

Rocky Mountain Skeptics

Editorial

The Rocky Mountain Skeptics is an "organization whose objective is to advocate for and demonstrate the use of scientific inquiry into any activity that claims to be scientific or that presents itself as an alternative to science." As skeptics we do our best work when we disregard any conclusions of a research project and focus on the science in the project. The relative value of the experimental conclusions are based on the merits of the test. And when the test is invalid so are the conclusions. We also believe that skeptics are at their worst when they accept the conclusions of an experiment just because it reinforces their particular world view.

For the last six years, many individuals within the Rocky Mountain Skeptics, working with these guidelines in mind, have subjected proponents of the nursing practice of "therapeutic touch" (TT) to considerable pressure to defend their claims by good scientific research. Our position has been and continues to be that if there is merit to TT then we will support adding it to the body of meritorious practices that can be used to enhance all our lives.

Skeptics discount TT for two fundamental reasons: 1) Either the proponents have not conducted good scientific experiments or, when test results appear to be favorable for TT they cannot be successfully replicated and 2) the fundamental premise of TT - that there is a human energy field (HEF) that can be detected and manipulated by a trained person - is not supported by any other well established discipline or principle. Nevertheless, it is possible that in the future there will be replication of a TT experiment showing some response to the manipulation. This will not necessarily demonstrate the existence of the HEF. Another prosaic explanation might very well explain the results. Similarly, some form of HEF may be shown to exist. This still would not show that any modulation of that field could occur.

Skepticism requires the willingness to modify belief when the evidence warrants; knowledge is always subject to revision. But, the burden of proof is always on the claimant. The more extraordinary the claim, the more exceptional the proof must be. These two principles have underlain the many successes skeptics have had in the past.

We make a fundamental mistake when we claim to know the truth. When we do that we create a situation where the burden of proof is on us. When we claim to know something does not exist then the burden of disproof is on us (this may be extremely difficult if not impossible).

RMS's effort to shed light on the practice of TT has been consistent. Representatives of RMS have published papers and given public lectures critical of TT claims. Our work has been featured in magazines and television world wide. We successfully challenged

the Colorado Nursing Board practice of offering continuing education credit for TT studies - which culminated in the official review of TT claims by the University of Colorado Health Science Center. Always the burden of proof was laid at the feet of the proponents. By doing so, the poverty of their claims and practices have become ever more obvious to the public. The consistency of our demand that the burden of proof must be on those teaching and selling the practice of TT is clear.

Anyone can claim to be a skeptic. When he or she does so and conducts experiments whose conclusions are consistent with our world view it is imperative that we subject these conclusions to the exact review and criticism to which we would subject any claim or conclusion arrived at by the opposition. Skeptics are, we believe, doubly obligated not to support any claim simply because of the very human need to have our beliefs validated. Furthermore, our criticisms must be consistent, fair and even handed. To be otherwise is to become vulnerable to accusations of dogmatism. We could suffer permanent loss of credibility. Once we cease to demand the same level of competence in an experiment whose conclusions we favor all our efforts to convince the "true believers" of our impartiality cease to be credible. At that point we might as well disband RMS or rename our organization Rocky Mountain Defenders of the Status Quo.

In the April 1, 1998 issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) an article appeared that had great media impact. The results of eleven-year old Emily Rosa's experiment were front page news in such publications as the New York Times, the Denver Post, as well as many other major metropolitan newspapers. One full page was dedicated to Emily's Little Experiment in the April 13, 1998 issue of Time magazine. Both National Public Radio and the Today show featured the story. The article responsible for so much attention was the paper, A Close Look at Therapeutic Touch, describing "2 series of tests" involving 21 people claiming to have the ability to influence the human energy field.

When the first of the two tests was written up in the publication, Skeptic (Vol. 4 No. 4, 1996, The Rosas' Study, p30) we at RMS found it interesting and provocative. We were further intrigued by an article two issues later in the same publication (Vol. 5 No. 2, 1997, An Experimental Analysis of Therapeutic Touch, p 27) written by Emily Rosa. It was very well written and gave a summary of the two experiments combined.

However, JAMA has clout; any article in it has potential public policy implications. In addition, it represents to many the quintessential journal of medical science. The Skeptic, on the other hand, is viewed as carrying much less weight.

Now that Emily's experiment has been published in JAMA the ramifications reach far beyond a ribbon in a 4th grade science class. If we, the skeptic community, allow questionable science to be labeled significant science, we are abrogating our responsibility to our principles. Thus it is absolutely essential to review the JAMA

article in the same manner as any other TT experiment reported in that journal or any other. When JAMA's editor, George Lundberg, appeared on TV to declare, "Age doesn't matter. It's good science that matters, and this is good science." We either endorse his view by our silence or fulfill our obligation to speak out and illuminate the mistakes.

[Read our review of the JAMA article.](#)

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