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### WHY DO SO MANY THINGS TURN OUT TO BE UNTRUE?

*This paper first appeared in the Spring edition of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer', 2016, p. 1.*

In 'Mark's Bookshelf' in this issue, Mark examines the 'stone tap theory' of Richard Felix. Felix explains that ghostly phenomena are 'recordings' of people 'captured by the physical environment in which they moved in life – especially the built environment, where stone is often plentiful'. I was immediately reminded of an item on one of Radio 4's news programmes many years ago. Two men claimed that sounds in a room might be recorded on the material of the walls in a similar way to recordings on magnetic tape. Somehow, so they claimed, they could play back these recordings. They gave an example of such a recording extracted from the walls of a house or inn that was about 200 to 300 years old. The recording sounded like one or more crazy men repeating something unintelligible over and over again. Some days later on the same programme the presenter read a message from a woman who said that as soon as the sounds were played on her radio her cats seemed to freak out. She wondered who these people could have been and what they were saying. I assumed it was serious at the time, but maybe it was a hoax.

Related to the above, I have been ruminating on how so many interesting and potentially useful ideas and claims that we hear and read about turn out to be substantially wrong. How I have arrived at this pessimistic outlook is understandable: the material that I gather for the 'Of Interest' section of this publication is very often to do with some belief or claim that has been shown to be unfounded or untrue. Indeed skeptics are often portrayed as compulsive debunkers and naysayers.

What triggered this was an announcement in the *Times* on 25.1.16 concerning 'scared straight' tactics that have been employed for several decades to dissuade children from offending. Typically young offenders are taken into a prison or gang members visit schools to talk about the harsh realities of the criminal life. However, the College of Policing has now advised that not only does this have no impact on likelihood of offending, it might make things worse.

Another recent announcement is that, contrary to accepted opinion, a study has found that birth order, IQ and personality are only minutely related (see 'Of Interest').

Of course, announcements of the ineffectiveness of popular alternative therapies come as no surprise. NICE has now announced that it no longer recommends acupuncture for back pain (*see notes 1 & 2*). Not only that, ultrasound, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, the routine use of opioids and spinal injections for low back pain are also ruled out. And paracetamol is no longer the first recommended option. This comes hard on the heels of another study suggesting that 'Paracetamol is next to useless at alleviating arthritic pain' (*see note 3*); also see 'Medicine on the Fringe', Winter 2014, and 'Of Interest', Winter 2015). Meanwhile, it has been announced that seasonal affective disorder' (SAD) doesn't exist (*see note 4*) and that, contrary to previous recommendations, the consumption of vitamin D during pregnancy may not help in improving bone density of babies (*see note 5*).

There is worse to come. 'Billions are lavished on flawed medical research' announced the *Times* on 4.1.16. In response, on the same day *PLOS Biology* launched a new Meta-Research Section devoted to 'research on research'. 'Widespread failure to reproduce research results has triggered a crisis of confidence in research findings, eroding public trust in scientific methodology....Billions of dollars are wasted every year on research that cannot be reproduced'. (*see note 6*; readers may already be aware of the replication crisis in psychological research – see 'Of Interest', Winter 2015).

There's a lot more (*you're running out of space - Ed.*). So why is it that so much information and advice and so many claims and practices turn out to be overvalued or just plain wrong? Of course, all the announcements and claims cited above could themselves suffer the same fate. But one theory I have is that in our society so many of us owe our livelihood and status to our ability to provide others with information, advice, services and solutions. That we are perceived as having plenty of this on offer may be more important for fulfilling our roles than whether what we are saying and doing is actually valid and effective.

#### Notes

1. <http://tinyurl.com/grglmj4>

2. <http://tinyurl.com/jxpkrdl>
3. <http://tinyurl.com/hurql9b>
4. <http://tinyurl.com/hkpgec5>
5. <http://tinyurl.com/jyhd4sb>
6. <http://tinyurl.com/zf7av75>