

[The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

[National Times](#)

Sceptics unite!

November 18, 2010

[Comments 144](#)

Hello and welcome to Sceptic Science, the National Times' new blog looking at science, pseudoscience and the paranormal.

The universe is an endlessly amazing place and every week newspapers, magazines and science blogs report on remarkable new discoveries in fields as diverse as astronomy, biology and neuroscience that help us understand it a little bit better.

But at the same time we're inundated with all sorts of claims about everything from "alternative" medicine to psychic mediums and those [magic rubber bracelets](#) that are so popular with footballers. This is where it pays to have a bit of healthy scepticism.

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So what is a sceptic? The usual image is of a humourless, closed-minded cynic who enjoys snorting derisively and saying things such as "Fiddlesticks! There's no such thing as ghosts!" But that picture is a bit out of date.

Serious sceptics don't just scoff at unusual beliefs. They know that most people aren't liars or fantasists and that there's often something behind even the strangest beliefs. A good sceptic will examine the evidence for a particular claim and, if it's unconvincing, look for alternative explanations. These often turn out to be fascinating in themselves.

In the case of haunted houses, for instance, people will often report feeling sudden fear or anxiety upon entering a certain room. In some cases, this has turned out simply to be because a ventilation fan is emitting inaudible [infrasound](#), which has been proven in experiments to induce feelings of fear.

So why does any of this matter? Well, there's [your health](#), your wallet, the health and wallets of your family and friends, the need to keep governments from spending your tax dollars on things that simply don't work, and the warm, fuzzy feeling that comes from knowing you're standing up for knowledge and reason against the forces of ignorance and endarkenment.

We all like to think that we've got pretty good bullshit detectors — none of us would have bought those [empty boxes](#) that the Iraqi army thought were bomb detectors, right? But our brains could always be in better shape and our critical thinking skills sharper.

And when it comes to assessing claims about "alternative" medicine — perhaps even your own experience of it — it helps to have a bit of background knowledge about things such as the placebo effect, confirmation bias, and the self-limiting nature of many minor complaints (if you've come down with a cold you're going to feel better in a few days regardless of whether you take a pile of overpriced vitamins and herbal supplements or nothing at all).

So there's quite a lot of territory for this blog to cover, and I'm keen to hear what you're most interested in. Are you intrigued by the idea of big cats stalking the Dandenongs and the Blue Mountains? Worried about the world ending with the Mayan apocalypse in 2012? Fed up with the anti-vaccine movement? Amused by the chemtrails conspiracy crowd? Wish people knew more about the art of cold reading?

Do tell.

Comments

144 comments so far

» «

»*Fed up with the anti-vaccine movement and the "gluten free is better for you" crowd!*«

»«

Merri - November 18, 2010, 12:39PM

» «

»*I'm sure positive thinking can be a great help in some circumstances, but fear and a certain amount of negativity is extremely useful too. Can you debunk some of the myths about positive thinking (such as The Secret)?*«

»«

Ruth | Brisbane - November 18, 2010, 12:48PM

» «

»*My concern is the deteriorating standard of science writing in the popular media. Yesterday, The Age ran a story on a newly discovered black hole, stating: "It began 30 years ago when a star 50 million light years away imploded, creating a region where gravity is so great that nothing can escape, even light." Clearly, something that happened 50 million light years away could not be observed on earth 30 years later. This is elementary stuff. The report went on: "The birth of the black hole in real time delivers a little-appreciated message about our galaxy and universe..." The context makes 'real time' appear to mean that we are observing the black hole as it occurs, not 50 million years later as is in fact the case. The report ends saying it comes from the Washington Post. Puzzled that such a respected paper would write so poorly, I looked up the original article, which turned out to be clearly and correctly written. I think it's great that The Age is beginning a skeptics blog, but it should first take the time to employ a sub-editor who can correctly cite a source as having been paraphrased, bot quoted verbatim.*«

»«

EMB | Melbourne - November 18, 2010, 12:51PM

» «

»*"Fed up with the anti-vaccine movement?" - how could anyone be "fed up" with a bunch of people who steal the hard work of others, put everyone at risk through their own negligence, all in the name of ignorance?*

Tell you the big thing that gets me though - people who think that "sceptic" means thinking evolution (or similar) stuff is "just a theory", but at the same time are prepared to believe in whatever new-age rubbish takes their fancy that week (power band, healing crystals, christianity...)«

»«

zebba - November 18, 2010, 12:59PM

» «

»*Perhaps you could start with the very topical miracles performed by "saints" (and any other religious tripe). Choose any or all of the crackpot religions if strange and unusual beliefs is the topic for discussion. I would lump Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Scientology, Pastafarianism etc. etc. all together as far as believability goes.*«

»«

Gibbo | Melbourne, Vic - November 18, 2010, 1:01PM

» «

»*I'm a sceptic and I think I say "Fiddlesticks! There's no such thing as ghosts!" on a fairly regular basis and often include crystals, mediums, astrology etc in the mix.*«

»*Looking forward to reading more!*«

»«

Kate | Bruthen - November 18, 2010, 1:01PM

» «

»*Good stuff.*«»*And lets try to stop our tax/health fund dollars paying for procedures that have been shown to be no more effective than placebos. Step forward homeopathy and chiropractors (for anything other than minor back pain)* «»*Ben Goldacre's 'Bad Science' should be compulsory school reading.*«

»«

Lamby | Melbourne - November 18, 2010, 1:06PM

» «

»*How about that hypothesis about paying politicians more to get a better class of politicians? Doesn't seem to have worked yet. In fact, seems to be a negative correlation.*«

»«

PMCD | Sydney - November 18, 2010, 1:13PM

» «

»*Wonderful to see this blog is starting up. It would be nice to know the author's background too which would help the credibility. Wouldn't be Dr Bob by any chance?*«

»«

Anthony - November 18, 2010, 1:13PM

» «

»*Just start with Simon Singh's excellent book "Trick or Treatment" and go from there. My mother-in-law believes that homeopathy, naturopathy etc are the solution to all medical issues - I like to say that she has more quacks than a duck farm!*«

»«

JB | here - November 18, 2010, 1:13PM[Show more comments](#)[Sceptic Science](#)[More Sceptic Science entries](#)[Close](#)

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