

Suffolk Humanists and Secularists

Newsletter June 2017

"Read any good books recently?"



June Meeting: "Book Review"

We have had to move our original meeting topic (on stem cells) to a later date and instead this month's meeting will have a literary flavour. Please come along ready and willing to share your thoughts about a recent (or not so recent) book that you have enjoyed and think that others might be interested in as well.

As usual we will meet at 7:30 p.m. in the Darwin Room at Arlington's Brasserie, Museum St. Ipswich

Summary of our May Meeting: "Popular Pseudoscience"

There wasn't a very big attendance at this from the regulars but it was great that we were able to welcome a couple of new members.

I was inspired to give this talk for several reasons. One was my growing concern that claims based upon pseudoscience seem far more prevalent today than they were even a couple of years ago. Much of this is due to rise of the web and social media where claims, no matter how crazy are

neither subject to scrutiny nor easily challenged. A second was that the level of scientific understanding by politicians seems to have plumbed even greater depths. This is especially so in America (see panel below). A third was my concern that pseudoscience is feeding a culture of anti-science right across the board from cosmology to health care, from energy to beauty products.

In many cases the nonsense peddled serves only to lighten one's wallet but in other circumstances the consequences are far more serious. A UK based company that sold devices variously claimed to be able to detect almost everything from explosives to drugs using "electrostatic magnetic ion attraction" was even backed by the UK government while selling to several war-torn countries. In fact the devices which were sold for more than \$5000 apiece consisted of nothing more than two metal rods fastened on to a plastic

Georgia Congressman: Science Committee member Paul Broun



"All that stuff I was taught about evolution and embryology and the Big Bang Theory, all that is lies straight from the pit of Hell. And it's lies to try to keep me and all the folks who were taught that from understanding that they need a savior."

handle. When the main perpetrator of this grim hoax appeared in court accused of fraud the judge asked if the device worked. The reply was “It does exactly what it is supposed to do; it makes money”.

In the same vein, and often using similar ideas, there is even a thriving market in “ghost and spirit” detection devices. And yes there is a downloadable App for it!

However it is probably in the health and beauty area where the really big money is to be made from pseudoscientific claims. Fortunately we no longer can be told just how good cigarette smoking is for our health “Light an Old Gold instead of a throat treatment” (1950 advertisement) but the market for so-called detoxicants, homeopathic treatments, health products and nutritional supplements alone is worth more than \$30 billion per year. That however pales in comparison with the beauty market worth over ten times as much where, as long as a product’s packaging and marketing materials don’t claim to mitigate, treat, or cure disease, or otherwise affect the structure and function of the body in any way, it is considered a cosmetic and therefore relieved from its burden of proof.

The role of pseudoscience in religious thinking also warranted a mention. This was not just because in the guise of creationism, astrology and miracle-healing it goes hand in hand with belief in the supernatural but because it has been used as the foundation of several religions. Here Scientology, Anthroposophy (the “spiritual science” of Rudolf Steiner) and Christian Science are probably the most familiar. These not only promote pseudoscientific ideas but in some cases actively discourage their followers from trusting anything based upon mainstream

scientific methods e.g. the anti-vaccination stance of Christian Scientists.

For more information on the BHA campaign on pseudoscience see

<https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/>

Denis Johnston

Future Events

Tuesday June 13th 7:30p.m. (Arlingtons, Ipswich)

"Read any good books recently?" (see front page)

Saturday 24th June Lunch meeting: The next of these will be held at the Duke of York in Woodbridge from 12:00 noon onwards.

Please let me know if you plan to attend.

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Tuesday 11th July 7:30 at Arlingtons
Topic (still to be confirmed): Video: "The Stem Cell Revolution"
Featuring beautiful hand-drawn animations this charts the history and scientific evolution of stem cell research and raises important ethical questions.

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