
'pro-information' rather than 'anti-immunisation'. Instead of subjecting their theories to scientific investigation and obtaining facts, one uninformed group resorts to bullying tactics.

At a hospital in regional New South Wales, a local anti-vaccination group engages in the ongoing harassment of the vaccination nurse and staff, involving abusive phone calls and threats. In 2000, this group stirred up local fears by claiming the combined Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine could cause autism. This led to a daily campaign over a two week period where the hospital vaccination staff were persistently harassed with serious threats. Upon learning that the vaccine does not pose a risk of autism, this group turned their focus to yet another unwarranted crusade.

Julie Leask from the Australian National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine Preventable Diseases was not aware of similar incidents but commented on the zeal of anti-immunisation organisations and their persistence in lobbying government agencies, child care centres, schools and the media.

No deal on psychic test

Richard Saunders reports on TV's latest example of dumbing down.

It was building up for weeks on the 7 Network. In ads for a game show *Deal Or No Deal: Test of the Psychics*, played throughout the Olympic Games, we constantly heard the phrase "We'll put psychics to the ultimate test!" Oh boy!

The show started with the words:

These 26 people all possess extraordinary abilities. Will those powers win one of them 2 million dollars? Twenty-six cases containing randomly placed cash amounts. Inside one of them is 2 million dollars. Every one of these clairvoyants, mediums, psychics, telepaths and astrologers believes they can sense where it is."

Without going into detail, the show is a guessing game, with contestants picking suitcases to try to win money. They are made tempting offers along the way, but usually hang on to try and

win the big bucks. This can lead to them at times walking away with next to nothing.

Some familiar faces turned up to have a go. Simon Turnbull, president of the Australian Psychics Association, Dadhichi a 'face reader' and astrologer seen on morning TV, 'Astro Girl' who is related to Athena Starwoman and various others, some of whom claimed to be able to talk with the dead.

It was difficult to judge which of the contestants might have been sincere but self-deluded, or which were outright con sharks, but judging from the comments it would surprise me if most didn't sincerely believe they had some sort of psychic powers. Regardless, each was allowed a brief time to trumpet their particular 'powers' and successes.

Whatever their beliefs, the result showed that 'psychics' could do no better than chance alone would predict. (What a shock; I wonder why none of them foresaw this?) Still, there was always a possibility, as is the case with each episode of the show, that someone would win the top prize.

The exercise demonstrated the falsity of one very important 'rule' that 'psychics' and others have used for years as an excuse to dodge taking the Skeptics' test for our \$110,000 prize:

We could never use our powers to take a test for money! It's a misuse of our abilities that are only there to help others.

(Bunyip has never been certain if this 'rule' is supposed to be a natural 'law', like that governing the conservation of energy, or merely some regulation of the Psychics' Trade Union.)

Nevertheless, we now have a clear example of just how ridiculous this 'rule' is. In *Deal Or No Deal*, each one of the 26 'psychics' was willing to use her/his 'powers' to win money, not for charity, not for a home viewer, but for themselves.

But maybe it was Jacqueline Frazer, a 'Reiki healer' who had the last laugh. She bagged \$31,150 after her Reiki powers and crystals failed to detect the case with the 2 million dollars. Still upward of \$30k, and an hour's worth of free publicity couldn't be bad for business.

Life, be in it

When discussing various topics such as the evolution of life on Earth, the plausibility of life on other planets, or similar epistemological subjects, we are often confronted with a demand to "define life". It's not all that easy, but the Bunyip has solved that for all time, to wit:

Life is that which people, who do not share your enthusiasms, always advise you to get.

Good reading

In the past we have advised readers of the delights that Skeptics can derive from reading the works of British author, Terry Pratchett. Pratchett's books, although they might be catalogued under the genre Fantasy, are far more than that, being hard-edged and always hilarious commentaries on much of the real world we inhabit.

If you a fan of Pratchett, and particularly if you are someone of a literary bent, we feel sure that another British author will appeal just as much. Jasper Fforde (yes, that is a double 'f', not a misprint) has written three novels in which the protagonist is an operative for an agency, JurisFiction, that seeks to prevent a sinister plot to subvert great works of literature, by changing the plots and characters from within. This detective, who goes under the improbable name of Thursday Next (and who keeps a pet dodo) manages to enter the plots of various works, where she meets such characters as Heathcliff, Miss Havisham and many others.

Fforde whose published books, *The Eyre Affair*, *Lost in a Good Book* and *The Well of Lost Plots* will soon be joined by a fourth, *Something Rotten*, will be visiting Australia for an author's tour in late September.

These books are great fun and exactly the sort of "fantasy" that Skeptics should enjoy.

Bunyip