

SACRAMENTO AREA SKEPTICS NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2010

GENERAL SCIENCE AND SKEPTICISM NEWS

Bad month for the anti-vaxxers

Any bad news for the anti-vaccination movement is good news for skeptics. And last month was a fantastic month. The great news started in late January when the UK General Medical Council concluded its extensive investigation of Andrew Wakefield's study published in British medical journal *The Lancet*.

Wakefield is widely considered to be the founder of the modern anti-vaccination movement. The GMC found that Wakefield acted "dishonestly and irresponsibly" while conducting his research, which hypothesized a link between autism and the MMR vaccination. This news was made even better a week later when *The Lancet* retracted the article from its published record.

Proposed changes to NASA

President Obama has released his proposed budget for NASA, which, if passed by congress untouched (unlikely), will result in a shakedown at NASA. It increases NASA's budget by \$6 billion over the next five years, with more than half of that dedicated to funding scientific studies like building new telescopes and more robotic missions to other bodies in the solar system.

The largest hubbub is over the cancellation of Constellation program, the Shuttle's replacement, which has been underfunded and behind schedule from the start. The new plan is to outsource rocket development to private firms (much as the Air Force does for its jets). This would speed up development of such technologies while freeing NASA to do more science.

Oprah sweat lodge guru charged with manslaughter

Motivational speaker and sweat lodge guru James Arthur Ray was arrested earlier this month on charges of manslaughter after three people died following an event he held in an Arizona sweat lodge last year. Ray became popular in 2006 after appearing in the "documentary" *The Secret* and after promotion by Oprah Winfrey on her show *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

The Amaz!ng Meeting 8

Registration for the James Randi Education Foundation's annual conference, The Amazing Meeting, will be opening soon. This comes from JREF President DJ Grothe, who also announced that this year's keynote speaker will be Richard Dawkins.

TAM is often considered to be the unofficial international skeptic's conference, with excellent speakers and panel discussions. This one is promised to be the best yet. TAM 8 will take place from July 8 through July 11 at the South Point casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. For a full report, visit www.newscientist.com/article/dn18336-politicians-and-celebrities-shamed-for-science-gaffes.html.

Upcoming events

SAS events

Feb. 20: Glenn Branch Presentation

NCSE Deputy Director Glenn Branch will present the history and prospects of creationism.

Mar. 5: SCC Open Observatory

Mar. 19: March - Drinking Sceptically

Apr. 9: SCC Open Observatory

Apr. 16: April - Drinking Sceptically

Apr. 24: SkeptiCal Conference

Sacramento Area Skeptics articles

(Find these and others at sacskeptics.org)

Winchester Mansion – Follow Up

Sacramento Coalition of Reason

Science Promotion in 2010

Wars break out over DSM-V

The DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) is repetitively referred to as “the bible of the psychiatric profession”, but since its first edition of 1952, which famously included homosexuality as a mental disorder, it has never been less than controversial.

Originally due for publication in 2012, DSM-V (replacing the 1994 DSM-IV) has now been put back to 2013 because of controversy over its proposed contents. (An outline of new content has this month been posted at <http://www.dsm5.org/Pages/Default.aspx> and a rundown of the controversies that dog it is at <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn18508-psychiatry-draft-new-bible-goes-online.html?full=true>)

Critics range from those who reject the entire psychotherapeutic model (for example, Scientologists) to those who are concerned about the medicalization of normal behaviors, which allows drug companies to expand the use of psychotropic drugs to new markets.

In recent years, for example, the expansion of the diagnosis and use of drugs for adult and juvenile bipolar disorder has sparked passionate debate (see the Skeptical Inquirer at <http://www.csicop.org/>



■ **This stack of editions shows how the DSM has expanded since 1952, and parallels the worries of those who believe its ambitions overreach the evidence.**

[si/show/bipolar_bamboozle/](http://www.csicop.org/si/show/bipolar_bamboozle/) and http://www.csicop.org/si/show/wholesale_sedation_of_american_youth/).

In addition to concerns about psychotropic drugs, critics are concerned about the use of forensic psychology in the courtroom.

The courtroom *Memory Wars* (book by Frederick Crews) over “repressed memories” of childhood abuse seem to have died down. But the use of psychiatric and psychological professionals as expert witnesses in, for example, child custody disputes is still widespread and politically explosive. Accusations of child sex abuse against fathers and of Münchhausen’s Syndrome by Proxy against mothers rely on expert testimony by psychotherapeutic professionals.

American courts have become extremely cautious about allegations of sex abuse against biological fathers in divorce proceedings, but Münchhausen’s by Proxy (now discredited in British courts after the Meadow’s Law controversy), is still accepted in American courts and still listed under “factitious

disorders” in the proposals for DSM-V (see <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=386> under the heading “Factitious Disorder on another”; see also “Meadow’s law” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meadow's_law).

One of the main sources of contention here is that 90% of those accused of “Factitious Disorder on another” are women. Professional and lay critics see this diagnosis as ominously similar to the entirely discredited 19th century diagnosis of hysteria.

A *New Scientist* editorial, titled “Psychiatry’s bible: its time has passed” sums up basic scientific problems with psychiatry and psychotherapy in the DSM:

“Psychiatry suffers in comparison with other areas of medicine, as diseases of the mind are on the whole less well understood than those of the body. We have, as yet, only glimpses into the fundamental causes of the common mental illnesses, and there are no biological tests to diagnose them (see the whole article at <http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg20427381.300-psychiatry-civil-war.html>)

This writer believes psychiatry, allied with neuroscience, is a vital area of scientific medicine and that some psychotropic drugs are life-savers. Nevertheless, everyone should be concerned about the use of shaky science in social contexts. We owe it to ourselves to learn more about the contents and uses of the DSM and to keep our eyes open, like all good skeptics, for unreliable evidence. **C.O..**