

Open Forum

Alternative remedies – the good, the bad and the ugly

Friday 22 August 2003

CSIRO Discovery Centre,
Clunies Ross Street

No charge

Registration 02 6296 4555

- 7.00 *Welcome and introduction*
Barry Williams: CEO,
Australian Skeptics
- 7.10 *Alternative remedies – what are the options?*
Dr Pete Griffith: President
Canberra Skeptics
- 7.45 *Why do people believe in and use unproven or useless treatments?*
Prof Bob Montgomery: Head,
Centre for Applied Psychology,
University of Canberra
- 8.20 Coffee break
- 8.45 *Dangerous practitioners.*
Peter Bowditch: Vice President,
NSW Skeptics
- 9.25 *The alternative remedies industry – protecting the consumer.*
Val Johanson: Executive
Director, Complementary
Healthcare Council of Australia
- 10.00 General discussion
- 10.30 Close

The Speakers



Dr Pete Griffith:
President, Canberra
Skeptics
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Allopathic (Western, conventional) medicine mostly has a scientific basis. This contrasts with that based on alternative views of the genesis of illness, healing, and body mechanics involving folk remedies and philosophies often of Eastern origin. Such alternative remedies may be integrated with each other or with allopathic medicine as complementary healthcare (e.g. acupuncture, chiropractic). To be claimed effective beyond placebo, remedies must generally be demonstrated efficacious in properly conducted controlled trials (e.g. new drugs). Alternative remedies often fail in this respect (eg. homoeopathy, iridology, reflexology) although some (naturopathy, herbalists) fall somewhere in between. Poorly trained alternative practitioners diagnosing and/or treating anything other than trivial complaints can be dangerous.

Born in London in early 1942, Pete played his part in the war effort as a moving target for Nazi bombs. After a spell at Oxford (Balliol College) reading biochemistry he arrived in Oz in 1964 as a PhD scholar at the ANU. His work on influenza viruses led to the position of senior lecturer in microbiology and immunology at the Victorian College of Pharmacy, where his research interests were in human virology, insect pathology, sheep blowfly, drug design, allergies and asthma, and tertiary education. In 1999 Pete moved to Canberra where he worked "part-time" for a while as an editor with the Commonwealth Department of Health. He is now retired.



Professor Bob Montgomery: Head,
Centre for Applied
Psychology,
University of
Canberra
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Humans do not spontaneously think logically, rationally or sceptically, although we are capable of all three, when shown how and motivated to do so. Our more usual ways of thinking leave us vulnerable to misleading ourselves and to being misled, especially over issues with strong emotional components, such as our personal health and well-being. Since this vulnerability results from both our typical

thinking behaviour and persistent environmental influences, it is likely to persist, raising the need for continuing individual vigilance and community action.

Professor Bob Montgomery is a Fellow of the Australian Psychological Society and a Member of the Society's Colleges of Clinical Psychologists, Forensic Psychologists, and Health Psychologists. Over more than 30 years he has combined the twin streams of professional practice and research plus teaching at Sydney, Macquarie, La Trobe, Hawaii, Oregon and Bond Universities. He left his position as foundation Professor of Psychology at Bond University in December 2001 to return to private practice. In February 2003 he took up his present appointment as Professor and Head of Psychology at the University of Canberra, with the main goal of developing its professional training program in clinical, health, forensic, sport and military psychology. He has over 30 publications in scientific and professional journals and is the author of thirteen best-selling self-help books, now published in a number of countries. He is well known to the public through his presentations on psychology on the radio, particularly the ABC, and through television and the print media. He is married to Dr Laurel Morris; their recreations include bush-walking, surfing, alpine skiing, and scuba diving.



Peter Bowditch: Vice President, NSW Skeptics
www.ratbags.com

A constantly repeated claim of the alternative medicine business is that alternatives are safe and can only do good. This is usually backed up by claims which distort, exaggerate and abuse statistics about the dangers of conventional medicine. This talk will examine several ways in which alternative medicine and associated practices can be dangerous and look at the tactics used by alternative practitioners to hide or deny these dangers.

John Lennon once said "Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see". I don't want to live with my eyes closed, so I choose to be a skeptic. I like my facts to be correct, and I don't like the things that I know to be things that ain't so. I think that irrational beliefs breed further irrational thoughts and it is too easy to go from UFOs or Elvis sightings which waste time to gurus and NLP preachers who waste money through to crazy medical and health beliefs which waste lives. The main focus of my skeptical activities recently has been fraudulent medical practices, but this is just a

specific example of the rejection of reason and, as it happens, one of the examples with dangerous consequences. In real life I run a computer consulting business and am otherwise an exemplar of the baby boomer generation.



Val Johanson: Executive Director, Complementary Healthcare Council of Australia
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The CHC is the peak industry body representing complementary healthcare products and plays an active role with the Government at both the political and bureaucratic level. It represents the industry nationally and internationally, and CHC membership covers at least 85% of the Australian market. As the voice of the complementary healthcare industry, the CHC promotes the use of complementary healthcare products for enhancing health and reducing the risk of disease. The Australian regulatory system for alternative remedies or complementary medicine, as the government terms them, leads the world and provides the Australian consumers with confidence that these products are good quality, low risk and that there is evidence to support their claims. There are controls over the quality, safety and efficacy, and complaint mechanisms in place to deal with fraudulent claims. The recent Pan recall demonstrates that the system works.

Val joined the complementary healthcare industry in 1995 as technical manager of the Nutritional Foods Association (NFAA) and became its executive director in 1997. Prior to that, Val held positions in the Australian Public Service as head of food standards at Federal level. She also established the Therapeutic Goods Administration's surveillance unit, which she headed for almost four years. Her background is in science, majoring in chemistry and biochemistry. She commenced her career as a research officer with Kanematsu Institute, Sydney Hospital, undertaking research on new drugs in kidney disease and obesity. Positions held include founding member of the Complementary Medicines Evaluation Committee, immediate past Chair of the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code Council, Head of the International Herbal Regulatory Task Force of the International Alliance of Dietary Supplement Associations (IADSA), Representative of the South West Pacific Region on the Executive of IADSA, Board of the Herbal Medicines Research and Education Council, Health Claims and Consumer Protection Advisory Committee and the Interim Advertising Council.