" have stepped forward to submit to adequate testing, even in the face of James Randi's \$10,000 reward. (The majority of those who have tried to claim that award are individuals who sincerely believe in the genuine nature of their abilities—a common occurrence, for example, in the case of many "dowsers.") But long before Uri Geller, the medium Daniel Dunglas Home was often cited (and occasionally still is) as a genuine spirit medium because, unlike virtually every other notable medium of his time, he was never fully exposed. This is precisely because Home was extremely cautious about his audience, and studiously avoided skeptics.

But what about the rest of the time? How can you say that Geller and others must be cheating *all* of the time?

It should be noted that believers and supporters, again from 19th century Spiritualism to present-day Geller advocates, frequently admit that their icons do cheat from time to time, but claim that this does not prove that they cheat all the time!

We can only reiterate that the burden of proof lies with the claimant: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." That a "psychic" is caught cheating at least indicates that he cheats at least some of the time, and hence his character certainly must be called into question. Add to this a healthy application of Occam's Razor, and we must conclude that since cheating has been established at least part of the time, the simplest solution for all other times would be more cheating,

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rather than any other extraordinary explanation (that is, if it walks like a cheat and talks like a cheat and acts like a cheat, it's probably a cheat!).

Even James "The Amazing" Randi does not explain exactly how he does the spoon-bending trick. If magicians know all about these tricks, why won't they explain them?

There are several reasons. Rarely, if ever, is there only one method for accomplishing a particular magical effect: magic, as a technology, largely consists of an abundance of methods for a paucity of effects. Explaining one method to an already ill-informed public may only serve to make people even easier targets for similar deception in the future. The reason for this is rather simple, to wit: John Doe is mystified by famous spoon-bender Uri Analysis. Magician Steinerini the Skeptic explains one method by which the trick can be accomplished. John Doe now sees spoon bender Shirley U. Jest bend a spoon, and clearly determines that the Steinerini method has not been used. Hence, John Doe now concludes that Shirley is the genuine article, since she couldn't have cheated via the described method. Moral: a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Another reason magicians don't like to explain the methods used by psychics is that traditionally magicians have safeguarded their professional secrets from the public, in the belief that secrecy is a necessary element to the success of magical entertainment. While there is some difference of opinion within the magic community concerning the degree of importance that secrecy should be accorded (and, conversely, on the degree of potential damage and danger to magicians that can result from public exposure), it is axiomatic that magicians will tend to protect one another's secrets as a matter of course and professional courtesy.

It should be pointed out, however, that in appropriate venues some magicians are quite willing to provide specific information on "psychic" methodology. There is a difference between informed inquiry and casual curiosity. When and where there is a clear "need to know" on the part of the questioners—for example, in the parapsychological laboratory setting, in dealing with researchers, establishing experimental protocols, and the like—magicians from Houdini to Randi and many others have been quick to provide the required information. And it should also be noted that such material is readily available in a variety of specialized magic texts and publications.

Why and how can parapsychology researchers benefit from consultation with qualified magicians?

Scientists are often deceived by crafty "psychics" because trained researchers are often reluctant to accept the notion that they can be deceived by essentially simple means. The common misconception that intelligence and education are the best protection against a magician's—or a "psychic's"—deceptive skills could not be farther from the truth. Any experienced magician will testify that the more intelligent a spectator, the easier it is to fool him. This is because a magician manipulates the audience's existing knowledge and assumptions: the more knowledge, the easier the manipulation. Unfortunately, this concept is an extremely difficult one to grasp, and so, despite the

fact that magicians have been calling for their inclusion in the laboratory since the turn of the century, invitations have often been slow in coming. While scientific researchers are generally unaccustomed to studying phenomena that attempt to deceive the observer—one is not likely to run into a sneaky amoeba—they have often been resistant to the idea that the magician can be a valuable, perhaps even necessary, resource. No one who has been a victim of expert misdirection finds it easy to believe that the dirty work was done when he wasn't looking, yet this is precisely how Geller's spoon-bending trick works. But misdirection is a misleading term. It does not simply mean diverting a spectator's attention from the method, but also includes preventing the spectator from realizing that his attention ever was diverted. The explanation for the metal-bending trick is essentially simple (although not necessarily easy). This is difficult for the victims to believe, however, because a skilled practitioner will prevent the spectators from realizing that they weren't always looking. Being fooled does not mean being a fool. The important conclusion to be drawn is that qualified magicians (those specifically familiar with close-up sleight-of-hand, mentalism and psychic effects, the psychology of misdirection, and the experimental process) must not simply be asked to consult in parapsychology experiments, but must be present at all times to directly view the action. Only in this way can a skilled magician be certain that the experimenters were not successfully misdirected, since if they were, they wouldn't know it! □

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

If there is one book about psychic phenomena I would like to see every skeptic read, it is this one:

Marx, David. 1980. *The Psychology of the Psychic*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

James Randi's works are not only always informative, but also entertaining. I suggest:

Assorted subjects: *Flim-Flam!* 1982. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Uri Geller: *The Truth About Uri Geller*. 1982. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

There are countless books concerning 19th century Spiritualism. One of my favorite skeptical works on the subject is:

Brandon, Ruth. 1984. *The Spiritualists*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.

Concerning the magician's point of view, and his role as a skeptic, with the emphasis on Spiritualism, see:

Mullholland, John. 1979. *Beware Familiar Spirits*. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons.

Blondini, Harry. 1924 (1972 reprint). *A Magician Amongst the Spirits*. New York: Arno Press.

Christopher, Millbourne. 1970. *ESP, Seers and Psychics*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

The noted science writer Martin Gardner is also a magician. Two of his numerous works are especially popular:

Science: Good, Bad and Bogus. 1981. Buffalo: Prometheus Books. *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. 1957. New York: Dover. □

Are Science Teachers Dummies Too?

By Randall Lockwood

In the last issue of *Skeptical Eye*, Michael Zimmerman's essay, "Newspaper Editors Are Dummies," lamented the declining level of basic scientific knowledge. Zimmerman reported on a survey of 534 editors of daily newspapers in which they were asked a variety of questions about basic concepts of modern biology, geology, and astronomy. The results, in his words, were "not in the least encouraging." Over 37% of the editors polled thought that humans and dinosaurs coexisted or did not know, and only 42% agreed strongly that "the Earth is approximately 4 to 5 billion years old."

Far more disturbing is a new study, reported by UPI, conducted by two sociologists at the University of Texas, Arlington. Dana Dunn and Raymond Eve sent questionnaires similar to those used by Zimmerman to 400 high school biology teachers selected at random from a list of 20,000 provided by the National Science Teachers Association. About 50% responded, the same as the response rate for the survey of editors. When asked if dinosaurs and humans lived at the same time, 19% said yes and 14% did not know... scarcely better than the "dummy" newspaper editors. If given the choice of teaching evolution or creationism, 30% said they would chose creationism. In addition, 27% believed that the dead can communicate with the living, 28% thought that people can predict the future, and 34% said they believe in mind reading!

Eve and Dunn said that "there can be no question that we are in a disastrous situation.... We are doing something very, very, very wrong in biology education." They attribute much of the problem to poor preparation of science teachers and to the common practice of allowing teachers to instruct some classes outside their areas of certification, noting that only about 25% of the teachers responding to their survey had degrees in biology. Most had been trained as general science education majors.

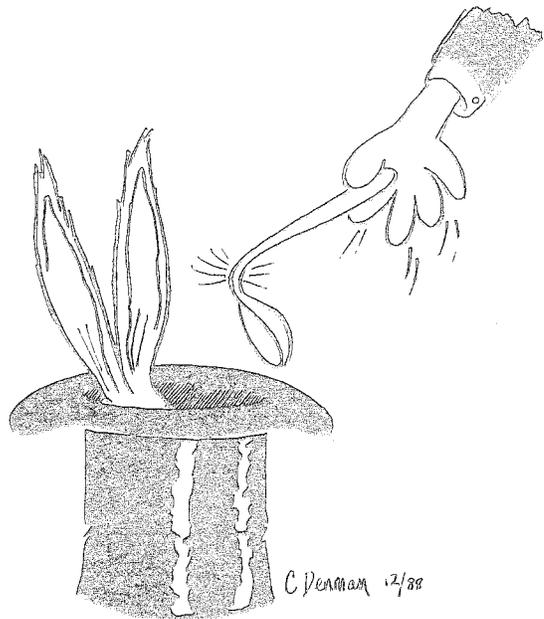
As Zimmerman noted, "It is imperative that members of our democratic society possess enough scientific sophistication to enable them to make rational choices about increasingly pervasive scientific issues." If those teaching science to future generations are themselves lacking in this basic level of knowledge and understanding, how can we expect their students to be anything more than scientific illiterates? □

President's Message, from p. 3

the coming months I hope every member will volunteer to help out with at least one activity. The CSICOP conference in particular will need many behind-the-scenes workers to surpass the high standard set by the Midwest Committee for Rational Inquiry, the local hosts of the Chicago conference.

In other news, NCAS recently was granted tax-exempt status by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. This means we now owe no federal tax and pay a lower rate for mailing the *Skeptical Eye*, and any contributions the group receives can be considered charitable donations for income tax purposes.

Finally, Uri Geller, nemesis of cutlery, was recently seen in a surprising place—at a convention of British magicians. Since giving up his stage act in Israel, Geller has repeatedly disavowed all association with other magicians. But at a recent International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM) convention in England, Geller appeared briefly as the guest of magician and one-time adversary David Berglas. Geller, now living in a \$3 million home in Great Britain, apparently feels secure enough to be seen in the company of other conjurers, who reportedly responded warmly to his charisma. Perhaps Geller has missed contact with sleight of hand experts, or perhaps he hopes to tweak the beards of skeptical magicians such as Randi. In any case, do not look for Geller to add bunny productions to his repertoire. □



Membership/Renewal Form

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public. I understand that my membership will be good for one year and will include a subscription to the *NCAS Skeptical Eye*.

Single: _____ @ \$20.00

Double: _____ @ \$30.00

Full-Time Student:* _____ @ \$10.00

Check particular areas of interest: Astrology Communications Creationism
 Education, Fringe Medicine UFOs Other (list below)

Make checks payable to
NCAS
and mail to:

Grace Denman
8006 Valley St.
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NAME		
STREET		APT. NO.
CITY	STATE	ZIP CODE
*STUDENTS: LIST INSTITUTION ATTENDING:		

The Banana Theory: Is Science Una“peel”ing?

By Demetrios Tsipsis

Greetings, fellow skeptics! This is the first in what I hope will be an ongoing series of columns, covering everything from the local media to local psychic events to related items of interest to all of you in the DC area. As a Washington native who has lived in this area all my life, I feel I have a pretty good knowledge of the field.

Dial-A-Psychic

My first brief is about some of the newest of the pay-per-call phone lines advertised on late-night t.v. and in the classified sections of local newspapers and magazines. For only \$19.95, you can call 976-FATE and get a psychic reading from “nationally known” professionals. They may be known to the nation, but unfortunately they can’t be known to me: I currently reside in Virginia, and 976 numbers can be accessed only from Maryland and the District. By calling another number, 976-TELL, you can get personal or financial psychic advice from Mistress Cassandra. If you act now, she will also send you a free “power crystal” (no doubt a cheap piece of quartz). If anyone gets the urge to call, please write to me in care of this newsletter and let me know what kind of response you get. I would love to have called myself, but I suppose the Old Dominion just isn’t into the New Age movement yet.

Subliminals

Did anyone see channel 5’s *A Current Affair* on November 15? One segment of the show covered an incident involving two boys, a gun, and a Judas Priest (heavy metal) album. One of the boys was shot, and guess who got the blame? That’s right: the album. This album contained the usual “kiss the devil”-type subliminal messages, and the recording company is now in court. *A Current Affair* decided to take a concerned, objective look at subliminals and therefore called in “noted researcher” Wilson Key. No air time was given to anyone who felt that subliminals don’t work. I tried to get a transcript of the show to share with you, but was told that the station doesn’t sell them. Oh well; and I used to think so highly of Morey Povich.

Inner Peace?

On Sunday, November 27, Q107’s *Liveline*, which airs from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., welcomed two guests, Richard Lassiter and Neal Krynski, who answered questions about the Inner Peace Movement, an international program that claims to be “helping hundreds of thousands of searchers throughout the world learn more about themselves and the universe in which they live.”

They responded to listeners’ call-in questions about everything from reincarnation to psychic healing to foretelling the future with dreams. I couldn’t resist: I had to call in and voice my opinion. When I was put on the air, I identified myself as a member of a group that offers logical, scientific, rational answers for many of the questions covered. I told them the name of this organization, and, immediately upon hearing the word “skeptic,” the two guests began to laugh like I was some kind of kook. “How do we know you’re really a member? We’re skeptical,” they joked. Biting my tongue, knowing full well that any kind of smart remark or argument—however rapier-like—would prove more fatal than fruitful, I went on to ask if the show was unbiased. “Yes,” I was told. So I then asked if I could give out the NCAS address for memberships. It took three times before they finally stopped cutting me off with cute remarks like “I think I started that organization and then quit.” Finally, I thanked them and asked for the time and place of the seminar they were holding the next day.

So as not to let you down, I attended this free seminar. (I would have gone to a following one as well, but the charge for it was \$30—a bit steep for a struggling screenprinter!) One of the first things Lassiter, the main speaker, asked the audience was whether “his skeptic” was among them. I raised my hand to identify myself, and he immediately asked if I had heard of spoon-bending. I said I had, so he made a point of intentionally bending a spoon with his hands. That got a lot of laughs! He went on to tell the group they could prove they had psychic powers with a simple test: go into a supermarket and stare at someone’s back. They will turn around and look at you. Obviously, you have psychically caused them to do this. His funniest point was when he asked me (“the skeptic”) to describe the taste of a banana. “It’s sweet,” I said. “Describe the taste better,” he responded, “a lot of things are sweet.” “I can only describe it by comparing it to something else,” I answered. “Something only *you* have experienced,” he countered. “It’s the same with this [the Inner Peace Movement]—only you can experience it, you just can’t describe it. You see, science doesn’t have all the answers.” To summarize his theory, science is wrong because we can’t describe the taste of a banana. Talk about bizarre reasoning!

My reward for attending the program came at its close, when two people approached me and asked for more information about NCAS. They seemed genuinely interested in learning about us. To be fair, if anyone would like to know more about the Inner Peace Movement, the group’s DC number is 363-7117. Call them up and ask for their brochure, which is at least good for a few laughs. □

ORDER YOUR NCAS SHIRTS NOW!

Keep an eye on yourself—a “Skeptical Eye,” that is, with our great new NCAS t-shirts and sweat shirts. These 100% cotton t-shirts and 50/50 sweat shirts are the perfect way to show off your NCAS membership (not to mention your good taste).

All shirts are black, with our “eye-catching” Skeptical Eye logo silk-screened in white over the left breast pocket.

Use the order form to get yours at the special introductory member price of \$10 per t-shirt and \$20 per sweat shirt (plus postage and handling). For a deal no rational mind could resist, buy any three shirts and pay no postage and handling.

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_____ T-Shirts @ \$10 = \$_____. Sweats @ \$20 = \$_____. P&H: _____ @ \$1.50 each = \$_____

(No postage and handling charge for orders of three or more shirts)

Total Amount Enclosed (Make checks payable to NCAS) \$_____

Name _____

Street: _____ City, State, ZIP Code: _____

Mall orders to: NCAS, 8006 VALLEY STREET, SILVER SPRING, MD 20910

Congressional Watch: A Skeptical Eye on Senator Pell

By Randy Lockwood

One of the forces leading to the creation of NCAS was the growing concern among many DC area skeptics that irrationality and pseudoscience were gaining a foothold in the official circles of Washington. Recent events, from the Nancy Reagan astrology flap to the Capitol Hill visits of Uri Geller, have dramatized the need for skeptical concern. In a recent *U.S. News & World Report* feature, "The Twilight Zone in Washington" (December 5, 1988), Representative Charlie Rose (D-N.C.) is quoted as claiming that "At any given time, about one fourth of the members of Congress are actively interested in psi, be that healing, prophecy, remote viewing or physical manifestations of psychic powers."

Foremost among those associated with a fascination for pseudoscience and the occult is Senator Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. According to *USNR*, his office bookshelves are crammed with books on astral projection and the works of Shirley Maclaine, reflecting interests that date back to his college years, when he contemplated becoming a priest. He admits to visits to mediums, without success, but maintains that true psychics exist. He continues to be one of a small minority of humans who still believe in the "powers" of Uri Geller, whom he met in London in 1986.

Pell's dabblings in the occult are legendary around the Hill and might be dismissed as harmless idiosyncrasy were it not for the fact that he often attempts to translate his fascination into legislation. As was reported in an earlier *Skeptical Eye* issue, Pell has repeatedly urged the National Science Foundation and the Defense Department to fund more psychic research, despite a report from the National Academy of Sciences strongly critical of the evidence for any value to such research efforts. Pell's office asked, unsuccessfully, that the NAS study be withdrawn.

Pell's legislative initiatives have generally steered clear of pseudoscience. He has a well-deserved reputation as a strong supporter of improvements in education, especially assistance for college education. However, one piece of legislation introduced in the last Congress has raised a few skeptical eyebrows. On August 11, 1988, Pell introduced SJ RES 368, officially titled "A joint resolution to establish a National Commission on Human Resources." The bill had only one cosponsor, Albert Gore (D-TN). In introducing the resolution, Pell stated, "The health and wealth of the Nation is in the realized potential of its citizens. I believe that the tools and techniques for attaining a fuller development of individuals can be identified. Moreover, it is a shared responsibility of the individual, the family, the community and the Nation to provide knowledge, opportunity, and discipline to increase personal excellence and to develop fuller human potential."

If all this sounds like a flashback to the human potential movement of the 1960s, Pell manages to give his mission an urgency right out of today's headlines. The goal of this commission is to act on the realization that "issues of compulsive,

addictive behavior, low self-esteem, high teenage pregnancy, suicide rates and a weakened family structure share in arrested or stunted development of human potential." He echoes his pattern of attempting to influence greater spending in fringe areas of research with the statement that "there is a role for government to assist in research and education on techniques that promote the development of personal excellence and fuller human potential in body, mind, and spirit and the ultimate impact of increased personal excellence and human potential will be a greater impulse to contribute and live in harmony within a transformed family, community, nation, and universe."

What, specifically, is Pell trying to establish? Will this be a thinktank of spoon-benders lounging in hot tubs as they read aloud from the collected works of Baba Ram Dass and Tom Peters? Actually, the proposal sounds quite interesting. Pell's bill would establish a two-year commission of 23 people appointed by the president. This commission will be empowered to "hold regional meetings, solicit views from the public on the role of the individual, family, community and government in researching, educating, and implementing techniques designed to increase human potential in body, mind and spirit." Furthermore "[t]he Commission will seek out practical, proven techniques to improve human capacities, and *with expert scientific advice*, recommend a research agenda to investigate promising but unproven techniques. [Emphasis added]."

The composition of the panel, as outlined in the resolution, will include two members "with training and experience in extraordinary human performance research," one physician, one nurse, one college professor, one elementary educator, two members of the clergy, two representatives with experience in organized labor, two people from business management, one retired person, two high school students, five members of the general public, one member of the executive branch, one senator, and one representative. Members will be paid for each day of service at the GS-18 grade scale.

If the panel does have the diversity and scientific support described, it could make for some very interesting hearings. I suspect the press would have a field day as representatives of the mainstream human potential movement, as well as its outrageously extensive fringes, paraded before the commission. If, in fact, the commission did have good scientific guidance and, more specifically, if the resolution were amended to include on the commission at least two members "with training and experience in critically investigating claims of unusual human performance," then this could provide the skeptical community with an opportunity to comment officially on many of the enterprises that Pell has found so appealing. At the very least, it would be a fascinating opportunity if some NCAS or CSICOP members could be among the "civilian" members of the commission.

In September Pell's resolution was referred to the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities, where it lay fallow like all the other legislation that Congress failed to act on before its adjournment. We will be keeping a watch to see if this is reintroduced in the next Congress. □

Locus Of Infection

By Walter F. Rowe

You are walking through the stacks of a library. On either side, shelves groan with loads of books heaped up chaotically. You take down a book: Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision*. You reach for another: Berlitz's *Bermuda Triangle*. You take yet another: McRae's *Mind Wars*. Frightened and confused, you reach for other books, looking for the names of James Randi, Paul Kurtz, Martin Gardner, Larry Kusche. Nothing.

What I have described above might be a nightmare; it could also be a fair description of your local public library or even a university library. We all know that fringe books sell very well. I wonder, however, if we appreciate the implications of that fact: not only are the homes of average Americans stuffed with fringe literature, but our libraries also bulge with fringe books. Worse, good skeptical works sell poorly, and predictably they are conspicuously absent from most libraries.

One Library's Collection

Recently, I set about reviewing the fringe holdings of the Gelman Library at George Washington University. The Education-in-Skepticism Special Interest Group has been interested in approaching a foundation for a grant to buy skeptical books for local libraries. Before contacting likely foundations, I thought that it would be a good idea to survey libraries to find out what fringe literature—and what skeptical literature—they had. I chose the library at GWU because of its convenient location and because it recently converted its catalogue to compact disk. A thorough search of its holdings thus was very easy to conduct in a short time.

The results of this preliminary survey were startling, to say the least. Here were all of the works of Immanuel Velikovsky (no matter how minor), the complete cult archeology of Barry Fell and Jeffrey Goodman, the fringe books of Wilhelm Reich (as well as his supposedly respectable works), and all of the Rhines' books on parapsychology. There were also numerous pro-UFO books by such dubious luminaries as J. Allen Hynek, Jacque Vallee, and Donald Keyhoe. The only fringe area not heavily represented was creationism: the catalogue listed only three minor books by Duane Gish, John N. Moore, and Henry Morris.

A Trivial Concern?

On its face, the presence of so much crank literature in a university library seems a trivial matter. After all, universities strive to provide compendious scholarly resources for their

students and faculty. What is worrisome is the virtual absence of skeptical works on most fringe topics. I ran catalogue searches for the names of the best known skeptical writers. The pickings turned out to be meager indeed: two books by Martin Gardner, Larry Kusche's *Bermuda Triangle Mystery—Solved*, Roger Culver's anti-astrology *The Gemini Syndrome*, Sagan's *Broca's Brain, UFO's—A Scientific Debate*, a couple of good anti-creationist books. I then searched for the names of James Randi, Paul Kurtz, and Kendrick Frazier. Nada.

The results of my survey raise some disturbing questions. How did so much fringe literature wind up in the GWU library? The book budget for the library is divided between the library and the university's academic departments. Within limits, the departmental library representatives can have the library order pretty much what they please in the way of books. This raises the disturbing possibility that true believers among the faculty have been systematically squandering scarce library resources on trash. Eventually, I hope to answer this question by examining each fringe work to determine how it came to be in the library.

What is now to be done? If I were a creationist or other fringe believer, my next step would be clear: demand the banning of the offending books. I hope that neither NCAS nor its members ever join the ranks of the book burners. Instead, I hope we will strive to counteract fringe books with skeptical books. That is the whole purpose of our library project.

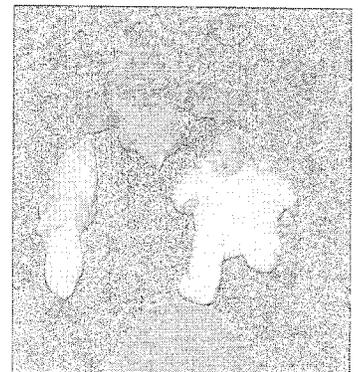
You Can Help

The readers of *Skeptical Eye* can help the Education-in-Skepticism Special Interest Group in its library survey project. Send me your lists of the most notable works of pseudoscience, as well as the best skeptical literature. We will collate these lists into a master list to be used in surveying local libraries. You can also help by prodding your public libraries into buying skeptical books. Most public libraries have forms you can fill out to suggest books that they should purchase. If enough NCAS members fill out these requests the libraries will start to buy "our kind" of books. Remember: the more skeptical books a library buys, the fewer fringe books it will buy. □

LAWYER WANTED: Attorney to provide various types of legal advice and/or services for NCAS. If you are interested, or know of an attorney or law firm that might be interested in providing reasonably priced help, please contact D. W. "Chip" Denman at (301) 585-4093.

The Littlest Skeptic

We'd like to apologize for the slight lateness of this issue, which was caused in part by a busy holiday season and in part by the arrival of our four-month-old daughter, Susan Mee, from Seoul, Korea, on December 13. Susan has been duly enrolled as a member of NCAS and, as you can see from the photo, is already active in group activities.—Julie Stern and Randy Lockwood



NCAS's youngest member conducts a personal investigation of a popular cult figure noted for his paranormal claims.

NAPHTHA SPEAKS

Following a recent board meeting, several NCAS Directors attempted to channel Naphtha's spirit directly, in order to allow Jamy Swiss time for an extra donut. This successful experiment resulted in a wide range of topics for this segment. Naphtha and Swiss would like to share the blame, uh, credit, for some of these answers with the NCAS Board.

NCAS: Do you believe in miracles?

NAPHTHA: NCAS has found over 300 rational thinkers in the Washington D.C. area; if that isn't a miracle I don't know what is!

NCAS: Recently NCAS presented a program concerning fringe medicine; what are your views?

NAPHTHA: The fringe has as much right to medicine as anybody else—who am I to deny Shirley MacLaine a couple of aspirin?

NCAS: In light of the new year, do you care to make any predictions for the future?

NAPHTHA: I predict that NCAS will host the next CSICOP annual conference, and that it will take place in spring 1990.

NCAS: Ladies and gentleman, how DOES he do it?

National Capital Area Skeptics

1988 Financial Report

Prepared by Grace E. Denman, Treasurer

1987 Balance:	\$4472.82	1989 Expenses:	
1988 Balance:	\$3466.84	Election	\$172.55
		Bylaws Ratification	\$231.62
		Justice Symposium	\$79.97
1988 Income:		Annual Meeting	\$1285.14
Dues	\$4160.00	CSICOP in China	\$115.00
Interest thru 11/30	\$131.79	Skeptical Eye	\$833.05
Annual Meeting	\$142.00	NCAS Brochure	\$355.14
T/Sweatshirts	\$335.00	T/Sweatshirts	\$366.35
Misc.	\$14.00	DC Taxes	\$577.18
Total	\$4782.79	Corporation Fees	\$369.75
		1987 Debts	\$236.44
		Misc.	\$897.58
		1988 Outst'nd'g Debts	\$0.00
		Other Postage	\$269.00
		Total	\$5788.77 □

NAPHTHA: I saw the galleys.

NCAS: How do you feel about the fact that this column has not only been reprinted by another local skeptics' organization, but that you and Swiss were quoted by magicians Penn & Teller during an appearance on David Letterman's show?

NAPHTHA: Three out of four skeptics agree: Naphtha's good for the soul.

NCAS: But not necessarily for the digestion!

NAPHTHA: Didn't you read the label? "Harmful or fatal if swallowed!" □

NAPHTHA'S BIRTHDAY HOROSCOPE

(For all persons born under the sign of Aquarius):

A SURPRISE IS IN STORE FOR YOU!

ALSO, YOUR FINANCIAL PROBLEM WILL BE SOLVED SOON. THEN AGAIN, IT MIGHT NOT.

WHO CARES ANYWAY? IT'S YOUR PROBLEM!

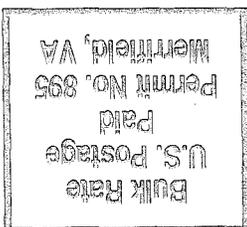
(EITHER WAY, RENEW YOUR NCAS

MEMBERSHIP NOW!) □

Polygraphy Update

In the April 1988 issue of this newsletter, Stephen R. Dujack, in "The Pinocchio Syndrome," reported on the use of the polygraph test, an unscientific and often inaccurate "lie detector." Now at least some Americans will be protected against its misuse. The Employee Polygraph Protection Act became law on December 20. While this law exempts critical industries, such as security guards, and state, local, and federal government agencies, it makes it illegal for all other employers to use polygraph tests to select employees. It also restricts how employers can use the tests to investigate specific criminal employee behavior.

As Leonard Saxe, senior author of a 1983 report by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment on polygraph testing, noted in *The Washington Post*, now "no longer will the fate of American job-seekers be dependent on how much they sweat when interviewed, rather than how much they will sweat on the job. And businesses will not be tempted to use invalid and sham techniques to select and control employees." □



National Capital Area Skeptics
 c/o D. W. Denman
 8006 Valley Street
 Silver Spring, MD 20916