

U.K. Broadcast Commission Rejects Geller's *Secrets of the Psychics* Complaint

Did you see that television program last summer with Victorian mediums faking ectoplasm and magicians showing how they could duplicate the kind of psychic feats that Uri Geller is known for? If not, you missed a treat, but not to worry, for now you may be able to see *Secrets of the Psychics* again. And why? Because Geller has had his complaint against the program rejected.

After the program aired in the U.K., Geller complained of unfair treatment to the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and I, along with a team from Channel 4, went to give evidence. It's been a long wait, but the commission has just announced its complete rejection of Geller's complaint (see text of decision, page 14). So it wasn't unfair to have magicians showing how they duplicate those "psychic feats," and experts saying there is no reliable scientific evidence for his psychic powers whatsoever.

If I'm sounding jubilant about this little victory it is not because I personally have anything against Geller. He has always been charming and kind to me, invited me and my children to tea at his flashy mansion on the bank of the Thames, showed us his boat (aptly named "Paranormal"), and let us swim in his pool. No—it is because this is a matter of scientific truth and freedom.

Although millions of people believe in extrasensory perception, ghosts, UFOs, crystal powers and the tenets of astrology, the evidence for ESP is controversial (at best) and the claims of astrology demonstrably false. However, people don't want to see endless meticulous experiments with nothing but negative results. Viewers, and the producers who are their slaves, seem to prefer conspiracy theories, beings from outer space, scientists who cover up the truth about our mental powers, and Russians who can move trains with their teeth or bamboozle television presenters with children's party tricks.

There was a classic, if mild, example of this genre last week. In *The Secrets of Sleep*, we saw an experiment from the 1970s in which U.S. psychologist Charlie Tart tested a young woman who had out-of-body experiences during sleep. We were not told that the woman was a mental patient who disappeared right after the tests and could not be re-tested, nor that the EEG record showed possible mains interference at the time of her success, nor that another claimant was tested by Tart and failed. The impression given was that this wonderful experiment has been ignored for decades by closed-minded scientists who want to suppress the truth about the psychic powers of our sleeping minds. This is ridiculous. The truth (and how that word is abused when psychic issues are at stake!) is that many other scientists tried to repeat Tart's finding and failed. I was one of them. Why should we scientists ignore such a potentially exciting discovery? If I had succeeded in repeating it I might have uncovered something absolutely new and shocking about reality. But it just isn't so. As Richard Dawkins said, if Geller's powers could be proved to be real they would open up a new field of physics, scientists would flock to be involved, and someone would get a Nobel prize. But they haven't been.

That's why it is so refreshing to see *Secrets of the Psychics*—to see the "mysterious" Ouija board explained, to see the mediums' tricks exposed, and to learn why all those experts doubt that psychic phenomena exist at all. And to all those producers pandering to popular belief, I say: Wake up! It is possible to make an enjoyable anti-paranormal program. It is possible to be skeptical and still please the viewers. Even my local grocer liked it. "You know," she said (lowering her voice) "I don't think Uri Geller's really psychic, do you?"

No, I do not. I was glad to give evidence at the hearing. I was glad to explain

why the evidence is not good enough. And above all I was glad that Geller lost his complaint. I may be wrong about his psychic powers, in which case he will be able to prove it to me, and then I will gladly change my mind. Meanwhile, it's good to know that programmers can make challenging and skeptical programs in the knowledge that, if they do so fairly and honestly, the broadcast complaints procedure will stand by them.

And if *Secrets of the Psychics* comes on in America—do watch.

—Susan Blackmore

Susan Blackmore is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of the West of England. She wrote this piece originally for The Independent (U.K.).

Myth and Mystery in Southern Climes

As the world shrinks and modern technology advances, the lands to the south continue to intrigue generations of Americans. With their vast, remote regions and rich cultural history, Mexico and Latin America naturally evoke mystery.

It is, however, a short step from the lure of genuine enigmas to the plagues of mystery mongering, conspiracy theorizing, and outright hoaxing—plagues that have often victimized the truth behind the legacies of these tropical civilizations. Here are several examples from the files—the "ex-files"—of SKEPTICAL INQUIRER magazine.

Ancient Effigies

Certain masterworks of native populations have been both deservedly celebrated and greatly misrepresented. These include the massive stone heads that stare vaguely skyward from Easter Island, and Peru's Nazca drawings, figures of birds and other creatures so large they can only be properly viewed from an airplane—or a spaceship. To Erich von Däniken, author of the 1970s bestseller *Chariots of the Gods*, these are evidence of visits by

Broadcasting Standards Commission Adjudication on Geller Complaint

The following is the text of the key introductory and concluding sections of the U.K. Broadcasting Standards Commission judgment regarding a complaint by Uri Geller of unfair treatment in a British science documentary television program, "Secrets of the Psychics" (see adjacent News & Comment article by Susan Blackmore).

Broadcasting Standards Commission

Complaint about unjust or unfair treatment by Mr. Uri Geller submitted on 31 October 1997 about Equinox: *Secrets of the Psychics* on Channel 4 broadcast on 24 August 1997.

Adjudication

1. Introduction

On 24 August 1997, Channel 4 broadcast a programme in its science documentary series Equinox entitled *Secrets of the Psychics*. The programme set out to investigate whether there was any scientific basis for the claims of paranormal and supernatural powers by spiritualists and psychics.

The programme questioned whether the psychic powers claimed by Mr. Uri Geller were genuine. Mr. Geller complained to the Broadcasting Standards Commission that he had been treated unjustly or unfairly in the programme.

2. The Complaint

Mr. Geller complained that:

- a) several contributors to the programme had been wrongly put forward as being unbiased and the programme had used unrepresentative extracts from interviews;
- b) no positive views had been put forward of Mr. Geller's work;
- c) doubt had been cast on the value of scientific testing of Mr. Geller;
- d) the programme had used selective and distorted extracts from previous programmes featuring him; and
- e) the voice-over in the programme had been generally derogatory.

3. Evidence considered by the Commission

The Commission had before it a complaint from Mr. Geller, with supporting documents, a written statement from Channel 4 also with supporting documents, the complainant's written comments and a response to those comments by Channel 4. The Commission viewed a recording of the programme as broadcast and read a transcript. It also viewed recordings of the extracts from Noel's House Party and the Andrew Neil Show. The Commission held a hearing attended by Mr. Geller and his representatives and representatives of Channel 4, accompanied by Mr. [Sebastian] Cody [executive producer of the show] and Mr. [David] Britland [the show's producer] of Open Media and Dr. [Susan] Blackmore [a contributor to the show]. . . .

4. The Commission's Finding

The Commission accepts that it is part of the role of a flagship science programme such as Equinox to question claims, such as those made by Mr. Geller, from a scientific point of view. It notes that the programme was not entirely devoted to Mr. Geller, but also looked at the history of the paranormal and included a number of other people who claimed to have psychic powers.

The programme made it clear that the contributors featured were sceptical and had not conducted first hand scientific tests on Mr. Geller's claims themselves. The Commission considers that the sceptical approach adopted by the contributors complained of did not prevent them from examining the evidence impartially. Nor does it consider that either they or the programme-makers, whose approach to the subject was consistent throughout the programme, were personally prejudiced against Mr. Geller. The Commission does not consider that the use made of Mr. [Russell] Targ's interview about his testing of Mr. Geller was unfair to Mr. Geller.

While the Commission considers that it is important for a scientific programme to seek balancing arguments, it accepts that Open Media did its best to find scientists who were prepared to support Mr. Geller's position and who met the criteria required by the programme-makers but were unable to do so.

The Commission also accepts that it was appropriate to include contributions from others knowledgeable about the subject. It notes that Mr. Geller said he could have suggested names but, because he had decided not to cooperate, did not do so. In the circumstances the Commission considers that the programme gave a fair reflection of the weight of opinion of Mr. Geller's claims.

The Commission notes that both the criticisms and the partial success of the SRI [Stanford Research Institute] tests were considered in the programme. It finds that legitimate questions were raised about the SRI testing and on the availability of other tests which fell within the programme's criteria. The Commission does not consider that the full extract from the edition of Noel's House Party which was used in the programme made it clear that Mr. Geller was not using the "peek." Nor does it consider that the Equinox voice-over obliterated any significant dialogue in the extract from the Andrew Neil Show.

While there was an element of scepticism in the voice-over throughout the programme, the Commission considers that the programme was clearly signalled as sceptical and in its view the commentary was straightforward.

It does not find that it was unfair to Mr. Geller. Although the Commission does not consider that a scientific programme would necessarily be expected to look at the lifestyle of its subject, it finds that in view of Mr. Geller's success it was reasonable in the circumstances for Channel 4 to refer to Mr. Geller's lifestyle.

The Commission does not, therefore, find that the programme was unfair to Mr. Geller.

Accordingly, the complaint is not upheld.

17 June 1998



Joe Nickell's condor drawn on a Kentucky landfill site using methods and materials available to the Nazca Indians.

"ancient astronauts." Supposedly it was their advanced technology that helped the "primitive" natives produce the effigies, possibly as landing beacons or as offerings to the extraterrestrial "gods."

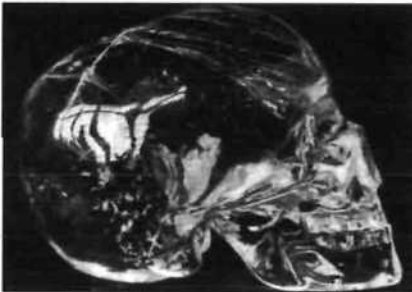
In fact, Easter Island's quarries contain unfinished, abandoned statues (believed to honor ancestral rulers) that provide mute testimony of their stone-ax creation. In 1955 explorer Thor Heyerdahl commissioned the island's inhabitants to re-erect one of the fallen statues. Through sweat and toil they accomplished the task by using the "heave-ho" approach Von Däniken disparaged. Despite such convincing counter-evidence, Von Däniken's conjecture lives on as fantasy fodder for numerous books and cable television documentaries on the unexplained.

Similarly, the Nazca effigies—which may have had astronomical/religious significance—are clearly associated with the ancient Nazca Indian culture. A front-cover story in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* (Spring 1983) demonstrated how such giant figures, such as the 440-foot-long "condor," could be duplicated using only sticks and cord, together with some "native" ingenuity. As to the possibility of extraterrestrials landing on the soft desert, the late Nazca expert Maria Reiche commented: "I'm afraid the spacemen would've gotten stuck."

Skull of Doom

A remarkable rock-crystal death's head, supposedly fashioned without the aid of tools, has been attributed to the mythical sunken continent of Atlantis. Its owner, Anna Mitchell-Hedges, claims she found it on her seventeenth birthday during her adoptive father's excavation of the lost Mayan city of Lubaantun in Belize (then British Honduras). Once said to bode ill to anyone who would mock it, the crystal skull has been rehabilitated by New Agers who claim it has powers of fortune telling and healing.

Actually the artifact, which does show evidence of tool work, resembles rock-crystal skulls made by the Aztecs as a symbol of death. Not only is there no proof Miss Mitchell-Hedges was at Lubaantun but documentary evidence proves her father simply bought the item at a Sotheby's sale. And there is no scientific evidence that the famous skull has properties different from other crystalline quartz. (See Joe Nickell with John F. Fischer, *Secrets of the Supernatural*, Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988, pp. 29–46.)



The "Skull of Doom" of Lubaantun

Image of Guadalupe

A portrait of the Virgin Mary, said to be "made without hands" and to be scientifically inexplicable, is enshrined in a Mexico City church. Attracting more pilgrims than any other Catholic shrine except the Vatican, the image is widely reproduced in the form of icons, religious medals, neon signs, even tattoos. According to pious legend, it appeared as a "sign" on a peasant's cloak, just after the Spanish conquest. Due in part to

confusion of the image with that of their own Virgin goddess, Tonantzin, the Aztecs were soon converted to Catholicism.

In fact, if the image were not scientifically explained it would be because independent scientists are not permitted to examine it. However, photographic enlargements show obvious signs of artistry, including some places where paint has obscured the cloth's weave and others where it has cracked. Infrared photos reveal preparatory sketch lines beneath the paint. Also, the image copies traditional Spanish portraits of Mary, and there is a report from an investigation of 1556 that the work was done by an Indian painter named Marcos. (See *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Spring 1985, pp. 243–255.)

El Chupacabras

In 1995, reports of a bloodthirsty beast known as El Chupacabras ("the goat-sucker") spread from Puerto Rico to Mexico and the southern United States. The bulging eyed, reptilian creature—variously assigned an extraterrestrial or supernatural origin—reportedly attacked goats, rabbits, dogs, and cattle, sucking all the blood from them.

Investigation, however, soon showed the animals were not drained of blood, and stakeouts invariably yielded nothing more exotic than wild dogs. The rest was mass hysteria spread largely by sensationalized media reports. (See *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, September/October 1996, p. 12.)

Miraculous Surgery

Called "the surgeon of the rusty knife," Brazil's José Arigo (1921–1971) supposedly performed operations with little pain or blood and no infection. Despite folktales of his prowess, however, it appears that Arigo simply performed primitive surgeries like lancing boils or removing cysts, while prescribing antibiotics and mumbo-jumbo remedies. (His brother ran the only pharmacy in the village.)

Other Brazilian healers have prac-

ticed "psychic surgery" whereby "tumors" or other diseased tissue are supposedly removed with bare hands. Common also to the Philippines, such effects are fraudulently produced by sleight of hand using animal tissue and blood. (See *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Fall/Winter 1977, pp. 104–110.)

Mexican UFO Wave

During the 1990s, Mexico City and nearby locales have been abuzz with flying saucers—or at least unidentified flying objects. For example, in 1991 a total solar eclipse attracted numerous sky-watchers whose camcorders captured luminous UFOs hovering overhead. And subsequent years brought additional amateur and commercial footage of various "inexplicable" phenomena.

While some waxed eloquent about Mayan cosmology, skeptics observed that some of the photogenic UFOs were positioned precisely where Venus and other planets and stars had been, and that other video sequences were indistinguishable from hoaxes. (For more on UFOs see Philip J. Klass, *UFOs Explained*, New York: Vintage, 1976.)

Carlos Castaneda and don Juan

Feeding on the New Age infatuation and drug culture of the 1970s, anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) claimed to be America's first-hand chronicler of don Juan Matus, a Yaquis Indian sorcerer in Mexico whose powers included dream transport. Castaneda devoted his Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA and many best-selling books to the art, magic, and life of don Juan. In the process, Castaneda's extraordinary stories helped inspire a close following of devotees and the fad of spiritual shamanism.

Allegedly based on field experience, observations, and interviews with the sorcerer among the exotic flora and fauna of the Mexican desert, Castaneda's accounts are undermined by discrepancies in narrative time flow and by peculiar inconsistencies in language. For example, don Juan never speaks Yaqui nor does he use Spanish. Few names of Mexican plants are provided other than Jimson weed, mescal, and hallucinogenic mushrooms. As author Gordon Stein points out, although a "smoking gun" proving don Juan a hoax has not

surfaced, strong circumstantial evidence shows Castaneda's books rely on information borrowed from other published sources, and not on field observations of a Yaqui sorcerer. (See *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Spring/Summer 1977, and Spring/Summer 1978.)

As these examples indicate, the exotic lands to the south are intriguing in their own right. Charlatans, mystery mongers, and hoaxers, many times in an effort to package and sell sensationalism to the media, simply divert attention from the genuine wonders and mysteries that are best left to the pursuit of science and reason.

—Joe Nickell and Matt Nisbet

Joe Nickell is Investigative Files columnist for *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. Matt Nisbet is Public Relations Director for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP).

Tolstoy Predicts Bulls' Sixth Championship (in Code of Course)

As my wife and I were driving through New Mexico, on Sunday, June 14, 1998, we listened to game six of the Chicago Bulls/Utah Jazz National Basketball Association (NBA) playoffs. As the game drew to a close, we heard the Utah crowd groan as Michael Jordan sank the winning basket. And then and there, a chill went down my spine. "Oh my God," I thought to myself. "The Tolstoy Code is real."

Fifty days (more than seven weeks) before, on April 27, I had undertaken a search for NBA teams and players using the technique of 'equidistant letter sequences' popularized in the book *The Bible Code*, by Michael Drosnin (Simon & Schuster, 1997). But I wasn't searching in the Hebrew Torah—instead, I was looking in book one of an English translation of Leo Tolstoy's epic, *War and Peace* (see my *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* arti-

Maria Reiche, Nazca Lines' Guardian, Dies

Maria Reiche, famed guardian of the Nazca Lines, died June 8 at the age of ninety-five. A German mathematician, Reiche devoted her last fifty years to preserving and studying the geometric designs and giant stylized animal effigies—a monkey, spider, various birds and other figures—etched into the Peruvian desert.

Although they were clearly made by the Nazca Indian culture, probably between 200 B.E.C. and 600 C.E., books such as Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* attributed them to "ancient astronauts" (who supposedly also helped create the pyramids of Egypt and the stone heads on Easter Island). But Reiche, who expended her own money to create a foundation to preserve the fragile lines, discounted the notion that extraterrestrials had landed on the soft pampas.

At her death authorities in the town of Nazca proclaimed a day of mourning, and German and Peruvian flags were lowered to half-staff. Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, visiting the United States at the time, told reporters, "This is a really painful and sad loss for Peruvian archaeology." How painful a loss was underscored just two months after her death. American tourists driving their van across the arid plain scarred the designs with tire tracks that, according to the Associated Press, "will remain for centuries."

—Joe Nickell

cles on the Bible Code, November/December 1997 and March/April 1998).

I had wondered if the NBA playoff winner could actually be predicted in advance. What did my April search reveal? "Chicago" was found encoded just once in *War and Peace*, at a step of 8891 characters (and therefore 100 percent 'minimal,' i.e. having the shortest step for that word). Ominously, "Jazz" was not encoded at all.

But there was more! "Bulls" was also encoded thirty-two times in Book 1 of *War and Peace*, and of these, five matches had non-zero domains of minimality. Amazingly, "Chicago" and one of the minimal (shortest-step) "Bulls" appeared close to each other in a classic "Bible-code" crossword puzzle. I also found fourteen hidden occurrences of "Jordan," and one of these (minimal step, of course) made an excellent, small puzzle with one of the minimal "Bulls."

With all these "Bible Code" indicators flashing—matching of long words, proximity of paired matches, and strict use of "minimal" matches—I rushed to send my prediction to several reporters and scientists. I thought about trying to warn Karl "the Mailman" Malone of the Jazz—but I decided to let history run its course. When I made my prediction, there were sixteen teams in the playoffs. And the Bulls, while favored, almost lost it all on more than one occasion. In fact, the Indiana Pacers came very close to defeating them, but Tolstoy's Bulls clung to their destiny.

And on June 14, my prediction came to pass. Not only had Tolstoy predicted the victors would be the Chicago Bulls, but Jordan's key role in the victory had been forecast—almost two months in advance.

And now, we are left to ponder the somber truth.

Either the "Bible Code" nonsense is just a general, arcane mathematical technique which can be employed to find any desired messages or predictions, hidden in any book or text. . . .

. . . Or Leo Tolstoy is the Supreme Being who created the universe.

CHICAGO: plot step N=8891

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iseyesthesIckmanwastu
wnoinfluenCeinpolitic
apegracethAtisallihav
toasmileofGlitteringt
sfavoritetOpichelooke
ewillsaveandhavemercy

BULLS: plot step = 889

Ireallycatichecantyou
ntbelievemethenbeliev
ifiedmySelfbutonlyth
utohaveasgoodanopinio
outitsooneritsinthein
adespeopLeranhurriedl
themyesrepliedafootma
seroomsannamikhaylovn
sheinrepLytohislookan
ousnessthatthedecisiv
naparticularlyrespect
nthiswaybUtallatoncehe
tiswellandheturnedtog
trangelaytheaidedeca
overfromBehindthechai
youbehindhimstoodthea

JORDAN: plot step = 1024

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ofabearsomewheelinthecOnversatio
nevidentlywishingtoshowuncyrlvla
dimiRovichhearinghowillheisbutide
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undthelouldnothelpjoininginnowth
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eansweredreturninghissmileborisqui

—David E. Thomas

David E. Thomas is a SKEPTICAL INQUIRER consulting editor.

The Pseudoscience of Ear Wax Removal

A fine example of pseudoscience is "ear candling," a current practice popular with customers of organic grocery and health food stores where the candles are



Figure 1. Ear candling in progress.

sold. Manufacturers of these products claim or strongly imply that ear candling will facilitate the removal of wax or cerumen from the ear.

For example, the "Wally's Candles, A Home Remedy" brochure that accompanies a package of two ear candles (which costs approximately seven dollars) states that these candles, "have been reported to aid in cleansing the ear, improve hearing and bring soothing comfort to the user." The brochure continues with a list of statements concerning how ear wax build-up can lead to "hearing loss, infections, ringing-of-the-ears, headaches, congestion and loss of balance."

The candle, which is more accurately described as a cone or funnel since it is hollow, consists of beeswax and cotton cloth. The process of ear candling begins by placing the narrow end of the tapered candle just inside the ear as the person lies flat on one side of their body (see Figure 1). The top of the candle is then ignited and once half the candle burns, it is removed and extinguished; an aluminum pie pan is usually used to collect any burning debris. The burning of the candle supposedly creates a negative pressure inside the ear, drawing ear wax up and out of the ear. When the candle is cut open (this is not part of the manufacturer's instructions), a fairly large deposit of a dried yellow solid is found inside (see Figure 2). This substance is easily mistaken as wax from the person's ear, but in reality it is the beeswax from



Figure 2. Beeswax mistaken for earwax.

the candle itself. The beeswax is extracted into the inside space of the candle by a pressure differential. As the oxygen inside the candle is consumed during combustion, the atmospheric pressure inside the candle decreases. This allows some of the wax to travel from the candle itself into the empty space inside the candle. When the candle is cut open, the wax observed is in the form of a dried powder since moisture is evaporated during the burning process.

Two simple tests can be performed to show that no earwax is indeed removed by the candling procedure. First, acquire a small clean test tube (to simulate the narrow ear canal) and into it add a weighed piece of wax, preferably human earwax. Heat the test tube containing the wax to body temperature in a hot water bath. Next, fit the candle into the test tube and then ignite the top of the candle with a match. After about half the candle has burned, extinguish the flame. When one examines the test tube containing the human earwax during the burning process, it will be observed that the earwax does not change in any way; it neither travels up the test tube nor does it enter the candle. The mass of the human earwax before and after candling is the same. Furthermore, when one opens up the bottom tip of the partially burned candle, the dried solid is observed to be in a quantity greater than the earwax placed in the test tube. This simulation strongly suggests that none of the human earwax is being removed by the candling process, but instead, the extracted substance originates from the candle itself.

A second test supports these findings. When the above procedure is repeated but without any human earwax in the test tube, the same result occurs—

a yellow dried solid is found inside the bottom tip of the candle.

The results of these tests are further supported by a recent medical study evaluating the efficacy and safety of ear candling (Seely et al. 1996). In a limited clinical trial (eight patients), it was found using tympanometric measurements that ear candles did not produce a negative pressure inside the ear nor did the candles remove cerumen from the ear as claimed. Furthermore, in a survey of 122 otolaryngologists, twenty-one ear injuries were identified resulting from using ear candles. In the definitive words of the authors, "Ear candles have no benefit in the management of cerumen and may result in serious injury."

—Stephen DeMeo

Stephen DeMeo is in the Department of Chemistry, City University of New York at York College in Jamaica, NY 11451.

Note

Seely, D.R., Quigley, S.M., Langman, A.W. (1996). "Ear candles—efficacy and safety," *Laryngoscope* 106 (10): 1226–9.

Council Against Health Fraud Concerned About Veterinary Pseudoscience

The National Council Against Health Fraud has expressed concern to the American Veterinary Medical Association over their "AVMA Guidelines for Alternative and Complementary Veterinary Medicine." The Guidelines were adopted in 1996, on the advice of a six-member committee chaired by Dr. Stanley Held.

The Council recently issued a letter of objection to the Guidelines, endorsed by over 150 people, including many scientists, physicians, and editors from medical publications. They object to the Guidelines on many grounds, including: that they contain inaccurate and misleading statements; they assert the efficacy of unproven therapies such as chiropractic

and homeopathy; and that the AVMA, by embracing such unproven therapies, is in effect working against the public interest.

Some excerpts: "No mention whatsoever is made of our responsibility to base *any* therapy we employ on the best available science. In fact, the word 'science' appears exactly nowhere in the 'Guidelines.' We believe this is a telling omission. . . . Including unproven and unscientific therapies under the 'standard of practice' umbrella, merely serves to lower that standard, and make the AVMA, itself, vulnerable to liability. . . . By 'exempting' veterinary practitioners from any requirement for scientific rigor, the AVMA has in effect exempted itself from serious consideration by the scientific community. They have, thereby, diminished the scientific standing of the entire profession."

The letter is set to appear in an upcoming issue of the *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*.

The Council Against Health Fraud maintains a Web site at <http://www.seanet.com/~vettfl>.

—Benjamin Radford

'The Straight Dope' is Colorful, Critical Thinking

His improvised experiments and acerbic style aren't likely to land him any publications in scientific journals, but for thousands of newspaper readers around the country, Cecil Adams provides a scientific point of view on all kinds of wild claims and weird stories. His "Straight Dope" column deals with topics such as end-of-the-world prophecies, zinc tablets, UFOs, remote viewing, exploding birds, and the reason why clouds—if they're so heavy—float.

Readers write in with questions, and Adams researches the answers. It is much like an advice column, except the questions must be factual and the modest, tongue-in-cheek aim is to "eradicate world ignorance." Adams isn't shy about throwing in sexual or scatological humor

(in fact, he throws it in whenever possible), proving that critical thinking can be colorful. He's not squeamish about pursuing topics some might consider trivial or in questionable taste, either.

Some "Straight Dope" findings: duck's quacks do echo; aliens didn't land at Roswell; the touted "laundry disks" clean clothes no better than hot water (and, interestingly enough, neither does laundry detergent); and, finally, nobody seems to know, exactly, the physical

forces at work when one sucks a strand of spaghetti into one's mouth.

For a skeptic, "The Straight Dope" is a welcome antidote to the astrology columns. It started back in 1973 at *The Chicago Reader*, and now appears in more than thirty newspapers throughout the United States and Canada, including *The Boston Phoenix*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, and *The Washington City Paper*. Small, "alternative" papers are most open to the column. Three *Straight Dope* books have

been published by Ballantine, and a television show aired on the Arts & Entertainment cable network in 1996. According to the "Straight Dope" Web site, another television show is planned for the future. To access the site, visit the Straight Dope area at America Online, keyword: Straight Dope.

—Jeff Miner

Jeff Miner edits *Writer's Carousel*, a writer's publication in Washington, D.C. □

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