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Richard Price, who says he's been abducted several times, produced an object he calls an "implant" left by aliens. Tests were inconclusive.

The search for physical evidence turns up little

What would it take to prove, or at least to produce good evidence, that such an extraordinary occurrence as being abducted by alien beings really did take place?

As astronomer Carl Sagan has often pointed out, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." So far, despite widespread interest in UFOs and in alien abductions, no such hard evidence has yet been forthcoming.

"I regard the best physical evidence" yet produced in support of the claims of alien abduction "as being totally inconclusive," said David Pritchard, the MIT physicist who organized a conference on the subject, in an interview last week.

Pritchard has studied one of the few pieces of purported physical evidence for the phenomenon: a tiny "implant" that UFO abductee Richard Price of Latham, N.Y. says was placed in his abdomen by aliens and later worked its way out. He

says the object provides "absolutely no proof of anything, but I wasn't able to explain it in some obvious way."

Tiny implants are a common feature of alien abduction stories, so they ought to provide a good way of testing the claims. Some investigators have obtained Magnetic Resonance Imaging scans of people who say they were given implants, and some of the scans do show unexplained spots that could be implants. But such spots also show up on a significant number of other MRI images in general.

Some investigators suggest that while individual MRI scans don't mean much, a large number of similar images might be more convincing — especially if spots seen in them correspond to where the abductees say their implants were placed.

Another line of evidence that would not provide proof but might be strongly suggestive, say

investigators, is a database containing many of the detailed stories told by abductees interviewed by different investigators. Many of these investigators have said they find amazing similarities among accounts given by people who have had no contact with each other, but others say the similarities could be caused by subtle leading of the witnesses by the investigators.

If significant similarities showed up in accounts collected by different investigators, therefore, it might make a more compelling case.

Psychotherapist David Gotlib also has suggested that the selection process could affect the findings — that investigators may select, out of thousands of people who contact them, the ones whose stories are most similar to those they have already heard and written about, thus producing a self-fulfilling prophecy of similar-sounding accounts.

— DAVID L. CHANDLER