

# SWIFT



VOL. 1 NO. 2 1997

*Therapeutic Touch, or TT, is a disturbing phenomenon that has spread rapidly throughout the medical community, specifically among those in the nursing profession.*

*Bob Glickman is a registered nurse in Philadelphia. He is proud of his honorable profession and dismayed at how many people in the nursing community, including the principal professional associations, have uncritically embraced TT and use it regularly even though there has never been any proven therapeutic value.*

*Glickman tried for months to coax practitioners of Therapeutic Touch to submit to a simple, inexpensive test of their claims here at the Foundation. His report will give you some idea of just how they wriggle when confronted with a legitimate challenge of their claims.*

*TT has been used increasingly in hospitals over the past twenty years. It consists of a practitioner running his/her hands over the body of the patient, about six inches away from the person. It is claimed that the practitioner can detect what is called the "human energy field" (HEF) and that it can be felt as distinctly as if it were a layer of sponge rubber. The practitioner can then adjust this field to the advantage of the patient, we're told.*

*Tests of cures claimed to have been attained through TT would be extraordinarily expensive, subject to many variables, and liable to produce endless discussion and argument. Bob Glickman and I decided it seemed best to test the basic claim: that the HEF could be detected by an experienced practitioner and that it could be detected with an accuracy that would establish its existence.*

*What follows is an interesting dialogue between Bob and some folks on an Internet e-mail discussion group devoted to Therapeutic Touch.*

—James Randi

## TOUCH OF MYSTICISM

by Robert Glickman, R.N.

One of the many places to look for potential TT practitioners is on the Internet. I submitted a challenge to the Nurse Rogers e-mail service run by devotees of Martha Rogers. Rogers was a famed theorist of nursing based at New York University's School of Nursing and was a major supporter of Therapeutic Touch.

Therapeutic Touch was created in the early 1970s by Dolores Krieger, R.N., Ph.D., and Dora Kunz, a "fifth generation sensitive" and "clairvoyant" since birth, who was the president of the American Theosophical Society at that time. (The Theosophists are followers of Madame Blavatsky, a Russian mystic who taught an Asian-style philosophy she said she learned in Tibet, and asserted that invisible entities known as "Mahatmas"

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# SWIFT TAKES

## GOOD VIBES AND BAD VIBES FROM ALL OVER

The front page of the Metro Section of *The New York Times* on Monday, July 21, 1997 featured a lengthy article entitled, "The NYPD's Psychic Friend: When Technology Fails, Detectives Call On a New Jersey Woman's 'Visions,'" featuring self-proclaimed psychic Dorothy Allison helping the men in blue solve murder mysteries. Why they devoted as much ink as they did to this silly woman is the biggest mystery of all. The best part of the story was a quote from Randi, where he recalled what a police chief from the Midwest told him about Allison: "She couldn't find a bowling ball in a bathtub if it were on fire." Skeptic/investigator Joe Nickell was also quoted in the piece.

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The folks over at *Life* may want to rename the magazine *Get A Life*. The August 1997 cover story, "The Healing Power of Touch," a decidedly credulous look at massage's purported therapeutic benefits, comes on the heels of the July issue's "Why So Many of Us Now Believe the Stars Reflect the Soul: Astrology Rising." The July cover story is bad journalism plain and

simple. Towards the end of his ten-page devout reportage of the pseudoscience's present scene and list of players, author Kenneth Miller recounts his conversation with University of Oregon Professor Ray Hyman, agrees with the fallacy of personal validation phenomenon, and then goes on for two more paragraphs about how angry it makes him that Hyman is right and that all the tests debunking astrology are conclusive. Immediately after this admission, he essentially throws it out the window: "Soon, though, I realized that I had found treasures in astrology that no fallacy could every taint: those flowing metaphors and profound myths; those conversations with strangers, in an arcane language, that had put me in contact with great chunks of my past. And there were things in those transcripts [of my chart readings] that Hyman's theory just couldn't explain." Shame on *Life* for actually publishing such schlock.

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The July/August 1997 issue of *Health* throws a bone to questionable arthritis treatments in an article concerning the claims of the

book *The Arthritis Cure*, alleging new but as yet unproven treatments for arthritis using the dietary supplements glucosamine and chondroitin. The piece leads off with the tale of a woman who began taking the supplements courtesy of her husband, a veterinarian, who had been using them for some time on dogs suffering from arthritis. Sounds like the remarkable transformation of a wife into a guinea pig.

In a sidebar, a book entitled *Alternative Medicine Sourcebook* written by a doctor and licensed naturopath is endorsed with the phrase, "for a balanced perspective." And lest any readers miss the bias, this appears under the headline, "Alternatives You Can Trust." "Balanced, unbalanced ... there was no notice informing readers that the magazine was now writing its material in Orwellian Newspeak.

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The July/August 1997 issue of *Weight Watchers* includes an article promoting aromatherapy, under the heading of "Mind: Bath of a Thousand Flowers." Hard to imagine the piece is good for mind or body, but the usual extravagant claims are made, including the advice that one should "consult a qualified aromatherapist," whatever that is. In fact, the article points out that "while national certification isn't available for aromatherapists in the United States, at least nine schools

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We encourage you to submit your ideas, items of note and original articles. Please send them for our consideration to Articles Dept., *Swift*, at the address or e-mail listed above.

offer correspondence and in-class courses about aromatherapy." Any bets on whether the diplomas are appointed with a pretty floral pattern?



The June 1997 issue of *Natural Health* poses the headline question, "Spiritual Medicine: Does it Work?" The piece is an excerpt from a new book entitled *Coyote Medicine* by a practicing medical doctor who also promotes American Indian healing strategies. The doctor reports that he has "seen cancers, neurological disorders, anginas, gland problems, and other diseases cured without (and sometimes in spite of) surgical or pharmaceutical interventions." He does not attribute this observation to the trivial fact that all medical conditions either get better or worse or remain unchanged regardless of whether or how they are treated, but in fact seems to attribute this unremarkable news to the wonders of American Indian mysticism. He also reports on the visions he experiences while using peyote. Perhaps Carlos Castaneda should write a medical book.

The same issue includes an article entitled "Strengthening your Life Force," featuring the ever-popular pseudoscience of qi gong, which, we are told, has been around for 2600 years, so it must be good. Either that, or it certainly does take a long time for some suckers to wise up.



The July 11-13 issue of the syndicated *USA Weekend* newspaper

supplement asks on its cover, "Can herbs heal you?" The author's answer is yes. The writer has a new book out entitled *Miracle Cures*, from which the article is excerpted. The hook here is a determined attempt to try to find smidgens of "scientific" evidence to support the endorsed remedies. But we're confused — why can't these alternative therapy people get it straight? Isn't science evil and wrong? Or is science good and accurate, but only when it provides something in support of your particularly favorite pseudoscience?



In honor of the 50th Anniversary of "the Roswell Incident," *Time*'s June 23, 1997 issue features a cover story, "The Roswell Files" with a tongue-in-cheek account by writer Bruce Handy of the entrepreneurial opportunities that existed in Roswell, New Mexico during the town's planned three-day commemorative weekend in July and little known trivia tidbits, like the fact that actress Demi Moore was born and raised in Roswell. A second article, "Did Aliens Really Land?" is an excellent, rational historical account of the incident by contributor Leon Jaroff.



The April/May 1997 issue of *Civilization*, the magazine of the Library of Congress, is a breath of fresh air. It contains a wonderfully written, succinct article tracing the history of homeopathy and its present-day popularity entitled "Medicine's New Age," by Robin Marantz Henig, who is also the author of five books and

numerous articles. The magazine's Contributors column states, "Henig sides naturally with the scientists who ask for objective evidence rather than testimonials." Hear, hear. The article also contains a sidebar listing and describing briefly "Other Unconventional Approaches" to healing, including acupuncture, Therapeutic Touch, chiropractic, and biofeedback.



The April 13, 1997 issue of *The Boston Globe Magazine* Sunday newspaper supplement featured a cover story called "Attack of the Pseudosciences: As aliens and auras take hold of the popular imagination, scientists fight back against the X-Filing of America." This thought-provoking piece by staff writer John Yemma focuses on the layered and complex factors that may have contributed to the prevalent anti-science attitude, scientific illiteracy and the migration of fringe science toward the media mainstream and what some critical and not-so-critical thinkers are doing about it. A parting question sums it up: "But, really, does it hurt to nibble *Mysterious Origins* mind candy or to secretly thrill at reports of UFOs, Loch Ness monsters, ESP? It doesn't hurt if we keep clear distinctions be-

CORRECTIONS: We reported on April 1, 1997 that one of the recipients of our Pegasus award was Robert Bigelow of the Bigelow Tea Company. We have since learned that Robert Bigelow is not connected with the Bigelow Tea Company. We apologize for any misunderstanding we may have caused. In "The Kassel Dowsing Test," Vol. 1, No. 1, Amardeo Sarma's name was incorrectly spelled in the byline.

# THE KASSEL DOWSING TEST PART II

The premier issue of Swift contained the first part of "The Kassel Dowsing Test," a reprinted article from Skeptiker, about the first original project of the GWUP, the German skeptics' organization.

We left the group of dowsers and GWUP members at the test site in Kassel thoroughly agreed and assured of the protocol, poised to make history. A wide variety of pendulums, forked sticks, and bobbing and twisted springs were in agitated motion as the claimants eagerly awaited their chance at the DM20,000 prize. TV cameras covered every aspect of the proceedings. Claimants told interviewing reporters that they were astonished at the naivety of the GWUP people who were offering them this easy way to win a substantial prize.

I must admit that at such moments, I have a momentary feeling of "But what if...?" Dowsers are almost universally honest folks who really believe they can pass such tests, and their guileless exhilaration is infectious. But as we've shown so many times, these folks are merely subject to the "ideomotor effect," whereby they are innocently unaware of moving the dowsing device, and do so unconsciously. They are often able to succeed in poorly designed and poorly controlled demonstrations, usually depending upon common sense and

careful observation, but they always fail in this sort of strict, double-blind, monitored test. Experience has shown me that any number of strong contraindications rarely sway them, and they persist in their convictions that they have supernatural abilities and that they can easily prove them to doubters. There is no joy in having to tell honest-but-deluded claimants that they have not demonstrated their claims to be true. When we demonstrate that dowsing is a delusion, we shoot fish in a barrel.

Lacking huge grants of money and endless maintenance funding, those of us who design and conduct tests of unusual claims often have to satisfy ourselves with going after less important targets, leaving the more damaging and glamorous pseudoscientific claptrap to proliferate. A dowser bobbing a stick in a field is a sad sight, but not a serious threat like homeopathic "medicine" or "recovered memory" witch-hunts. Too bad Congress didn't see fit to hand us the \$30 million that they gave to the promotion of quack-

ery by unqualified "experts" at the National Institutes of Health, where it was promptly squandered.

GWUP deserves high marks for the care they demonstrated at Kassel. I'm happy that I was able to contribute to the design of the protocol, and I feel that the results speak for themselves. Dowsing will continue, of that we're sure. But at least critics of these silly notions will now have a very definitive piece of research to which they can point when confronted with the usual blather on the subject.

Again, we are grateful for the translation skills of Jutta Degener with assistance from Clive Feather and Mark Brader. Ms. Degener also provided us with the official portrait of Pigasus, mascot of the 2000 Club, and designed the popular JREF Web page.

Here is the second and final part of the Skeptiker article.

—J. R.



ABOVE: A DEMI-DOZEN DOWSERS AT KASSEL, STICKS AND WIRES AT THE READY, PREPARED TO CARRY AWAY THE PRIZE. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE TEN-BOX EXPERIMENT WAS EAGERLY ATTACKED BY A CLAIMANT. THE RESULTS WERE ABOUT 10%.

# THE DEFINITIVE DOWSING TEST

by Robert König, Jürgen Moll and Amardeo Sarma

## THE TEST COMMENCES

Of 21 dowsers who applied in writing, 20 came to Kassel to participate in the tests. Nineteen of them took the test involving water running through pipelines, while the last said the whole area was too "contaminated" for him to do the tests. Fourteen participants took part in the box experiment, but only 13 of them were used in determining the results, because one person broke the previously agreed-upon rules; this was the same person who turned down the water experiment. The results from this person are listed separately; the overall results would not be affected if they had been included.

The 19 participants who took the water test made 30 runs each and scored between 11 and 20 (37% to 67%) — see "Water Test" figure below for a chart of the distribution — with a total score of 298 out of 570 (52.3%).

Four errors were made while setting the valves; in each case a valve was turned off when it should have been on. In three cases it was noticed during the trials and corrected immediately, while the fourth case was discovered afterwards and confirmed from the videotapes.

For scoring the results, the actual valve setting was used.

Another incident occurred during a changeover of observers: the new person didn't completely cover the receptacle tank during two runs. That resulted in an increased level of noise from the running water.

One observer thought that a slight difference between the sounds of the two settings could have been noticed. The mistake was discovered during a routine check of the trial conditions. Most dowsers felt the box experiments were more difficult, and so expected not to do as well as they did in the water tests. They scored between 0 and 2 hits each out of 10, 1.08 on average, against an expected value of 1 — see "Box Test" figure below for a chart of the distribution.

One candidate was omitted from the results of the box experiments, as mentioned already. This was be-

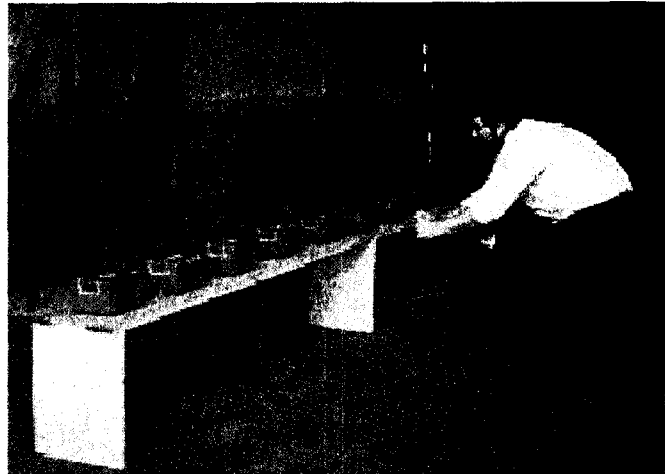
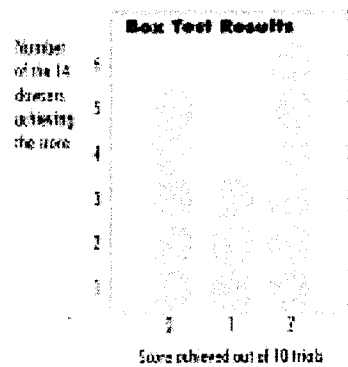
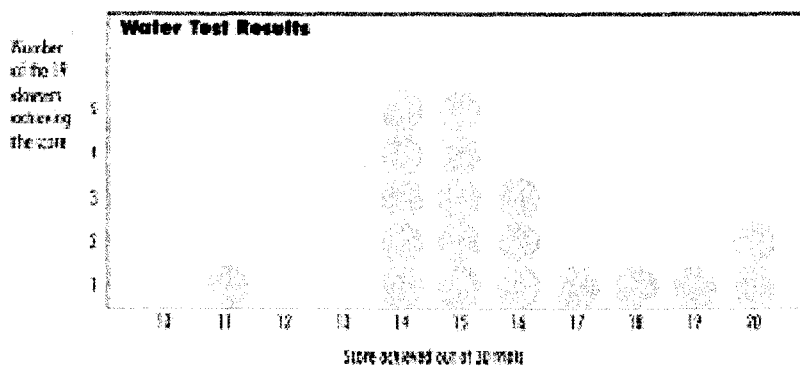


photo by James Randi



**THE STORY THAT NEVER WAS.** The Hessische Rundfunk TV network, who paid for the expenses of setting up the dowsing tests, had covered the proceedings assiduously. Their crews were unobtrusively everywhere, taping every aspect of the tests. Such involvement of personnel and equipment, aside from the outlay of expenses for the basic water delivery system and security procedures, is quite expensive. They had planned to prepare a TV special, and GWUP had granted them this right in return for their participation. Crews and executives from the network were as eager as all of us to see the final results, but as it became evident that the dowzers had failed spectacularly, interest faded quickly. Crews packed away their equipment, scheduled post-results interviews were canceled, and the TV special never took place. It was a case of a "non-story" to Hessische Rundfunk, though if the dowzers had been successful, we expect it would have been a celebration of rare dimensions. —J.R.

cause the realization diverged from the protocol in two respects: first, this person's runs were done outside, possibly compromising the double-blind setup; and second, they made 20 tests rather than the pre-agreed 10. Even so, the contestant failed to make a single hit. Altogether the 13 participants scored 11% (14 hits out of 130); if the omitted results are included, this shrinks to 9% (14 out of 150).

Apart from the actual results, we also gained other interesting insights during the experiments. The dowzers indicated "interfering anomalies" prior to the start of the water test (see diagram below). Not

only did the "anomalies" diverge considerably from each other, but the dowzers also traced the disturbances to widely different causes. These ranged from water veins via buried metals to "global lattice networks."

### THE RESULTS

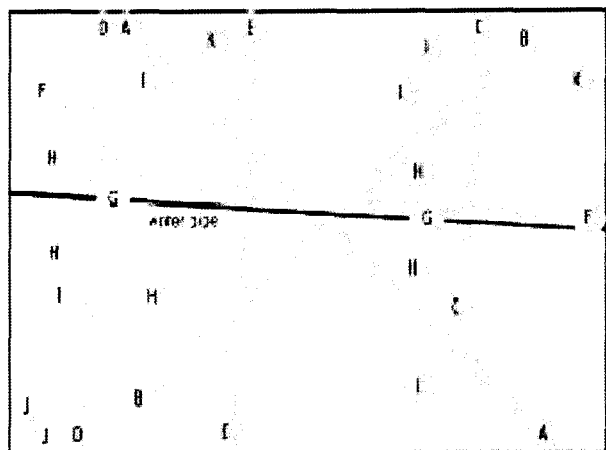
The overall result of the water trials (52.3%) is very close to the expected rate of 50%. The distribution of rates is within the range that would be expected under the chance hypothesis, which is therefore confirmed. Now, considering the best results from the water trials, we see that two participants achieved 20 hits

and a third person scored 19. Taken alone, this might seem remarkable. But in fact, the chance of two or more people scoring 20 is about 24%, while the chance of three or more scoring 19 is 30%, both higher than one might have expected. One should remember that such outlying results are of limited value, even if they look unusual, because a large number of such patterns can be "discovered" in any random sequence, depending on a human observer's sensitivity.

Apart from this, we also compared the hit rates with random YES/NO settings. These random drawings scored between 11 and 21, thus managing to generate a better score than even the best dowzers. Singularities in random results are quite likely and don't signify a deeper meaning. Even a single result of 23 or 24 wouldn't be proof for "earth rays" or other "locational influences."

The results from the box experiments are equally clear. 95% of all trials of this type should be expected to score between 5% and 15%. In this case, the actual result (10.8%) is very close to the expected value. The distribution of the results (0 to 2 hits out of 10) also provides no hint of a hidden effect.

The overall results fail to verify the claimed abilities of dowzers. Of course, this is not the same as proving that such abilities don't exist, because it is practically impossible to prove such a thing to the satisfaction of believers in dowsing. Someone can always claim that we tested the wrong dowzers, used the wrong hypotheses, or expected too strong an



**SCHEMATIC OF  
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SAME  
ANOMALIES.**

effect. Take, for example, that last objection. If we wanted to test an effect at the 54% level, we would have to make more than the scheduled 570 experiments for the water trials. Testing a hit rate of 53% would require at least 1000 separate runs. Under these circumstances, who could deny a dowser the claim that they were fatigued?

An even more important point is that, though people occasionally talk about a weak, only statistically significant effect, there is no clear definition of this effect. But such a definition is needed before designing a test for it. Once defined, even a small effect could be tested for in principle. The belated discovery of significant results for not previously defined hypotheses cannot be used as proof. If you look hard enough, something significant can almost always be found. Such results are at most a starting point for new hypotheses and new tests.

## CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The trials do not confirm the pre-defined hypothesis. The tested dowsers could not achieve their claims in either of two situations; to the contrary, and as predicted by the GWUP, the results were exactly what would have been expected by chance. A closer examination of the results does not hint at any "small effect" either, but it should be admitted that the experiments weren't designed to detect such a thing (even supposing that such an effect had been well-defined before the experiments were made).

There have been a few suggestions for improving future trials. To begin with, more people should be involved with controlling the test conditions in order to be able to react immediately to protocol errors. Such errors are a greater danger than accidental, statistical deviations. For the same reason, this test's requirement for the repetition of a result should definitely be retained. Second, deviations from protocol, as in the case of the test person who was disqualified for the box experiment, should be excluded as a matter of principle. Third, it was pointed out that the shack with the valves wasn't completely isolated from the outside world; an accomplice could have gained information from the reactions of the people in the shack and passed it on in some way. Even though this is considered a very minor risk, it should be excluded in the future.

These three examples show how difficult it is to conduct the perfect experiment. Nevertheless, it must be said that no other German trials for the dowsing/earth ray problem have come close to the high standards to which this one aspired. Given the right conditions, the GWUP will continue to hold experiments on claims of dowsing and of other paranormal or extraordinary claims. However, a strict precondition will be that the hypotheses are precisely defined before the tests, that the tests are strictly controlled, and that they can be conducted as double-blind tests. The more extraordinary the claim is, the stronger the security controls must be.



photo by James Randi

ONE OF THE CLAIMANTS USING A CUSTOMIZED PENDULUM TO DETERMINE SOMETHING ABOUT A BOOK. THE PENDULUM TECHNIQUE WAS AS DEPENDABLE AS THE FORKED STICK METHOD.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At this time, we'd like to thank the people and institutions involved with the preparation and realization of the dowsing test, without whose help such activities would have been impossible. We are grateful to the Hessische Rundfunk for their generosity. We should also mention that the Kassel Fire Department School provided invaluable assistance both in technical matters and with personnel. Finally, our special thanks to James Randi, who not only significantly influenced the design of the dowsing test, but also helped make it a worthwhile and very pleasant experience for all of us. ■

## MORE ON DOWSING

*The most strident objections offered by "experts" to counter the failure of the dowsing tests at Kassel were put forth by two German physicists, Drs. H. L. König and H.-D. Betz, authors of Der Wünschelrute, a book about their government-funded dowsing investigation. (The German word for "dowsing stick" is Wünschelrute, which literally translates as "wishing stick," an appropriately accurate designation.)*

*König and Betz had employed the usual questionable reinterpretation to all their data, such as assigning significance to a "mirroring" effect in dowsing, which claims that if a dowser guesses that the target is number two in a row of ten targets, yet the target is actually number nine, since the target and the guess are each one-removed from the ends of the row, a "reflection" effect has taken place.*

*These two celebrated dowsing experts have had an incredible influence on belief in dowsing worldwide, and when they were asked by GWUP and myself to become involved in the Kassel tests, they quickly declined to do so. They stated that their own tests had sufficiently established the phenomenon, and that further replication would not be necessary. Naturally, when the Kassel tests proved so negative, they rushed to defend their claims.*

*Dr. Jim Enright, professor of behavioral physiology at Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California at San Diego in La Jolla, California, offers the following comments on the objections made by König and Betz to the Kassel tests and on their own results. —J. R.*

The 1989 Kassel dowsing study reported in *Swift* [Vol. 1, No. 1, 1997] is the most carefully planned and executed experiment ever undertaken to determine whether dowsers can perform as claimed.

In 1986, the German government provided some \$250,000 (DM400,000) as a grant to a group that included two university physicists from Munich, Drs. König and Betz, for their proposed experimental study of dowsing. That research was not as carefully planned and controlled as the Kassel study, but it was a project of much greater scope, with

some 500 dowser candidates and nearly 10,000 individual tests.

Those researchers concluded in 1988 that their data unequivocally demonstrated the existence of a real dowsing phenomenon, implicating some unknown stimuli unfamiliar to present-day science. The Kassel experiments were originally proposed as an attempt to replicate that study by the Munich physicists, using fewer subjects but clearly a significantly controlled experimental design. The negative outcome of the Kassel project supports the doubts that skeptics have long had about dowsing, but enthusiasts might dismiss that outcome as only an unsuccess-

ful attempt at replication: a failure to replicate cannot be regarded as compelling proof that the originally reported results were simply wrong.

Equally relevant to the original objective of the Kassel study is a re-examination of the data from the Munich study, which was recently published in *Naturwissenschaften*, the German journal of the Max Planck Gesellschaft (Enright, 1995, 1996). That reanalysis led to the interpretation that if a real dowsing ability exists, it was decidedly not reproducibly demonstrated. Most dowsers consistently did very badly; even in the best cases, intra-dowser reproducibility was also very poor. When, as occasionally happened, a particular dowser achieved unusually good agreement, in a set of 5 to 10 tests, between chosen location and the concealed water pipe, that same dowser failed to achieve similarly good results in other replicate sets of tests. When a phenomenon is as unreproducible as water dowsing proved to be in the Munich study, the most sensible interpretation is to attribute the occasional successes to chance alone.

Those who are interested in more information about dowsing should consult what in my estimation is the best Web page out there on the topic. Go to <http://www.voicenet.com/~eric/dowsing.htm>. ■

### REFERENCE

Enright, J. T. "Water dowsing: the Scheunen experiments," *Naturwissenschaften* 82, 360-369, 1995; and "Dowsers lost in a



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## X-RAY VISION

by Massimo Polidoro

In Italy, CICAP is well-known to the public due to the many TV appearances of its members. Because of our visibility, we are frequently approached by people who claim to possess psychic powers and want us to test them.

The psychics who visit us at the University of Pavia are very rarely deliberate frauds. More often, they are sincere people who really think they possess paranormal powers just because they have never properly tested their claims; this has been the case, for example, of the lady who "impressed images on film," of the man who "changed the taste of wine," of the one who "moved the clouds" or of the other who "was immune to acids." In all of these cases, after submitting the claims to scrutiny, we were able to find normal explanations for the phenomena.

### THE WOMAN AND THE BOXES

Some time ago, we received a letter from a woman — we'll call her R.G. — who said she could see inside a sealed box and could describe what objects were inside it; she wanted CICAP to test and verify her powers.

We accepted her proposal and invited R.G. to the University of Pavia to test her with the help of Dr. Luigi Garlaschelli and Professor Adalberto Piazzoli.

In the letters and phone calls that followed, she assured us we could use any kind of box and any object we liked; she claimed a 60% to 70% rate of success.

Once in Pavia, she agreed that the situation was ideal, the conditions were met, the people there were not hostile, and that she was confi-

dent she would succeed. We read her the protocol we had prepared for the test, to which she also agreed.

### THE TEST

We had previously selected 12 random objects, each one different from the others in shape, color and material; these objects were taken into a different room from the one where the test was going to take place and randomly numbered from 1 to 12. During the test, an experimenter would choose a random number, then take the corresponding object, wrap it up in paper to avoid any clue by noise (the psychic said beforehand that paper didn't block her visions), put it in a wooden box kept closed by two rubber bands, and then bring it in view of her. This would happen for each object, and each object could be chosen only once.

At this point, when she saw the box for the first time, R.G. asked us to take off the rubber bands, because she claimed they could confuse her images. We accepted on condition that nobody could get close to the box after the experimenter had entered the room.

We then gave her a list of the 12 objects to help her remember what

*Massimo Polidoro is the European representative for the JREF; he is also researcher for CICAP (the Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), an expert in the techniques and psychology of deception, the author of various books dealing with the critical examination of paranormal claims.*

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