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# Skeptical Adversaria

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2010, Number 3 (Autumn)

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The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

I have been persuaded by Tony Youens to contribute a regular 'Chairman's Blog' on the ASKE website at <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>. ASKE members are welcome to contribute their own blogs. We might even approach you.

### The Council for Skeptical Inquiry

<http://www.csicop.org/>

I have received the following from Amardeo Sarma, Chairman of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations, who recently attended a meeting of the CSI in Los Angeles:

'At the Los Angeles meeting, the CSI Executive Council was reactivated with the following members: Benjamin Wolozin, James Alcock, Ray Hyman, Amardeo Sarma, Eugenie Scott, Barry Karr, Dave Thomas, Leonard Tramiel, Ken Frazier and Scott Lilienfeld. Fourteen new Fellows were elected: Edward Kruglyakov, Edzard Ernst, Keith E. Stanovich, Mark Boslough, Karen Stollznow, Sandra Blakeslee, Daniel Kahneman, Benjamin Radford, Barry Karr, Simon Singh, Sanal Edamaruku, Anthony Pratkanis, Wendy Grossman and Richard Saunders. The most important decision was to give CSI back its old clear skeptical profile. CSI agreed to co-sponsor the 2012 World Congress in Berlin, for which details are being worked out. CSI will discuss a possible sponsorship of the Zurich DENK event in 2011. CSI is considering sending Ray Hyman and Jim Alcock on

a round trip to Europe with the Skeptics' Toolbox, and it is also planned to send Eugenie Scott to talk about creationism in a Europe tour before the Zurich event, where she will be speaking. CSI also will support the 10:23 Campaign.

'On the day after the CSI meeting, I had a long talk with Randi, who is in very good spirits and full of enthusiasm. The plan is to have Randi for a western and central Europe tour in autumn 2011 after his successful Scandinavian tour this year, for which JREF is looking for co-sponsors in Europe. The target would be filling halls of about 500, as in Scandinavia. JREF will send me a media kit.'

Members will be kept informed of developments in organising the proposed World Congress in Berlin on 2010. For details of the 2011 meeting in Zurich see 'Meetings' later in this Newsletter.

### Peak District Skeptics

Thanks to the efforts of John Tanner from Sheldon in Derbyshire, a new local sceptical society is now in its embryonic stages. This is the Peak District Skeptics. A meeting of interested persons took place at the *Crispin* pub in Great

Longstone on 7.10.10. Future meetings may be held in Bakewell. For further information email:

<mailto:info@peakskeptics.org.uk>

or visit:

<http://www.peakskeptics.org.uk/>

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

Here's a little puzzle I made up (though this is no guarantee that it is original). It's about prime numbers but it requires only a very basic knowledge of mathematics.

Two mathematicians are blindfolded and face the firing squad (no cheering please!). At the last moment the captain of the squad throws them a lifeline. 'I shall grant you a reprieve', he says, 'provided you get this right'. He then explains that he is going to ask them to raise one arm and show any number of fingers that they choose (from 1 to 5). If the sum of their fingers is a prime

number they will be shot; if it isn't they will be spared.

'No problem!' says one of our heroes and he shows his hand. The captain, with a sneer, then says, 'I haven't explained yet that you will also be shot if you show the same number of fingers'.

The first question is: If the mathematicians choose their fingers at

random, what is their chance of survival?

The captain now says to the second mathematician, 'It's your turn'.

The second question is: What would you do if you were the second mathematician and why?

Answers on page 12

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## THE ASIAN RATIONALIST SOCIETY (BRITAIN)

The following has been received from Sachdev Virdee of the Asian Rationalist Society (Britain), information on which was provided in the previous Newsletter.

On June 20th 2010 in Birmingham the Asian Rationalist Society (Britain) organised a public meeting on the 110th birth anniversary of late Dr. Abraham Thomas Kovoov. He was the founder and organiser of the rationalist movement in India and Sri Lanka which has now entered the international arena.

Sach Dev Virdee, secretary of the organisation, while speaking on the life and mission of Dr Kovoov, shared his lifelong commitment to the rationalist movement and the explanation of spiritual frauds in the Indian sub-continent in the name of divine power. Advocate Harinder Lalli, who is the head of the legal department of Tarksheel Society, Punjab and came from India especially to attend this public meeting, highlighted the importance of rational thinking in daily life. He explained to the audience the need for logical thinking and how it extends our scientific knowledge and allows one to become free from psychological fears, such as prevailing blind faith, superstitions, and misperceptions.

Mr Chris Neville, head of Birmingham Trading Standards, informed the meeting that if it is proved in a court of law that any faith healer has

taken money to carry out some magical remedy to resolve problems and has failed to do so, then he may be punished as per law. He quoted the current case of a faith healer known as Peer Syed Sahib (Niem Mohammed) who was sentenced to imprisonment for a period of 18 months by the Wolverhampton Crown Court (see the previous issue of this Newsletter).

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### **The acceptance of rational thinking in the Asian community will lead to the building of a caste-less society.**

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Mrs Janice Bayliss, a nurse from the NHS, explained how important is the need for organ and blood donation in the Asian community and asked people to come forward to save those who are dying without the availability of organs in the community.

Dr Harish Malhotra said that the acceptance of rational thinking in the Asian community will lead to the building of a caste-less society.

Mr Sheera Johal president of the Indian Workers Association, strongly emphasised the need for rational

thinking in the Asian community to safeguard themselves from fraudulent faith healers.

Representative of the Birmingham Humanist Group, Mr Bill Green, shared his views about how important human rights are and must be honoured.

Surinder Pal Virdee, Ashwani Kumar and Devinder Naura all sang their progressive poems and songs and magical tricks were performed by Harinder Lalli and the National President of ARSB Mr Bhagwant Singh. Tari Athwal, Lavkesh Prashar, Balbir Rattu, Rajinder Claire, Jagtar Sahota, Bill Green, Eddy Roberts, Advocate Mohinder Uppal and a few new members from the audience took part during the question & answer session and helped to raise funds for the venue.

Mr Raj Balwinder and Vijay Virdee took the responsibility of selling literature at the book stall. Voluntary photography and video service was offered by Navmeet. The whole programme lasted for 3 hours and left valuable information with the audience.

Asian Rationalist Society (Britain), 346 Soho Road, Birmingham, B21 9QL

Tel: 0121 554 0077

Email: [arsb\\_logic@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:arsb_logic@yahoo.co.uk)

Website: <http://e-voice.org.uk/arsb/>

# MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Michael Heap

## The UK National Health Service

In the 1980s I attended a conference in Toronto and at the conference dinner I was seated next to a psychologist from Texas. When I introduced myself to her and informed her that I was from England she immediately replied, 'Oh! You have socialised medicine don't you?' She then embarked on a lengthy exposition about why we in the UK are misguided in not having the system of healthcare that exists in her country. Trust us Brits to get it wrong again!

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**According to one US commentator, 'People such as scientist Stephen Hawking wouldn't have a chance in the UK'**

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I don't suppose that the merits and shortcomings of the UK National Health System and President Obama's healthcare reform bill are topics that one would normally place in the category of 'Medicine on the Fringe'. Neither does there seem to me to be any reason to suppose that sceptics are likely to speak with one voice when asked whether a state-controlled health system is a good or a bad thing. However, the distant sound of some of the propaganda that informed the recent healthcare debate across the pond should certainly have awakened the seasoned sceptic from the deepest of slumbers. Notable was the comparison of survival periods for certain cancers without any consideration given to time of diagnosis. But what about this: apparently (I didn't know this, even though I have worked in the National Health Service (NHS) for the best part of 40 years) the UK healthcare system has 'death panels' that decide which sick people should be allowed life-saving treatment. According to one US commentator, 'People such as scientist Stephen Hawking wouldn't

have a chance in the UK, where the National Health Service would say the life of this brilliant man, because of his physical handicaps, is essentially worthless' ('How the house bill runs over grandma', *Investor's Business Daily*, 31.7.09).

Does the word 'nitwit' come to mind?

There is a very balanced comparison of the healthcare systems of the two countries in the July 2010 issue (Volume 103) of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, ('Two countries divided by a common language: Health systems in the UK and the USA' by M. Desai, B. Rachet, M.P. Coleman & M. McKee, pp 283-287). There are relative advantages and disadvantages; for example, in the USA older people with cancer fare better than in the UK but outcomes for younger people with chronic disease are much worse. And the USA spends three times as much per person on healthcare than does the UK.

## More on homeopathy and the NHS

The Spring 2010 issue of this newsletter noted that in February the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published a report on the use of NHS money to provide patients with homeopathic treatment. The committee's conclusions were that there is no evidence that homeopathy works beyond the placebo effect; that the Government should stop funding homeopathy on the NHS; and further clinical trials of homeopathy are not justified. In June 2010 doctors at the British Medical Association annual conference voted that NHS funding for homeopathic treatment should be withdrawn.

However in July the Government decided that the NHS will continue to fund this placebo. See:

[http://www.homeowatch.org/policy/evidence\\_check\\_response.pdf](http://www.homeowatch.org/policy/evidence_check_response.pdf)

The Department of Health based this decision on 'choice', not efficacy. 'We believe in patients being able to make

informed choices about their treatments, and in a clinician being able to prescribe the treatment they feel most appropriate in particular circumstances,' said a spokesman. 'Local NHS and clinicians, rather than Whitehall, are best placed to make decisions on what treatment is appropriate for their patients'.

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**Choice is a fine thing so long as it doesn't come at too high a price.**

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Supporters of homeopathy point out that the total annual NHS expenditure on homeopathy (estimated at around £4 million) is a tiny fraction of the total cost of the NHS (currently over £100 billion). So what price do we put on 'choice'? Periodically the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) decides that it is not worth the NHS funding a certain treatment, often a drug for cancer or dementia, because the clinical benefits do not justify the expense, the latest casualty being the anti-cancer drug Avastin. Commonly, patients already on the treatment and their doctors protest, but usually in vain. The cost of keeping *them* happy would be far more than the cost of keeping users of homeopathy happy. Choice is a fine thing so long as it doesn't come at too high a price.

One positive outcome is the decision that the MHRA (the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency) is to review the labelling requirements of homeopathic products 'to ensure that these deliver clarity as to the status of products and their composition'.

Meanwhile, it has been reported that one of the quangos that the government is considering axing is the Advisory Board on the Registration of Homeopathic Products. For details of this committee go to:

<http://www.mhra.gov.uk/Committees/MedicinesAdvisoryBodies/AdvisoryBoard/theRegistrationofHomeopathicProducts/index.htm>

And in September, NHS Highland, which spends a minimum of £13,000 a year on referrals to two homeopathic practitioners in Inverness, has decided to withdraw its funding. This follows the revelation on a television documentary by homeopath Katie Jarvis that she gave

patients a homeopathic medicine designed to replace the MMR vaccine. See:

<http://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/Article.aspx/1917558?UserKey=#ixzz128PD>  
[CsQu](#)

and

<http://news.scotsman.com/news/NHS-funding-cut-for-homeopathy.6567228.jp>

Finally the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital has changed its

name to the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine 'to better reflect the services it offers'. See:

<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23878782-homeopathic-hospitals-name-change-is-dishonest.do>

## LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

### Mark Newbrook

#### Making it up

There is a vast literature on invented languages. These can be divided into two broad types. First come languages invented for use in works of fiction, usually science fiction or fantasy; some used by imaginary human or near-human groups, others by outright aliens. Although some inventors are amateurish and come up with implausible systems and palpable errors, the authors in question also include some expert linguists, notably J.R.R. Tolkien (Elvish etc) and Suzette H. Elgin ('Laadan'). The 'human' languages which these writers create are perfectly normal languages which happen not to exist in the real world. Indeed, in 2004 David Salo published what is much the best of a string of technical linguistic books analysing Tolkien's languages as if they were real; he can be viewed discussing the matter on the supporting DVD for Peter Jackson's movie *The Return Of The King*. (I myself had a minor role in this work as one of a two-scholar pre-publication review team for the University of Utah Press.)

Languages portrayed as used by non-humanoids are more awkward, but in competent hands these too may be plausible (so far as one can tell, given that – unless we accept certain unconvincing claims made by UFO-contactees – we have no actual evidence yet!). The trick is to invent systems

which (a) fit the alien physiology, psychology, home environment etc. as described and (b) (partly for that reason) infringe some of the main 'typological' patterns which prevail across the range of human languages, or even some well-established 'language universals'.

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#### **Linguists are in fact divided as to the degree to which the set of all human languages genuinely displays important universal features.**

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Linguists are in fact divided as to the degree to which the set of all human languages genuinely displays important universal features. The best-known 'school', that of Chomsky, takes the strongest view on this issue. But all linguists acknowledge **some** features which are universal despite not being logically necessary; and there are certainly statistically preferred and non-preferred patterns in grammar, sound-systems etc. There are thus various types of language which are completely fit for purpose but are very rare or altogether absent on Earth. A language totally unrelated to human languages and developed by another species on another planet – even if similar to ours in very general/superficial terms, e.g. uttered with similar speech organs – could well be of one of these types.

The best-known invented language of this sub-type is Klingon (used in the *Star Trek* series and movies); the Klingon are relatively humanoid. This language, developed by the linguist Marc Okrand, displays some alien phonetics and typologically striking features such as Object-Verb-Subject word order, which (arguably for reasons involving conceptualisation) is the rarest among human languages – or those which actually have subjects and objects – of the six possible basic word orders (compare English with Subject-Verb-Object, Japanese or Latin with Subject-Object-Verb). See:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klingon_language)

A more recently invented language of this kind is Na'vi, introduced in the 2009 movie *Avatar*. This language was invented by the linguist Paul Frommer, and again displays some typologically striking features of grammar etc. See:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na'vi\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na'vi_language)

Some languages are invented for use in domains other than literature as such; see for example Kobaian, developed by the French rock band Magma – although this 'language', like some others, seems to involve mainly vocabulary (easier for non-linguists to invent!).

A dated but still fascinating book-length work on science-fiction languages is Walter E. Meyers' *Aliens*

*And Linguists* (1980). For more up-to-date material, see for instance:

<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/11/17/okrent/>.

Also, for discussion of communication with actual aliens when encountered, see:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/even-if-we-found-aliens-how-would-we-communicate-1878670.html>

and Stephen Battersby in *New Scientist* 23/1/10, etc, and other such pieces – which, however, are often seriously lacking in specifically linguistic expertise; on this point, see my ‘The Aliens Speak – And Write’, in *Magonia* 85 (2004), pp 3-8.

I will examine the second broad type of invented language next time.

### **Sounding harsh, talking sexy**

Over the years, various sociolinguists have researched the subjective associations of different spoken languages and accents. Predictably, these differ for contrasting groups of experimental subjects who do or do not know the languages in question, can or cannot accurately identify the geographical areas where the accents are used, do or do not like what they know or believe about these areas or entire countries, etc. Few Singaporeans agree with the common British judgment that German sounds ‘harsh’, but many hear

native-speaker English accents as ‘over-excitable’. And Americans who wrongly identify a Birmingham accent as Scottish often find it much more palatable than Brits who are very familiar both with its provenance and with the (over-)negative popular image of the West Midlands, while those who have no idea at all as to where it is from typically have **no** specific feelings about it. Even well-informed Brits may find the sound of a Cockney saying *paint* ‘ugly’, while having no issue with an educated speaker saying *pint* – even though the two sound the same!

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**Every few years some untrained person does a poorly-designed survey purporting to show which accents are perceived as ‘sexy’ and which not.**

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In contrast, on some issues there is wide agreement across language communities about the ‘feel’ of spoken words. For example, almost everyone, whatever their first language and their experience, agrees that an object called *ikiki* in some unidentified language will be spiky, whereas an object of similar size and colour called *umumu* will be rounded.

Many non-linguists have come up with less well-grounded or even bizarre claims in this area. Every few years some untrained person does a poorly-designed survey purporting to show which accents are perceived as ‘sexy’ and which not, sometimes offering to train people to use the sexier ones! (It has been said, tongue in cheek of course, that one **cannot** seduce someone in an Ulster accent!) And in my article ‘Good or bad, round or spiky’ (*Skeptical Briefs* [CSICOP] 15:4, December 2005) I examine the claims of a Russia-based theory called ‘phono-semantics’, whose practitioners naively treat a whole raft of educated native-speaker accents as good or bad approximations to General American – which they believe will be perceived as the most attractive and is thus suitable to be adopted by all.

### **Panda-speak**

In February 2010 it was reported that a giant panda raised in Atlanta was to be assigned a Chinese language teacher on her move to a zoo in Chengdu, Sichuan Province. Apparently she will not be familiar with Chinese, especially the Sichuan ‘dialect’ (*fangyan*). So how much English does she know?! And can she understand only the Georgia accent?

## *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*?



## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

*Afrikan Alphabets: The Story Of Writing In Afrika* by Saki Mafundikwa. New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2007, (pp xix + 169).

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

This book provides a very interesting survey of an area often neglected in discussions of writing systems; indeed, as the author and the preface-writer Maurice Tadadjeu indicate, it is often assumed (though not by linguists) that African languages were seldom written before the introduction of alphabets (mainly by European colonisers) in modern times. The material covers the origins and characteristics of a wide range of scripts used to write various African languages.

The main problem with the book involves a considerable element of 'Afrocentrism': the recent tendency (especially in the USA and elsewhere in the African diaspora) to exaggerate the role of Africa in world culture, by way of reaction to the previous, often racist, downplaying of Africa's contributions to history and intellectual life (and to institutions such as slavery). Examples are the ready acceptance of Ayele Bekerie's extreme and often dubious claims about the Ethiopic 'abugida' (intermediate between an alphabet and a syllabary), and the seriously exaggerated claims made for the Cameroonian Shu-

Mom system (made especially strongly in the preface). Afrocentric pseudo-historical works are cited without any acknowledgment of their highly marginal status. Quasi-mystical notions involving 'harmony' and spirituality are foregrounded in places.

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**While the book is informative on a little-known topic, it must be read with various caveats in mind.**

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There are also some oddities, commencing with the decision to spell the words *Africa* and *African* with K rather than C, on the ground that K is the letter normally used for the sound in question in Africa itself. The C-K contrast arises only in the context of the modern use of the Roman alphabet, where either letter would serve. The Romans used the form with C because this was how they transliterated all Greek loans which had kappa (K) in the original. Furthermore, and more seriously, the scripts covered include

various non-alphabetic systems (syllabaries, the Ethiopic abugida, etc); the title is thus misleading (possibly because *alphabet* is much the best known of these terms among non-linguists). In addition, some of the systems discussed are not true scripts but are instead semiotic systems not representing specific languages or their words, or even simply art or at best matters of graphic design. This may involve the desire to suggest that pre-modern African societies were more literate than was in fact the case (another manifestation of Afrocentrism). And in more general terms the level of linguistic expertise leaves something to be desired. For instance, the notions of *ideograph* and *logograph* are confused, and the comments about the ultimate origins of writing are rather naïve and inaccurate.

In sum: while the book is informative on a little-known topic, it must be read with various caveats in mind.

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*Alternative Medicine? A History*, by Roberta Bivins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 2008 (pp 264). ISBN13:9780199218875/ ISBN10:0199218870.

Reviewed by Niall Taylor

I have to say, despite the promise of its title, this book was a disappointing read. Although the first chapter harks back as far as the 17th century and there is a nod to the 20th century in the closing chapter, the bulk of this work is an account of the challenges to the Western medicine of the 18th and 19th centuries from medical systems introduced from other parts of the world. The alternative

medical systems addressed are mainly moxibustion and acupuncture but also include Traditional Chinese Medicine, Ayurveda, Unani Tibb, mesmerism and homeopathy (Europe's 'home grown' alternative medicine).

The history covered in the work is worthwhile, if limited. It is interesting to learn for example about the introduction of acupuncture into Europe and the

reaction of the medical establishment to it in the 1700s or even earlier and how, as a practice, it was confused by western doctors with a method of bleeding and so condemned as ineffective; similarly moxibustion was confused with cautery. It is interesting to hear that moxibustion as a treatment for the ubiquitous gout of the 18th century was highly praised in certain circles, not least because it

avoided the brutal, painful and occasionally life threatening medical practices then current.

Following this however, no attempt is made to bring the subject up to date and discuss how scientific advances have allowed modern medicine to emerge from and leave behind earlier 'mainstream' practices including bleeding, cupping, scarification, puking and purging, which by and large made no more rational sense than the alternative practices under discussion. Instead, the author chooses to portray the current medical establishment as if it were still of the dogmatic mind set of its predecessors of 200 years ago. This approach provides a false, straw man, construct which will give encouragement and ammunition to those who currently practice and promote non-scientific medicine but has no basis in reality.

So, this book appears to be yet another work by an author versed in social sciences that conflates 19th century so-called 'heroic' medicine with modern science-based medicine and, with a postmodern bent, presents any and all alternative systems of medicine as simply 'other ways of knowing' and

allegedly equally as valid and effective as science-based medicine. Very early in the work the tone becomes increasingly partisan and, turning against scientific medicine, borders on the polemic at times with claims that orthodox medicine was 'forged in the furnace of fear and loathing of homeopathy', that ether was promoted to combat Mesmerism, and that anatomical study is a way of excluding women and non-whites from 'the franchise' (none of these claims is referenced so the reader is left guessing about their veracity).

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**Neurotransmitters and the Krebs cycle exist; whether Western intellects find them attractive or not is simply missing the point.**

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Scientific medicine (or 'biomedicine') is dismissed, without supporting evidence as impersonal and driven by the needs of the laboratory and technology and the 'medical-industrial complex'. Modern doctors are accused of being concerned only with dispassionate observation and

measurement and of ignoring patient self-reporting. The author is apparently unaware of the enormous part played in the conventional therapeutic relationship by history-taking and has perhaps forgotten how often a doctor will open a consultation with the words, 'How do you feel?'.

From the outset, as the reader is told of the author's childhood, growing up alternately in various isolated African communities and urban New England, to the closing sentence when people are urged to see other cultures first hand and '*judge for themselves if qi or prana are more or less credible, comprehensible, and intellectually attractive than neurotransmitters or the Krebs cycle*', this book is characterised by an apparent lack of understanding of science and the importance of simply being able to decide whether a medical procedure works or not, something science alone, not tradition, not intuitive 'ways of knowing', can tell us. Neurotransmitters and the Krebs cycle exist; whether Western intellects find them attractive or not is simply missing the point.

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## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE 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:

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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.

### 14<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress

The 14th European Skeptics Congress, hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society, took place in Budapest from September 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> 2010. This was an excellent meeting and the presentations were of a consistently high standard. Congratulations are due to Gabor Hrasko of the Hungarian Skeptics and his colleagues.

For further information visit the Hungarian Skeptics Society website:

<http://www.szkeptikustarsasag.hu/en/index.php>

It is likely that the 15<sup>th</sup> European Skeptics Congress will be in Prague (the year has to be decided as the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress was delayed by a year.)

## OF INTEREST

### **The 1023 Campaign ('Homeopathy: there's nothing in it')**

Website: <http://www.1023.org.uk/>

Email <mailto:contact@1023.org.uk>

Andy Wilson of the Merseyside Skeptics is co-ordinating the next international 'mass overdose' which will be held over the weekend of the 5th and 6th February 2011 (either day to allow some flexibility).

Please get in touch as soon as possible if you are organising an event in your locality.

### **School of Old Wives' Traditional Medicine**

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/PDF/OldWivesMed.pdf>

On Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> September Sense About Science launched the Voice of Young Science School of Old Wives' Traditional Medicine. VoYS, SaS's network of young scientists and medics, took to the streets of London to hand out diplomas and register members of the public who could correctly answer a few simple questions on traditional advice and cures. VoYS did this in response to the Department of Health's proposed professional registration scheme for practitioners of traditional medicine, which will regulate everything *except* whether a practitioner has medical training or is practising an evidence-based discipline.

### **College of Medicine**

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/02/prince-charles-college-medicine-holistic-complementary>

or

<http://bit.ly/99c71a>

Senior figures at the Prince of Wales's complementary health charity, which closed amid a criminal investigation this year, are opening a college to promote holistic medicine in the NHS. The College of Medicine aims to raise the acceptance of 'an integrated approach to health' among doctors, politicians and the public by running courses and publishing books, journals and films.

Clarence House (*this is one of his palaces, not one of his servants - Ed.*) says the Prince of Wales is not involved.

According to the *Guardian* article (above) one director of the college is Michael Dixon, a GP in Cullompton, Devon, who was formerly medical director of the Foundation for Integrated Health. Dixon's surgery lists alternative therapies including one called 'frequencies of brilliance' which, according to its Australian founder, works in extra dimensions of space. See: <http://www.frequenciesofbrilliance.com/>

Dr Dixon does not practice any alternative medicine himself.

### **NHS job advert for a 'homeopathic specialist'**

<http://www.dailyexpress.co.uk/posts/view/192956/NHS-alternative-therapy-blast/>

In August it was announced that while NHS Tayside was planning to cut 500 jobs in the next year in a £30million economy drive it has advertised for a 'specialty doctor in homeopathy' who is required to hold two sessions a week at a salary of £36,807 to £68,638. (*I hope this is pro rata - Ed.*) NHS Tayside insists that the £68,000-a-year homeopathic specialist, based in Dundee, will bring "real benefits" to people who are recovering from illnesses such as cancer.

Also visit:

<http://torgwen.posterous.com/application-for-specialty-doctor-in-homeopathy>

and

<http://xtaldave.wordpress.com/2010/08/14/in-which-i-apply-for-a-job-as-a-homeopath/>

and

<http://www.dcscience.net/?p=3339>

### **Nirmukta: Promoting science and free-thought in India**

From Ajita Karmal:

Nirmukta has been promoting science and freethought in India for the past 2 years now, mostly through online activism. The main site is:

<http://nirmukta.com/>

### **Mecca challenge to Greenwich Mean Time**

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/middleeast/saudi-arabia/7937123/Giant-Mecca-clock-seeks-to-call-time-on-Greenwich.html>

or

<http://bit.ly/cAWJUw>

According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric known around the Muslim world for his popular television show 'Sharia and Life', Mecca has a greater claim than Greenwich to being the prime meridian because it is 'in perfect alignment with the magnetic north'. His claim that the holy city is a 'zero magnetism zone' has won support from some Arab scientists like Abdel-Baset al-Sayyed of the Egyptian National Research Centre who says that there is no magnetic force in Mecca. 'That's why, if someone travels to Mecca or lives there, he lives longer, is healthier and is less affected by the earth's gravity', he said. 'You get charged with energy'.

Western scientists have challenged such assertions, noting that the Magnetic North Pole is in actual fact on a line of longitude that passes through Canada, the United States, Mexico and Antarctica.

### **'Einstein's theory is proved'**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/einsteins-theory-is-proved-ndash-and-it-is-bad-news-if-you-own-a-penthouse-2088195.html>

or

<http://bit.ly/cKoolc>

The world's most accurate clock has neatly shown how right Albert Einstein was 100 years ago, when he proposed that time is a relative concept and the higher you live above sea level the faster you should age.

### **British False Memory Society**

<http://www.bfms.org.uk/>

The latest BFMS Newsletter can now be accessed at the above website



## My Lie: A True Story of a False Memory

[http://www.salon.com/books/memoirs/index.html?story=/books/int/2010/09/20/meredith\\_maran\\_my\\_lie\\_interview](http://www.salon.com/books/memoirs/index.html?story=/books/int/2010/09/20/meredith_maran_my_lie_interview)

Meredith Moran's account of her experience of false memory.

Follow this link to listen to a preview:

<http://vimeo.com/14865735>

### Peer-reviewed journals

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/nigel-hawkes-peer-reviewed-journals-arent-worth-the-paper-theyre-written-on-2058067.html>

or

<http://bit.ly/9GXw64>

Peer-reviewed journals aren't worth the paper they're written on according to Nigel Hawkes of the *Independent* Saturday, August 21<sup>st</sup> 2010

Nigel Hawkes is Director of Straight Statistics:

<http://www.straightstatistics.org/>

### UFO sightings

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufo/>

The Ministry of Defence has just released the latest batch of their UFO files (see above), as part of an ongoing three-year collaboration between the MoD and the National Archives.

See also:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/05/ufo-files-conspiracy-allegations>

or

<http://bit.ly/dtnxtR>

And ASKE member Ed Buckner recently posted the following on ASKE.net concerning a list of UFO sightings at:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_UFO\\_sightings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_UFO_sightings)

'This list of sightings, according to Wikipedia, is quite interesting. There are attempts at neutral editing in some of the articles, i.e. to make the language neutral as to whether UFOs exist or not (usually by qualifying claims by 'alleged' or 'reported') but in many cases the accounts are not neutral. E.g. here

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorman\\_Dogfight](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorman_Dogfight)

where the introduction qualifies the report as a 'UFO incident', and where it is claimed that 'the Gorman Dogfight was one of three "classic" UFO incidents in the late forties that "proved to [Air Force] intelligence specialists that UFO's were real" ' Or this

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariana\\_UFO\\_Incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariana_UFO_Incident)

which says that the film footage is believed to among the first taken of a UFO. At the end it says that "over 100 other UFO sightings have been made in Great Falls, Montana, making it one of the most active locations for UFO sightings in North America." Or here

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascagoula\\_Abduction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascagoula_Abduction)

which is "among the best-known cases of alien abduction".

### Philosophical conundrums and paradoxes

<http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/>  
Test yourself on a number of 'philosophy experiments' at the above site.

### More from Sense About Science

[www.senseaboutscience.org](http://www.senseaboutscience.org)

'We now store a large amount of information: logging calls and enquiries, keeping track of examples of pseudoscience and miracle cures and running a huge support base for the libel reform campaign. Our computers are creaking, slow and pretty much defunct. To help us respond more efficiently we desperately need three new PCs and some extra software. The cost is about £1,500 – can you contribute towards it? Do you work for an organisation with money left in a budget that could be donated to this?'

Or, do you have computers that can be donated? They need to have the following specs:

- 1GHz or higher processor
- 512 MB RAM or higher
- 80Gb hard-drive
- A CD drive
- And ideally be loaded with Windows XP or newer

If you can help with this, please drop me an email as soon as possible!

### Sense About Science wins Health Charity of the Year

On 16th July 2010 the Medical Journalists' Association announced their 2010 awards at a ceremony held at the Royal Society of Medicine. We were honoured to win Health Charity of the Year for our work campaigning to reform England's libel laws. We were delighted that Simon Singh won Health Campaigner of the Year. See who else won awards and read reactions from Tracey Brown and Simon Singh on our website:

[www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/518](http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/518).

### Update on libel reform campaign

The Government is currently drafting a bill to reform the libel laws to protect freedom of speech, as announced in the House of Lords on July 9<sup>th</sup>. We have been closely involved in this and Tracey has met the Ministry of Justice to feed into the drafting process. If you are a science writer or editor and can share with us examples of the impact of the libel laws on your work, get in touch with Sife:

[slane@senseaboutscience.org](mailto:slane@senseaboutscience.org).

Thank you for all the support so far and remember to keep asking your friends and colleagues to sign up at [www.libelreform.org](http://www.libelreform.org).

### Our sessions at Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF 2010)

Julia blogged about her time in Turin at ESOF2010, on the sessions we ran, partnered by Elsevier, on peer review and myth busting and on parties in castles. Read "Julia's diary" and see photos of the packed sessions here:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/517>.

Our experience at ESOF demonstrated the interest there is worldwide on myth-busting initiatives and how early career researchers are embracing their civic responsibility. To build on this VoYS plans to run an international congress on standing up for science in 2011 to share experiences and inspire other scientists.

## Making Sense of Statistics

We have, with your help, sent a copy of our guide to statistics to every MP and we're now trying to complete the last bit of funding to cover Scottish MPs, Welsh Assembly members etc. If you can help us make this happen please donate here: [www.justgiving.com/makingsenseofstatistics](http://www.justgiving.com/makingsenseofstatistics).

## Sense About Science Lecture 2010

We were delighted to have Dr Fiona Godlee as this year's speaker. She gave a thought-provoking lecture on 'It's time to stand up for science once again'. Follow the link to hear the podcast of the lecture and see photos of the evening here:

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/297/>

The lecture was also an opportunity to thank Joe Beard, who cycled from John O'Groats to Lands' End, and Aoife Hunt, who leapt out of a plane (with a parachute), for their charitable fundraising. If you have any ideas for raising funds for Sense About Science then do get in touch or you can set up a Justgiving page (find out more at: [www.justgiving.com](http://www.justgiving.com)).

We're having a busy summer and in amongst dealing with issues on pheromones, junk food and allergies, enquiries about cloned cows and milk, our work on drug safety science is well

underway. We also have several new Sense About Science publications planned, which we'll tell you more about later in the year.

Dr Leonor Sierra  
Science and Policy Manager  
Sense About Science  
25 Shaftesbury Avenue  
London W1D 7EG  
Registered Charity No. 1101114  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7478 4380

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### MISCELLANEOUS OCTOBER EVENTS

Chris French has just circulated the following list of events happening this October:

**21 Oct: Chris French** @ The Goose Pub, 167 Rushey Green, Catford, London SE6 4BD, 7:30 pm

Talk for the Lewisham Humanists: 'The Psychology of Anomalous Experiences' See:

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/meet-up/groups/london/lewisham-humanist-group>

**22-31 Oct: London Ghost Festival**

No less than 24 spooky events (talks, ghost walks, etc.) spread over ten days. See:

<http://www.londonparanormal.com/lgf.htm>

One of which is...

**26 Oct: Chris French** @ Shoe Lane Library, Hill House, 1 Little New St, London EC4A 3JR, 12:30 pm

'The Psychology of Ghosts and Hauntings'. See:

<http://www.londonparanormal.com/GFtalk2tues26oct2010.html>

**26 Oct: Deborah Hyde** @ Goldsmiths, London, 6:10 pm

'Demons and nightmares: Why do People Believe in the Malign Supernatural?' See:

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/apru/speakers/abstracts-1011/#d.en.22058>

**25-31 Oct: Swindon Ghostfest**

Including 'Seriously Strange' on 30 Oct with Lionel Fanthorpe, Peter Underwood, Chris French & Nicky Sewell. See:

<http://hswin.moonfruit.com/>  
(*That's enough of Chris French - Ed.*)

### CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON

<http://www.cfilondon.org/>

Stephen Law has circulated details of two interesting forthcoming events organised by the Centre for Inquiry UK and South Place Ethical Society. The meetings take place at Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL (Main Hall)

**Saturday October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010**

10.00-10.50am: *Intellectual black holes*. Stephen Law

This talk is drawn from Stephen's forthcoming book *Believing bullshit: How not to fall into an intellectual black hole*.

11.00am-1.00pm (includes 30 mins. Q&A): *The God virus*. Darrel Ray

A fast paced, humorous and engaging talk from this best-selling U.S. author of *The God virus: How religion*

*infects our lives and culture*. Darrel will explore 'even the most sensitive areas of religious infection from sexual guilt to abstinence only, from the hypnotic techniques of ministers to music's role in infection and how it all fits together'. Darrel will be signing copies of his book.

Just £7 on the door.

**Saturday December 18<sup>th</sup> 2010**

*The Root Causes of The Holocaust*

What caused the Holocaust? What was the role of the Enlightenment? What role did religion play in causing or trying to halt the Holocaust?

10.30-11.00am: Registration

11.00-12.00am: Jonathan Glover

12.00am-1.00pm: David Ranan (author of *'Double cross'*)

1.00-2.00pm: A.C. Grayling

Just £10 on the door.

Both meetings are free to Friends of CFI UK, PLUS GLHA, SPES, BHA, AHS, CAMP QUEST, New Humanist subscribers and subscribers to *The Skeptic* magazine. To book in advance go to:

<http://www.cfiuk.org/>

hit button 'support' and follow instructions.

**THE ANOMALISTIC  
PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH  
UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S  
COLLEGE LONDON**

<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>

[tamas.borbely@gmx.com](mailto:tamas.borbely@gmx.com)

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in room LGO1 in the New Academic 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/>

and

<http://www.twitter.com/ChrisCFrench>

and

<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 now so numerous there is almost bound to be a meeting near you.

**TAM ZURICH 2011**

September 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup>, 2011

At the Volkshaus in Zürich's City centre.

<http://www.twitter.com/TAMZurich>

**HEALTHWATCH**

<http://www.healthwatch-uk.org/>

There will be an open meeting and the Annual General Meeting of HealthWatch on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2010 at The Medical Society of London, 11 Chandos House, Cavendish Square, London W1M 0EB. The reception is at 6.30 p.m., the presentation of the Student Annual Award is at 7.30 p.m. and the HealthWatch Annual Award will be presented by Nick Ross at 7.40 p.m. to Professor David Colquhoun. The meeting is free and open to all. If you would like to attend the dinner afterwards (£35) you must return the booking form (which is on the HealthWatch website) no later than October 17<sup>th</sup>.

**TRADITIONAL HEALERS &  
MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

A one-day conference on November 10<sup>th</sup> at:

The Resource Centre  
356 Holloway Road  
London  
N7 6PA

Tel: +44 (0)20 7700 0100

<http://www.theresourcecentre.org.uk/>

This conference will be relevant to all professionals in the field of mental health and social care, including those from local authorities and NHS trusts across the UK, chaplains, community faith leaders and healers, equality leads, community development workers, service user representatives, charities, third sector, educational establishments, academics and policy makers.

Conference co-ordinator:

Ahmed Qureshi: Tel. 07540 356 526  
email:

<mailto:info@bmehealth.org>

or visit:

<http://www.bmehealth.org/>

**'BEYOND RATIONALITY III'  
WORKSHOP**

**'Resistance and the Practice of  
Rationality'**

This meeting is from November 19 to 20, 2010 at the London School of Economics & Political Science.

The themes for this workshop involve the linking of the issue of the limits of rationality with the concept of 'resistance'. This word used to be used as a synonym to irrational or reactionary behaviour in the social sciences. But things seem to have moved on and we now are able to recognise that resistance is a constant of human conduct, and its relation to rationality or irrationality is not determined or fixed at any historical epoch or with respect to any topic. The study workshop will ask: to what extent are social scientific conceptions of 'resistance' *sui generis*, or to what extent are they borrowed from the natural sciences by metaphor and analogy and vice-versa? The meeting will take place at the LSE under the auspices of the Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science, the Institute for Social Psychology and the Centre for Intelligence and Strategic Studies (Oxford MS).

If you would like to attend please email [Philcent@lse.ac.uk](mailto:Philcent@lse.ac.uk) to reserve a place. Please include your name, your institution and a contact email address. For more information please see:

[http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CPNSS/events/BeyondRationality/beyondRationalityIII.as](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CPNSS/events/BeyondRationality/beyondRationalityIII.aspx)

[px](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CPNSS/events/BeyondRationality/beyondRationalityIII.aspx)

## LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

The answers are as follows:

If the mathematicians choose their fingers a random, what is the chance that they will be shot? There are 25 combinations of numbers to consider. Of the 25 sums, 11 are primes and 5 involve the same number of fingers, one of these also being a prime (1 plus 1 = 2). So there are 15 ways of being shot and 10 ways of escaping. Hence innumerate victims of the firing squad would have only a 40% chance of survival.

Can the mathematicians improve on this? If you are one of the mathematicians the most sensible number of fingers to raise is 5, since adding 5 to the numbers 1 through to 5 will generate only one prime number (5 plus 2 = 7); the remaining sums (6, 8, 9

and 10) are all non-primes but 10 will result in death as the number of fingers on each hand is the same. Thus if you raise 5 fingers and your comrade has chosen randomly, your chances of survival are now 3 in 5, or 60%.

The worst number of fingers to raise is 2, since this generates 3 primes (3, 5 and 7), which is more than the other numbers, plus one involving the same number of fingers (4). You only survive if your comrade chooses 4 fingers (making a total of 6 with yours). Thus your chance of survival is down to 1 in 5 or 20%. Raise 1 finger and there are 2 ways of escaping (40% chance of survival), likewise with 3 and 4.

Now when your comrade prematurely raises his hand and says,

'No problem!' you will reason that he has deduced that 5 is the best number to choose (even though he is will not yet aware of the rule about the same number of fingers being chosen.) So you should avoid raising either 2 or 5 fingers. That leaves 1, 3 and 4. Is there any reason to choose or eliminate one or more of these? Well, allowing for the possibility that your comrade may well have raised 5 fingers, but assuming that he may only have realised that he should avoid choosing 2 fingers, then you could discount raising 4 fingers since one of ways of surviving with this is now lost (2+4 = 6).

So on this reasoning, if you are the second mathematician you would raise either 1 or 3 fingers.

### 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](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net)  
website: <http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>

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