

# Ready for Battle

## Taking the Skeptical message abroad



*Richard Saunders, a member of the NSW Committee, is the perpetrator of the Great Skeptic CD, among other accomplishments.*

This is an abridged transcript of a talk given by Richard Saunders at the Third International Rationalist Conference held at Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi, India from 8 to 12 February 2002.

In this talk, I'll outline some of the experiences I've had when dealing with people in informal situations who discover that I belong to a group of Skeptics. First of all, what is a skeptic? Or maybe more importantly, what do people think a skeptic is? Over the last few weeks, I've put this question to various people. Their answers include:

- They're those men who don't believe anything.
- Old men who don't think anything is possible... (you're not one of them are you? You're too young!)
- You mean there is a group of people who don't believe?
- People who debunk UFOs.
- A skeptic says it can't be done. I think they close their minds to all possibilities
- I'm skeptical about Skeptics!  
We hear the last line all the time!

As you can see, there is a certain level of ignorance when it comes to the meaning of the word 'skeptic'. I sometimes think we should be called the Australian Rationalists! The word 'skeptic' in Australia has unfortunately come to mean 'cynic'.

The best definition of the word skeptic I've heard came from a famous debate held in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. My colleague Richard Lead told the audience that "A skeptic is one who bases his or her beliefs and opinions on the evidence. I cannot imagine living any other way". I have since adopted that as my stock reply.

### Sowing the seeds of Doubt

Now, to a few my own experiences.

A friend of mine who I had not seen for a few years had a baby. When we meet, the talk turned to how she was taking care of her new daughter and herself. "I was taking homoeopathic medicine every day before the baby came," she said. At once my sister and my wife, who were in the room, glared at me as if to say, "Oh no ... don't you say a word Richard". The new mother seemed puzzled and asked why the funny looks. "Do you know what it is, how

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it's made?" I asked. "Yes," she said "It's all natural".

I gave her a brief explanation of Homoeopathy and how none of the original substance is actually in the so-called medicine. This information was hitherto unknown to her. Although I left a seed of doubt in her mind, the last thing I wanted to do was to get into an argument; after all she was my friend with a new baby. I shut my mouth.

At another time, during a dinner party, a woman tried to convince me that the alternative therapies she was undergoing were just as valid as 'western medicine'. "Western medicine only treats the symptoms, not the illness," she told me. I think there is a strongly romantic notion attached to anything to do with healing from an exotic place or culture. I explained to her that there is medicine, it does not matter where it comes from; it could come New York, New England, New South Wales or New Delhi. Upon hearing this explanation, she actually thought I was right and that what I'd said made sense. Now this took me by surprise! I went on to say that people in Australia were in better health and living longer than at anytime in our history thanks to scientific medicine. A moment passed as the message slowly sank in. I left the discussion at that point, not wishing to push my luck. A seed of doubt was sown and to continue could have had the effect of turning me into a bore.

### On the air

Other situations arose when I was being interviewed on netFM, an Internet radio station based in Sydney. (By the way, be sure to tune into *The Skeptic Tank* at [www.netFM.net](http://www.netFM.net), Thursdays, 6pm Sydney time.) The topic of the show was iridology, and we talked at length about how silly this pseudoscience is. As you know,

iridology is the ridiculous belief that the pattern of the iris reflects the well-being of various organs in the body. The interviewer asked me, "The iris is just a muscle, isn't it?" I was stuck. I had no idea as I, in my research, did not find out just what the iris is. It was better to say 'I don't know' then to carry on with incorrect information. To me, saying

*cles that dilate (widen) and constrict (narrow) the pupil size. The sphincter muscle lies around the very edge of the pupil. In bright light, the sphincter contracts, causing the pupil to constrict. The dilator muscle runs through the iris, like spokes on a wheel. This muscle dilates the eye in dim lighting.*



*The author outside the Convention venue.*

"I don't know" ranks up there in importance with another three letter sentence. "I love you". I have found that people from 'the other side' tend to make up things on the spot rather than admit to ignorance. I have since done my homework. Turning to the Internet I found [www.stlukeseye.com](http://www.stlukeseye.com). Why anyone would be interested in St Luke's eyes is beyond me. (At the conference the joke flopped, not even a chuckle).

*The coloured part of the eye is called the iris. It controls light levels inside the eye similar to the aperture on a camera. The round opening in the centre of the iris is called the pupil. The iris is embedded with tiny mus-*

*The iris is flat and divides the front of the eye from the back of the eye. Its colour comes from microscopic pigment cells called melanin. The colour, texture, and patterns of each person's iris are as unique as a fingerprint. The iris begins to develop at week 11 and is functioning by week 31.*

I wonder how many iridologists know that? The point is, I should have known this myself. However, I was able to use this knowledge a few weeks later as I discussed iridology with a 'believer'. After hearing this explanation, the believer was somewhat stranded for a reply. She had never bothered to find out what the iris is or does. I also mentioned the fact that Australian Skeptics offers \$100,000 for proof of the claims of iridology. "Why hasn't someone claimed the money?" she asked. "Why indeed?" was my answer. Again, I left a seed of doubt.

Back in the radio studio, we had just finished our talk and were leaving. The following show was about Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP for short). Now I knew from my reading of *the Skeptic* that NLP is a pseudo-science, but that was all I knew. I was not then and indeed even now, in the good position to comment on the subject, let alone enter into an argument. So as the NLP programmers made their way into the studio, a polite smile and a gracefully exit were the order of the day, even though I longed to attack.

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## Personal notes

Another reaction I get when people hear that I am a Skeptic, is that they rush over to me and say something like: "How do you explain the fact that my father took so and so herbs and lived to 80, even though the doctors said he would not live past 70?" or other similar stories ranging from success at water diving to encounters with UFOs. Many seem to relish the chance to convert me to

course this usually gives the impression that you, the doctors and modern science have lost. There are many times when you will get nowhere.

My arguments on the Internet with dowsers show that even though you might hold all the aces, you have no chance of winning. (At this point I produced a bent wire coat-hanger, told the audience I was looking for someone with 'Delhi-Belly', walked along the stage where other speak-

the test, your words fall on deaf ears. Many people will not accept your point of view, but also *cannot* accept your point of view. They will perform mental gymnastics in order to preserve their belief system. Anything you do, any point you make will simply not make sense to them.

After over a year of these arguments, I left the Internet group as I was receiving threats. In conclusion, I think that the most important thing you can do, especially in an



*Richard and Richard with their Delhi taxi driver*

their way of thinking. Now what can you say here? You don't know the medical history of the father, you have no idea what the doctors said or why they said it or IF in fact they said it at all! I have found it best to say is, "I can't explain it. I don't have all the facts. You may well be right, but without knowing all aspects of the situation, I can not say one way or the other." It's almost the answer of a politician, but it's honest. Of

ers were seated and sure enough, the coat-hanger moved as if by magic over the one speaker who was unwell. At last I heard a chuckle! Now I know that's an amusing demonstration, but that would be enough to convince some that dowsing really works. No matter how logical you are or what evidence you have or the fact that you can cite many examples of the failure of dowsing when put to

informal situation, is not to 'push it'. You are not there to make enemies, you are not there to convert anyone over night because you won't. It just can't happen. All you can do is hopefully give people a different point of view and let them do the rest. As for the dowsers and their ilk, you're probably not going to win anyway. But you might change the minds of others.

