

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

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Anthrax Quackery by Daniel R. Barnett

There is scarcely a disorder incident to humanity against which our advertising doctors are not possessed with a most infallible antidote. — Oliver Goldsmith, *On Quack Doctors*

ANTHRAX! Ever since September 11, 2001, the mere mention of the word causes fear and trembling in many Americans, and with good reason. Primarily an infectious disease of ruminant animals such as sheep and goats, anthrax has been known to infect humans occasionally through avenues such as ingestion of raw meat or exposure to contaminated wool or other animal products. Anthrax is deadly to humans, and the inhalation form of anthrax is especially fatal. As everyone undoubtedly knows by now, anthrax can even be cultivated as a biological warfare agent.

Newspaper headlines have kept running tallies of those killed or sickened by anthrax spores contained in mail parcels that have shown up at network television stations, newspaper publishers, Planned Parenthood clinics, and even Capitol Hill. Are terrorists from the Al-Qa'eda network responsible? Or should we blame homegrown white supremacists? Regardless of the source, anyone exposed to these spores must seek medical attention immediately — and that means dodging a growing number of quacks that are trying to promote questionable anthrax remedies.

Hi-Yo, Colloidal Silver!

Colloidal silver, a solution of submicroscopic particles of silver dissolved in demineralized water, has apparently emerged as a popular alternative remedy for anthrax. While medicines containing silver have been used to treat ailments such as epilepsy and gonorrhea in the past, they're being phased out gradually by newer and more effective medications.¹ Colloidal silver in particular was once used in cold remedies until the middle of the 20th century; its current role in health care is mostly limited to clinical pathology and laboratory analysis.

For years, however, various health food stores and distribu-

tors sold non-prescription, over-the-counter (OTC) colloidal silver with the claim that this liquid is able to cure or treat various ailments ranging from AIDS to leukemia to typhoid. With a nationwide anthrax scare in effect, the marketers of colloidal silver are apparently finding an expanded market for their product. Some are even selling colloidal silver generators; these are small battery-operated boxes with silver electrodes that are inserted into glasses of water, producing ready-to-drink colloidal silver in minutes. One such generator, the CSG-1Shot, sells for \$7.99 on-line and is sold by Ronald Todd, who served in the US Army as a medic during the late 1970s.²

James South, MA, wrote an article called "Mild Silver Protein and its effect on internal and topical infections" that has been posted on the Web site operated by International Antiaging Systems.³ He states that silver, both as a liquid solution and as an aerosol, "has been known since 1887 to be extremely toxic to Anthrax spores." Furthermore, South claims "it is widely reported in the medical literature on Silver that various forms of Silver, often at surprisingly low concentrations, routinely kills germs that are known to be antibiotic-resistant." To bolster the latter claim, South provides references to older articles in *Science Digest* and *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy*.

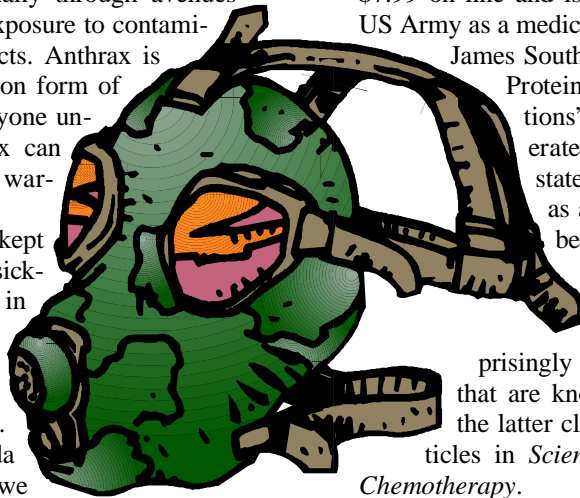
Unfortunately for the proponents of colloidal silver, modern medical science has yet to corroborate the claims that the substance can treat anthrax or any other infection or disease. A search on MEDLINE failed to produce any references to medical journal articles that demonstrate colloidal silver's effectiveness in curing anyone of any illness. Colloidal silver may be great for the detection of extremely small amounts of electroblotted proteins for high sensitivity peptide mapping, but it appears to be a dud when it comes to neutralizing anthrax spores in humans.

On August 17, 1999, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) declared that all OTC products "containing colloidal sil-

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

I don't have a whole lot to say here this month. We have some timely articles, though – one on anthrax quackery (thanks to Danny Barnett and the North Texas Skeptics for that one) and one on psychics. The psychic one has two parts. The first deals with the military use of psychics, which has come up again recently with some claims by a group of “psychics” that the FBI and/or CIA has hired them to help smoke out Osama bin Laden. The second part deals with why police departments continue to use psychics. This part is especially relevant because of what I'm going to present at our December meeting.

December Meeting

December's meeting will be the one I've talked about for a couple months now. I have collected a great deal of information on how various “psychics” have behaved since the September 11 attacks, and will be presenting it all in my talk, **Psychic Parasites**. You may be thinking that you've already seen the stuff in the pages of this newsletter. Nope. I've gotten additional information and will expand greatly even on the cases I've already discussed here.

The meeting will be, as usual, on the first Tuesday of the month: December 4, at 7:00 in the Lincoln Library's Carnegie Room South. I hope to have a good turnout because I think the way these people have acted is simply despicable, and I have all the evidence to prove it. ☹

A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. To become a patron member of REALL, please use the membership form insert. Patron members are:

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(“Anthrax Quackery” continued from page 1)

ver or silver salts are not recognized as safe and effective and are misbranded.”⁴ This is partially due to the fact that excessive use of colloidal silver can cause argyria, a permanent bluish-gray discoloration of skin. The ruling effectively outlawed the sale of non-prescription colloidal silver products for drug use, although bottles of the elixir are still being sold in stores and on the Internet minus any health-related claims.

Even with the FDA ruling, however, it is easy to access a Web site dedicated to colloidal silver, get the information you need about dosage and treatment claims, and then buy a bottle of colloidal silver – with no health claims printed on the label – from your local health food store or preferred on-line distributor. Or you can buy a colloidal silver generator that will allow you to create the stuff in the privacy of your own home. And it’s all apparently legal.

Greg Bittner, mayor of the central Florida town of Howey-in-the-Hills, has been planning to buy a colloidal silver generator for the town so that the locals can drink the stuff and protect themselves against anthrax.⁵ Calling it “the greatest medicinal item that has ever come along,” Bittner advised residents to contact Police Chief Curtis Robbins, who regrets being dragged into this: “I can’t reach the mayor. He’s apparently out of town. He shouldn’t have mentioned my name. I’m sure we’re going to do battle over this, but I’m sure we’ll do it in a professional way.”⁶

Surfing for Bogus Anthrax Remedies

It should come as no surprise that other alternative treatments for anthrax are also being peddled on the Internet. If you’re looking for a homeopathic remedy for anthrax, you’re in luck; Rite Care Pharmacy advertises homeopathic *Anthracinum* on their Web site. Manufactured by Boiron, the 800-pound gorilla of modern homeopathic pharmacopeia, these tiny white pills are impregnated with homeopathic “potencies” from 6X all the way up to CM for as little as \$4.36 a bottle. You can even get a free US flag pin with each on-line purchase.⁷ (By the way, I learned from the James Randi Educational Foundation



People are usually more convinced by reasons they discovered themselves than by those found by others.

— Blaise Pascal

that BestEarth.com has also been advertising a homeopathic anthrax remedy kit, but information on that kit was unavailable when I visited their Web site.)

Homeopathic remedies are produced by repeatedly diluting and agitating a *mother tincture*; this consists of a mineral, herb, or other substance (in the case of *Anthracinum*, anthrax spores) that has been dissolved in an equal volume of water or alcohol. I’ll spare you the details, but if you fill Texas Stadium to the top with water, stand on the roof, release a single drop of mother tincture into the artificial lake, stir it up real good, and then fill a test tube with that mixture, that test tube now contains approximately as much of the original substance as a 6C potency.

Rite Care’s Web site, however, states that the “generally prescribed” dose of *Anthracinum* is two daily doses of a single 9C pill, which is more dilute than the 6C version. Homeopathic potencies such as 12C (equal to one drop of mother tincture in the Atlantic Ocean) and 30C (equal to one *molecule* of mother tincture in a container of water 30,000,000,000 times larger than the Earth) are so dilute that absolutely none of the original substance remains, but these are among the most common “strengths” marketed today in American pharmacies and health food stores. I won’t even begin to discuss the astronomically high CM potency. Of course, many homeopaths will often state that the amount of *Anthracinum* present is not important; the “essence” of *Anthracinum* is still present in those little white pills and will act upon the “vital force” of the person taking them. This bizarre concept, however, has yet to be demonstrated reliably in any clinical trial.

Of course, if homeopathy isn’t your cup of tea, aromatherapy awaits you further down the information superhighway. One site operated by The FadaleGroup promotes the use of “essential oils” to fight infection, offering the following commentary:

With more and more research underway, we now know that essential oils are much like the blood of humans, that they are the transporters of the fundamental nutrients, vital elements and chemical constituents necessary to feed and support life in plants. They have the unique ability to penetrate cell walls to transport oxygen, nutrients and many other vital elements directly to the cell nucleus...

We know that essential oils are terminators of disease-causing microorganisms, So deadly, they can kill them by proximity alone (This is due to the oil’s volatility). Such notorious characters as staphylococcus, pneumococcus, meningococcus, hemolytic streptococcus, typhus bacillus, diphtheric bacillus, anthrax bacillus, Kock’s [*sic*] bacillus, many kinds of mold and a plethora of other pathogenic micro-organisms, are all susceptible [*sic*] to the killing power of specific essential oils.⁸

I love the smell of sandalwood and myrrh as much as any-

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Psychics and the Government

Fighting Ignorance with *The Straight Dope*

by David Bloomberg

As I've mentioned before, I write for the Staff Reports portion of *The Straight Dope* by Cecil Adams. The column is of the question-and-answer variety and runs mostly in alternative independent newspapers across the country. It does not run here in Springfield, but you can still read it on the web at www.straightdope.com and buy collections in book form at pretty much any book store.

A number of the Staff Reports I write are also related to REALL, so we reprint them here from time to time. This month, we are featuring two questions that deal with psychics and the government. In case some of you long-time readers feel a sense of déjà vu, some of this material actually came originally from work I did for REALL articles a number of years ago. But I think it's good to go over some of the basics that come up time and time again, anyway, especially since some of it will be brought up in my talk this month.

As before, Ed Zotti, Cecil's editor, did some editing on these answers.

Dear Straight Dope:

Some years ago I recall hearing that our federal government was spending money researching "Remote Viewing" for military or intelligence purposes. This work was being performed in Palo Alto, at the infamous SRI laboratories. Supposedly, this research went on for years and was being actively used by the NSA and CIA. What's the real story on this psychic stuff?

— Kelly Hall

Kelly, you've hit upon one of the reasons many people consider "military intelligence" to be an oxymoron. It's true — your tax dollars (and mine) went to fund studies of psychic power. Needless to say, the cold war didn't end because some guy could bend a key.

This story was reported by a number of media outlets in 1995. I have articles from the Associated Press (11/29), *Newsweek* (12/11), *Science News* (12/9), and *Nature* (12/7), and saw other mentions on various TV news programs. Each contains essentially the same information. Also, columnist Jack Anderson dealt with the subject (none too skeptically, I might add) in several of his columns around that time.

Over a period of more than 20 years, the CIA and Pentagon spent approximately \$20 million to study and employ numerous "psychics." They were supposed to help track down terrorists, find hostages, help anti-drug activities, etc. Experiments were conducted on precognition, clairvoyance, and remote viewing.

You are correct that the Stanford Research Institute (SRI)

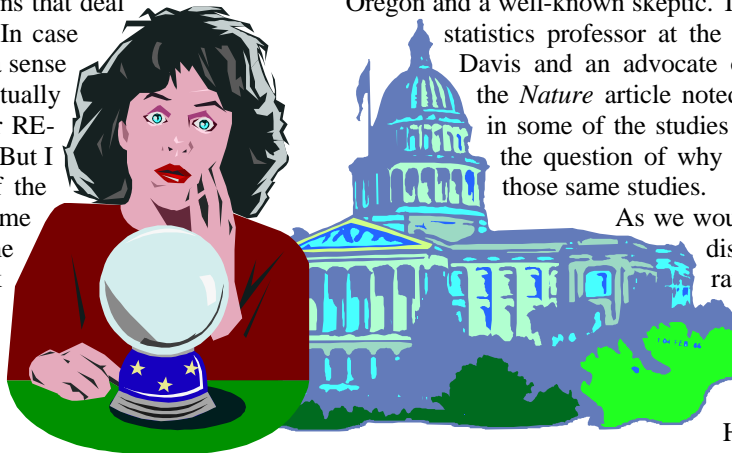
was involved. Apparently, this project began with help from Russell Targ and Harold Putthoff, who had previously "tested" Uri Geller — that should tell you something right off the bat. Anyway, our tax dollars supported this nonsense while they came up with stories much like ones we are used to hearing from proponents of "psychics" — tales which could not easily be verified or falsified, and which underwent changes in the telling over time.

The CIA asked two reviewers to evaluate the studies. One was Ray Hyman, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon and a well-known skeptic. The other was Jessica Utts, a statistics professor at the University of California at Davis and an advocate of parapsychology. Indeed, the *Nature* article noted that Utts had participated in some of the studies — which in my mind raises the question of why she was selected to review those same studies.

As we would expect, Hyman and Utts disagreed on how the studies rated. While both agreed that the first "era of research was problematic," Utts said there was "a statistically robust effect," while Hyman noted that "there's no evidence these people have done anything helpful for the government."

So where does this leave us? Let's look more closely at the studies. Utts said the "psychics" were accurate about 15% of the time when they were helping the CIA. Fifteen percent? Is this supposed to convince us to pay them to help the United States government? Utts says she thinks "they would be effective if used in conjunction with other intelligence." My intelligence tells me that 15% accuracy isn't much help no matter what it's used in conjunction with—that's an 85% failure rate! So 85% of the time, spies would be wasting their time and resources on incorrect information. We're supposed to be happy with that? And that's presuming she's right about the 15%.

In one particular study on remote viewing, the "psychics" scored above the result expected from chance by getting the right answer approximately 33% of the time when there were four choices, which *Science News* characterized as "a moderate increase over chance." But the judgment of success was determined by the project's director, who rated the similarity of each response to the target display and to other randomly chosen pictures. Hyman argued that these studies offer no insight as to why the scoring is above chance—it's just assumed that it must be psychic ability. He also noted that the accuracy ratings should have been done by independent judges—not the project director—and that none of the studies have yet undergone peer review. In other words, there were severe methodological flaws in those studies that did seem to show a hint of something. Indeed, a former CIA technical director who monitored these pro-



grams said on *Nightline* that he wasn't aware of any significant results from the "psychics."

An interesting note in this regard is that "psychics" interviewed by CIA evaluators said the program worked well as long as it was run by those "who accepted the phenomenon." Sorry, guys, but objective scientific results shouldn't depend on who's running a study!

Both the *State Journal-Register* and *Newsweek* reported anecdotal stories that were used in support of this program (it is interesting to note that neither scientific publication did—only the ones from the popular press). One of these stories is that a "psychic" predicted that an American official would be kidnapped on a certain day in 1981, and Gen. James Dozier was taken that night. As Hyman noted, though, "these are nice tall stories that can't be evaluated." As with all "psychic" reports of this type, there is too much missing information. What, specifically, was the prediction? When was it made? When was it recorded? Had this psychic made other such predictions that did not come to pass? There are simply too many unanswered questions. The stories told in the *State Journal-Register* mostly came from one of the "psychic spies" himself, but I would never suggest that a "psychic" would tell tall tales in order to promote himself.

Newsweek also reported that, as if the early years of the program weren't bad enough, it became even worse in the mid-1980s. A senior general would call subordinates together for spoon-bending sessions. One "psychic" wrote a long paper predicting a huge air attack on Washington during a Reagan State of the Union speech. The program offered several suggestions about capturing Saddam Hussein during Desert Storm, and all of them proved utterly useless. And one of the "remote viewers" left the army because he was convinced there was a Martian colony beneath the New Mexico desert.

Why does it seem so difficult to have an objective, scientific experiment to look at claims of psychic power? Why do we always hear anecdotal tales about the great successes of "psychics," which, all too often, turn out to be exaggerated, misleading, or even completely untrue? Again in this case, we saw the problems that so often raise their ugly heads with studies of psychic power—poor control, methodological flaws, and too much subjectivity.

Dear Straight Dope:

I read your column on psychics hired by the military, and I've also heard of psychics who solve cases for police departments. If they're all such "tall tales" as you call them, why do psychics keep getting called back to help out people like cops when they have no other way of solving crimes?

— Ray

Well, one answer, though somewhat snide, is that police officers who do this should go back and review their classes on basic evidence collection. If they applied the rules of evidence to psychics' claims, they'd stop using the psychics.

But it's not only the fault of the police, though they should probably know better – these psychics often do quite a good job of marketing themselves. Now, those psychics may come back and say, "But we don't take any money to help the police." No, they don't (usually). But they get one thing that is more pre-

cious: free advertising. Then, if they so choose, they can use that advertising to their advantage in the business they get paid for. After all, if the local paper runs a story saying that you helped find a missing body, surely you can help a spinster find a husband.

OK, David, but that doesn't explain how they manage to get that article written. I mean, they wouldn't write it if it weren't true, right? Wrong. At least, wrong to a point. The writers of such articles often take things at face value that perhaps they should be a bit more skeptical about. Indeed, cases have been found in which the reporters just basically wrote what they were told, without bothering to do any checking at all.

There are, however, some journalists who remember that skepticism is a virtue (a motto adopted by *Brill's Content*, a media review magazine). Ward Lucas, a reporter who also wrote a chapter in the book *Psychic Sleuths* ("A Product of the Media: Greta Alexander"), has discussed some of the ways psychics make their predictions. He noted that such predictions generally fall into five different categories:

- ? Extremely general statements with a wide application
- ? Self-fulfilling prophecies
- ? An occasional wild guess with very specific characteristics
- ? Those that are false but contain enough flexibility that they can be modified or "corrected" when confronted with an objection
- ? Unverifiable statements

Let's look at each of these.

General statements are those like, "The initial 'B' is around the victim's body." In this context, "B" could be brown soil, blue water, branches, blood, brush, the first initial of a county, or any other "B" word you can find in a dictionary.

Many psychics use such statements throughout readings and predictions. For example, you'll often hear, "I see somebody whose name begins with 'J.'" Hmm. John, Jack, Jason, Jeff, Julie, Jennifer, Jean, etc. Well, that's certainly helpful. But many people will go through this at a reading and report, "The psychic knew my ex-husband's name!" No, she didn't. She guessed "J" and you filled in the details. But that's often not the way it's remembered.

Wild guesses, when used in the right proportion, can build credibility. If they're wrong, then they're considered "an occasional failure," and explained away. (I have actually seen a letter to the editor complaining about some coverage of a psychic's prediction that was wrong; the letter writer claimed that the reason she missed some predictions was that it was a problem with the interaction between the physical and non-physical worlds. Uh huh.) If the wild prediction is right, it can make the psychic famous. Or if it's almost close enough, it can work as well, with a helpful media push (see earlier answer on Jeane Dixon's non-prediction of JFK's assassination).

Self-fulfilling prophecies involve the suspension of disbelief of the average person. The person searches for ways to make the prediction come true, rather than noticing that it was false. In one case Lucas examined (dealing with the late Greta Alexander), the psychic had predicted the importance of a "bridge" and a "church." Neither had anything to do with the

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one else does, but I’m not convinced that these oils can oxygenate my body and cure any sort of bacterial infection I’ve picked up along the way. Of course, this page doesn’t bother to list the oils capable of performing these feats, but a Web site operated by Cambridge Essential Health Center states:

Dr. Jean Valnet, MD, well-know French medical researcher and essential oil expert, points out that the essential oil from thyme literally destroys the anthrax bacillus, the typhoid [sic], bacillus, the glanders bacillus, staphylococcus [sic], the diphtheria bacillus, staphylococcus, the diphtheria [sic] bacillus, meningococcus, and Koch's bacillus, which is the bacteria [sic] responsible for tuberculous lesions.⁹

There are some inhalation anthrax patients in America right now who could really benefit from aromatherapy with thyme and other essential oils if these claims were true. But that’s a really big *if*. In the meantime, since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are still advocating the use of antibiotics, I’m going to assume that they know what they’re doing.

A Word about Anthrax and Antibiotics

Anthrax spores are useful as bioweapons partially because they’re tough little critters – they’re resistant to heat, radiation, and even explosives. As one might imagine, they give physicians no end of trouble when it comes to treating anthrax patients. Fortunately, antibiotics such as ciprofloxacin (better known as Cipro) can cure many anthrax cases if the diagnosis is made before symptoms develop. As a result, there has been a huge run on Cipro, with anxious Americans begging their doctors for prescriptions and survivalist quacks encouraging everyone to maintain Cipro stockpiles. Some have even traveled to Mexico, where Cipro can be purchased without a prescription and then brought back to the United States.

When Dr. Tim Gorski discussed medical quackery at the North Texas Skeptics meeting in October, however, he mentioned that even evidence-based medicines could become quack medicines if they’re used incorrectly. Using Cipro or any other antibiotic as an unwarranted prophylaxis against anthrax infection qualifies as quackery.

For years, medical experts have been pleading with Americans not to take antibiotics unless they’re directed to do so by their physicians. If you haven’t been exposed to anthrax spores, there’s no need to take antibiotics in the first place. If you do come in contact with anthrax spores, a doctor can make an ob-

jective and reliable determination as to which prophylaxis or treatment regimen is best for you. While Cipro is the drug of choice for many recent anthrax patients, other antibiotics such as penicillin have proven effective in treating anthrax cases. Once again, your doctor can make the best decision.

Why use a relatively lightweight antibiotic against anthrax when you can bring out the big guns? There are two good reasons for this. When a doctor prescribes antibiotics, he or she always admonishes the patient to take every single pill until the treatment regimen is complete. If the patient stops taking antibiotics because the symptoms are beginning to disappear, the organism responsible for the infection may not be completely wiped out at that point; it can recover and re-infect the patient. This time around, however, the invading bacteria may develop a resistance to the antibiotic that would have cured the patient in the first place if he or she had just listened to the doctor. As I stated earlier, anthrax spores are tough critters. Treat a strain of anthrax with the wrong antibiotic or fail to complete the treatment regimen and you may wind up with a form of anthrax that’s stronger and deadlier than it was before treatment took place. *Don’t take the risk.*

In addition, taking antibiotics is not the same thing as reaching for aspirin if a headache develops. French physician Claude Bernard is credited with making a very profound statement about pharmacology: “Everything is poison; nothing is poison. It is the dose that makes the difference.” All antibiotics are capable of producing occasional side effects, but heavyweight antibiotics such as ciprofloxacin, while capable of knocking out nastier infections, are also very toxic to the human system. As an example, Cipro is not recommended for anyone under 18 years of age because of possible joint damage. In fact, a few exceptionally powerful antibiotics such as dactinomycin and doxorubicin are so powerful that they are used in cancer chemotherapy, but their toxicity matches their ability to knock out

tumors. Talk to a cancer patient or an oncologist about the various adverse effects of such antibiotics. Above all, keep this in mind: *Antibiotics are not benign medications, and should not be treated as such.*

As skeptics, we urge everyone not to panic. Approach the recent anthrax scare with a rational and measured response. Chances are that you, personally, will not develop cutaneous or inhalation anthrax, but if you do, you should seek out the best evidence-based medical care possible. Avoid unproven



“alternative” treatments that have yet to prove their mettle in a clinical environment. Likewise, avoid the temptation to treat yourself for an illness you don’t even have yet unless your doctor instructs you otherwise.

Messing around with many forms of September 11 malarkey, such as Kim Clement’s prophecies and dubious Bible Code predictions, may cost you nothing more than a little anxiety and a little cash. Messing around with anthrax quackery, on the other hand, could cost you your health – even your life. And we’d sure appreciate it if you could stick around with the rest of us.

Footnotes

¹ Fung MC, Bowen DL. Silver products for medical indications: risk-benefit assessment. *Journal of Toxicology – Clinical Toxicology* 1996;34(1):119-126.

² *CS Control* Web site. <http://cscontrol.hypermart.net>. Accessed October 27, 2001.

³ *International Antiaging Systems* Web site. <http://www.smart-drugs.net/ias-silverJamesSouth.htm>. Accessed October 23, 2001.

⁴ “FDA issues Final Rule on OTC Drug Products containing Colloidal Silver.” FDA Talk Paper T99-39; August 17,

1999. <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/ANSWERS/ANS00971.html>. Accessed October 22, 2001.

⁵ “Small-town mayor touts colloidal silver as cure to anthrax.” *The Daytona Beach News-Journal*; October 20, 2001. <http://news-journalonline.com/2001/Oct/20/SATT1.htm>. Accessed October 21, 2001.

⁶ “Silver promoted as anthrax cure.” *MedServ Medical News*; October 20, 2001. <http://medserv.no/print.php?sid=1010>. Accessed October 22, 2001.

⁷ *Rite Care Pharmacy* Web site. <http://www.ritecare.com>. Accessed October 24, 2001.

⁸ “ESSENTIAL OILS – The Perfect Match for Healing.” http://www.oilsandthings.com/Oils_and_Healing.htm. Accessed October 24, 2001.

⁹ *Cambridge Essential Health Center* Web site. <http://www.squonk.net/users/ancient/Oils.html>. Accessed October 24, 2001.

Daniel Barnett currently serves as Vice-President of the North Texas Skeptics. He lives in Dallas with his wife, Ginny. This article originally appeared in the November 2001 issue of The North Texas Skeptic and is reprinted with permission. ☞

(“Psychics and the Government” continued from page 5)

case or the finding of the body but both were examples of this type of situation. It turned out that there was a bridge off in the distance. There wasn’t a church nearby, but there was a church camp about a half-mile to a mile down the road. So these were matched up to the predictions after the body was found. It should be noted especially here that none of these predictions have any significance prior to the discovery of the body.

Rapidly altered prophecies are often used as well. In 1986, this type of prophecy was recorded by the *Chicago Tribune* when the late Greta Alexander appeared at the Illinois State Fair. She asked a woman in the audience if she had back problems (many people over 30 do suffer some sort of back pain, so it’s a good cold-read guess). The woman replied that she did not, so Alexander shifted gears and said, “Well, my back hurts with you, so watch for kidney and bladder infections.”

It works in police cases as well. Alexander did something similar with the case of a boy kidnapped while fishing. She originally said the body would be found “near water.” Now, that prediction is vague enough in and of itself (the kidnapping occurred in Kankakee River State Park), but the body wasn’t really found all that close to water, so things shifted in her later statements to the press. Alexander said that she heard a “whooshing” noise, which turned out to be a highway. When pressed, she said that the “water” part referred to the start of the crime. This is true, but one hardly needed to be psychic to figure it out, since the boy was abducted while fishing! Yet many press reports gave her credit for a correct prediction here.

Unverifiable statements are another staple of such predictions. To use Alexander again, she has made statements in various cases like: “A man with funny-looking boots walked right past the body during a previous search” and “The man with the boots had a dog.” How can that “prediction” be verified? It can’t. It might later be retrofit as a rapidly-altered or self-fulfilling prophecy, but standing alone it is meaningless.

In some cases, combinations of these categories are used. For example, in one case, Alexander mentioned “Grabner’s farm.” While there was no such person, if circumstances were right, “Grabner” could have been seen to actually mean “Wagner” or “Abner” or some other similar name. In the same vein, if she predicted the man who would find the body has a “crippled hand” and the finder actually had a gimpy leg instead, she would have likely taken credit as only being slightly off. So a wild guess becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

You add up all these techniques and what do you have? A whole lot of nothing that seems to actually work. And, of course, when the psychic can’t come up with anything at all, it likely won’t make the newspaper. I once saw a small article noting that two psychics had taken police to an abandoned farmhouse, saying a body was there. It wasn’t. The psychics weren’t even named. You can bet that if there had been anything at all there, they’d have gotten their names in the paper.

The fact here is that no psychic has ever been shown to have helped the police. They do a lot of claiming after the fact, but it’s never been backed up with evidence. In fact, when an independent experiment was done some years back to determine if psychics could help, the psychics actually did worse than the control group of students!

So why do the police continue to use psychics? Some don’t know better—even police officers can be fooled. Some are hesitant to refuse any aid, no matter how little they think it will actually help. (Imagine if they didn’t accept a psychic’s help on a high-profile case and the psychic went to the press complaining that she has knowledge that could help but the police wouldn’t listen.) Sometimes they are pressured by families who believe the psychics.

Unfortunately, none of these reasons has anything to do with evidence because if they relied solely on evidence, the police would never use a psychic again. ☞

Our Next Meeting

Psychic Parasites

David has collected a great deal of information on how various "psychics" have behaved since the September 11 attacks. He will present information about cases beyond what he has already discussed in The REALL News and will also expand greatly on the cases he's already discussed.

David notes, "I hope to have a good turnout because I think the way these people have acted is simply despicable, and I have all the evidence to prove it."



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Tuesday, December 4, 7:00 PM

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