

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 9, Number 1

January 2001

Homeopathy and Veterinary Medicine: Has *Bird Talk* Magazine Been Quacked? *The Infinitesimal Dose and an Immense Dilemma for Pet Owners* by Laura Ainsworth and Daniel Barnett

The two of us have a few things in common. For starters, both of us love birds (especially parrots), and we've welcomed a few feathered friends into our homes (especially Laura). Also, we're both married to truly wonderful people who share our fascination with birds. There's one more thing we share – we're both skeptics. As such, we affirm that rational and scientific processes provide us with a pretty accurate view of how and why things work the way they do in biology, chemistry, and veterinary medicine.

It therefore came as a surprise to us when Laura opened the September 2000 issue of *Bird Talk* magazine – one of America's most recognized bird care periodicals – and found, of all things, an article singing the praises of homeopathic medicines and their supposed efficacy in treating avian illnesses.

Shortly after reading the article, we sent a letter to *Bird Talk* expressing our concerns about the information presented. It has been about three months since we mailed our response to *Bird Talk*, and so far we have yet to receive any response from the magazine, let alone see the letter published. Since this controversy deals with medical treatment for pet birds, we think we've waited long enough. Therefore, we shall discuss the problems we have found with the homeopathy article, covering all of the points mentioned in our initial letter to *Bird Talk*.

The article, entitled "Exploring The Homeopathy Option," was authored by Alicia McWatters, Ph.D., CNC, who currently works as a holistic avian nutritional consultant in New Mexico. Dr. McWatters incorporates various alternative medical therapies into her treatment programs, including herbalism, vitamin/mineral therapy, and homeopathy.¹ She also helps promote the Pet Power line of avian nutritional supplements, which contain bee pollen, royal jelly, and propolis.²

Despite the fact that McWatters owns several birds and

has bred them, she offers no credentials to suggest that she knows anything whatsoever about treating them when they are ill. McWatters also fails to note that there is no consensus within the medical community that homeopathy produces anything more than a placebo effect (which, she rightly points out, is nonexistent in birds), and also fails to quote any conclusive American studies that validate its use.

In her article for *Bird Talk*, McWatters gave very brief summaries of the underlying theories behind homeopathy, including the Law of Similars and the practice of using infinitesimal doses of medication. She also detailed what to expect when visiting a homeopathic veterinarian and explained how homeopathic medications should be administered to birds. McWatters then offered this information concerning scientific research and homeopathy:

Scientific studies have been performed and published in British, German, and Indian medical journals that support the effectiveness of homeopathy. In one double-blind study, nearly twice as many flu patients recovered within 48 hours after receiving a homeopathic remedy than those receiving a placebo. In another study, hay fever sufferers experienced six times as much relief from symptoms after taking a homeopathic remedy as those who received placebos. Both of these studies were published in The Lancet, a prestigious British medical journal.³

Granted, such results produced by scientific research sound pretty impressive. Both of us

("Homeopathy" continued on page 6)



In This Issue

Homeopathy and Veterinary Medicine.....	1
Book Recommendations	2
Review of Therapeutic Touch	3
African Witchcraft Problems Continue Today.....	5

Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Welcome to the first REALL newsletter of the new millennium! Let's hope it's a little bit more rational than the previous one. So do your part to help – attend some REALL meetings! You can start with the one on Tuesday, January 2nd, at 7:00 in the Lincoln Library.

This first meeting of the millennium will feature a discussion on one of the biggest questions of the previous millennium: quantum mechanics. Rich Walker will be leading a discussion – not a speech or presentation, mind you, a discussion – about some of the strangeness inherent in quantum mechanics. He will point out some of its weirder aspects when it comes to causality, logic, and what we think of as reality when it gets down to the quantum level.

Why should we care about quantum mechanics? For one thing, many physicists are calling it “spooky.” Now, they certainly don't mean atoms are haunted, but there is obviously something going on at the quantum level that we don't yet understand. But the main reason is that some paranormalists see that we don't understand and take that to mean this is something they can sink their teeth into as “explanation” for all sorts of nonsense, such as ESP, alternative medicine, and the like.

This should be an interesting discussion, and we haven't seen most of you since at least October. So come join us!

We also have February's meeting all planned out already. Professor Malcolm Levin will give a presentation on “Creationist Goals and Objectives or How to Prepare to Give a Lecture to a Creationist Organization.” Malcolm will be discussing, in part, the presentation he recently gave to the Creation Club at Lincoln Land Community College. It's not often that a skeptic gets to speak directly to the believers, so make sure you mark your calendar for Tuesday, February 6! ☹

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Book Recommendations

By David Bloomberg

Time once again for a short book review. As a reminder, the scale goes from 0 to 5 stars.

Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History, by Philip Jenkins (Oxford University Press, \$27.50): Jenkins put together a good history of “cults” in history, showing how what was once a cult is now an accepted religion. In addition, he talks about cult scares and anti-cult activities that sometimes were worse than the cults (for example, the anti-Satanic ritual abuse panic that tore apart the lives of some parents and daycare workers). I think he downplays cult violence a bit too much, but he still has interesting things to say and provides a good historical perspective. ★★ ★★



Review of Therapeutic Touch

by David Bloomberg

As readers of this newsletter are certainly aware, there are many modes of alternative medicine that have been making headway into the public consciousness in recent years. While all of these are called “alternative” because they do not have the backing of the medical profession, some are more alternative than others. These are the ones that make claims not just relating to biology, but also relating to spirits and “energy fields” and other areas for which scientific evidence does not exist. Strange though it may seem, some of these have even gotten backing within certain branches of the medical field.

Therapeutic touch (TT) falls into this area. While it is completely misnamed (there is no touching involved), it is also founded on the ideas of a “human energy field” and the ability of a practitioner to manipulate this field to speed healing and remove pain. Unlike similar practices, though, therapeutic touch has the backing of many in the nursing field, and some states have allowed continuing education credits for courses in this practice.

This has spawned a great deal of controversy throughout the country, with skeptics and scientists squaring off against defenders and believers. Over a decade of inquiry has led two of the investigators, Béla Scheiber and Carla Selby, to put together the first book taking a critical look at this practice, simply named, *Therapeutic Touch* (Prometheus Books, \$26).

TT made big news across the country when young Emily Rosa had her grade school science project turned into an article for the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1998. Her basic test showed that therapeutic touch practitioners couldn't even detect the alleged human energy field under simple experimental conditions. Further, more refined tests, have come up with similar results. This raises the question of how practitioners could use the field to cure when they

couldn't even find it?

In September 1997, the *State Journal-Register*, acting at least in part after seeing an article in this newsletter, published an article looking into this practice, noting that it was offered at St. John's Hospital's Center for Mind-Body Medicine. (A recent inquiry with the Center's director found that it is no longer offered.)

Scheiber and Selby brought together a number of investigators familiar with TT (themselves included) and combined the essays into a comprehensive look at this phenomenon. The discussions include historical overviews, ethical issues, whether it should be used and taught, attempts to test its claims, and, of course, whether TT actually works. As a whole, the book serves as a good example of solid investigation, including voluminous references. It even includes several key papers by therapeutic touch proponents, showing some of their best evidence. These are further examined by others later in the book, showing how that best evidence has major flaws.

Scheiber and Selby became involved in the saga of TT through a the Colorado local skeptics group. That group, with these two leading the charge, tried to get the Colorado Board of Nursing and others to explain why continuing education credit was being granted for courses in this area, and to provide evidence to back the claims for TT. Through that fight, Scheiber and Selby became experts in the field. Other chapters are written by those who have similarly become knowledgeable in this area.

One interesting chapter discusses the attempts of the local Philadelphia skeptics group, along with magician and investigator James Randi, to find a TT practitioner who could pass some simple tests to show how therapeutic touch works. This search was buoyed by Randi's standing offer of a large monetary reward to anybody who can demonstrate a paranormal event under test conditions; at the time, this amount was over \$700,000. Yet only one person came forward to be tested, and he did no better than simple guessing would have done. It seems strange that if so many people think they have this ability, only one came forward to even try to get such a large sum of money.

Several of the chapters point out that this is not just a case of an individual choosing to go to an alternative practitioner because he or she believes in them. Government funding has been given to TT proponents. For example, the U.S. Depart-

(“Therapeutic Touch” continued on page 7)



Where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?

— Jane Austen

African Witchcraft Problems Continue Today

by Richard Petraitis

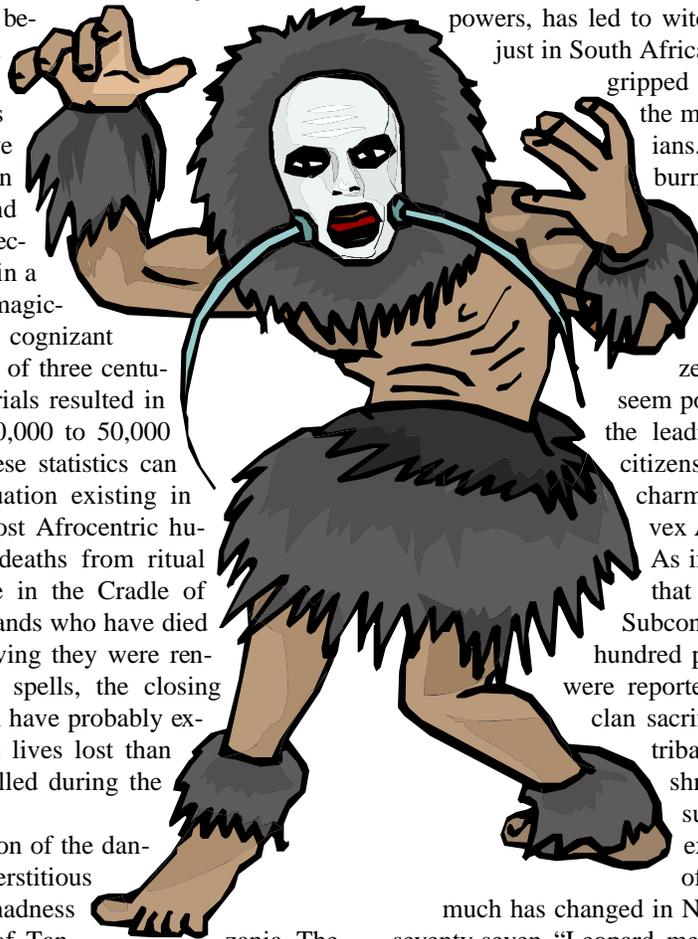
The late Carl Sagan, in his popular work *The Demon Haunted World*, stated that the Christian Churches had been the last bastion of persecution for those falsely accused of witchcraft.¹ However, I don't believe Dr. Sagan's charge in light of current and historical events. As I have addressed in previous articles, independent news sources verify that the often fatal lynching of suspected witches and sorcerers still continues to this day on the African Continent. These ancient human rights abuses never really died out, despite the efforts of European colonials to suppress them. Presently, these barbaric murders are continued at a local level via the exploitation of people's superstitious fears by local witch-doctors, who are often hired by Africa's believers in black magic for "smelling out" witches. At other times, the jealousies of neighbors, fueled by Old Age beliefs, are enough cause to set alleged witches aflame. Irrational fears have cost the lives of approximately twenty-five thousand people in the nation states south of the Sahara. And this is the death toll for the decade of the 1990s alone! To obtain a better appreciation of this magic-based mayhem, we need to be cognizant that from 1450 to 1750, a span of three centuries, Europe's 100,000 witch trials resulted in the deaths of approximately 40,000 to 50,000 alleged witches.² Hopefully, these statistics can better illuminate the grim situation existing in modern Africa for even the most Afrocentric humanist. Counting the human deaths from ritual sacrifice, currently on the rise in the Cradle of Civilization, and also the thousands who have died fighting in Africa's wars believing they were rendered bulletproof via magical spells, the closing decades of this past millennium have probably exacted a higher price in human lives lost than the total number of persons killed during the Inquisition.

There is no better illustration of the danger to human life posed by superstitious belief than the witch hunting madness currently gripping the nation of Tanzania. The horrific statistics at this epicenter of magical thinking defy all Western sensibilities in regards to human rights – given the almost 20,000 killed by witch lynching inside that East African state over the past decade.³ From 1994 to 1998, nearly 5,000 unfortunates were killed by Tanzanian witch-hunting mobs.⁴ The last eighteen months of the Twentieth Century saw hundreds of persons lynched to death throughout Tanzania. Women with red eyes, caused by years of work over smoky

kitchen fires, were believed to bear the mark of witches and subsequently were set afire by armed mobs, or they were executed by contract killers hired by family members! Not unlike the witch executions of Europe's Past, over 70 % of the alleged witches were female octogenarians.⁵ Poverty and illiteracy continue to be major contributors in a surge of belief, among many Africans, in the existence of witches and magic. Tanzania's witch-hunt death toll overshadows even South Africa's 1990s record of 1,000 to 2,000 deaths from witch executions and magic based ritual ("muti") murders. This East African nation has been ravished by witch-hunts resulting in lynching deaths far in excess of India's decade-old witch lynching death toll of 2,000 victims – some 200 persons killed annually.⁶

In fairness, the belief in the existence of sorcerers and witches, with the execution of those believed to have magic powers, has led to witch hysteria throughout Africa, not just in South Africa or Tanzania. In 1992, Kenya was gripped by witch hunting that resulted in the mob murders of three hundred civilians. They died by having their homes burned down over their heads.⁷ That same year, dozens of others were ritually slain for their tongues and genitals, to be used in magic formulas by those embracing Old Age beliefs among Kenya's citizenry.⁸ Consequently, ritual murders seem poised to gain equal status as one of the leading causes of death for Africa's citizens. Ritual murders for magical charms and herbalist potions continue to vex African police agencies.

As if to emphasize the pernicious hold that paranormal belief has over the Subcontinent's citizens, in 1999 several hundred people, including eight policemen, were reported killed in Nigeria after a tribal clan sacrificed several persons from a rival tribal group to Ju-Ju gods at their shrine. The rioting that ensued resulted in the high death toll and the exodus of thousands from the area of conflict.⁹ It appears that not much has changed in Nigeria since the 1946 execution of seventy-seven "Leopard men," magico-religious ritual killers belonging to the Idiong Society, who were implicated in the murders of some 157 civilians - many of those killings were conducted to obtain body parts for magic nostrums.¹⁰ Currently, the Nigerian city of Lagos is combating a crime wave fed by a black market in human body parts. Crime statistics for Lagos have shown ritual murders, conducted to obtain human heads, genitalia, eyes or other body parts for use in magic ceremonies, ranging from 100 to 350 murders annually.¹¹ A great



number of these “shaman murders” are for selfish purposes, such as the procurement of great riches, or even great power within Nigerian society. Ritual killings are rampant throughout the rural areas of this West African nation. This past year, a thirty year old man was arrested by police authorities; he later confessed to the kidnapping of over one hundred Nigerian children for their sale to black magic practitioners – so they could have the necessary organs for their clients’ magic potions ! South African police believe that over a five year period, between 1995 and 2000, three hundred people, mainly children, were killed within the city limits of Johannesburg for their vital organs, all due to a rising demand for “stronger medicine” needed by spell-casting witch-doctors.¹² No wonder that in 1999 King Mswati III of Swaziland decided to keep the death penalty in place out of concern for the rise in ritual murders inside the borders of his nation state.¹³ From Tanzania, a cross border trade in human skins has begun with human skins being sold to clients in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, and Malawi. Victims are kidnapped and killed for this lucrative black market activity that fetches up to \$9,000 per human skin from practitioners of the occult arts. The human skins are believed to repel evil spirits from one’s home, or business, and to bless the possessor with riches.¹⁴

According to a 1999 U.S. State Department report, ritual murders were quite popular during Liberia’s civil war. From the start of this regional civil war, some nine years earlier, magic-based killing to build supernatural powers for oneself, and for the procurement of battlefield immunity against one’s enemies, was a desired end for combatants on all sides. The exact number of ritual victims is difficult to tally since the local police counted many deaths, with organs cut from the dead, as accidents.¹⁵ One of Liberia’s occult villains was General Joshua Milton Blahyi, also known as General Butt Naked. Commander “Butt Naked” claimed to have performed magico-religious ceremonies, including the human sacrifice of young children, to gain supernatural powers. Ferocious in combat, General Butt Naked led hundreds of drunken teenagers dressed in drag (wearing wigs, dresses and carrying purses) into battle. He would sport only his birthday suit and a pair of sneakers! A belief in magical protection, backed by automatic rifles, created a battalion of shock troops out of gullible, scared young men. Tragically, their belief in General Butt Naked’s supernatural immunity and his powers to protect them led many of these believers to become mere statistics on Liberia’s 200,000+ war death roll. In 1996, Mr. Blahyi became a born again Christian and now spends his time as a preacher in Monrovia, Liberia.¹⁶ Other “generals” who engaged in occult based, ritual murders weren’t so lucky. President Samuel Doe, a member of the occult group “The Zo Society,” was reputed to be immune to bullets due to a regimen of sleeping with virgins and human ritual sacrifice. In 1990, Samuel Doe caught a bullet in the leg which led to his capture and murder by political rivals.¹⁷ Despite his supernatural abilities, the president wasn’t able to save himself. A year before Samuel Doe’s demise, a Liberian general named “Gray Allison” was sentenced to death for the murder of a local policeman. Why? Because the military man thought he could cast a spell and depose the dictator Samuel Doe

through a magical rite using the murdered officer’s blood.¹⁸

In the early 1980s, there were only 100 psychiatrists for some 340 million people living in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹ Since not all Africans have access to the benefits of Western medicine; the majority of these individuals seek their medical needs, physical and psychological, from the nearest witch-doctor (i.e. local shamans and healers). In effect the magic men and women of Africa hold a monopoly-like power over the members of their respective societies. Even with education programs, many African states haven’t made great headway in their illiteracy rates, leaving the witch-doctors with the high cards in the fight against magical thinking. Some social scientists believe that 75% of Sub-Saharan people believe in the power of witchcraft to some degree; so it seems the war against unreason will take many generations to win.²⁰ Currently, too many African leaders, rather than dressing themselves in the robes of the enlightenment and helping their people use the advances of science and technology, remain mired in ancient, Old Age beliefs simply for the hope of increasing personal political power with the aid of unseen, and, I believe, wholly non-existent forces. I foresee, without claim to any psychic abilities, the deaths of thousands more in the creation of a historical event far more tragic, in terms of lives lost, than Europe’s darkest years of superstition and Inquisitorial persecution.

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(“African Witchcraft” continued on page 7)

(“Homeopathy” continued from page 1)

were interested in getting our hands on the actual *Lancet* articles themselves, but McWatters did not supply the reference notes to those articles in her essay for *Bird Talk*. We sent e-mail to McWatters asking for the references and eventually received them with the following explanation: “Only one of the studies was published in *The Lancet*. The other one was published in the BHJ.”⁴ It should be noted that BHJ is shorthand for the *British Homoeopathic Journal*.

We were understandably disappointed that both articles mentioned by McWatters were not available in *The Lancet*, contrary to her statement in *Bird Talk*. Unfortunately, we weren’t able to get hold of the BHJ article, which detailed the results of a double-blind study in which a homeopathic remedy was tested on patients with influenza-like symptoms. The fact that this glaring error by McWatters somehow made it past the editors of *Bird Talk* seems fairly irresponsible, and we wish that they caught it before the article went to press.

The other study cited by McWatters, which dealt with hay fever pollen (published in the October 18, 1986, issue of *The Lancet*) has been criticized for numerous flaws, including subjective assessment of response, dropout rate, method for assessing improvement, and subjective interpretation of results. The way we see it, things currently aren’t looking good for McWatters’ arguments in favor of avian homeopathic therapy.

McWatters has made two additional claims in the *Bird Talk* article that could endanger the health and even the lives of many beloved pet birds. Concerning recovery from illness, McWatters states:

*In the recovery stages, an initial brief period called a “healing crisis” may occur. This is the process of shedding the “layers” of a disease, with its many deep-rooted levels of biological stress as well as the physical pathology.*⁵

The last statement of McWatters’ article in *Bird Talk* asserts that since birds are not influenced on a mental level by receiving a homeopathic medication, one can assume that “when a cure occurs, we can acknowledge that indeed a cure has resulted from the medicine given.”⁶ This assertion left us with further concerns about her understanding of the scientific method and the controls necessary for testing. Recovery sometimes occurs when no medicine at all is given (as in the case of self-limiting illnesses); in other cases, there may be some other reason for improvement.

The problem is that, as many bird owners can attest to, birds often don’t show symptoms of illness until they need immediate medical attention. What truly worries us is that if McWatters’ methods are applied to birds, death could occur while the owner is tinkering with finding the “right” homeopathic remedy. When dealing with a sick bird, there is no time to treat the bird with a specific homeopathic “cure,” give it five more times to see if the bird’s health improves, and then try another homeopathic concoction if the first one didn’t work – not to mention the process of waiting for the “healing crisis” of aggravated symptoms to pass!

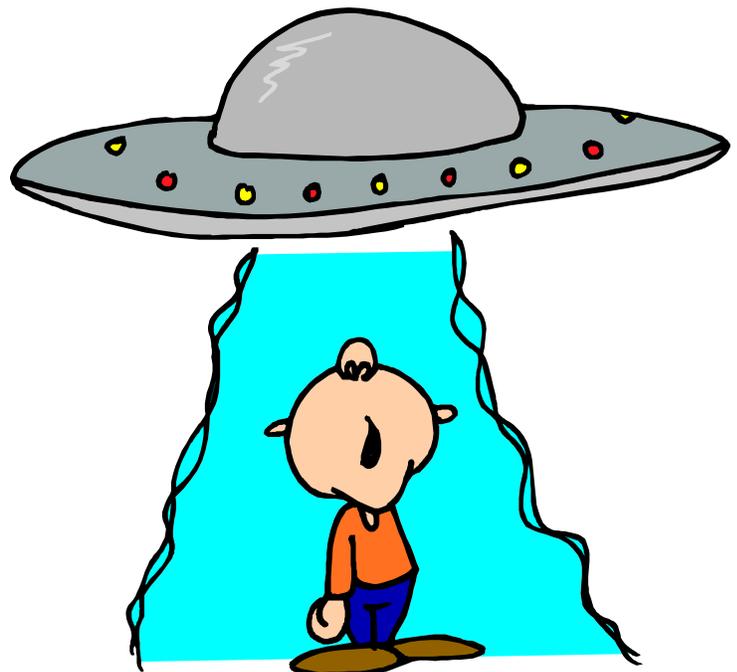
A sick bird needs to be examined by a competent avian

veterinarian – without delay. As skeptics who have welcomed various parrots into our respective families, we plead with readers of *Bird Talk* and all other bird owners not to deny their birds prompt, scientific, and professional medical care.

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[Danny Barnett is the Vice President of the North Texas Skeptics; Laura Ainsworth is on the Board of Directors of the North Texas Skeptics. This article originally appeared in the December 2000 issue of The North Texas Skeptic and is reprinted with permission.] ♡



(“Therapeutic Touch” continued from page 3)

ment of Health and Human Services gave a \$200,000 grant to a New York nursing center “to treat patients and train students in” TT. The Department of Defense gave a \$355,000 grant to nurse researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, for a study of the effects of TT on burn patients.

It may seem odd that TT is still so widely accepted in certain circles, with all of the evidence that has mounted against its veracity. However, some of this is explained in a chapter discussing how TT proponents deal with science. The author says their attitude is “inconsistent if not self-contradictory.” He further notes that supporters give the impression that they have scientific research to bolster their claims. But when flaws are pointed out or an experiment fails to produce the results they wanted, “they quickly proclaim that science is irrelevant or is not necessary or that the mysterious physics of quantum mechanics surely has answers that confirm the legitimacy of TT.”

This is not the way science and medicine are supposed to work. If a new approach consistently fails to get results in a proper experiment, it should be shelved. Certainly if a new method postulates magical energy fields that cannot be detected and makes miraculous claims that cannot be backed up, such a technique has no place in the medical field.

Scheiber and Selby, along with all of their co-authors, show that therapeutic touch falls into this area.

[A version of this article originally appeared in the State Journal-Register, and is reprinted with permission.]

Additional Note: After this review’s appearance in the *State Journal-Register*, R. Joel Cohen wrote a letter to the editor to complain. Without citing any evidence, he claimed the Office of Alternative Medicine “found TT to have one of the strongest research bases of any modality under study.” He further cited studies that supposedly show the effectiveness of TT, as if to counter what I had said in my review. Unfortunately, he seems to have ignored the fact that I mentioned those very studies in the review and noted that the book reprinted some of the “best” ones, while other chapters discussed the flaws in those “best” experiments.

He further said that TT is used in many hospitals by “more than 30,00 nurses.” I have no idea if this is true or not, but it underscores the fact that this particular form of pseudoscience has managed to get more than a foothold in the medical community, which is why this book needed to be written. However, the fact that many people may be fooled does not make TT any less a pseudoscience, any more than the large number of people who believe that stars control their destiny makes astrology a valid science.

As I’ve said in these pages before, unfortunately, there is no fact-checker for letters to the editor. ♡

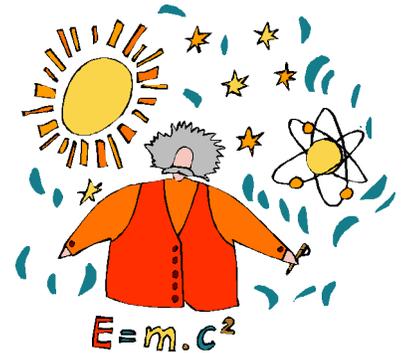
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Our Next Meeting

Round Table Discussion: Quantum Physics
Led By Richard Walker, Ph.D.

In the first meeting of the new millennium, we will be having an informal discussion about some of the stranger discoveries in quantum physics, led by Richard Walker, Ph.D.



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Tuesday, January 2, 7:00 PM

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