

## Watered Down Nonsense

In the Sunday Telegraph, James LeFanu writes that we should be **nicer** to homeopathy. Specifically he takes issue with Michael Baum, Professor Emeritus of Surgery of surgery at University College London, who has pointed out that homeopathy has no more merit than **astrology**. LeFanu writes:

The claim that homeopathy is "unsupported" by evidence would be contradicted by the many tens of thousands of people worldwide who say that it has cured their asthma or eczema or markedly reduced their reliance on conventional medicines. Are they all, as he would suppose, foolish and self-deluded?

Of course they are; either that or for some reason the news has not reached them (as it clearly has not reached LeFanu) that science is, in the words of Richard Feynman, "what we have learned about how to keep from fooling ourselves". So if you don't use it when reasoning about what does or doesn't work, what will reliably happen is that you will continue to fool yourself.

Millions of people believe in **witches** and would swear that killing old women can and does alleviate a wide range of misfortunes including diseases. So, finding a group of people who claim that something cures them has no bearing at all on whether it does. LeFanu, unfortunately, continues:

It is true that homeopathy's supposed mechanism - treating like with like, where "the lower the dilution the more potent the remedy" - seems "barmy" to Western science. But so does acupuncture.

No demonstrable channels of communication cross the six feet that separate the toes from the skull, so how, as is undoubtedly the case, does twiddling a needle in the former cure a crashing migraine in the latter?

What? First of all, there is in fact **no** good **evidence** for acupuncture as a treatment of anything. But never mind that: pain and touch nerves *do* carry information from the foot to the brain. LeFanu is a physician and cannot possibly be that ignorant of basic anatomy. So it is, again, his standards of argument that are at

fault. The Telegraph's editors ought to require a higher standard of

reasoning in their newspaper than this watered down nonsense.

Sun, 05/27/2007 - 14:06 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## Nonsense in the News

The Telegraph? When was the last time we've read anything but nonsense and hokum in the newspapers?

The article on homeopathy sounds like another fine example of prospective prize winning journalism to me. Of course, said with tongue in cheek but the state of news reporting is in one sad state.

Sure they can write for consumption, but what of substance? They cut down trees for this? Yet we still subscribe to the stuff or some at least still waste their time on it.

It is no wonder that newspapers are dinosaurs fighting extinction. They need to hold on to their dwindling readership and the homeopathy and ufo articles apparently help meet the sunday quotas for articles in the pop-science section.

by a reader on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 00:01 | [reply](#)

## Placebo

The person who comes up with the mechanism of action of a placebo will be quite famous, as he will be able to partially treat many conditions.

I don't object to the use of placebo's, as long as there is informed consent. Acupuncture is a powerful placebo, and potentially useful to many people.

by a reader on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 00:52 | [reply](#)

## Re: Placebo

A study in 2001 **concluded** that placebos are ineffective except for conditions, such as pain, that have a large subjective component.

"The high levels of placebo effect which have been repeatedly reported ... are the result of flawed research methodology," said Dr. Asbjorn Hrobjartsson, a professor of medical philosophy and research methodology at University of Copenhagen.

It seems likely, then, that in most cases flawed methodology, rather than the placebo effect, is responsible for people falsely concluding that they have been cured by homeopathy and the like.

by [Editor](#) on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 01:34 | [reply](#)

## Chicken Hypnosis and the Faculty of Reason

In his new book, "The Assault on Reason", Al Gore tells us how to

hypnotise chickens. Find out how by reading the section on politics, pundits, and the modern media.

Does this picque your interest? If so, read on.

The source of the paradox of knowledge standing side by side with psuedo-knowledge is that reason is a higher order faculty that can be rather easily subverted into psuedo-reason. The fact that one can read and write and speak in complete sentences, quote authorities and journals, and believe and espouse complex psuedoscientific arguments, does not prove that our faculties of reason are fully engaged. Further, working in opposition to reason, there are tried and true methods, employed consciously or not, but certainly habitually and repetitively, in which repeated incidences of passive exposure to today's pundits via media distribution tend or intend to intrigue us with nonsense. The bond between consumer and producer of nonsense is created and fostered.

How so, and also importantly, Why so?

Firstly, it is of benefit to the pundit, as well to the ubiquitous media carrier to espouse and carry such nonsense. Nonsense is easy to produce, can be produced in great volume and with vast repetition, and it sells, rewards the producer, because readers and viewers enjoy the experience of being placed in a semi-trance state. It is a natural state but with sufficient soft prodding can also become an acquired pleasure.

Consumers in a semi-trance state will read or view almost anything set constantly before them and with sufficient repetition and exposure will tend to believe the content.

To coin a descriptive term, I will call this phenomenon, Cereal Box Syndrome. It is likely a distant cousin to the phenomenon of Chicken Hypnosis but is of a somewhat higher order on the scales of neurological evolution since it involves language, attitudes, and acquired beliefs.

The simple antidote in the case of a hypnotised chicken is to grasp the bird in the right hand like a football, and throw forward in a smooth flowing motion. The spell is immediately broken and the bird flies away unharmed.

I leave it to science to more clearly elucidate the antidote for what I have labeled Cereal Box Syndrome, but which certainly is more dangerously pervasive and subtle than the effects of chicken hypnosis.

Fortunately and in summary we can be assured, there is a vaguely remembered but sure and certain cure for CBS, and it is, to state simply:

Reasoning. Pure and simple, wide awake, Reasoning.

by a reader on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 15:01 | [reply](#)

**Pain is a Problem**

"A study in 2001 concluded that placebos are ineffective except for conditions, such as pain, that have a large subjective component."

I have seen that study. It is one amongst many. But even if its conclusions are accurate, pain is a problem for many people. To the extent that a placebo (versus doing nothing) helps that is a good thing.

by a reader on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 16:28 | [reply](#)

## Placebo

A Reader:

You said placebos are ok if there is informed consent. Homeopathy and acupuncture patients don't give \*informed\* consent.

-- Elliot Temple

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**Dialogs**

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 05/30/2007 - 21:26 | [reply](#)