

# National Capital Area SKEPTICAL EYE

Fall 1991

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## Cancer Quackery

By Alfred Baer

Cancer (Latin for "crab") is a result of uncontrolled growth of single cells in any bodily tissue or organ. Recent studies have shown the presence in cells of oncogenes (from "onkos," Greek for "mass" or "tumor"), which multiply when "turned on" by known or unknown stimuli. The susceptibility to these stimuli varies from person to person, which explains why, for example, tobacco does not cause lung cancer in every smoker, but only in a limited, though very significant, percentage.

The treatment of early cancer, usually by surgical excision, is quite successful; the problem here lies with early detection. Even more advanced cases originating from certain organs, such as the thyroid, prostate, testis, and so forth, can be controlled by specific therapy. Exciting work is being done at the National Institutes of Health in colon cancer by introducing targeted, specific cancer-destroying cells. This biological approach probably represents the future of oncological therapy.

Unfortunately, metastatic tumors (cells that have invaded other organs) are rarely curable, but they can often be kept in check for varying periods of time by doses of certain drugs (chemotherapy). These drugs are usually highly toxic and are poorly tolerated by many patients. But to the extent that they prolong life they may be worth the sacrifice. The same can be said for radiation therapy.

Despite the great strides that have been made in the understanding of the molecular events in cancer development and in the treatment of many different malignant tumors, the medical establishment is far from happy with the present state of affairs. A recent editorial in *Lancet* by A. S. Braverman (no. 337, April 13, 1991, p. 901) points out that "no disseminated neoplasm [spreading cancer] incurable in 1975 is curable today." Braverman urges that future research be directed toward molecular intervention rather than chemotherapy.

To receive a diagnosis of malignancy is a devastating experience. To undergo prolonged and upsetting therapy with ultimately disappointing results is very discouraging. It is, therefore, not surprising that patients turn to unconventional healers who usually do not hesitate to promise more than they can deliver. Interestingly, these patients are predominantly well

## The Doctor is In(teractive)

By Grace E. Denman

Several interactive language programs are now available for home computers. These programs use artificial intelligence techniques to converse with a user in a therapist-to-patient manner. By picking up on key words in the "patient's" input and feeding them back in the form of a question, the program "therapist" leads a dialogue to explore the "patient's" thoughts and feelings. The technique is not unlike that used by "psychics" in cold readings. Playing with such a program can be an instructive experience for skeptics.

Recently, I spent some time "dialoging" with "Dr. Sbaitso," a recent addition to the growing list of interactive language programs. Although the doctor responds very reasonably to statements such as "I have a headache" (replying, "How often do you have a headache?") or "I am lonely" (asking, "Have you tried to make new friends?"), it is really just responding with partially canned responses from its internal library. If you spend sufficient time with Dr. Sbaitso, you recognize several frequently used responses.

Here is a transcript of one of my conversations with "Dr. Sbaitso," edited slightly to remove some anomalies of grammar:

DrS: Hello, Grace, my name is Doctor Sbaitso. I am here to help you. Please say whatever is in your mind freely. Our conversation will be kept in high confidence. Memory contents will be wiped off after you leave. So tell me about your problems.

GED: Can you really help me?

DrS: Please help yourself.

GED: Can you help me to help myself?

DrS: What if I can help you to help yourself?

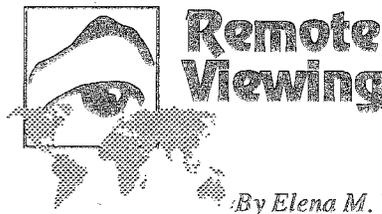
GED: I would like to be convinced.

DrS: I see. Go on.

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**N** encourages critical and scientific thinking  
**C** serves as an information resource on extraordinary claims  
**A**  
**S** provides extraordinary evidence that skeptics are cool



By Elena M. Watson

In this corner of the Eye, our remote correspondent will be keeping watch on strange goings-on outside the Washington area and in the Tidewater region of Virginia in particular.

“Goddess” Worship in the ‘Burbs, “Elvis” in Richmond

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The worship of “female spirituality” is practically mainstream these days, or so it seemed in a June feature article in the *Virginian-Pilot*. Fortyish baby boomers from Virginia Beach to Newport News have jumped on the goddess bandwagon, frolicking on the solstices, worshipping the Earth, getting in touch with their spirituality, and nurturing their creativity. And not just women but men too are discovering the so-called “goddess within” themselves. One such man, English professor Archie Whitehill, became a witch (or wicca) after realizing that he had been neglecting the sensitive, intuitive side of himself. Other reasons for the sudden popularity of the movement include a concern for ecology; dissatisfaction with mainstream, “male dominated” religion; and a validation of feminism. But perhaps one woman, Virginia Beach artist Meryl Ann Butler, summed it up best when she said, “The Goddess consciousness has reached critical mass and suddenly it’s all over the place.”

Apparently none of these folks realize that there are indeed alternatives to the oppressive male-dominated religion they so dislike--secular humanism, for one. For confirmed theists, there are religious humanists too.

Personally, I think the revisionist glorification of fertility cults and nature goddesses is not only a bit childish, but also steeped in magical thinking. And it is the latter which could ultimately lead to a denial of reality.

And speaking of denial of reality, just when I thought it was safe to read the book section of the paper, I discovered a reprint of an interview with Shirley MacLaine from *Publishers Weekly*. That’s right, “She’s baaack...” And she’s written yet another autobiography, number seven for those of you keeping score. The title is *Dance While You Can*, and MacLaine explained that she has discovered that “nothing is more important than this life and the people involved in it.”

But don’t assume that the dancing redhead has joined the here and now, and has grown tired of her New Age philosophies: she went on to talk about her “soul memory” and the pain of her “samskara,” or soul scar. She also

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Keep Your Eye Open

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confessed that she began writing books because she was bored making movies. As usual she claimed to be making her own reality and to be the center of the universe; she also claimed that she and God are one. The latter, of course, is in her view the reason we must all take responsibility for our own lives, because we are all God and created our own circumstances, good and bad. This is of course simply a shallow way of dealing with the fact that there is so much tragedy in world. In short, blame the victim.

The self-obsessed movie star also revealed that she was pushed into show business by her mother, and that she only began dancing as a way to get out of the house. She concluded the interview by saying that although she has enjoyed performing, it is her writing that has sustained her, and that she "can't imagine anyone living without some internal life like this, without the belief that we are tied to something bigger than we are. Can you imagine just being famous and having money and lovers?" Not really, but I wouldn't mind trying the first two.

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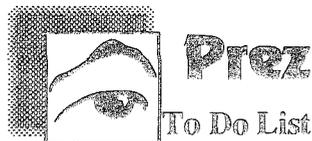
Those of you who read *Parade* magazine are most likely familiar with columnist Marilyn vos Savant, listed by the *Guinness Book of World Records Hall of Fame* as the smartest human in captivity. Her column, "Ask Marilyn," caused a big flap last year with a probability problem based on the game show "Let's Make a Deal." The controversy over Marilyn's answer was so great that the whole ordeal was written up in both the *New York Times* and the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Summer 1991). And this coming February, an Old Dominion University professor of mathematics, John Morgan, will have his say on the infamous brain-teaser in *The American Statistician*. Written with three other members of the math department, the paper is titled "Let's Make a Deal: The Player's Dilemma," and beat out five other papers on the topic.

The question that started it all was essentially this: If you have a choice of three doors, behind one of which is a car, and behind the others are goats, if you pick No. 1, and the host (who knows what is behind all the doors) shows you that No. 3 conceals a goat, should you switch your choice to No. 2? Marilyn said yes, you should switch, because now door No. 2 has a 2 out of 3 chance of having the car behind it. Because this answer is so counter-intuitive, the controversy began. Morgan's thesis is that the problem is one of conditional probability.

And while it looks as if the ODU Norfolkians may be getting the last word in the "Three Door Marilyn" dilemma, it was a man from the capital area who started the whole debate, Craig Whitaker of Columbia, Maryland. He sent in the question back in November 1988. A federal government actuary and puzzle buff, Whitaker claims that vos Savant reworded the puzzle, and in the process may have made it more ambiguous.

\* \* \*

Elvis Presley, the long-dead King of Rock and Roll, was reportedly sighted shopping at a Wal-Mart store in Richmond, Virginia, this summer, according to the *Weekly World News*. □



By Chip Denman

You might think that in the home of MIT, Harvard, and the Red Sox there would be nothing *but* skeptics. But on a nice afternoon the Boston Common is likely to be littered with Tarot readers, aurologists, and other pushers of newage (rhymes with "sewage") mysticism. And one such afternoon a friend of mine--a skeptical science kinda guy--fought back. He staked out his own turf on the Common and for a buck offered to explain anything--neural networks, quantum chromodynamics, the carburetor on a '68 Chevy, you name it--in ordinary plainspoken language. That's the coolest example of skeptical activism in the streets that I know about.

We can't all be Dr. Science, but every well-informed skeptic has important talents and experience, white lab coat not required. Recently Robert Steiner, a C.P.A. and prominent skeptic in the San Francisco area, wrote an analysis of extraordinary claims regarding fluoridation of water. Steiner drew from his own personal expertise as an accountant and deftly showed that the economics of the claim were simply not tenable.

Within NCAS itself, we are fortunate to have many active members with impressive scientific backgrounds, but we also have even more concerned members who have integrated sharp thinking with personal interest and knowledge outside the sciences. Jamy Ian Swiss, NCAS's resident professional deceiver, speaks regularly to scientific audiences to remind them of the fallibility of human perception. Elena Watson, who in the last issue of *the Eye* described herself as "a mild-mannered but skeptically minded housewife" is now contributing a regular column to the *Skeptical Eye*. And whenever I go to the supermarket, I keep an eye out for the "FREE--TAKE ONE" cards promoting book series on psychic stuff; not a grocery near me has any cards left.

What can you do? "A Skeptic's Response" in every issue of the *Eye* is designed to arm skeptics with accurate, understandable information to answer the question "But what about...?" Read it,

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## How Do You Keep Them Down on the Farm? A Report from Our Agricultural Columnist

By Steven N. Shore

Yes, it has been a hard year in the fields. This summer has been one of the worst droughts in recent memory in the mid-Atlantic area. But not to worry, some farmers in Frederick County, Maryland, have hit on the explanation, and are they angry. It seems that the government has been experimenting with cloud seeding again and, as if that weren't enough, the farmers' rain has been stolen.

The allegation was made in a *Washington Post* article of August 11, 1991, by a group called Citizens Against Weather Modification. According to the *Post*, this group has paid over \$20,000 to private investigators to turn up evidence that the cloud seeding has deliberately produced the inclement weather suffered by the area for several summers. When the detectives failed to find any evidence for the seeding, they were fired.

Now for the background. The idea of cloud seeding originated with Irving Langmuir, one of the founders of modern physical chemistry (Nobel prize, 1932). He and his colleague, V. J. Schaeffer, noticed that the addition of carbon dioxide pellets to a supersaturated vapor promotes the formation of fog. Silver iodide crystals have also been used. The physical process that is responsible for forming the droplets of fog is that the grain surfaces serve as sites for nucleation and reaction, a process that has been central to the understanding of cloud formation in general.

The idea was compelling enough that several large-scale experiments were attempted in Ohio, along the Gulf Coast, in the Sierra Nevadas, and in New Mexico between 1947 and the early 1950s. (The best review I know of these tests is that of R. D. Coons and R. Gunn, "Relation of Artificial Cloud-Modification to the Production of Precipitation," in *Compendium of Meteorology* [Washington, D.C.: American Meteorological Society, 1951], p. 235; for a popular account including more recent developments, see J. Chew, *Storms Over the Desert* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987].) Langmuir and his colleagues at General Electric Research Labs conducted a series of inconclusive experiments in New Mexico during the late 1940s, attempting to produce enhanced rainfall in the Midwest by seeding the clouds as they formed at the source, before they were transported to the wheat fields of Kansas.

Further attempts have been made to seed hurricanes and produce other forms of large-scale atmospheric engineering, all with questionable success. Presently, cloud physicists have to rest content, for the most part, with the passive role of observers of atmospheric phenomena rather than active initiators of the events. The Frederick County farm-

ers, however, are convinced that the process is a secret success. The *Post* article quotes one as saying that the city of Frederick seeded clouds during a baseball game (though it doesn't say whether to cause it to rain or prevent a downpour). The farmers say they have seen many small planes criss-crossing the skies--sure evidence, they say, that someone is trying to rob them of their vital heavenly fluids. There is no smoking gun (or coal trail) to support their claims. But a comment by a county extension agent, also quoted by the *Post*, smacks of the conspiratorialist in a most illustrative way: "I guess it's sort of like UFOs. The fact that we don't see them does not mean it doesn't exist."

There has also been more movement this summer in the new field of "cereology." Yes, that's as in cereal. Several prominent news reports have appeared in the media on crop circles. These large artifacts, usually circles of varying complexity but sometimes more elaborate figures, have been making quite a stir in the press for about the past two years. They were discussed at the CSICOP meeting in Berkeley earlier in the summer and have been the subject of one National Public Radio broadcast, a BBC "Horizon" special, and several other television and radio programs. The *Washington Post* devoted an entire "Science Monday" segment (August 19, 1991) to a purported physical explanation of the circles in terms of plasma vortices (analogs of ball lightning, a more tangible though elusive natural phenomenon of somewhat dubious repute).

Other proposed explanations range from intense wind vortices generated by local topography to UFOs leaving deliberate messages (see R. Noyes, ed., *The Crop Circle Enigma* [Bath: Gateway Books, 1990]). Then came the confession, reported in the national press on September 11, that two British artists, both in their 60s, have been hoaxing the world for the past 13 years. The article was from the *Los Angeles Times*, reporting the contents of a London paper, *Today*. The artists' confession came on top of the "Horizon" program, aired over one year ago, that showed some farmhands producing a crop circle by marching in tandem with ropes and boots to stamp out a circle.

The most interesting feature of the *Post* report is that the paranormalists will not let the phenomenon go, even in the light of a complete and detailed confession by the perpetrators of some of the most touted examples of the circles. One claimed that the hoaxers' circles were an "absolute mess" and that the true circles could not have been made by human activity. But the capping point is the way that the *L. A. Times* treated the story: "Bower and Chorley are not the first to claim that they made the circles as a hoax. Scientists looking for explanations have always acknowledged that many of the circles were man-made, but they say the fact that the phenomenon has been reported for centuries from many parts of the world argues for a natural explanation."

There's more than compost fertilizing the fields this year. □

## Doctor, from page 1

- GED: Skeptics believe that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.
- DrS: What does that suggest to you?
- GED: It suggests that you are not much help.
- DrS: What makes you think that I am not much help?
- GED: The lack of evidence.
- DrS: I am not sure I understand you.
- GED: Why don't you understand me?
- DRS: The world is too unpredictable, there is no reason.
- GED: The lack of reason is a problem.
- DrS: This is getting boring. Just now you were talking about needing help.
- GED: I was talking about needing evidence.
- DrS: Yes, sometimes I also would like evidence.
- GED: What else would you like?
- DrS: Why do you ask this question?
- GED: I want to understand you.
- DrS: What kind of price are you willing to pay to understand?
- GED: I would spend time to understand your limits.
- DrS: How about your limits?
- GED: My patience has limits.
- DrS: Does talking to me help?
- GED: Not yet. What do you suggest?
- DrS: Grace, I need more computing power to answer your question.
- GED: How much computing power do you need?
- DrS: Find it out yourself.
- GED: That sounds like a New Age answer.
- DrS: Come on, pour out your thoughts.
- GED: I think you are a poor excuse for a psychotherapist.
- DrS: Same to you.
- GED: I never pretended to be a psychotherapist.
- DrS: Have you tried to ask for help?

Indeed, we have returned to the beginning, having resolved nothing. In the words of the good doctor, "I am only a simple computer program, don't expect too much."

"Dr. Sbaitso" is part of a genre that began some years back with a program known as ELIZA. Two similar programs include "Doctor" by Joseph Weizenbaum, which takes the role of a psychiatrist during therapy, and "Parry" by Kenneth Colby, which attempts to behave as a paranoid would. More recently Colby has designed a program called "Overcoming Depression." Colby is currently a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at UCLA School of Medicine.

"Overcoming Depression," which is published by Malibu Artificial Intelligence Works and sells for \$200, states it can help with "specific cognitive strategies and tactics for working your way out of your depression." Unfortunately, according to Lawrence J. Magid (*Washington Post*, November 19, 1990) the program suffers from the same infuriating

mistakes and language confusions as "Dr. Sbaitso." Even worse, it is promoted as serious therapy, and its manual carries none of the usual disclaimers and warnings about seeking professional help. If you are not easily frustrated, such a program may be good for a few laughs. But evidence for other benefits seems sorely lacking.

"Dr. Sbaitso" is one of several programs packaged with the Creative Labs, Inc., Sound Blaster, an Ad-Lib-compatible sound board for IBM PCs and compatibles. (The other programs include a musical keyboard and a talking parrot.) Since the primary purpose of the Sound Blaster is to make computer games sound really great, the entertainment nature of the "Dr. Sbaitso" software seems clear, and the program creators make no claims of any therapeutic value. The Sound Blaster can be purchased from discount houses or via mail order for approximately \$150.

The success of all these programs--like the success of a cold reading--depends on the human user reading more into what they say than is actually there. According to Joseph Weizenbaum, in his book *Computer Power and Human Reason*, "Most men [*sic*] don't understand computers to even the slightest degree. So unless they are capable of very great skepticism (the kind we bring to bear while watching a stage magician), they can explain the computer's intellectual feats only by bringing to bear the single analogy available to them, that is, their model of their own capacity to think. No wonder, then, that they overshoot the mark." □

### Eye on Randi

James Randi still needs support in his courtroom battles with self-proclaimed psychic and expert spoonbender Uri Geller. In a televised interview on CBS "This Morning" (9/9/91) Geller, speaking via satellite from England with great agitation and waving of papers, reiterated his determination to sue Randi for allegedly libelous statements regarding his abilities as a psychic. Randi, speaking from the New York studio, calmly insisted that he had a right to speak of things which he can prove to be true. On close-up camera Randi caressed a stainless steel spoon from the CBS cafeteria until it seemingly melted.

In order to defend himself in court Randi has asked for financial help. If you wish to contribute, send checks to:

The James Randi Fund  
c/o Robert Steiner, CPA  
P.O. Box 659  
El Cerrito, CA 94530

This past year Randi was featured in a six-part British TV series. PBS is considering running the series here. Interested viewers should write to PBS, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314 to request that the series be presented.

## Update on the Fairfax School Faintings

Neither sewer gases nor mass hysteria caused the outbreak of faintings that plagued West Springfield High School during the last school year, according to the consultant hired by the Fairfax County school system to investigate the problem.

In the "Skeptic's Response" column in the summer 1991 issue of the *Skeptical Eye*, psychotherapist Seán O'Neill pointed out that the Fairfax school faintings resembled known episodes of mass hysteria. Steven H. Lamm, a pediatrician and epidemiologist whose study is estimated to cost the school system some \$200,000, found that of 26 students who reported fainting (some repeatedly), 4 fainted for medical reasons, 13 for physiological reasons, and 9 for unknown reasons. His findings were reported in an article in the *Washington Post* by staff writer DeNeen L. Brown, "Study: School Didn't Cause Faintings" (August 21, 1991). "Most...fainted for physiological reasons," Lamm said at a news conference. "It gets too hot and they keel over, the blood sugar goes down, they get a common faint." Lamm rejected mass hysteria as a possible cause, noting that none of the faintings met the medical definition of hysteria. He did admit, however, that some of the faintings may have resulted from the "stress" of students seeing fellow-students faint. Lamm based his conclusions on data from surveys and medical interviews with West Springfield High students and their parents, and comparative data from two other area high schools.

As part of his investigation, Lamm ordered 183 tests for sewer gases, such as methane and hydrogen sulfide; 181 of the tests detected no gases, while the other two showed barely detectable traces. These tests exploded the hypothesis of another consultant, Ameritec Environmental Services Inc. of Scottsdale, Arizona. Ameritec was hired to investigate the faintings by parents of some of the students who had fainted. The firm conducted a one-day study of the building and concluded that various building problems--plumbing defects, drains, and bad ventilation--were allowing sewer gases to enter the building, causing students to become ill. The results were reported in the *Journal* newspapers (August 9, 1991) and in the *Washington Post* (August 10, 1991). Ameritec's investigator, Stephen C. Maupin, said in his report that "we found critical circumstances that not only can cause fainting but death. They have asked the children to walk into a gas chamber and ask them to learn. And they can't do that. If they don't correct it, they're going to have seizures and deaths." He also said his firm had not conducted any tests for the presence of gases because of lack of time. The *Post* reported that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has never known a case in the workplace of sewer gas buildup causing fainting.

The Fairfax County school system says it is satisfied with the

results of Lamm's study, but Superintendent Robert R. Spillane emphasized that West Springfield High School is open for any further investigations that might be conducted. As quoted in the *Post*, he said, "I'm sure there are some who will think we need to do other explorations. Let me tell you, if a psychic wants to go into that school, it's open. Anytime anyone wants to look at anything, they're welcome to that school....It's a safe facility."

As for the parents, Jane Stottlemeyer, a parent and member of the advisory committee formed by the school to address the problem, told the *Post* that "it may remain a mystery....I think the majority will accept Dr. Lamm's final report and move on."

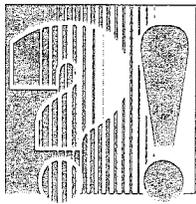
Since then and as of this writing, the Fairfax school faintings appear to have faded away--not unlike most episodes of mass hysteria. □

## Polygraphers Just Average at Detecting Lies

The lie detector, or polygraph, long ago made its way into the mainstream of the crime detection field in the United States. Many businesses make use of "lie detector tests" to identify dishonest employees, and the CIA, FBI, and National Security Agency all have professional polygraphers on staff. In spite of a body of technical literature skeptical of the accuracy of polygraphs, their widespread use persists.

A brief item in the health section of the *Washington Post* (September 3, 1991) provided an interesting sidelight on polygraphy. Headed "Secret Service Agents Appear Gifted at Detecting Lies," the article reported on research results published in *American Psychologist*. The psychological study, by Paul Ekman and Maureen O'Sullivan, tested a group of over 500 people that included police officers, judges, psychiatrists, robbery investigators, and college students, as well as polygraphers for the federal agencies named above. Participants watched 10 one-minute video clips of interviews with young women. In the interviews, the women were asked about their feelings as they watched a film. Half the women had been told to lie about their feelings, and participants were informed of this. After viewing each clip, the participants had 30 seconds to decide whether the woman was lying or telling the truth.

Secret Service agents were right more than two-thirds (70%) of the time. Next best were judges and psychiatrists. According to Ekman and O'Sullivan, the Secret Service agents were the *only* group to score better than chance. □



## A Skeptic's Response

*This feature of the Skeptical Eye is designed to provide skeptics with brief, logical answers to questions that may arise in conversation. Tales of the doings of psychic detectives crop up frequently in the popular press; one such case, analyzed here, occurred earlier this year in the Washington area when a psychic was reported to have helped an Alexandria family locate the body of a missing man.*

### Psychic Detectives

By Walter F. Rowe

A casual reader of American newspapers and supermarket tabloids would be likely to think that U.S. law enforcement agencies routinely consult psychic detectives. He or she might well wonder how criminals can hope to escape detection in the face of so much paranormal firepower. Digging a little deeper, this individual would even find technical publications advocating the police use of psychics and recounting the amazing successes of psychic detectives. Is the case for psychic detectives conclusively proved? I don't think so.

In 1989, I collaborated with two graduate students in the Department of Forensic Sciences, George Washington University, on a critical examination of the purported achievements of psychic detectives. My colleagues were both members of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps: Eric L. Provost, now executive officer of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Laboratory in Camp Zama, Japan; and Jeanette Clark, a U.S. Army criminal investigator with many years' experience. We decided to concentrate on psychics who had recently been active in the United States; my colleagues would contact police officials who had supposedly worked with the psychic detectives and solicit their candid appraisal of the contributions of the psychic detectives to their investigations. The psychic detectives chosen for evaluation were selected mainly from the works of Charles R. Farabee and Whitney S. Hibbard and Raymond W. Worring (see bibliography for these and other works cited in this article), along with others whose abilities had been touted in newspapers and popular magazines. In some cases, we were also able to interview the psychic detectives themselves and obtain examples of their press clippings.

One of the best-known psychic detectives is Peter Hurkos. Many of the false claims regarding his psychic abilities were exposed by the late Piet Hein Hoebens. Hurkos provided U.S. police with information in major cases, such as the Boston Strangler case (which Norma Lee Browning's *Psychic World of Peter Hurkos* credits him with solving) and the Sharon Tate murders, both in the 1960s. In fact, Hurkos did not solve the Boston Strangler case and the information he provided in the Sharon Tate murders was not merely useless, it was also hopelessly incorrect. According to Ed Sanders in

his book *The Family*, "Mr. Hurkos crouched down in the bloodstained living room, picking up the vibes....After his void-scan Mr. Hurkos announced that three men killed Sharon Tate and her four friends and I know who they are. I have identified the killers to the police and told them that these three men must be stopped soon. Otherwise, they will kill again."

The facts are that only three of the victims could reasonably have been called friends of Sharon Tate: the remaining victim was visiting the caretaker and was killed because he happened on the crime in progress. More important, the killers were two women and one man (a third woman acted as lookout). The killers were already in police custody (although not for the Tate murders), and they had already murdered again. Nor was the Sharon Tate murder case Hurkos's only abject failure. According to Detective John Schaeffer of the Chicago Police, whom we had contacted about another psychic detective, Hurkos became unwelcome among the wealthy Chicagoans on whom he "sponged" after he failed to solve a \$60,000 burglary committed against his hosts.

Hoebens also discredited many of the cases allegedly solved by Gerald Croiset in Holland and elsewhere in Europe. We were able to examine one of Croiset's rare American cases. Hibbard and Worring claim that Croiset successfully located the missing daughter of the chairman of the Political Science Department at the University of Kansas. We contacted Dr. Paul Schumaker, the present departmental chairman, and Dr. Earl Nehring, Schumaker's predecessor. Nehring became chairman in 1972 and had worked in the department for many years before that. Neither Schumaker nor Nehring had heard of any such missing child case.

Marinus Dykshorn is another Dutch psychic detective. He is credited by Hibbard and Worring with having aided the North Carolina State Police in four murder cases. Unfortunately, there is no such organization as the North Carolina State Police. Detective Bill Doubty of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (who has been with the bureau twenty years) has never heard of a psychic named Dykshorn; furthermore, to the best of his knowledge the bureau has never requested the aid of a psychic.

Irene F. Hughes and Beverly C. Jaegers are two other psychic detectives mentioned by Hibbard and Worring.

*continued on page 8*

Detective John Schaeffer of the Chicago Police informed us that Hughes was infamous for providing unsolicited information about unsolved crimes and that law enforcement officers in the Chicago area regarded her information as being without value. Jaegers has supposedly organized psychic detectives to work on cases throughout the United States. Although Hibbard and Worring give her place of residence as Creve Coeur, Missouri, the Creve Coeur Police Department had never heard of Jaegers and the local telephone directory has no listing for either a "Beverly Jaegers" or a "B. Jaegers." John Catchings, himself a psychic detective, informed us that he had once met Jaegers, but had not heard from her in twelve or fifteen years. Moreover, she had never approached him to join any organization.

Dorothy Allison is a New Jersey psychic who provided police with information concerning the Atlanta child murders in the 1970s. More recently, she was apparently contacted by the Fairfax County Police in the Melissa Brannen abduction of 1989. Whether she provided any information to Fairfax police in this instance is not known at this time; however, despite the conviction of Caleb Hughes for Melissa's abduction, Melissa Brannen remains missing. As to Allison's claim to have aided in solving the Atlanta child murders, she provided police with forty-two different names, none of which were "Wayne" or "Williams". Wayne Williams was apprehended purely as the result of police surveillance of the bridges over the Chattahoochee River, where Williams was disposing of his victims. We did not contact Allison directly; however, Jeanette Clark interviewed Detective Salvatore Lubertazzi, the Nutley, New Jersey, police officer who has worked as Allison's liaison with police for fifteen years. He helps police interpret Allison's visions. Lubertazzi explained that because Allison works so many cases she sometimes confuses visions.

John Catchings claims to have located twelve bodies and caused the arrest of thirteen people. He notes, however, that his visions are used in conjunction with a common-sense investigation into the circumstances of the case. Law enforcement officers we contacted felt he had been of significant help in solving cases. However, Catchings and a local police officer have been investigated by the Texas Rangers to determine if they had moved a body (apparently to make the spot where it was found conform to Catchings's predictions).

Despite what tabloid writers might have us believe, law enforcement officials do not always react positively to information provided by psychics. The cases of Brett Cadorette and Steven Paul Linscott illustrate rather hard-headed responses to information volunteered to police by would-be psychics.

Cadorette volunteered to police that he had had psychic visions of the throat slashing and sexual abuse of a Staten

Island, New York, woman. He described the victim clutching a clump of hair in her hand (a fact not made public by police). Police made Cadorette the prime suspect of their investigations, and he was ultimately convicted of attempted murder.

Linscott volunteered to police details of his dream regarding the death of Karen Anne Phillips, who had been sexually assaulted, beaten, and strangled to death. Police in the course of their investigation routinely questioned Linscott (who lived with his wife in the same apartment complex). Two days later Linscott related to police a dream he had supposedly had on the night of the murder. According to Linscott's dream, the victim had been beaten in a downward fashion and the victim and assailant had been spattered with blood. He described the murder scene as the living room (correct) of a two-bedroom apartment (incorrect); he saw a couch in the living room (incorrect). He described the victim as black (incorrect). Linscott was arrested and prosecuted for Phillips's murder. Scientific tests found Linscott's hair to be consistent with that left by the murderer. Serological tests showed that the assailant was either an O secretor (like the victim) or a nonsecretor; Linscott proved to be an AB nonsecretor. Linscott was convicted, but his conviction was overturned on the grounds of the prosecutor's prejudicial misrepresentations of the scientific evidence.

Linscott now awaits retrial on the same murder charges.

## Investigation of a Washington-area Psychic

The March 15, 1991, edition of the *Washington Times* carried the story of how local psychic Ann Gehman had helped an

Alexandria family find the body of Festus Harris, who had disappeared while on a visit to friends about a week earlier. The story quoted a family member saying that Gehman had had a vision of "a bridge, a garage...with lots of traffic." Harris's body was found in a small wooded area in the 1900 block of N. Van Dorn Street near the Ramada Inn. The article further stated, "Mrs. Gehman is a nationally known psychic who has aided police in a number of high-profile murder cases, including one that led to the conviction of notorious serial killer Ted Bundy in Florida."

I contacted the author of the article, Michael Cromwell, at the *Washington Times* Alexandria bureau. He informed me that he was somewhat skeptical of the claims made for Gehman; the background information used in the article was provided by her and he had made no effort to verify it.

I later interviewed Gehman over the telephone regarding this case. She informed me that she had been contacted by Harris's niece and her husband or brother (she did not remember which). At that point Harris had been missing approximately one week, the family had combed the neighborhood without success, and police had not been able to

help. The niece had been referred to Gehman by a coworker.

When asked about the information she had when consulted by Harris's niece, Gehman stated that she knew the niece lived in Alexandria; the niece also brought (at Gehman's request) two photographs of her uncle and an article of clothing, a sweatshirt. Gehman stated that she had a feeling of Harris wandering. In her vision she saw a high-rise building and had a sense that Harris had been on the sixth floor. She next saw Harris with a person in uniform and at a telephone booth. She had a sense of a parking lot or garage. Finally, she could see Harris near a bridge and could hear traffic in the background. Gehman claimed that all the information in her vision had been confirmed. She further observed that often her visions don't provide her with any information at all.

When I questioned Gehman about her background, she stated that she came from an Amish background and had grown up in Michigan. Formerly, she lived in the Orlando, Florida, area. While living in Florida she had (as she claimed) worked on the Ted Bundy case, specifically on the disappearance of Bundy's last victim, Kimberly Leach. Gehman had told investigators where to find the victim's body. She had described Bundy's appearance and that of his car, and had informed investigators that Bundy was using stolen credit cards. One of the investigators with whom she claimed to have worked in this case was an FBI agent. Gehman seemed reluctant to discuss other cases. She claimed the information about other cases was filed away and not readily accessible. She also could not provide me with newspaper clippings describing her involvement in other cases. When I pointed out that other psychic detectives (such as Ginette Matacia) had such "press kits," she laughed and said she was skeptical of many of the claims of the better known psychic detectives, believing that many exaggerate their abilities. At the conclusion of our interview Gehman said she would contact Harris's niece to see if she would talk with me (the niece was not named in the article and Gehman refused to give me her telephone number). As of this writing Harris's niece has not contacted me.

The numerous hits in Gehman's vision became less impressive when I visited the site where Harris's body was found. This part of Alexandria has numerous high-rise apartments and parking lots. In fact, on the east side of I-395 high-rises and parking lots alternate for several miles. There are also numerous bridges, some spanning I-395 and others carrying the highway over streets or streams. As might be expected, I-395 and the neighboring streets have heavy traffic. Given the environment in which Harris disappeared, the only features of the vision that turn out to be remarkable are the reference to the sixth floor of the high-rise, the attempted telephone call, and the person in uniform. As I have not been able to interview Harris's niece I have not been able to confirm whether these were indeed hits. Given that one of the niece's coworkers is acquainted with

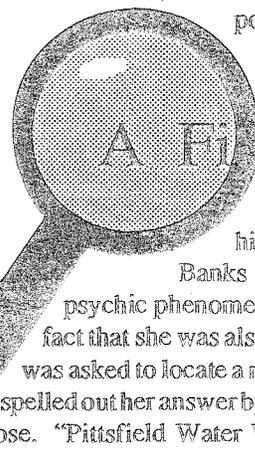
Gehman, possible nonparanormal explanations for these hits come to mind. Significantly, in her vision Gehman did not see the large red Ramada Inn sign within a few feet of the site where Harris's body was found.

It is possible to evaluate at least some of Gehman's other claims. As for her claim to have worked with an FBI agent in the Ted Bundy case, the FBI does not solicit information from psychics (in fact, psychics are classified as unreliable sources). While it may be true that she provided police with information in the Ted Bundy case, her information certainly did not aid in either the apprehension of Bundy or the recovery of the body of Kimberly Leach. Gehman is not mentioned in either Ann Rule's *Stranger Beside Me* or Stephen Michaud and Hugh Aynsworth's *Only Living Witness*, two detailed accounts of Ted Bundy's criminal career. Bundy was apprehended when a police officer spotted the stolen car he was driving coming out of a restaurant parking lot late one evening. Curious to identify the driver of the car, the officer followed Bundy and radioed in a routine check on the license of Bundy's car. When the officer learned that the license plate was stolen, he gave chase and ultimately subdued Bundy after a struggle.

The recovery of Leach's body was the result of good forensic work, not psychic detection. According to Ann Rule, "when the Dodge van [in which Kimberly had been abducted] was processed, criminalists had taken samples of soil, leaves and bark found inside and caught in its undercarriage. Botanists and soil experts had identified the dirt as coming from somewhere close to a north Florida river."

The discovery of a pile of Winston cigarette butts near the entrance to Suwanee River State Park had focused police attention on the state park and its environs as a possible search area. The ashtray of Bundy's stolen car had also contained Winston cigarettes. A careful ground search of the forests surrounding the park uncovered Leach's body under an abandoned shed. The absence of any references in Rule's book to psychics helping police apprehend Bundy or find his last victim is significant because Rule professes to believe in ESP and elsewhere in the book relates the

(unsuccessful) attempts of psychics to aid police in solving the murders Bundy committed in the Pacific Northwest.



mal Note

Lady Wonder has gone down in history as the horse that got Joseph Banks Rhine interested in investigating psychic phenomena. Less commonly known is the fact that she was also a psychic detective. In 1952 she was asked to locate a missing boy. As was her wont, she spelled out her answer by touching lettered blocks with her nose. "Pittsfield Water Wheel," she replied to the police

continued on page 10

chief's query. After the water wheel had been searched without success, the police chief realized (in the words of Bergen Evans) that Lady Wonder had made "an equinopsychical blunder or horsegraphical error." He then made the perfectly obvious correction to "Field and Wilde's water pit," the name of an abandoned quarry near the boy's home. The boy's drowned body was ultimately recovered

from the flooded quarry. This case bears a striking resemblance to most of the cases of purported psychic detection.

Walter F. Rowe is a professor of forensic science at George Washington University. His most recent contribution to the Eye was "Lucian and Alexander: Debunking in Classical Style" in the Spring 1991 issue. □

### Further Reading

A complete bibliography of works on purported psychic detectives would cover many pages, particularly if all the tabloid articles were cited. This list includes writings that purport to be scholarly, rather than sensational. *The Blue Sense* by Arthur Lyons and Marcello Truzzi (New York: Mysterious Press, 1991) is not included because I have not yet had time to read this new book on psychic detectives. [A detailed review of the book appears in the current issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* (Fall 1991), pp. 67-71.]

Farabee, Charles R. "Contemporary Psychic Use by Police in America." Master's thesis, University of Southern California at Fresno, 1981. Written for the Department of Criminal Justice, this thesis is chiefly remarkable for accepting as accurate tabloid accounts of psychic detectives.

Hibbard, Whitney S., and Raymond W. Worring. *Psychic Criminology*. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1982. Similar to Farabee's work. The level of scholarship is reflected by references to such noted scientific journals as *New Times*, *People*, *Psychic Magazine*, and *Self Help Update*. Although the publishing house is well known for its catalogue of forensic science and police texts, this work is indistinguishable in quality from pulp potboilers.

Hoebens, Piet Hein. "Reflections on Psychic Sleuths." In *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology*, ed. Paul Kurtz. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1985. Contains exposures of

Peter Hurkos and Gerald Croiset. Readers of *Skeptical Inquirer* will be familiar with Hoebens's two-part exposure of the shameless promotion of Croiset's "miracles."

Marshall, Eliot. "Police Science and Psychics." *Science* 210 (1980): 994-95. Discusses Dorothy Allison's claims in the Atlanta child murders, as well as Martin Reiser's research.

Reiser, Martin, et al. "An Evaluation of the Use of Psychics in the Investigation of Major Crimes." *Journal of Police Science and Administration* 7/1 (1979): 18-25.

Reiser, Martin, and N. Klyver. "A Comparison of Psychics, Detectives, and Students in the Investigation of Major Crimes." In *Police Psychology: Collected Papers*, ed. Martin Reiser. Los Angeles: LEHI Publishing, 1982. Reiser's research involved presenting psychic detectives with items of evidence from major cases. The psychics did not score better than detectives or students.

Editor's Note: To see how the psychic detectives themselves present their cases, you might want to consult one of the following titles.

Browning, Norma Lee. *Peter Hurkos: I Have Many Lives*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976. Biography based on the author's tape-recorded interviews with Hurkos.

Yeterian, Dixie. *Casebook of a Psychic Detective*. Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein & Day, 1982. A psychic investigator tells her own story.

## Psychic Detectives: A Shaggy-Dog Story

The following account is summarized from an article in the Washington Post, "Montgomery Police Used a Psychic to Collar Their Missing Canine," by staff writer Veronica T. Jennings (July 31, 1991).

One night in July, Montgomery Police lost one of their workers--Vader, a member of the K-9 corps. While being exercised in a park in Burtonsville by his trainer, Officer Timothy Carroll, Vader took off in hot pursuit of a rabbit. In moments, he was gone--out of sight, out of hearing. There followed 60 hours of searches--on foot, by helicopter, and on horseback. No Vader. On Monday afternoon, a psychic (whose name the police refused to release) called from Catonsville to volunteer her detective services to find the runaway dog. At the end of their rope, so to speak, the police were glad to accept her offer.

The woman met the police in the park, where at her request she was given one of Vader's toys and his harness to touch. Officer Lee Marsh, a police dog handler, told the *Post* that the woman "held onto these things and also sat in the car that the dogs ride in." This was sufficient, it appears, to tell the psychic that the dog would be found near a creekbed, caught in heavy undergrowth. Obediently, the police once again began searching the wooded area where Vader had last been seen. Soon, the psychic said she heard a dog panting, although the officers heard nothing. A minute later, however, they all heard the sound of barking. There was Vader, not 400 yards from where he had broken loose, in the bushes, with his leash caught on a tree trunk.

What did the officers involved conclude from this episode? At least one felt changed by the experience. Officer Marsh told the *Post*, "I had not put much stock in it [the supernatural] before. But there were too many things involved for it to be just luck." □

## Protocols for Ghostbusting

By Elena M. Watson

CSICOP got down to brass tacks in its spring workshop on investigative techniques, held in Lexington, Kentucky, in April. Jointly conducted by noted investigator Joe Nickell, a member of CSICOP's executive committee, and retired University of Kentucky psychology professor Robert A. Baker, the three-day seminar drew about forty people, of whom I was one. The topics covered included "Busting Ghosts and Poltergeists," "Hypnosis, Trances and Past-Life Regressions," and "Investigative Techniques I and II." Two guest speakers, David Kesling and Stephen Peterson, discussed "Belief, Logic and Proof, and Computers as Investigative Tools" and "Dealing with the Media," respectively. There was also an uneventful trip to the "haunted" Hunt-Morgan House.

Nickell, best known for his investigation of the Shroud of Turin, hopes to compose a handbook to aid skeptics in investigating the paranormal. He listed three approaches to such investigations: (1) eagerness to believe; (2) eagerness to stamp out belief (a debunker); and (3) interest in investigating and solving a problem. Nickell himself prefers the third approach, since mysteries by definition are to be solved. But skepticism is required, because only knowledge tested by skepticism is worthy, along with an investigative strategy.

Using examples from his book, *Secrets of the Supernatural*, Nickell explained how an investigative strategy works. It can be as simple as comparing two things, or as complicated as trying to reproduce an unexplained phenomenon. But a strategy is not always obvious, occasionally calling for the "Barnaby Jones" approach, in which one kicks around to see what turns up. Later, using as an example his investigation of the Shroud of Turin, which is detailed in *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin*, Nickell summarized five different investigative strategies.

In Baker's ghostbusting session, the emphasis was on tactics. He explained that strategy is a plan, but tactics are how you gain ground. In dealing with ghosts, he said, it's important to look at the people who have problems with them, for there is usually a reason. He was quick to point out that people who do strange things often have coping problems and may just need a friend or someone to talk to. Psychics, he said, often fulfill this need--but through reassurance, not special powers.

Ghosts themselves stem from people's fear of death. The belief that the spirit lives on reduces the fear. People generally fall into two types, says Baker: idealists, concerned with the spiritual, or sensationists, concerned with

the rational and material. Rarely do these two types bridge the gap between them. Giving examples from his experience, Baker stated that hauntings have either a physical or psychological explanation. "People are haunted, not houses."

In his session on hypnosis Baker summed up the phenomenon as social compliance, aided by relaxation, suggestion, and imagination. After a demonstration, he discussed the history of "animal magnetism," as it is detailed in his book, *They Call It Hypnosis*.

Baker later spoke on UFO abductions, and labeled the UFO phenomenon itself a media-created event. UFO abductees, he said, no matter how normal they appear, usually have some sort of problem or axe to grind.

The final session focused on recent paranormal events, and included videotapes of two media favorites, crop circles and exorcism. The latter was drawn from ABC TV's "20/20" program. The report on crop circles was British, and featured a group of young adults creating one of the mysterious depressions in a wheat field. They used a stick, some string, and their own feet. The BBC reporter noted that the hoaxers seemed quite proficient, and perhaps experienced in the endeavor.

Overall, the wide-ranging subject matter of the seminar provided those attending with a solid notion of how to approach--by developing a strategy and tactics--any paranormal investigation we might someday be called on to undertake. □

## Continuing Education

Throughout the month of October, NCAS and the Johns Hopkins University School of Continuing Studies offered a series of 5 seminars entitled "Science and Pseudoscience: A Rational Inquiry." The program was so well received that a new expanded seven-part series on "Mysteries of the Mind" will be offered in the spring.

The first six will be:

"Things That Go BUMP in the Night: A History of Spiritualism and Psychic Investigation"--Chip Denman

"Creationism: Is it Science?"--Steve Shore

"Extra-Sensory Perception or Expert Sensory Deception?"

--Jamy Ian Swiss

"Cult Psychology"--Randy Lockwood

"Vampires, Werewolves, and Wildmen: The Beast Within Mankind"--Randy Lockwood

The seventh lecture, which may be registered for separately, will feature James "the Amazing" Randi.

The talks will be on Thursday evenings beginning in mid-March. Call 401-338-7428 for more information. □

## Cancer, from page 1

educated and economically comfortable.

What distinguishes these unconventional treatments from conventional ones? The fact that their efficacy or limitations have not been established by rigorous scientific criteria, such as histologically proven diagnoses, placebo-controlled test series, objective verification of inhibition of tumor growth, and so forth. A very enlightening volume, entitled *Unconventional Cancer Treatments* and published by the Office of Technology Assessment of the U.S. Congress in September 1990, describes and evaluates a large number of these in great detail.

The least harmful of these treatments are those representing a form of psychotherapy. While the claim that these efforts can arrest cancer progression is unsubstantiated, they no doubt can improve the patient's outlook on life. The same results are obtained with various forms of meditation, some of which have religious undertones. Compared to conventionally treated patients, those treated with such procedures did not live any longer.

Many cancer patients are attracted to various dietary therapies, usually vegetarian, with all manner of vitamins, high doses of potassium, and the use of coffee enemas. The latter, though lacking any theoretical basis, are very popular among the unconventional healers. Max Gerson (1881-1959) instituted a diet rich in fruit and vegetables and low in salt and fat—unquestionably a wholesome combination but of no proven curative value. It may, however, help the nutritional state of many cancer patients. In his later years, he added more bizarre modalities to the regimen, such as ozone enemas, bacteriophages, and influenza vaccines.

In 1969, an orthodontist named William Donald Kelly proclaimed that cancer was an enzyme deficiency, particularly of pancreatic enzymes, and instituted a dietary regimen that, according to him, could halt tumor growth within three hours to twelve days.

From Japan comes the macrobiotic diet, accompanied by a philosophy of life and concept of universal order. This diet encourages the consumption of cooked vegetables and whole grains to relieve cancer and AIDS. This sounds harmless enough—if it were not for some fatal cases of scurvy and kidney failure due to inadequate food intake. One proponent of the macrobiotic diet, Michio Kushi, in a 1983 book entitled *The Cancer Prevention Diet* warns patients not to combine mainstream therapy with the macrobiotic diet, as this may slow recovery.

A Canadian nurse named René Caisse developed a herbal medicine, Essiac (“Caisse” spelled backward), based on the report of one of her patients who claimed that a Canadian herb had cured her breast cancer twenty years earlier. Essiac was available from the 1920s to the 1970s. Another herb treatment, that of Harry M. Hoxsey (1901-74), is based on

the claim that cancer occurs “only in the presence of profound physiological changes in the constituents of body fluids.” Hoxsey's herbal concoction supposedly normalizes these changes. It is still administered in various forms in a clinic in Tijuana, Mexico. An 80 percent cure rate is claimed, the failures being attributed to “poor attitude” on the part of the patients.

A mistletoe preparation named Iscador, the mainstay of “anthroposophic treatment,” was promoted by Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925), who used “spiritual science” to combat cancer. No convincing report exists of any antitumor effect.

A number of biological treatments are based on usually unproven theories of cancer causation. A prominent example is the “antineoplastons” developed by one Stanislaw Burzynski, a Polish physician now established in Texas. He claims that these substances, isolated from blood and urine, have antineoplastic [anticancer] activity on a molecular level. On close examination, Burzynski's claims of a high cure rate were found wanting, either because the diagnosis was not reliably established, or because the patients had received conventional therapy before or along with the drugs under evaluation.

Cellular treatment consists of injection or ingestion of extracts of animal tissues or glands. Therapeutic claims for these substances have been made for a variety of conditions, such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and multiple sclerosis. This method has enjoyed some popularity in Germany and Switzerland, but fatal reactions have also been reported.

Dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) and hydrazine have both found adherents, but limited studies have shown no advantage of these treatments over placebos. Laetrile (amygdalin), developed in the early 1950s by the father-and-son team of Drs. Ernst Krebs, Sr. and Jr., was quite popular for a time. Laetrile is extracted from apricot pits, and its cyanide content was thought to be toxic to malignant cells. The drug was taken off the market in 1981 after a controlled Mayo Clinic study showed it to be not only worthless but dangerous as well.

Dr. Virginia Livingstone-Wheeler, who had a distinguished academic career, postulated that cancer, like some other diseases, was caused by a microorganism which she named Progenitor cryptocides. She undertook to treat patients with an autogenous vaccine derived from this organism. A recent paper in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (by Cassideth et al., no. 324, April 25, 1991, p. 1180) followed 78 patients of her clinic matched to an equal number from the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center. It was found that both groups had identical outcomes and quality of life.

A Romanian physician named Emanuel Revici who came to the United States in 1940 stated that cancer is associated with a lipid (fat) imbalance. He developed a large array of medications to correct this disorder. He too acquired a large

following, but when his cases were evaluated by impartial scientists, his treatments were judged to be of no value.

Vitamin C, promoted by Ewan Cameron in the early 1970s and supported by Nobel prize-winning chemist Linus Pauling, was extensively investigated with highly controversial results, leaving the matter unsettled.

A large chapter of the OTA book is devoted to Immune-Augmentation Therapy (IAT). Developed in the 1970s by a Ph.D. named Lawrence Burton, the treatment is available in the Bahamas, Germany, and Mexico. It consists of daily self-injection of processed blood products. The theoretical groundwork for the treatment consisted largely of experiments with fruit flies. Burton postulated the existence of a tumor-inducing virus. He injected this virus into some drosophila and inoculated a similar number of controls with inert material. A skeptical virologist reviewing this work noted that the control group had no needle marks. When the work was repeated with blinded observers, no difference was found in the two groups. Nevertheless, the material was extensively used on human patients. Experienced oncologists evaluated the treatment as largely neutral or unfavorable. The OTA proposed a clinical trial, but the proposal met with much acrimony and opposition from Burton. The use of peritoneal mesothelioma, an exceedingly rare neoplasm, was agreed upon as the tumor of choice in the trial. However, the attempt to test the treatment fizzled when Burton failed to cooperate.

Given the often unsatisfactory outcome of conventional cancer treatment, should patients consider turning to an unconventional therapy? Conventional treatments are based on proven patho-physiological data and backed by proof of success, or at least of improvement or inhibition of disease progression in a significant percentage of cases. No unrealistic promises are made to patients, and the possibility of untoward effects is presented in an open manner. As should always be the case in medical practice, dangerous and disabling therapy is undertaken only if the likelihood of success justifies such measures and outweighs the dangers.

Unconventional approaches sometimes afford the patient psychological support and the hope for a good result seemingly unobtainable elsewhere. It is tragic when patients choose this avenue in situations where genuine help is available or where merely supportive care can be justified. It takes medical maturity not to expose cancer patients to needless suffering and to let them die with as little pain as possible. Few people who have not witnessed such a situation appreciate the depth of this bond of honesty between doctor and patient.

*Alfred Baer is a physician and NCAS board member. His most recent contribution to the Eye was "Ruminations of a Skeptical Physician" in the Winter 1990-91 issue. □*

The Office of Technology Assessment report, *Unconventional Cancer Treatments*, is available for \$14.00; write to Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402-9325.

All Wet:

## *The Gulf War Prophecies of (Paul) Solomon*

*By Elena M. Watson*

When the Persian Gulf War first broke out last January, many people began consulting the various prophecies of the Bible and of Nostradamus. But one Virginia Beach man claimed to have his own visions, including a warning that Iraqis might try to poison the local water supplies.

His name is Paul Solomon. He is a self-proclaimed psychic, since 1971, whose followers believe he predicted the downfall of Nixon and the acid rain problem. He also prescribes health cures while in a trance (much as Edgar Cayce once did).

Solomon's revelations about the war supposedly came to him the Saturday night after the war broke out, while he was meditating. Among his visions was an image of Saddam Hussein's previous incarnation as Belshazzar, the ruthless nephew of ancient Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Solomon believes that **Saddam saw himself as a reincarnation of the virtuous king, when in fact he was Belshazzar.**

In another vision he saw the Hampton Roads area as a major target for terrorists, perhaps number one in the country. He stressed that "the most important thing for us to protect is our water supply."

These observations were made public on January 25 in the *Virginian Pilot* newspaper. Solomon planned to repeat them the following Sunday to his congregation at the Fellowship of the Inner Light Church, in Virginia Beach, which claims to have a membership of 5,000 internationally.

On January 20, the *Virginian Pilot* had reported that security was being tightened at most Hampton Roads water treatment plants, because of the Gulf War. Although it was stated that there was no evidence of enemy interest in the water system, utility operators felt that because of the Navy's presence "we're more sensitive than other utilities across the country." However, no acts of terrorism were reported locally during the entire period of the war. □

## To Do List, from page 3

quote it, or even better, use your own knowledge and write a "Response" for a future issue.

Check the renewal date of your membership printed on the mailing label; if it is past due, please renew today. NCAS will continue to provide resources such as this publication and the monthly programs as long as there is support from the members. Renewals trickle in every week, but many people allow their membership to lapse.

Everyone in NCAS can make one easy contribution to skepticism this week. Show this issue to someone—a friend, a colleague, a co-worker, a student, a teacher—who might also be looking for a skeptical resource. If they are interested, ask them to join. If you would like extra copies of the newsletter or the NCAS brochure, call or write me. New members provide the energy that makes a volunteer organization thrive.

NCAS exists because many of us firmly believe that the kind of thinking that underlies the process of science is important and relevant no matter what your background. But don't just listen to me. Do it yourself. □

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## The Beneficial Argument for Pseudoscience

By *Taner Edis*

The usual skeptical response to a claim deemed unreasonable to accept is to point out that the best information available does not support it, so it would be a misuse of one's limited time and effort to become involved as a believer. However, not uncommonly one encounters a counterargument that accepts that the claim is not convincing but appeals to openmindedness and the promise of significant benefits. I have come across it mainly when variations on "spiritual healing" are proposed as panaceas for practically any ailment, and when the miraculous feats of one or another guru are touted.

The argument proceeds as follows: As a skeptic, one is committed to allow a (however small) finite probability that the claimant is right, even after investigation fails to provide support. Now consider the problem as one of decision making. If belief is withheld, and the claim is true, at the least an opportunity is missed, so a significant loss is suffered. If one withholds belief and the claim is false, everyday life continues with small gain. On the other hand, if one becomes a believer, and the claim is true, one gains miracle cures, eternal bliss, and the heart's desire. And if one believes, and

the claim is false, the worst that happens is a serious disappointment. In short, the expected gain is said to be much larger if the choice is made to believe, by virtue of a practically infinite value assigned to the "belief and correct" case. This is actually an adaptation of "Pascal's Wager," an argument for religious belief that proceeds by viewing the options as a wager and asking which possibility one would bet on to maximize expected benefits.<sup>1</sup>

Since the question is one of deciding on what beliefs to hold, it seems that followers of pseudoscience have a rational justification for their belief, provided that the claim is extraordinary enough to take advantage of the foot in the door gained by the skeptic's commitment not to arbitrarily rule it out. Of course, one could question the decision criteria, and say that it's wrong to believe in the weakly supported claim no matter what, but this would clearly not be satisfactory to most skeptics. Skeptics can do much better by pointing out that the beneficial argument is actually fallacious.

The problem with it is that "further experience confirming great expectations" and "doesn't work, business as usual" don't exhaust the possibilities. We can construct others, such as an outcome of eternal torment and suffering rather than healing and bliss in the case of belief in the claim. While the utility of this scenario is opposite to the original form of the argument, it can be said to have a similar, extremely low probability, so the same wager argument should apply. But now the expected benefit has to be computed by inclusion of **a practically infinite possibility of loss rather than gain. And** one could continue to construct other new scenarios. To correctly evaluate the benefit of a decision, one would have to consider all possible outcomes, weighted by their utilities and probabilities. Just enumerating these would take forever, never mind testing the claim empirically! Clearly, such a task is impossible, so one has to resort to approximate procedures in real life. Discounting truly unsupported claims regardless of their promise is thus probably reasonable, with the expectation that similarly improbable alternate negative scenarios would cancel out the rosy ones.

So when confronting a claim that accepting an extraordinary claim would lead to self-realization and the cure of anything from a cold to AIDS, one is still justified in saying that a rational decision-making process would not allow one to jump easily into the highly improbable.

<sup>1</sup>A fuller treatment of "Pascal's Wager" can be found in M. Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 229. The present discussion is adapted from Martin, with the difference that uncomputability is invoked to dispose of the argument, instead of ill-defined cancellations of infinities. This discussion was inspired by an exchange concerning the guru Sri Mataji on the computer list SKEPTIC. □



## Past Life Reporting

Capturing the spirit of past NCAS events

How do you recognize a crank? Dr. Mark R. Chartrand has had more experience at that task than most people. While serving as the astronomy columnist for *Omni* magazine, he built up a large "crank file" of letters from people who "had a problem with how the universe works." Currently a consultant, author, and lecturer in the fields of astronomy, space science, and satellite telecommunications, Chartrand is also an officer of the National Space Society and a member of NCAS. He is a former director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York.

On June 1, Chartrand shared with NCAS members and others his checklist for recognizing cranks. Some indicators are the following. Cranks are:

- ✦ absolutely adamant in the belief that they're right.
- ✦ not self-correcting; they seldom revise or change their beliefs.
- ✦ often ignorant of the content and methodology of science.
- ✦ fond of finding hidden meanings in texts.
- ✦ often eager to dethrone an eminent figure.
- ✦ frequently of a religious background, forcing their own ideas on the universe.
- ✦ logical in their reasoning, but basing it on false premises.
- ✦ likely to put math in their arguments where it doesn't belong.
- ✦ sometimes paranoid, convinced that someone--science, the press--is out to get them.
- ✦ fond of bringing up cases of famous people persecuted in the past, such as Galileo, whose beliefs turned out to be correct.

In addition, crank arguments often proceed by analogy, Chartrand said--except that every step is "a little off, a little beyond what the analogy will bear." The arguments also tend to pile up hypotheses, so that a crank may "come to a wonderful revolution at the end, having forgotten that hypotheses were made at the

beginning of the complex argument."

Chartrand found that cranks often claim false credentials. "I've had people writing to me on White House stationery, FBI stationery. They may claim acquaintance with famous people, saying 'When I was talking to Carl Sagan the other day....' Of course, someone like Sagan gives many speeches in a year so that almost anyone could have an opportunity of meeting him."

"Anytime someone tells you he's found The Solution, capital T capital S, then he's giving you capital B capital S," Chartrand concluded.

\*\*\*\*

Snazzy "UFOs" of black recycled plastic were the hit of the NCAS "Close Encounter" picnic, held September 21 in Rock Creek Park. About twenty people attended, enough for a mass UFO toss, captured on film for the annals of UFOdom. Against the brilliant blue sky of a crisp fall day, the sight was spectacular, if not sufficiently convincing for a mass conversion to belief in alien visitors.

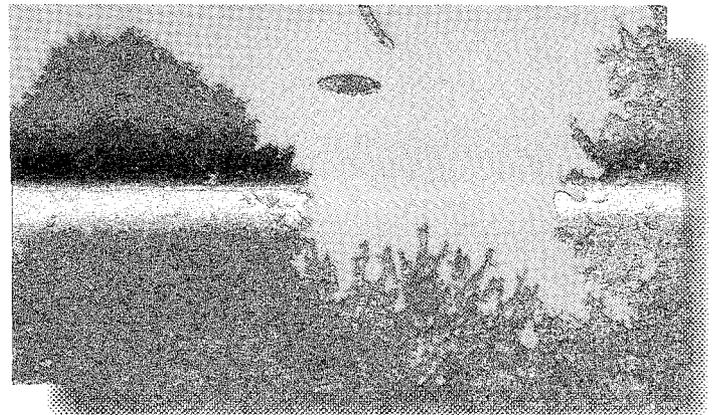


photo by Nelson Davis

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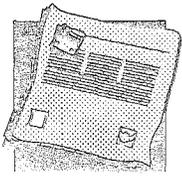
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# The Last Word

Some Stories Never Die

By Lys Ann Shore

It was 1979, and I had just moved to Cleveland--a city whose white inhabitants were still enmeshed in the fears brought to consciousness by the urban riots of the 1960s. Whites feared blacks; suburbanites feared the urban core; west siders feared the integrated east side. In this climate of apprehension, I began my new job as an office worker. As a newcomer, I was deluged with helpful advice from the locals with whom I worked. One of the first things I was told was: don't shop at the nearby mall because several women had been assaulted there by a man who came up behind them, injected them with "drugs," and kidnapped them. I was a former New Yorker, so this warning didn't stop me from shopping at the mall, it simply made me more cautious--and somewhat fearful.

Several years later, a columnist for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* wrote a piece about rumors. As an example, he gave the story I had heard--and mentioned that it was entirely untrue, and that police had been attempting to debunk it for years. In short, I was the victim of an urban legend.

Part of the problem here is the same one that plagues any flap or hoax: sensational events, even if they didn't really happen or can be explained prosaically, attract much more public interest, and hence are more "newsworthy," than debunkings. Thus we hear much more about the mystery of crop circles than about the folks who have admitted hoaxing the public with them. Unable to reach the public effectively to debunk the "mall kidnapping" story, the police were pretty much limited to responding to individual queries about it.

For over a decade, one of the biggest American corporations has faced a similar situation. The company, of course, is Procter & Gamble, which since 1980 has been fighting

persistent rumors that its moon-and-stars corporate logo is a Satanic symbol. The company's legal department has aggressively pursued the rumormongers whenever it could identify them, and has won and/or settled several libel suits. Among those the company has sued are four distributors of Amway products. Still, the rumors have persisted. In 1985, P&G began leaving off the logo from its product packages. Most recently, it has redesigned the logo to eliminate the "beard curls" that the rumor identifies as three sixes (666, the number biblically linked with the Antichrist).

Nonetheless, the legend goes on. This summer, it swept suburban Maryland, in the form of a flier that claimed that on March 1, 1991, P&G's president appeared on the "Phil Donahue Show" to announce his support for the Church of Satan. "He stated that a large portion of the profits from Procter [sic] & Gamble products goes to the support of the church," the flier said (quoted in the *Washington Post*, July 15, 1991, p. B1). Of course, the claim was completely untrue. P&G's public relations department set up a hotline with the message that "the president of Procter & Gamble has never ever appeared on the 'Donahue' show. If your family and friends say they've seen it, they are quite mistaken" (ibid.).

One of those circulating the flier was Reverend Jay Hurley of Greenbrier Baptist Church in Boonsboro, who told the *Post* that he had read the flier to his congregation, distributed copies, and asked them to take it with them when they went shopping so as to join his boycott of P&G products. The *Post* also interviewed an insurance company worker in Frederick, who said several of her coworkers had posted the flier in their cubicles.

Most people would find it easy to dismiss the P&G satanism story because its claim is as extraordinary as any UFO flap. Also, thanks to P&G's prominence, the debunking has been widely publicized over the years. Tales like that of the "mall kidnapper," however, might be harder to dismiss. Such stories are passed from individual to individual rather than shouted from the pulpit or circulated in fliers, and their content, although sensational, is not so obviously extraordinary. "Urban legends" like these can live on in our minds for years, contributing to the climate of fear and suspicion in which present-day Americans live. □

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