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IDEAS FROM WONDERLAND

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'A Scientist in Wonderland'

Edzard Ernst's new book *A Scientist in Wonderland: A Memoir of Searching for Truth and Finding Trouble* was published in January this year (Imprint Academic, 200pp, £14.95, see *note 1*). Most skeptics will be aware that until recently Edzard was the Professor of Complementary Medicine (now emeritus) at the University of Exeter and co-author of *Trick or Treatment?: Alternative Medicine on Trial* with Simon Singh. A review of his latest book will be appearing in a future *Skeptical Intelligencer*, but for two in-depth reviews see *notes 2 & 3*. Publication of the book has also triggered numerous articles because of the connection with Prince Charles. (Prince Charles himself has recently received even more controversial publicity than usual owing to the publication of a new biography *Charles: The Heart of a King [note 4]* by journalist Catherine Mayer. Amongst other topics covered, this has featured the heir apparent's outspoken opinions on a range of often controversial issues.)

An MP in Wonderland?

At the time of writing this, concerns are growing about the performance of the UK's NHS Accident and Emergency Departments. Many are failing the Government's target of seeing 95% of patients within four hours, and a lack of beds means some patients are left waiting in ambulances rather than being admitted. The situation was exacerbated over Christmas and the New Year when departments were swamped with new cases.

Step forward Mr David Tredinnick, Conservative MP for Bosworth, who has raised the issue with the Department of Health thus: 'To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the potential contribution of regulated complementary and alternative medical practitioners to reducing demands on the NHS' (*note 5*).

But to no avail. In a written answer to Mr Tredinnick, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Health, Daniel Poulter, said:

Practitioners of complementary and alternative medicines are not subject to statutory regulation. A working group has been established to consider a number of matters relating to the use of herbal and traditional medicines by practitioners. I know my Hon. Friend is a member of this working group. The findings of the working group will be published in due course, once it has finished its work. Until that working group has reported, no assessment can be made of the contribution of such practitioners to reducing demands on the National Health Service.

Just days before in the House of Commons, Mr Tredinnick called for a homeopathic flu vaccine to be given to people at risk this winter. Mr Tredinnick has also informed surgeons that they must not operate during a full moon (because blood won't clot then) and told GPs to use patients' horoscopes when they come for consultations (also see 'Of Interest').

A GP in Wonderland?

A Christian family doctor is alleged at a medical tribunal to have performed an exorcism on a seriously ill patient after promising he could heal her without medication (*note 6*). GP Dr Thomas O'Brien 'persuaded the mother of one to undergo the spiritual procedure at his local Pentecostal church after telling her: "God is your surgeon"'. During a four-month period leading to the ceremony, Dr O'Brien is alleged to have subjected the patient, who was in great pain after stomach surgery, to 'religious grooming' in which he said 'the devil was having a real go at her' and that she had 'devil items' in her house. The patient, who was also severely depressed, became convinced she had been possessed by demons. Dr O'Brien and his wife allegedly took her to a meeting at their Pentecostal Church, where she was advised against seeing a psychiatrist, that God was her surgeon, and she should stop her medication. It is also claimed that they performed an exorcism on her.

As it happens, I once interviewed a man whose GP performed an exorcism in his church as a form of treatment. The man was claiming psychological injuries following his participating in a stage hypnosis show at his local pub and was suing the entertainer (*note 7*). He was claiming that in the period following the show, as a result of a

suggestion that the hypnotist had made, he was subject to an overwhelming desire to have sexual intercourse with his household furniture and fittings, including the contents of his bed (with the exception of his wife), the bedroom ceiling, his bath, his wife's washing machine, various ornaments, and the ambulance that finally came to take him away. His GP, who was an evangelical Christian, decided that the only treatment for him was an exorcism (his wife later told the Court that the doctor told them that hypnosis was a form of Voodoo.) This initially seemed to work and a psychiatrist who examined him pronounced that he was back to normal. Alas, his recovery was short-lived; he subsequently succumbed to a bewildering array of psychological problems and symptoms, and over the next three years was diagnosed with almost every major psychiatric illness to be found in DSM IV, until he his case came to the County Court. Four days into the hearing it was suddenly realised that he no longer qualified for legal aid. So we all went home.

Notes

1. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Scientist-Wonderland-Searching-Finding-Trouble/dp/1845407776/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1423132302&sr=1-1&keywords=edzard+ernst#customerReviews
2. <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/a-scientist-in-wonderland/>
3. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/a-scientist-in-wonderland-a-memoir-of-searching-for-truth-and-finding-trouble-by-edzard-ernst/2018120.article>
4. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Catherine-Mayer/e/B00MT58ZSI>
5. <http://www.hinckleytimes.net/news/local-news/mp-claims-solution-ae-crisis-8496026>
6. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11356805/Christian-GP-performs-exorcism-on-patient-because-God-is-your-surgeon-tribunal-hears.html>
7. <http://www.mheap.com/hypnosis.html>