
Skeptical Adversaria

2010, Number 2 (Summer)



The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

There has been some discussion lately amongst ASKE members (on ASKEnet) about how ASKE and other sceptical organisations could contribute to raising awareness about the need for applying critical thinking to government initiatives and decision making.

I imagine that sceptics, including readers of this newsletter, have mixed political allegiances and that their opinions on many government policies are, as with a random group of individuals, far from homogenous. However, I am sure there is unanimity over the importance of adopting an evidenced-based approach and the proper application of science, mathematics and logical thinking in the business of policy-making. At the risk of seeming to be partisan, I must say that over the years, I lost track of the number of times I read that an initiative by the previous government, usually costing millions if not billions of pounds, had failed to have any effect on the problem it was supposed to address.

Sense about Science initiative

With this in mind, we can take comfort in the following announcement that ASKE has received from Leonor Sierra at Sense about Science:

'I'm delighted to tell you we now have the hard copies of our new guide, *Making Sense of Statistics*, in the office (see the electronic guide here: www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/484/). The guide provides three vital questions to ask when weighing up stories that use statistics and gives warnings of common pitfalls to look out for. It is published by Sense

about Science and Straight Statistics in collaboration with the Royal Statistical Society.

'We are keen to ensure it goes far and wide and hope you can help spread the word. Do you run a group that could have a discussion about the guide? Do you want copies for your library? Would it be useful for your students? Do you have a website or blog where you could feature it? We hope to develop a web button for it soon, so do also let me know if you'd like this when it comes out.

'Can you help us to send a copy to every member of Parliament? We would also like to provide copies to all media outlets. Additional print and postage will cost £1,673 and we need your help to reach all of them - £10 will get this to six MPs and peers (we can't guarantee which six!) - but please help us with whatever you can by donating at:

www.justgiving.com/makingsenseofstatistics (or visit:

www.senseaboutscience.org/donate for other ways to donate).

'Do also let me know if you would like a hard copy, or if you have suggestions of other places we should be sending it to.'

Leonor (lsierra@senseaboutscience.org)

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Misuse of crime statistics by politicians

Just one illustration of the need for the above initiative is the misuse of statistics on violent crime by the Conservative Party and the then shadow Home Secretary Mr Chris Grayling. In February 2010 the Conservatives sent

details of crime figures to their workers in constituencies throughout England and Wales to promote David Cameron's claim that Labour had presided over the creation of 'a broken Britain'.

But the information omitted Home Office warnings that the figures for the periods before and after 2002 were not comparable because of a change in the way violent crime is recorded. Instead of police officers deciding whether an incident should be recorded as a violent crime, they are now required to do so whenever an alleged victim asks them to. The effect was to force up recorded violence by an estimated 35 per cent in the first year.

The figures were used in Tory campaign leaflets, including one produced by the office of Milton Keynes MP Mark Lancaster, which suggested that violent attacks in the constituency had soared by 236 per cent from 1,790 to 6,015 a year since 1999. Inexcusable! In fact one local police chief described the use of the figures as 'extremely misleading'. And Sir Michael Scholar, chairman of the UK Statistics Authority, wrote to Mr Grayling saying: 'I do not wish to become involved in political controversy, but I must take issue with what you said yesterday about violent crime statistics, which seems to me likely to damage public trust in official statistics.' The authority said the British Crime Survey (BCS), an annual questionnaire of 46,000 people, indicated there had been a big fall in violent crime since 1995. It said the BCS (which asks adults if they have been victims of crime over the previous year) was the most reliable way of assessing the trend, because it was 'not affected by changes in reporting, police recording and local policing activity, and has been measuring crime in a consistent way since the survey began in 1981'.

MPs and science

In November 2008 it was announced that Conservative MPs were to receive compulsory lessons in scientific literacy under a plan to strengthen evidence-based policy-making (see:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/article5168006.ece>).

According to the *Times* 'Classes explaining scientific method and basic concepts will be included in the induction programme for all Tory MPs after the next election, and sitting members and peers will also be offered the opportunity to attend...The plan, drawn up by Adam Afriyie, the party's spokesman for science and innovation, is designed to address concerns about a lack of scientific expertise and understanding in the House of Commons and Whitehall. Though scientific challenges such as global warming, stem-cell research, pandemic flu and GM crops are becoming increasingly important political issues, Parliament and the Civil Service have long been dominated by people with backgrounds in the humanities, law and business'.

In November 2008 it was announced that Conservative MPs were to receive compulsory lessons in scientific literacy.

In March this year, ASKE member Charles Paxton emailed Mr Afriyie (MP for Windsor) to ask if the training would still happen and he received the following reply:

'Science and the scientific approach to policy making will be vital for helping to lift our economy out of recession. These science induction lessons for all incoming Conservative MPs remain a firm policy and I have been working with the whips and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology to get a programme ready.'

Mr Afriyie was not made Science Minister. However Charles suggests that it may be worth badgering the Tories (including David Willets the new Minister of State for the Universities and Science) about this matter.

Indeed, at the time of writing a meeting of MPs (of all parties) has taken place. This was on 15th June 2010 and

was organised by POST, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology

(<http://www.parliament.uk/post>). There is an account of this at <http://www.newscientist.com/blogs/theword/2010/06/how-to-turn-politicians-on-to.html>. According to its author, Chandrika Nath:

'This was the first time anyone had suggested we should organise training for new MPs, so we were keen to take it on, as long as it was open to MPs from all parties...In the end we put together a panel to talk to new MPs around the theme of "science, uncertainty, evidence and policy". The panel featured fertility expert Robert Winston and geophysicist Ron Oxburgh, as well as Phil Willis, the former chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee; John Beddington, the chief scientific advisor; and David Willets, the new minister for science and universities. It was chaired by Michael Connarty, the Labour MP for Linlithgow and East Falkirk....Around 25 MPs signed up and just under half actually came.....

'Since the general election, there have been fears that science - and evidence-based policy making as a whole - would suffer now there are fewer MPs with science backgrounds. The loss of well-known MPs such as Evan Harris, who were actively engaged in science issues, has also been a blow.'

(Despite the sterling efforts of Ben Goldacre...<http://www.badscience.net/2010/05/keep-evan-harris-in-parliament-oxford-west-and-abingdon/>...and with the help of a hate campaign by Christian groups, Mr Harris (whose wise pronouncements have occasionally been quoted in this Newsletter) lost his seat of Oxford West and Abingdon in the May general election).

David Tredinnick MP

I am not suggesting for one moment that the ideas and opinions of Mr David Tredinnick, MP for Bosworth, are typical of MPs but at present he is opposing the considered opinion of medical doctors represented by the

BMA (see 'Medicine on the Fringe') that homeopathy is no more effective than placebo and therefore money used by the National Health Service to fund it should be put to better purpose.

In January 2010 it was disclosed that Mr Tredinnick had come to a private agreement with John Lyon, the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner to repay over £755 of expenses he had claimed for astrology software which claimed to enable users to analyse their health based on the stars. 'Mr Tredinnick's view is that many complementary or alternative therapies, including English herbal medicine and Ayurvedic medicine, have links to astrology', Mr Lyon wrote.

Last year it was revealed that Mr Tredinnick had also attempted to claim £125 in expenses for the cost of attending a course on 'intimate relationships', but was turned down. He attended the four-hour course, learning how to 'honour the female and also the male essence and the importance of celebrating each'.

However, any ambitions that Mr Tredinnick may have had for yet further promotion beyond his level of competence had already been derailed-

back in 1994 when he was found to have accepted £1,000 from an undercover reporter in return for asking Parliamentary questions about a fictitious drug. He resigned from his role as a PPS and was suspended from the Commons for 20 days.

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/mps-expenses/6982318/MPs-expenses-David-Tredinnick-repays-750-in-secret-deal.html>)

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**KEEP LIBEL LAWS
OUT OF SCIENCE**

(<http://www.libelreform.org/>)

Since the Spring Newsletter we have witnessed the demise of the libel suit by the British Chiropractic Association against Simon Singh. The Defamation Bill, a private member's bill by Lord Lester of Herne Hill is to have its second reading in the House of Lords on July 9th. This can be found at:

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/defamationhl.html>

A critical appraisal of the bill may be found at:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2010/jun/23/lord-lester-defamation-bill>

USA authors and the British libel laws

<http://www.thecuttingedge.com/index.php?article=12332>

'On June 22nd, Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-VT) and Ranking Member Jeff Sessions (R-AL) introduced the Securing and Protecting our Enduring and Established Constitutional Heritage Act, or *SPEECH Act*. This bipartisan bill is co-sponsored by Senators Arlen Specter (D-PA), Joseph Lieberman (ID-CT), and Charles Schumer (D-NY). It will strengthen the protection of American authors and publishers from the enforcement of judgments ruled against them in frivolous and extortionate libel suits in foreign countries that do not have our protections for freedom of speech.

'Such lawsuits have been often used by "libel tourists" in an effort to suppress the rights of American scholars, writers, and journalists to speak, write, and publish freely in print and on the Internet, especially on matters of national security. American writers and media outlets have been sued for libel in England, Ireland, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Australia, France, Singapore, and many other countries.

LOGIC AND INTUITION

Somewhere up in my attic lies a piece of brown paper carefully folded into an hexagonal shape of several layers. The name of this construction is a hexaflexagon and I made it over 45 years ago. It still worked the last time I had it out.

Along with around 30 other pupils I made my hexaflexagon in a maths lesson at school. It was the end of term, exams were out of the way and our maths teacher was introducing us to some logical and mathematical games and puzzles that she had borrowed some books from the local library. The hexafleagon was one of the games. We also made and experimented with the mysterious Moebius strip.

I also recall several of the puzzles. One was the well-known brain-teaser that goes as follows:

'A man walks 1 mile south, 1 mile west and 1 mile north. He finds himself back at the place he started out from and sees a bear. What colour is the bear?'

Mathematical fallacies that we were introduced to included a very deceptive proof that $1 = 2$.

The source of all these delights (and they honestly were, even at the time, and still are) was Martin Gardner's books on mathematical puzzles and diversions. It seems incredible that Martin was with us until very recently and still very active. He was also well-known in sceptical

circles, being a founding member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP; now the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, CSI). He contributed a regular column to the *Skeptical Inquirer* under the title 'Notes of a fringe watcher' and published several sceptical books.

Martin died at the age 95 on May 22, 2010 at a hospital in Norman, Oklahoma. For an obituary by Chris French and a tribute by James Randi go to:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/may/25/martin-gardner>

Many of the puzzles that I have described in this column have, somewhere, appeared in Martin Gardner's books. The type of puzzle I try to choose is one that is simple and subtle and whose answer takes the solver by surprise, the sort of reaction one has when discovering something new and the world doesn't seem quite

the same as it did before. Here then is such a puzzle which I read in a recently published book (*The Drunkard's Walk* by Leonard Mlodinow, Penguin Popular Science, 2008) but which appeared in slightly different form in Martin's book *Mathematical Puzzles and Diversions* (Penguin Books, 1959).

The daughter paradox

The first part of the puzzle is a classic problem: 'Jane has two children. One is

a daughter. What's the probability that she has two daughters?'

The second part is: 'Jane has two children. One is a daughter, Emma-Louise. What's the probability that she has two daughters?'

Answers on page 12

THE ASIAN RATIONALIST SOCIETY (BRITAIN)

ASKE has been contacted by the Asian Rationalist Society of Britain (ARSB) based in the Midlands. I can do no better than reprint here their statement of aims, kindly provided to me by Sachdev Virdee. I am sure all readers will support the ARSB in its endeavours and will want to be kept informed about its activities.

Asian Rationalist Society (Britain) Charity Reg no:1087925

The Asian Rationalist Society Britain is a registered charity and its aim is to promote the adoption of scientific thinking in daily life amongst the general public, with particular regard to the Asian community.

The way the majority of the people think, behave and make decisions are the reflection of their cultural concepts which are unfortunately not immune from superstitious belief in Asian society. This type of cultural belief is embedded since childhood and grows like a cancer in the majority of Asian people and becomes virtually impossible to release oneself from.

In fact superstitious belief leads to an illusionist vision in life which leads to vulnerability, which in turn leads to their exploitation at the hands of so called faith healers, tantrics and fortune-tellers. Regrettably some Asian bureaucrats in local authorities feel that the role of such people is helpful for the mental health of Asian people, a matter which we believe is incompatible with the duties of an official serving a multicultural society within secular society.

Organisations like ours and like-minded individuals who are working for the cause of human equality, its values, peace and a just society, have been able to convince the European Union to revise the fraudulent mediums act of 1951. The new legislation has now been in force since 26th of May 2008. Considering the size of this industry and its impact on people's mental health, this is no mean feat. We hope that the new legislation will provide an avenue for victims to seek legal as well as moral redress, as well as protecting other people falling victim to such malpractices.

We will be happy to work with local and regional authorities who have stepped up their campaign against fraudulent faith healers.

It is notable that the industry is worth 40 million pounds which is extorted from vulnerable Asians. The Asian Rationalist Society (ARSB) is currently offering ten thousand pounds reward to any one who claims to be able to cure all sorts of illnesses, personal problems and business problems through his or her

divine/magical powers. ARSB has 23 challenges and by winning one out of those, under fraud-proof conditions; prize money can be claimed. To date not a single person has taken up our widely publicised challenge

We will be happy to work with local and regional authorities who have stepped up their campaign against fraudulent faith healers and expect the same from all other authorities in the country. One would think that after more than 150 years of scientific testing of psychics, there would at least be one who could demonstrate a single psychic ability under test conditions. Education and public awareness campaigns are the practical source of building their self-confidence to stand up against their unwanted exploitation and file complaints to the concerned trading standard offices.

The public awareness campaigns would help in three material regards:

1. People could save their hard earned monies;
2. People then make full use of and benefit from the health services available to them;
3. Scientific thinking culture would develop people's knowledge and understanding about mental and

physical health as well as improve it.

Harmony, peace, and a just society consisting of humanistic values and healthy lifestyle are the aims and objectives of the ARSB. We would welcome any comments that you may have and look forward to hearing from you.

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Editor's note

Contact details for ARSB are as follows:
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ARSB have been in the news recently involving a case pursued by Sandwell Trading Standards of a notorious 'faith healer'. I am grateful to ARSB for the following:

'Jailed for 18 months, spreading cheer among Indian-origin rationalists'

Niem Mohammed, who reportedly owns a house worth £850,000 in Cheshire, was found guilty at the Wolverhampton Crown Court yesterday of three counts of fraud, seven of procuring a valuable security by deception and one of obtaining property by deception.

The Asian community has been particularly vulnerable to the influence of charlatans, psychics, 'babas' and 'tantriks', who promise to cure all ills, remove spells and bring luck to those who believe in spells and occult

practices. Notably, Indian-origin rationalists have been campaigning against such practices for several years.

Delighted at the judicial verdict, Sach Dev Virdee, general secretary of the Asian Rationalist Society of Britain told PTI (Press Trust of India), 'We challenge those who exploit vulnerable and desperate people under the name of faith healing to accept our challenge and win £100,000 under our published conditions'. Mohammed's case was taken up by Sandwell-based officials after the local BBC showed a programme with the help of ASRB.

The faith-healing industry is estimated to be worth £40 million. Most Asian newspapers are full of advertisements...

The faith-healing industry is estimated to be worth £40 million. Most Asian newspapers are full of advertisements offering the services of faith healers. Britain recently repealed the 1951 Fraudulent Mediums Act, which harmonised trading laws across the EU as per the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive. This new trade law means that consumers can take traders to court if promises are not delivered. Faith healers, babas and tantriks also come under the purview of the new EU trade regulations.

Mohammed's is the first case in which a faith healer has been convicted and jailed for failing to deliver on the promises he made to clients. Among his victims were a couple who could not conceive a child, a woman seeking the

removal of a 'black magic' spell and another woman seeking to trace her estranged son. Passing sentence, Judge Jonathan Gosling said his victims had 'plummeted into despair' while he enriched himself and added humiliation to their pain. He told Mohammed: 'You targeted vulnerable and desperate victims with promises which you knew you could not fulfil. You did it with bogus advertisements and outlandish guarantees - you used a veneer of holiness to get them to pay large sums of money that they couldn't afford.'

During the two-week trial the court was told that that some victims were encouraged to borrow money to pay for the services of Mohammed, who claimed to be able to lift spells, bring about reconciliation, resolve health problems and perform paranormal phenomena. Mohammed told the jury that he had a gift passed down through generations. During his defence, the faith healer sat on the floor of the courtroom and assembled a miniature fire pit on top of a silver table to demonstrate techniques he uses to meditate and prayer.

Sandwell Council's trading standards manager, Bob Robinson, said: 'We are very pleased by the outcome of the trial and it proves we were fully justified in taking this action on behalf of people we felt had been duped. There were many people who were reluctant to come forward to help us bring this case, because of their religious beliefs and embarrassment about how it would be viewed in their community'.

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MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

No link to child cancer from phone masts

Researchers at London's Imperial College have found no evidence that living close to a mobile phone mast increases the risk of a pregnant woman's baby developing cancer before he or she reaches the age of five.

The research studied almost 7,000 children aged up to 4 years and found that those who developed cancer aged 4 years or younger were no more likely to have a birth address close to a mast than their peers. The study included 1,397 children from Britain who were registered with leukaemia or a tumour in the brain or central nervous system between 1999 and 2001. They compared each child with four children of the same sex and born on the same day but who had not developed cancer.

Any risks of cancer from mobile phone masts are dwarfed by the risks posed by people who uses mobile phones while driving,

Researchers only considered the address the mother was living at when the baby was born, as information on any previous or subsequent addresses was not available. The authors of the report say they would like to investigate the exposure of children to mobile phone base stations, which this study did not cover. The study was funded by the Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research (MTHR) programme.

The lead author is Professor Paul Elliott, director of the MRC-HPA Centre for Environment and Health at Imperial College London and principal investigator for the UK arm of the cohort study on mobile communications (COSMOS), which was launched in April 2010 and will run for 20-30 years,

following the health of around 250,000 participants in five European countries.

In a commentary, Dr John Bithell a statistician with the childhood cancer research group at Oxford University said any risks of cancer from mobile phone masts are dwarfed by the risks posed by people who use mobile phones while driving, even in hands-free mode. Some expectant mothers have moved home to be away from phone masts but Dr Bithell points out that moving away from a mast, with all its stresses and costs, cannot be justified on health grounds in the light of current evidence.

The report is published on the website of the British Medical Journal at http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/340/jun22_1/c3077.

The Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health

http://www.fih.org.uk/media_centre/closure_of_fih.html

On 30 April 2010 the Trustees of the Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health (founded by the Prince of Wales in 1993) made the following announcement

'(The Trustees) have decided to close the charity. Whilst the closure has been planned for many months and is part of an agreed strategy, the Trustees have brought forward the closure timetable as a result of a fraud investigation at the charity.....From 2000-2007, at the request of the Department of Health, the Foundation ran a regulation programme which resulted in the creation, in 2008, of, an independent self-regulatory body for complementary therapy, called the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council' (<http://www.cnhc.org.uk/pages/index.cfm>).

The Trust received funding from the Prince's Charities Foundation and a £300,000 grant from the Department of Health. It was hoped that 10,000

practitioners of alternative medicine would have registered with the CNHC by the end of 2009 but according to its website the current registration is only around 2,600.

In April 2010, it was reported that the Metropolitan Police Economic and Specialist Crime Command had begun an inquiry into alleged fraud, after claims that £300,000 was unaccounted for and as of April 4 2010, accounts for the organisation had not been filed with Companies House. George Gray, a senior officer at the charity, was arrested and charged with two counts of theft totalling £253,000, one count of fraud by abuse of position and one count of money laundering.

BMA votes to end NHS funding of homeopathy

Doctors attending the recent British Medical Association annual conference have voted that NHS funding for homeopathic treatment should be withdrawn. This follows a report in February by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee which came to the same conclusion (see Spring Newsletter). The doctors also say that homeopathic products should no longer be labelled 'medicines' and should instead be marked 'placebo' when sold in pharmacies.

'If people want to access these expensive sugar tablets, they have to find the money themselves'

Dr Gordon Lehany said, 'We're not saying homoeopathy shouldn't happen, just that it should not be funded on the NHS. While placebos can work, they are not medicines, there is no active ingredient, and so if people want to access these expensive sugar tablets, they have to find the money themselves'.

LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

Of Finns and Frisians

Sometimes, partly isolated (and often nationalistic) sub-traditions of non-mainstream work develop in specific countries. One such tradition, with a linguistic focus, involves Ior Bock's wild (and often obscure) notions about his native Finland. As a result of earlier hegemony and settlement, Swedish is a major minority language in Finland. Bock and his followers (notably Les Whale in Australia) assert that the Finnish variety of Swedish – which they call *Rot*, pronounced like English *root* – was used in a primordial civilisation in Scandinavia and indeed is the ancestral language of humanity. Most other languages (including Swedish Swedish) are descended directly from *Rot*, and a sub-set come from Finnish itself, known here as *Van* and supposedly an early offshoot of *Rot*. The sound-system of Finnish Swedish is heavily re-interpreted and presented as uniquely structured.

Bock holds...that anyone who knows *Rot* and *Van* can understand any other language without learning it, and Whale claims...that he himself is able to follow spoken Burmese on this basis.

Bock holds, further, that anyone who knows *Rot* and *Van* can understand any other language without learning it, and Whale claims (without any actual evidence!) that he himself is able to follow spoken Burmese on this basis. Bock's's family has reportedly handed this knowledge down through the generations, with sons apparently assisting the acquisition process by drinking their fathers' sperm (Bock himself drinks his own sperm as well)! Etc, etc!

In fact, Finnish and Swedish are transparently **not** related other than by contact. And the examples from other languages given in support of Bock's claims display vast confusion.

There are other cases of this kind in the Germanic world, notably similar claims regarding the vast antiquity of Frisian and involving the *Oera Linda Book*, a 19th-Century forgery.

Poles apart?

Yet another case of this kind, which has come to my attention more recently, involves Poland. Igor Witkowski (who has published mainly on 20th-Century history) has produced a 'popular' revisionist archaeological book titled *Axis Of The World*, which promotes a new version of the 'Hancockian' theory of a highly advanced world civilisation pre-dating those recognised by historians. As usual, Witkowski treats myths as a reliable source of evidence about early history, and suggests that mainstream archaeology rejects the 'undeniable facts' because accepting them would involve overturning entire theories. And he links e.g. Indus Valley Script and Rongo-Rongo (Easter Island) because of loose superficial similarities.

Witkowski's work is partly based on the earlier work of fellow Pole Benon Zbigniew Szalek, whose 1984 book (available in English) discusses the decipherment of unknown scripts. This book is quite well-informed, though Szalek's views on these matters are still often controversial; for instance, his 'decipherment' of the Phaistos Disk has not been generally accepted. But where he (as cited now by Witkowski) deals with etymology and relationships between languages, his methods are the usual ones adopted by amateur enthusiasts. One has the impression that Witkowski and even Szalek (like Bock & co.) have failed to familiarise themselves with the international 20th-Century historical linguistic tradition.

Kennewick Man revisited

Readers may have seen my brief discussion of this case in my earlier review of Fritze's 2009 book. The struggle for control of Kennewick Man is in fact many-sided. The 10,000-year-old remains do not appear to be Amerindian and have been technically described as 'caucasoid', but they are not likely to be European either, and have indeed been related quite persuasively to those associated with the prehistoric 'Jomon' culture of Japan and Taiwan. This would be hugely interesting. The Jomon may have been the ancestors of the Polynesians, and in 2001 the Polynesian chief J.P. Siofele sought ownership of Kennewick Man on this basis – unsuccessfully, even though his claim had far more scientific plausibility than that of the local Umatilla tribe. Earlier, the Nordic neopagan revivalist group Asatru had argued that Kennewick Man **was** European and in fact one of their own (part of a supposed prehistoric Norse diaspora).

Kennewick Man is not the only essentially scientific/historical issue to be muddied and politicised by the anti-European bias which is currently trendy.

Against the West

Kennewick Man is not the only essentially scientific/historical issue to be muddied and politicised by the anti-European bias which is currently trendy, especially in circles affected by postmodernism. For instance, the ancient historian Mary Lefkowitz has forcefully critiqued some recent politically-motivated unhistorical Afrocentrist claims about the alleged Egyptian origins of Greek civilisation and the supposed black African ethnicity

of ancient Egyptians (and even of ancient Greeks such as Socrates!), initially believing – perhaps naively – that historical truth was the key issue in such cases. Alarming, this action has brought her much grief at the hands of activists, many of them conspicuously ill-informed.

In a similar vein, the historian Keith Windschuttle argues that contemporary **mainstream** academic ideas about European-Aboriginal relations in 19th-Century Australia have been skewed in this way. He holds that the National Museum in Canberra exaggerates the amount of gratuitous violence against Aborigines (e.g. foregrounding some ‘massacres’ which may well never have occurred) and that claims of ‘genocide’ in Tasmania are much overstated.

Skeptical heroes?

Some of Windschuttle’s other ideas are such as might draw skeptical criticism. For example, he has endorsed some views of Australian prehistory which are partly based on highly controversial linguistic theories. But his claims about Aboriginal matters have made him something of a hero among Australian skeptics, many of them displaying limited knowledge of the relevant disciplines but – not unreasonably – alarmed by creeping postmodernism and by the wholesale public adoption of ill-founded but politically palatable historical ideas.

A more prominent Australian ‘skeptical hero’ is Ian Plimer, the senior earth-scientist who challenged creationist nonsense in the courts (incurring large financial losses). Plimer

is among the dwindling minority of scientists who dispute the view that human actions are crucially significant as causes of global warming. His 2009 book on the subject has divided local skeptics; and, while there are fierce exchanges on bulletin boards from those with relevant knowledge, some who themselves are **not** experts seem to support him partly out of loyalty.

Interestingly, both Windschuttle and Plimer are, in fact, slightly unusual skeptical heroes, opposed as they are to currently popular mainstream ideas rather than obviously fringe thought. There are indeed other such figures, of whom more later.

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

ASKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <http://forum.ecso.org/>.

Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany
Tel.: +49 6154/695021
Fax: +49 6154/695022
Website: <http://www.ecso.org/>

Via the website you can access articles, news, and commentary on a range of topics of interest to sceptics.

Volunteers invited to contribute to the ECSO blog

Amardeo Sarma, chair of ECSO has started postings on the ECSO blog along with Wendy Grossman and Gabor Hrasco.. You are invited to contribute, comment and pass this blog address to others: <http://blog.ecso.org/>. Note also note that the blog is now linked into the official ECSO web site above. Amardeo would like to know of blogs (especially of other sceptics sites) to add on the ‘blogroll’ (<mailto:sarma@gwup.org>).

14th European Skeptics Congress

The 14th European Skeptics Congress will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest from 17th-19th September 2010. See the ECSO website (<http://www.ecso.org/>) or visit the Hungarian Skeptics Society website: <http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>

Call for Contributions

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Would you like to contribute a regular column in your specialty or area of interest – e.g. an ‘On the Fringe’ feature? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

OF INTEREST

Proposed MSc in Anomalistic Psychology

Chris French has recently been sounding out opinions and interest concerning proposals for an MSc in Anomalistic Psychology to be taught at Goldsmiths College, University of London. The proposed content is as follows:

Anomalistic psychology (40 hours); parapsychology (20 hours); science, pseudoscience and critical thinking (20 hours); foundations of neuroscience (20 hours); research skills (20 hours); statistics and experimental design (40 hours); research project; invited speakers programme.

The following is an abridged version of his recent communication on feedback received:

‘A number of you asked if it would be possible to do the programme on a part-time basis. I would hope that this would be possible.

‘Most, if not all, students who signed up for the proposed programme would have to self-fund which would probably cost around £3.5K for fees (over one year for the FT programme, spread over two years for the PT programme).

‘The programme would provide an excellent preparation for anyone wishing to pursue a PhD in anomalistic psychology, parapsychology or a related area (evaluation of complementary and alternative medicines; psychology of religion; etc). Also anomalistic psychology is now an option on the AQA A2 Psychology syllabus as well as being taught in an increasing number of colleges and universities, so the programme would provide relevant background training for individuals considering a career in teaching, either in schools or at a higher level. Those involved in science communication in the media would also benefit from the training in critical thinking skills provided by this programme. Finally, anyone simply wishing to obtain a higher degree including advanced research skills (e.g. for professional

advancement) would also find this programme attractive.

‘It is anticipated that many of the applicants would have a first degree (2i or above) in psychology or a closely related discipline (neuroscience, cognitive science, etc.). However, given the multidisciplinary nature of the subject, candidates with other relevant backgrounds (e.g. other social sciences) would also be eligible to apply provided they could demonstrate background knowledge and/or experience of psychological approaches. The programme would be designed to provide any applicants who needed it with a crash course in experimental design and basic statistics before moving on to the more advanced methods suitable for MSc students. Such candidates should be prepared for a steep learning curve!

‘One respondent asked if it might be possible to take individual modules of the programme, paying *pro rata* rates. This is an interesting idea that I will explore further.

‘A few people, especially our overseas subscribers, asked if the programme would be available via distance learning. This is an option that we might explore at some point in the future but the programme would run initially (if indeed it runs at all) along more traditional lines.

‘Although there are some MScs around that overlap to some extent with the proposed programme, it does look like this would be the first MSc in Anomalistic Psychology in the UK (and possibly the world, as far as I can tell!).’ Chris (<mailto:c.french@gold.ac.uk>)

Article on acupuncture research

Study suggests that acupuncture with mice relieves pain not just through the placebo effect but also by stimulating cells to pump out the body’s own painkiller. See <http://bit.ly/bFIEYZ>

‘Acupuncture: unregulated therapy that took off in 70s Britain; evidence for

efficacy of 19th-century import hard to establish. See <http://bit.ly/a2rzyJ>

Sense about Science

From Leonor Sierra

(lsierra@senseaboutscience.org)

‘We are delighted that the Sense About Science Annual Lecture 2010 by Dr Fiona Godlee, Editor in Chief of the *BMJ*, is now available as a podcast from the *Guardian*:

www.guardian.co.uk/science/audio/2010/jun/24/sense-about-science-lecture-2010.

‘To see some pictures of the event (we’re still uploading more!) and for more information about the Sense About Science lectures please visit

www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/297/.’

Crop circles

Crop circle season arrives with a mathematical message. See:

<http://bit.ly/9Zomg0>

Science and Scepticism

Good feature in *New Scientist*:

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20627605.900-special-report-living-in-denial.html?DCMP=NLC-nletter&nsref=mg20627605.900>

UK Sceptics Newsletter

The latest edition (with news, articles, commentary and a competition) is available at:

<http://ukskeptics.com/newsletters/2010-1.pdf>

and at:

<http://www.ukskeptics.com/newsletters.php>

Online APRU lectures

Thanks to Mark Williams, several lectures can now be viewed online at:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/lectures/>

These include lectures by Richard Wiseman (on parapsychology), Rupert Sheldrake (on morphic resonance), Sam Parnia (on NDEs), Mark Vernon (on happiness) and Chris French (on sleep paralysis).

From the 'Psychologist'

The following is an extract from a letter that appeared in the 'Psychologist', July 2010.

I am pleased to announce the Orwellian Prize for Journalistic Misrepresentation, which will be presented annually to the author of the most inaccurate newspaper article describing academic research. There will also be certificates for runners-up who will get a dishonourable mention, and a

cash prize for the nominator of the winner. Let's fight for accurate reporting of psychological research in the press. For details of how to nominate an article, please see <http://tiny.cc/9jxuc>. (also see below)

Dorothy Bishop, University of Oxford
Also

<http://deevybee.blogspot.com/2010/06/orwellian-prize-for-journalistic.html>

Note that you can view articles (but not letters unless you are a member) in

the 'Psychologist' at the British Psychological Society website (<http://www.bps.org.uk/>). There are in fact two articles of interest to sceptics in the July issue, namely 'The naturalness of weird beliefs' by Stuart Wilson ('on why scepticism is so cognitively taxing') and 'The truth is out there' by Viren Swami and Rebecca Coles (on belief in conspiracy theories).

UPCOMING EVENTS

CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://cfilondon.org/>.

Meetings are held at Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, WC1R 4RL. Click on the above website for upcoming events.

THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>
tamas.borbely@gmx.com

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room 256, Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. Talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book.

You are strongly recommended to register (at no cost) with the APRU's 'Psychology of the Paranormal' email list to ensure that you are informed of any changes to the programme. Visit:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/email-network/>

Also visit:

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>
<http://feeds.feedburner.com/apru>

SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Website for all venues:

<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>

This event was founded by Dr Scott Campbell in 1999, for all those interested in the bizarre and the rational approach to extraordinary claims. A speaker is invited each month to present a topic of interest, which is followed by a discussion in a relaxed and friendly pub atmosphere.

Go to the above website and then choose the venue you are looking for to access the upcoming events (and information on any associated local sceptic group). Current venues are Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Winchester, Ipswich, London, Leicester, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield and Westminster.

'EXPLORING THE EXTRAORDINARY'

2nd Conference, University of York,
UK, September 24th-25th, 2010

Keynote speaker: Dr David Clarke, investigative journalist, author and broadcaster on extraordinary phenomena.

'This conference will be hosted by the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit, members of which established 'Exploring the Extraordinary' in 2007 at the University of York, with the aim of

creating a supportive researcher network that would encourage interdisciplinary links and discussions regarding the study of extraordinary experiences. By "extraordinary" we refer to experiences that are considered by experiments to be beyond the mundane, having significant spiritual or life changing connotations. We include experiences that have been called supernatural, paranormal, mystical, transcendental, exceptional, spiritual, and religious, as well as the belief systems such experiences may connect to.'

Cost: 1 day £30 (£20 concessions); 2 days £60 (£40 concessions). Includes refreshments and lunch

Registration deadline: 9th August, 2010
For more information and to register contact:

<mailto:ete.network@gmail.com>

Also see:

<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/soci/research/aeru.htm>

PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

53rd Annual Convention
Enclos Rey
57 Rue Violet
Paris
July 22nd-25th, 2010

The Annual PA Convention is a multidisciplinary international gathering of scientists and scholars engaged in the study of psi or ('psychic') experiences such as telepathy, clairvoyance,

psychokinesis, psychic healing, and precognition. The convention features three days of papers and posters presenting the latest academic research taking place in laboratories and research centers around the world. PA conventions are open to the public, and provide ample opportunities for

attendees to discuss and exchange ideas. For further information go to: <http://www.parapsych.org/convention/>

TAM LONDON 2010
October 16th-17th
Hilton London Metropole Hotel
<http://www.tamlondon.org/>
Starring Richard Dawkins, James Randi, Stephen Fry, Robin Ince (*that's enough celebrities - Ed.*)

LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answers are as follows:

The answer to the first part of the problem is 1 in 3. Many people will say 1 in 2 on the grounds that this is the probability of a child being a girl, so Jane's other child has an equal chance of being a girl or a boy. However we must first look at all the possible ways in which Jane can have two children identified only by their sex. These are as follows:

daughter / daughter
daughter / son
son / daughter
son / son

We know Jane has at least 1 daughter. There are 3 different and equally probable ways that this can happen (the first three listed above). One

of these 3 ways is to have 2 daughters. Hence the probability that she has 2 daughters is 1 in 3.

In the second part of the puzzle the child who is a daughter is uniquely identified by her name, Emma Louise (we make the reasonable assumption that Jane does not give both her children the same name). The 'other child' now is the child who is *not* Emma Louise and can be a boy or a girl. Hence the probability now that Jane has 2 daughters is 1 in 2!

Another way of uniquely identifying the daughter in the question could be to say that she is the older of the two or the taller, and so on. Or by being introduced

to her. Again the answer would be 1 in 2.

If the attribute could equally apply to the other child – e.g. 'Jane has two children; one is a daughter whose eyes are blue' - then the answer would remain at 1 in 3 – I think. What puzzles me is what is the answer if the attribute is *less* likely to be shared by the two siblings (e.g. Jane has two children; one is a daughter who plays in a cricket team'.)

Any suggestions?

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Why Statues Weep (Philosophy Press)

For the first time, the best articles from 'The Skeptic' in one volume. The collected writings from over 20 years of the publication, with articles by eminent academic researchers, and contributions from sceptics including Stephen Fry and Paul Daniels, and a foreword by *Guardian* political writer, Simon Hoggart. Why do statues weep? Did Nostradamus really predict 9/11? Is it true that we only use 10% of our brain power? Does quantum theory explain the mystery of consciousness? For 21 years, questions like these have been posed, and answered, in the pages of The Skeptic magazine, Britain's foremost and longest-running sceptical magazine, dedicated to the pursuit of truth through reason and evidence. This collection brings together the best articles from the magazine's archive in one myth-busting volume. It covers a wide range of topics, including psychic fraudsters and claims of psychic healing and alien abduction; near-death experiences, false memories, and much more.

Available at 10% discount by typing code SKEPTIC when ordering: <http://bit.ly/9ZAM1b>

POSTSCRIPT

The management at a certain health service trust have devised a scheme to create more jobs for themselves. Each job has 4 words in the title, chosen from each of the 4 columns in the table below. How many jobs can thus be created?

training	development	finance	officer
healthcare	resources	procurement	executive
corporate	communications	innovation	facilitator
research	investment	monitoring	co-ordinator
service	information	promotion	manager
staff	recruitment	support	assistant

Answer at the foot of page 12.

ABOUT ASKE

ASKE is a society for people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email <mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk>

Association for Skeptical Enquiry
email: aske1@talktalk.net
website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>

(Please note that the ASKE PO Box has now been closed down.)

Answer to postscript:

1,296!