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A TBS "\$1,000 Challenge" matching medical ailments

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

I received a telephone call on October 7 from Ron Pearce of Prattville, Alabama, asking to be tested for the Tampa Bay Skeptics ["\\$1,000 Challenge."](#) In that conversation, and his follow-up e-mail of Oct. 10 from which I quote, Mr. Pearce indicated that he would be able to psychically determine ten people's medical ailments via e-mail or, preferably, over the phone, without having to see the people in person. Further: "I do not [even] need photographs -- just names and [medical] conditions or problems . . . for me to put together with the names . . . or you may even use numbers instead of names."

Shortly thereafter, I queried members of TBS (via our e-mail list) soliciting volunteers, reminding them that I am a licensed physician and would, of course, keep their medical conditions confidential. Of course, I lied. But the only other person to whom I sent the information (on November 13) was TBS chairman [Terry Smiljanich](#), who is a partner in a prestigious Tampa law firm and at least as trustworthy with confidential information as I.

Below are the ten sets of medical conditions that were provided to Mr. Pearce via e-mail (and U.S. mail) on November 14:

- a. Nerve damage deafness in right ear since childhood
- b. Hemorrhagic stroke with dementia (mother of the multiple sclerosis person)
- c. Multiple sclerosis
- d. Type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, obesity, bilateral short Achilles tendons requiring shoe orthotics
- e. Physiologic (harmless) heart murmur with no other known medical problems

- f. High cholesterol (on medication), eczema
- g. Bilateral mastectomies for cancer (now in remission)
- h. Severe mental retardation including inability to speak (niece of the nerve damage deafness person)
- i. Obstructive sleep apnea, persistently painful bursitis of left hip, inability to bend last joint of left little finger due to severed tendon
- j. Hypertension and sciatica

Mr. Pearce's task was to match each of the ten above sets of medical conditions to the correct person (there is a 1:1 correlation). And, as per our agreement, rather than providing him with names, we simply referred to the people by number (with the numbering key and names known only to Terry and myself). For the record, the following are the correct match-ups: Person #1=d, 2=f, 3=a, 4=h, 5=g, 6=c, 7=b, 8=i, 9=j, 10=e.

So, for example, in order to win the TBS "\$1,000 Challenge," Mr. Pearce needed to correctly match Person #1 with medical condition set d, person #2 with set f, etc., and get them all correct. The probability of getting all 10 correct was 1 in 10! (10 factorial) or 1 in 3,628,800. And were he to succeed, we would also arrange for the [James Randi Educational Foundation](#) to similarly test him for its \$1,000,000 prize.

In a recorded telephone call to me on November 15, Pearce offered the following determinations: Person #1=b, 2=f, 3=d, 4=c, 5=j, 6=i, 7=e, 8=a, 9=h, 10=g. Of the ten, only one (#2) was correct.

Pearce countered that he had never been tested in this manner before, but that he could demonstrate to us, in person, his ability as an "empath" to relieve patients of their symptoms and diseases. He added, "I've had people that cancer has actually disappeared" as a result of his presence. When I challenged him to ask any of these former "cancer" patients to sign a medical record release so that I could see documentation of his claim, he replied that he was "not going to even make the attempt." After all, numerous doctors and nurses, he says, have been impressed by his medical successes.

Pearce and others may believe he is an "empath." But I explained why TBS, and the scientific community at large, cannot accept any paranormal claims in the absence of solid, reproducible evidence gathered under properly controlled conditions. And Pearce agreed that, at least in our test, no such evidence was forthcoming.

Pseudoscientific therapies at Tampa General Hospital

By Gary P. Posner, M.D.

As reported in a feature article in the October 18 *St. Petersburg Times* (Tampa edition), Tampa General Hospital has become part of a "growing movement at hospitals across the country" to "enhance traditional medicine" with an "integrative medicine program" of "alternative" therapies.

Some, like biofeedback and nutritional support, are scientifically evidence-based. Others, including relaxation therapy and massage, are certainly benign enough and soothing to the psyche. And encouraging the ill to use their imagination via "visualization" and "guided imagery" seems akin to employing more traditional hypnotic suggestion.

But when a major American hospital like TGH treats its patients with the likes of "Reiki" and "therapeutic touch" (TT), the line is crossed between providing rational medical care and calling in the "Medicine Man."

The *Times* article, devoid of skepticism, describes one such treatment session as witnessed by the reporter:

She begins to sweep her hands through the air immediately over [the patient's] body, working her way across his face and down his arms. She's trying to sense his energy patterns. She detects congestion in his abdominal area. . . . She senses imbalances [and] tries to repattern the energy with her hand movements.

There is no disputing that these sorts of New Age modalities "work," in the sense that the practitioners ooze empathy and their medically naive patients derive emotional benefit from the "caring" atmosphere. But what if a terminal patient, wracked with pain, happened to prefer a lap dance to a Reiki session? TGH would, of course, never sanction such "non-medical" therapy.

Both Reiki and TT work their alleged wonders by manipulating the "spirit life force" (known variously as chi, qi, ki, and prana) via hand movements in close proximity to the patient's body (no actual touching is required). A Reiki master channels additional "chi" from the heavens into the patient, whereas a TT practitioner removes chi blockages and balances the energy flow.

One might hope that even a ten-year-old would have sense enough to recognize such pseudoscience for what it is. Better yet, nine-year-old Emily Rosa made national headlines when her 4th-grade science project exposing the nonsense of TT was published as an article in the April 1, 1998, issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. She demonstrated, with eloquent simplicity, that when the TT practitioners extended their arms through holes in a barrier, they were simply *imagining* the presence of someone's "spirit life force." Half the time there was no one in proximity on the other side, and thus no energy fields to detect.

The leader of the TGH program, which began last year, is Dr. Sheela Chokshi, an internist from India who trained at the Harvard School of Medicine's Mind-Body Institute, which was founded by cardiologist Herbert Benson. Dr. Benson may be best known to the public for having popularized the "Relaxation Response," claiming that stress-reducing measures can help alleviate not only conditions like high blood pressure and anxiety, but "infertility" as well.

Common sense dictates that relaxation would benefit hypertension and anxiety. But with regard to "infertility," Benson stands accused of misrepresenting his own co-authored research findings. A book review (in the April 18, 1997, issue of *Science*) of Benson's *Timeless Healing* reports that his original research article actually contains "*no evidence* that the relaxation response improved the conception rate, *as the authors are careful to point out there; there were no matched controls . . . to show what the conception rate would have been without the relaxation response.*" (Emphasis added.)

Per the *Times* article, the American Hospital Association reports that 17% of hospitals now offer programs like TGH's, and one in four without such a program plan to start one. An AHA representative is quoted, "Some of the hospitals say, 'We're doing this as part of our mission. If this is what our constituents want, we'll provide it.'"

The article does *not* quote *JAMA's* editor saying, in the aforementioned 1998 issue, that insurers "should question [paying for TT] until or unless additional honest experimentation demonstrates an actual effect." But given a suggestible patient, TT and the like *do* provide a genuine *placebo* effect. Even so, does that justify the practice of pseudoscientific medicine in our nation's hospitals?

Snippets



It appears that Ashley's Restaurant in Rockledge is haunted: "In 1934, Ethel Allen was murdered after a fight with her boyfriend at this roadhouse. Her apparition appears in the powder room, while diners have reported giving their orders to a ghostly waiter."

(*Life magazine* online, Oct. 21)

The former Lili Marlene's Aviator's Pub & Restaurant in Orlando's Church Street Station seems to be quite the "spirited" scene as well. That's why the new owners, who renovated the place into a Japanese restaurant, are refusing to move in and thus being sued by their landlord. Seems a subcontractor told the *Orlando Sentinel* earlier this year that workers had seen, in a mirror, the reflections of a ghostly bartender and two dancing girls. According to Emilio San Martin, head of Orlando Ghost Tours, the floor above the restaurant was once a hotel/brothel whose visitors often saw and heard apparitions, including the cries of the souls of the prostitutes' illegitimate newborns who supposedly were routinely murdered there. All that was more than enough to scare away the restaurant's owner, Christopher Chung, a Jehovah's Witness whose beliefs require that he "avoid encountering . . . spirits or demons."

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Sept. 9)

Greg Jenkins, an Orlando mental health professional and "armchair ghost hunter from way back," has written a new book entitled, *Florida's Ghostly Legends and Haunted Folklore, Vol. 1: South and Central Florida*. The forthcoming second volume concentrates on the St. Augustine area, and a third will focus on Florida's west coast. Though he considers himself a "skeptic" at heart and has come away unconvinced from many of the locations he has visited, Jenkins, who had an encounter with a deceased uncle several years ago, is "certain that the Myrtle Hill Cemetery in Tampa is indeed inhabited by something," as is Sunland Hospital in Orlando. But by what? "There is an intense residue of emotions [after death, especially suicides], of energy that has to go somewhere . . . like grooves cut into an unseen record that plays over and over."

(*St. Petersburg Times*, Oct. 29)

Earth's own "Face on Mars"?



According to the Oct. 28 *St. Pete. Times*, this is merely an aerial photo of a cluster of lakes in Odessa. Whatever, it seems not to have frightened the aliens away from Earth. On Sept. 25, former Canadian defense minister Paul Hellyer proclaimed that "UFOs are as real as the airplanes that fly over your head."

Letter to the Editor

Editor: I saw the *Psychic Detectives* episode about John Monti that [you discussed](#) in your Fall issue. If it were just some miniseries I wouldn't give it as much credence, but when an actual investigator involved in the case speaks up about his amazement over the details, it does get one to thinking. If this case is not really what it was presented as, it would seem they must have paid off one of the police chiefs to exaggerate or fabricate "facts."

I don't think even the best psychics are always right. And the most honest of them will tell you that they themselves don't understand why some visions don't pan out, or why they don't get a clear picture on some cases. But when they *do* get one, and it leads to very specific facts (unknown to the public) about a case, it does make me wonder. Most of the field is filled with hacks, I'm sure. But I do

think that there are some who are empowered.

--Tom Hartman
Boca Raton
oceantracks@mac.com

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