



# RESEARCH NOTE

Number 31, 28 November 1995  
ISSN 1323-5664

## A Sceptical View of Paranormal Claims



While many of us can have a laugh at reports of flying saucers, psychic experiences and the like, growing public interest in these matters affects the nation's economy, can cause personal angst, and is of mounting concern to science professionals. Scientific organisations now see a direct link between a "counter-science" movement in society and the available pool of research funds for professional research. Trusting people are spending large sums on "new age" fixes that sometimes lead to personal ruin, psychiatric illness, or even death. The latest ASIO Annual Report (ASIO 1995 p.5) suggests a rise in doomsday thinking and related groups as the millennium approaches. With such effects on the Australian lifestyle, these matters should be of wider general concern.

Many of the pseudo-sciences draw on a smattering of real science to give them credibility, coupling this with a dose of mystic belief and phenomena that science cannot readily explain.

These movements often seem to re-



ceive favourable media treatment, to the extent that evidence now emerges of a philosophical and ideological trend, based on personal perceptions and directed against proven scientific and technological progress. It is all too easy to dismiss members of counter-science groups as ill-informed, but put together they constitute a significant section of our supposedly educated population and sometimes even include academics. This note provides some simple explanations to counter familiar examples of anti-science. Some have been the subject of recent media exposés, but on the other hand, the media promotes as many through sensationalist programs, advertisements and astrology columns.

### **Astrology/**

### **numerology/**



### **crystals or**

### **pyramid power/tarot.**

An easy way to prove the spurious nature of astrological forecasts is to compare the prognostications appearing in different publications that purport to cover the same period.

Of the very few that may match,

their generalisations and vagaries could equally apply to everyone and anyone. There is no scientific proof of day-to-day planetary or star influence on human lives. With numerology, "damn lies and statistics" can prove just about anything. If these techniques are so powerful, then the gambling industry should be out of business. Pyramids or crystals hold no special powers aside from looking nice, having a strong structure and reflecting natural formations. Quite often a testing "placebo" effect or conditioned response and expectancy creates the "observed results". Although often pleasing to hear, and of general entertainment value if recognised as limited to such, psychic claims can be dangerous to those they influence, when recipients follow advised courses of action that may be detrimental to their own welfare. Certain Heads of State were infamous for following astral predictions and in cases acted to their citizen's detriment.



### **Alternative healing/**

### **channelling/**

### **The Scientific Basis Versus The Paranormal**

The scientific method allows us to predict the behaviour of natural phenomena without recourse to accepting the paranormal. As a general guide to scientific truth about phenomena, we should look for impersonal, non-dogmatic explanations that can absorb new discoveries and accept ruthless, worldwide peer review and criticism. A sceptical attitude aims to seek out all relevant details while keeping an open mind that prefers ordinary explanations to the fantastic or supernatural. While we may like to believe in the latter we must live with the reality of life.

## homeopathy/ iridology/magnets.

While some natural therapies reflect chemical or physiological properties, there are others that hold no medicinal basis at all. Unfortunately, it is quite often difficult to separate these from more respectable ones, but it suffices to say that people should regard with some scepticism any program not recognised by established medical professionals. Claims of miracle cures associated with large monetary commitments are often a clue to quack medical practices. Some new-age therapies can be quite dangerous, or even ultimately deadly as in reports of patients refusing conventional treatments in favour of unproven alternative remedies. Recent publicised cases involving bogus cancer cures come to mind.

## Ancient astronauts/ alien abductions/ Bermuda Triangle/ UFOs/Yetis etc.



Recent reports of alien abductions by patients under psychiatric hypnosis reveal more about the television programs that patients watch and the fantasies that they hold rather than any tangible proof of visitations (Turner 1995). While odd physical phenomena, dreaming and psychological images may account for the three per cent of unexplained UFO sightings, there remains no physical proof of alien visitations that bears up to proper scientific examination.

This is not to preclude the possible existence of life elsewhere in the Universe, currently the subject

of the serious scientific Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). Despite the reported disappearance of craft in special triangle regions, often in bad weather, the actual rates are no more than to be reasonably expected given the weather record. Yetis, monsters, alien bodies and the like remain the subject of fiction where there can be no proof of their existence.

## Psychics/clairvoyance/ ESP/ghosts/ levitation/ water divining/ predictions.

In 1980, Australian broadcaster Phillip Adams and entrepreneur Dick Smith donated \$30,000 to give to any person with provable paranormal powers, but the prize remains unclaimed. Water diviners, spoon benders, levitators and psychics have all failed to prove their so-called powers. Those scientists who have seriously investigated extra-sensory perception (ESP), such as the renowned English parapsychologist Dr Susan Blackmore, have had to ultimately resign themselves to its non-existence. Dr Blackmore now asserts that mystical transcendence is a state of self awareness which is actually dangerous if misused. As for ghosts, in spite of their distinguished lineage, especially in English literature, these appear to be visions experienced by the mind, particularly when people are in extreme states of mental agitation.



Such is the power of the mind over matter that people should realise the need to seek out rational explanations for seemingly paranormal experiences, rather than assign them to the unknown.

## References

ASIO 1995, *Annual Report*, Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, AGPS, Canberra; Australian Skeptics (Quarterly), *The Skeptic* magazine, Sydney; Frazier, K. 1981, *Borderlands of Science*, Prometheus, New York; Gross, P. 1994, *Higher Superstition*, John Hopkins, Baltimore; Samways, L. 1994, *Dangerous Persuaders*, Penguin; Turner, T. 1995, "Alien Encounters", *The Independent Monthly*, October, Sydney, pp-30-34; Ward, P. 1980, *A Dictionary of Common Fallacies*, Oleander (2 vols.), New York.

### Matthew James Science, Technology, Environment and Resources Group Parliamentary Research Service

Phone: 06 277 2423  
Fax: 06 277 2407

*Views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Parliamentary Research Service and are not to be attributed to the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Research Notes provide concise analytical briefings on issues of interest to Senators and Members. As such they may not canvass all of the key issues.*

© Commonwealth of Australia