



Saint Valentine's Day  
February 14

# Phactum

The Newsletter of the  
Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking  
February 2008

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[www.phact.org](http://www.phact.org)

**On Saturday, February 16, 2008, at 2:00 PM, the Physics Department of Community College of Philadelphia will host Paul A. Offit, M.D.,** chief of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Henle Professor of Immunologic and Infectious Diseases at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine will be PhACT's speaker. Dr. Offit, an internationally recognized expert in the fields of immunology and virology, will discuss **Vaccine Safety: Science, Politics, and the Media.**

Dr. Offit has been a member of the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization



Practices. Dr. Offit has published more than 120 papers in medical and scientific journals in the areas of rotavirus-specific immune responses and vaccine safety and is the co-inventor of a rotavirus vaccine recently recommended for universal use in infants by the CDC. Offit is the co-author of three books, entitled *Vaccines: What You Should Know* (2003), *Breaking the Antibiotic Habit* (1999), *The Cutter Incident: How America's First Polio Vaccine Led to Today's Growing Vaccine Crisis* (2005), and *Vaccinated: One Man's Quest to Defeat the World's Deadliest Diseases* (2007).

Dr. Offit is no stranger to controversy; much of which has revolved around autism and the substance thimerosal, a mercury-containing preservative in vaccines. It has been claimed by some highly credentialed physicians and scientists, as well as lawyers in

many courts, that this substance has been responsible for the onset of autism in children. Dr. Offit and others citing a mountain of evidence have repeatedly refuted that claim. Dr. Stephen Barrett recently reported in his Quackwatch weekly newsletter that a judge, The Honorable Stuart R. Berger of the Circuit Court for Baltimore City in Baltimore,

*(Continued on page 4)*

## The PhACT Council

Eric Krieg, President  
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*Phactum* is, in theory, printed 6 times a year and is the main propaganda organ for the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking.

If you are not a subscriber we invite you to become one by sending \$15 for a one year membership to PhACT, \$10 for students. Donations are welcome.

Send letters of rebuttal, ideas, short essays, poetry, opinion pieces, complaints, and lavish praise to Ray Haupt, Phactum editor, at [phactpublicity@aol.com](mailto:phactpublicity@aol.com).

# PHACT CALENDAR

The **Physics Department of Community College of Philadelphia** hosts meetings of **PhACT** - at 2:00 PM on the third Saturday of most months at Community College of Philadelphia, 17th and Spring Garden Streets, West Building Room W2-48. **Meetings are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted.**

**Saturday, February 16, 2008** - **Paul A. Offit, M.D.**, chief of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Henle Professor of Immunologic and Infectious Diseases at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine will discuss **Vaccine Safety: Science, Politics, and the Media**. Dr. Offit is an internationally recognized expert in the fields of immunology and virology.

**Saturday, March 15, 2008** - **Nick Pine**, an Electrical Engineer for 40 years, will discuss **Real Free Energy**. In this age of Global Warming concern there are many crackpot con men selling elaborate schemes promising free energy without fuel costs. These plans mainly do not work, but in the realm of home heating there is technology that can yield vast amounts of free energy through solar power. Nick will discuss this technology and help separate fact from fiction.

**April 19, 2008**—**Andrew J. Petto, PhD**, will discuss his book **“Scientists Confront Intelligent Design and Creationism”** and he will give an update of what is new in the ongoing tussle between Science and Religion in America’s public school classrooms. See page 11 for book description.

**Friday, February 8th, 8:00pm - Delaware Valley Mensa General Membership Meeting - HISTORY BROUGHT ALIVE** - We will be honoring Black History Month with a visit by one Samuel Sepitun (personified by Fred Minus of Trenton), a New Jersey slave, who served as a substitute for his master during the American Revolution. His talk will provoke you while enlightening your understanding of the role of African Americans during our nation's struggle for independence. Mr. Minus has been active in historical affairs for years. He is a member of the 1st Rhode Island reenactment group and a docent at historic Trenton Barracks, Trenton, New Jersey.

The General Membership Meeting will be held at the Police Administration Building, 750 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA. This meeting is DVM's only activity specifically open to the public, so feel free to invite your friends and relatives. The meeting will begin promptly at 8:00pm. Contact Pete Stevens ( [pete.stevens@phila.gov](mailto:pete.stevens@phila.gov), 215-235-7383 ) for more information.

PS: Don't let traffic on the Schuylkill Expressway interfere with attending. Consider taking SEPTA and exiting at Market Street East / Gallery, it is only a two block walk to the Police Administration Building.

Things to come: Attention chocoholics.....April's speaker will be a chocolatier!

**Sunday, February 10, 2008 at 1:00 pm to 4:00—Darwin Day at University of Pennsylvania Museum.** Charles Robert Darwin, author of **On the Origin of Species** and **The Descent of Man**, was born February 12, 1809. Penn Museum joins a growing international celebration leading up to next year’s 200th anniversary of his birth in 2009. On Sunday afternoon, Penn professors from a variety of disciplines will offer short talks in the galleries, focusing on what evolution means to their particular fields of study. There will be children’s activities, badminton (a favorite Darwin pastime),

film, a sneak preview of the spring exhibition “Surviving: The Body of Evidence,” and birthday cake—and Charles Darwin promises to make an appearance! This enlightening celebration is FREE . Information: 215-898-4890.

**Wednesday, February 13 , 2008 from 8:30 -9PM EST.** PhACT member Harvey Mathason invites you to a special conference call on human energy to be presented by **Jon Gordon** author of *Energy Addict, 101 Physical, Mental, & Spiritual Ways to Energize Your Life*. The call will be 30 minutes, 20 minutes presentation, 10 minutes question and answer. The Conference Call Number is (308)344-6400. The Access Code is: 348875#

There will be many guests on the call. To eliminate noise, at the beginning of the call hit \*6 to mute your phone. Hit \*6 again to demute at the question and answer portion of the call.

Reading the book is optional but is recommended even after the call. If you find only a few items to increase your energy it's well worth it. RSVP to Harvey Mathason by email or phone. if you will be attending the call since spots are limited. This event is free. (215) 752-5117 [hmathason@aol.com](mailto:hmathason@aol.com)

**Tuesday, February 19, 2008 at 6:00 pm** - Evening Talk with Penn Museum’s Director : **Butrint: At the Crossroads of the Mediterranean**. Dr. Richard Hodges, Penn Museum’s new Williams Director and a renowned classical and early medieval archaeologist specializing in Western Europe, has, for the past fourteen years, worked extensively on archaeological and cultural heritage projects in Albania. With this illustrated lecture, he offers a wide-ranging look at the archaeology, history, and modern cultural heritage issues of Butrint, an ancient, medieval, and Ottoman Empire town on the Straits of Corfu in southern Albania. Free. Reservations recommended: 215/898-4890.

# PHACT CALENDAR

## Wagner Free Institute of Science

1700 West Montgomery Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19121  
ph 215-763-6529 www.wagnerfreeinstitute.org

### Spring 2008 Courses

*The Evolution of Ideas about Human Evolution*, Professor Monique Scott. **Wednesday, March 26, 2008**, beginning at 6:30 PM. 7 Wednesdays. Independence Branch of the Free Library, 18 S. 7th Street (7th and Market Streets). This class explores how ideas of human evolution and what it means to be human have changed over time. **No preregistration required.**

*Invasive Plants in the Philadelphia Area*, Professor Alfred E. Schuyler. **Monday, March 31, 2008**, beginning at 6:30 PM. 6 Mondays, 1 Saturday. Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 100 N. 20th Street (20th and Arch Streets). This course will discuss how invasives differ from non-invasives, negative impacts of invasives from the 18th century to the present day, some notorious invasives and their habitats, and management strategies for reducing or eliminating the negative impacts of invasives. **Preregistration required.**

**To preregister, call 215-763-6529, ext. 23, beginning Monday, November 12.**

Wagner Institute courses are Free, but **contributions are welcome.** To order a copy of the catalog and a full description of courses, please email [info@wagnerfreeinstitute.org](mailto:info@wagnerfreeinstitute.org) or call 215-763-6529, ext. 21.

**Lecture: SATURDAY, March 29, 2008**

**Dr. Nina G. Jablonski**

**The Evolution of Human Skin Color**

Human skin serves a range of functions - from protection against the elements to assertion of identity through self-decoration. One of its unique and most significant attributes is that it comes in a range of natural colors.

Dr. Nina Jablonski joins us on March 29th to discuss her groundbreaking research on the evolution of human skin. A biological anthropologist and paleobiologist, her research focuses on environmental adaptations in human and nonhuman primates. In the last 15 years, she has been increasingly absorbed in studies of "unseen" aspects of human evolution, most notably the evolution of human skin and skin color. Her studies have significance for human health, our understanding of human variation, and our use of skin color to define unique human "races".

Dr. Nina Jablonski is Head and Professor of Anthropology at the Pennsylvania State University. She is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the California Academy of Sciences. In 2007, she was awarded the W.W. Howells Book Award of the American Anthropological Association for her book *Skin: A Natural History*. Her research on human skin has been featured in *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, and several PBS documentaries. She has also appeared on *The Colbert Report*. The Museum will be open from 12:00 - 4:00 PM

**Talk begins at 1:00 PM . Free, but donations are welcome.**

**Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP)** and the **Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia (HAGP)** co-sponsor a monthly book discussion club. The book club meets on the third Saturday of each month at 7:00 PM at Willow Grove Barnes & Noble, 102 Park Avenue, Willow Grove, Pennsylvania 19090. If you have any questions, please contact the book club moderator, Ian Thomas. Email: [ian.thomas101@gmail.com](mailto:ian.thomas101@gmail.com) Phone: (610) 368-5915 Cell: (610) 565-4530.

**Delaware Valley Mensa.** Monthly Meetings are always open to family, friends, interested others, and the public. See the "Events Calendar" on the Mensa website for more information. After the meeting they adjourn to a local restaurant for some inexpensive food and conversation. The website is <http://dvm.us.mensa.org/>.

The PhACT Calendar is open to members and non-members who wish to announce meetings and events of other groups of which they are interested or affiliated. These events should be of some general interest to the Skeptical or Scientific community and should be within a reasonable radius of Philadelphia. Send submissions to the editor at [phactpublicity@aol.com](mailto:phactpublicity@aol.com). Keep the announcements brief. Space is limited and insertions will be made on a first come-first served basis after the needs of PhACT are accomplished.

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## Your opinion counts

Members and others are invited to submit letters and articles to be published in Phactum.

If you have a point of view on some matter in Phactum, whether in agreement or opposed, why not write it down and send it in? Do not hesitate to comment on matters that have not been in Phactum since we constantly wish to present information of interest to Critical Thinkers. We try not to get into religion bashing or partisan politics, but the rest of the Universe is fair game for civil discussion. You need not be in agreement with the editor of this propaganda sheet so don't worry about your loss of Brownie Points if you do happen disagree, in which case your entry may be printed in Invisible Ink.

**Send more clerihevs!!** Suggestions to improve Phactum are very appreciated. Send submissions by email if you can since my scanner is not a very good one. Hand written notes are OK if they are short.

**[Phactpublicity@AOL.com](mailto:Phactpublicity@AOL.com)**



(Continued from page 1)

Maryland, has precluded the testimony of five expert witnesses who offered to support the plaintiffs' claim that their son's autism was caused by thimerosal-containing vaccines. The judge concluded that "thimerosal in vaccines does not cause or contribute to neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism" and that he knew of no case in which a proffered expert was permitted to offer "a novel causation opinion that directly contradicts every generally accepted epidemiological study addressing the issue of causation." During the past few years, similar opinions have been issued in several other cases.

Come to this meeting to learn from an expert about the matter of vaccines, vaccine safety, the effect of spurious lawsuits, and media reporting and misreporting.

At **Community College of Philadelphia, 17th and Spring Garden Streets, West Building Room W2-48**. This meeting is free and open to the public.



## Vaccinated: One Man's Quest to Defeat the World's Deadliest Diseases

By Paul A. Offit, M.D.

Harper Collins

ISBN: 9780061227950

Hardback, 272 pages \$26.95

Maurice Hilleman's mother died a day after he was born and his twin sister stillborn. As an adult, he said that he felt he had escaped an appointment with death. He made it his life's work to see that others could do the same. Born into the life of a Montana chicken farmer, Hilleman ran off to the University of Chicago to become a microbiologist, and eventually joined Merck, the pharmaceutical company, to pursue his goal of eliminating childhood disease. Chief among his accomplishments are nine vaccines that practically every child gets, rendering formerly dread diseases—including often devastating ones such as mumps and rubella—practically toothless and nearly forgotten; his measles vaccine alone saves several million lives every year.

*Vaccinated* is not a biography; Hilleman's experience forms the basis for a rich and lively narrative of two hundred years of medical history, ranging across the globe and throughout time to take in a cast of hundreds, all caught up, intentionally or otherwise, in the story of vaccines. It is an inspiring and triumphant tale, but one with a cautionary aspect, as vaccines come under assault from people blaming vaccines for autism and worse. Paul Offit clearly and compellingly rebuts those arguments, and, by demonstrating how much the work of Hilleman and others has gained for humanity, shows us how much we have to lose.

## Letters

Editor: In the January 2008 Phactum, p8, there is a report of the supposed greater dangers of cannabis smoke compared with tobacco smoke as reported by *New Scientist* magazine and many other famous but amateurish publications. A statement from the abstract of the original paper noted that cannabis smoke contained 20 x as much ammonia and 5 x as much hydrogen cyanide as tobacco smoke.

First, there was no indication in the original paper that the higher concentrations of NH<sub>3</sub> or HCN actually represented a health risk; such was implied as an innuendo.

Second, according to Jacob Sullum of Reason magazine, marihuana is smoked in one cigarette per day by a heavy user, whereas tobacco is smoked in 14 cigarettes per day by an average user, so the total dose of NH<sub>3</sub> would be similar, and the total dose HCN higher for a tobacco user. <http://reason.com/blog/show/124017.html>

Third, the original paper used a common method of misrepresenting its results as seen in many papers on drugs and nutrition: the abstract did not reflect the findings in the body of the paper.

In the body of the paper, in its Table 3 on the assay of various components in mainstream tobacco and marihuana smoke in standard cigarettes, the following were found: tobacco smoke (T) had 1.6x the carbon monoxide of marihuana (M) smoke; T had 490x the nicotine of M; T had >3x the mercury of M; T had 4x the cadmium of M; T had 5x the lead of M; and T had 5x the arsenic of M. None of these were in the abstract.

Why the bias? In the Acknowledgment for reviewers of the manuscript, a member of the Canadian Tobacco Control Programme and a member of the Safe Environments Programme were listed. There was no one from any medical marihuana group. One of the authors was from the Tobacco Control Programme; three of the authors were from the Safe Environments Programme; and two of the authors were from

the Drug Strategy and Controlled Substances Programme, Health Canada.

See the original paper yourself: <http://pubs.acs.org/cgi-bin/sample.cgi/ctoes/asap/pdf/tx700275p.pdf>.

The colloidal silver note will not fare too well, either; but I am waiting for an original paper.

Joel M. Kauffman, PhD  
Berwyn, PA

Editor: On p8 of the Jan 06 Phactum, a report from the Quackwatch newsletter was cited as claiming that there are false claims colloidal silver can prevent and treat diseases, and that there is "Risk without benefit." While drinking colloidal silver may not be a good idea, an impression is given that there is no legitimate use for silver preparations.

Actually, a very thoughtful review: Lansdown ABG, A review of the use of silver in wound care: facts and fallacies, *British Journal of Nursing* 2004 (Tissue Variability Suppl.);13(6):S16-S19 notes that colloidal silver in wound dressings has a very low risk of causing lasting damage or persistent functional disorder in any tissue. "The ability of silver ion [released from the metallic silver] to kill or otherwise inhibit a wide range of Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, filamentous fungi and some viruses found in skin wounds is unequivocal. Silver is effective at low concentrations and... is without appreciable toxic risk." There are 74 citations to papers in peer-reviewed journals.

Please be reminded that a website review of [www.Quackwatch.com](http://www.Quackwatch.com) found 8 of 8 topics addressed were misleading in their implications. See: <http://www.scientificexploration.org/jse/bookreviews/v16n2.php>  
Joel M. Kauffman, PhD  
Berwyn, PA

Editor: Does Arnica Work?

Jerome Mendel's letter piqued my interest about arnica and I did a little research. Although arnica is generally considered to be a homeopathic remedy, Jerome astutely noticed that the 1X dilution in the product he used takes it out of the realm of homeopathy and into the realm of herbal medicine.

When used in homeopathy it is much more dilute, like 30X. A recent meta-analysis in a German medical journal (Ludtke R, Hacke D. On the effectiveness of the homeopathic remedy Arnica Montana. *Wien Med Wochenschr.* 2005 Nov; 155 (21-22):482-90) concluded, "The hypothesis that homeopathic Arnica is effective could neither be proved nor rejected." As far as I am concerned, this is a pretty good indication that it doesn't work.

The *Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database* has an article on arnica as used in larger, non-homeopathic doses as an herbal medicine. It rates it as "possibly safe" when used topically for short-term use only on unbroken skin, and as "likely unsafe" when taken orally. It does not rate Arnica for effectiveness because "there is insufficient reliable

information available about the effectiveness of arnica." They warn against its use on broken skin and in patients with allergies to ragweed and related plants, because it has some cross-allergenicity.

Jerome describes the effect on pain as "flipping a switch." After reading the literature, I'm afraid I'll have to write this off as an unsubstantiated testimonial. If it really had such a dramatic effect, I would think the research done to date would have been strongly positive. The product also contains witch hazel – what's its effect? And simply applying an inert gel to the skin might make it feel better. And taking any action to treat a symptom helps to relieve the mind and allow diversion of attention elsewhere. We are all susceptible to the placebo effect – most of us have kissed our kids' bruises and made them all better. It would be interesting if he could get a compounding pharmacist to mix up two gels, one containing arnica and witch hazel, the other containing only witch hazel, and do a double blind test to see if he could tell the difference.

I'm not saying arnica doesn't work, but I must remain skeptical until I see more convincing evidence.

Harriet Hall, MD

The SkepDoc

Puyallup, Washington.

*Editors note: See page 6 for more information about Dr. Hall.*

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## Various Ruminations

Collected/written by Ray Haupt, editor  
(with help from others)

### JREF Million Dollar Challenge

The James Randi Educational Foundation has decided to slam the lid on the Million Dollar Challenge. Good. Mr. Randi explains the rationale at this website:

<http://www.randi.org/joom/content/view/144/1/#14>

The Million Dollar Challenge began in 1998 and will end two years from now. After ten years would you not expect that at least one metaphysical practitioner or off-beat scientist would have proven a claim of free energy, levitation, unerring identification of cards in sealed envelopes, or some other mysterious spell or incantation to manipulate unseen waves and forces? I would expect that, but it has not come to pass and I applaud Mr. Randi for calling an end to this challenge.

Some critics have claimed that the Million Dollar prize does not exist. I prefer to take Randi's word on the matter, and even if it did not exist and a claimant actually fulfilled his claim, the resulting fortune would render the million dollars nugatory. What does a measly million dollar prize matter when you have conclusively demonstrated dowsing or remote healing worth trillions of dollars?

By releasing that prize money the JREF can concentrate greater resources on educational programs, establish new ones, and continue to aggressively debunk charlatans and their preposterous assertions.

And all is not lost to potential claimants who have just been too busy to collect Randi's million dollars. PhACT's president, Eric Krieg offers a \$10,000 prize to anyone who can demonstrate, in a mutually agreed upon environment and test protocol, any paranormal experience or scientific claim that defies the Laws of Physics. You say Bigfoot is real? Bring one in and collect \$10,000. You can cure Parkinson's Disease through devotional drumming? Please, go ahead and do so, but do you really need prize money to forge ahead?

Bravo, Randi!

### Gambling - The Crocodile Tears Department

The Philadelphia Inquirer reported on January 11, 2008 "*Casinos' annual win has 1st drop. Competitors and smoking ban hurt Atlantic City's gaming halls.*"



See the article at: <http://www.philly.com/philly/news/homepage/13701437.html>

The article states that the 5.7 percent decline to \$4.9 billion was all because of slots parlours opening in Pennsylvania and New York, and new smoking restrictions on Atlantic City casino floors. It further states that the people of New Jersey were deprived of \$24 million in gambling tax revenue which funds programs for senior citizens and the disabled. Yeah, Folks lose out. So sad.

Gambling profits for Atlantic City in 2006 were \$5.21 billion. The reduced profitability for 2007 comes to the tune

of \$290 million and of that the state would have taken \$24 million. The article makes it sound as if there was a loss to the people of New Jersey, that there is some tragic circumstance, but in reality that loss has been due to competition in Pennsylvania whose senior citizens and disabled stand to gain from programs funded in that state. Despite these heart wrenching "losses" there is a planned building boom in Atlantic City where at least \$4 billion dollar casinos are planned and one super casino that will cost about \$5 billion. Surely

all Phactum readers are saddened by this hard times Grapes of Wrath drama..

And get a load of this. New Jersey is denied \$24 million in tax revenue because of a \$290 million reduction in casino revenue. That is a tax rate of less than 10 percent. Cross the Delaware River to Pennsylvania where the state tax on casino revenue is a whopping 55 percent and you will see business interests fighting tooth and nail to be awarded a license to operate a slots parlour.

There are many tears in the crocodile pond.



*"I thought I'd drop by and tell you I'm quitting. Last night I won \$87 at the poker table, which has prompted me to become a professional gambler. So you won't have me to kick around anymore."*

### New Blog: **Science Based Medicine**

I'm proud to announce a new blog, Science Based Medicine, that should be of interest to critical thinkers. It is a joint effort of 5 MDs, (Steven Novella, Kimball Atwood, David Gorski, Wallace Sampson, and Harriet Hall) each taking one day of the week, with occasional guest authors.

"Science-Based Medicine is a new daily science blog dedicated to promoting the highest standards and traditions of science in medicine and health care. The mission of this blog is to scientifically examine medical and health topics of interest to the public. This includes reviewing newly published studies, examining dubious products and claims, providing much needed scientific balance to the often credulous health reporting, and exploring issues related to the regulation of scientific quality in medicine.... The authors are all medically trained and have spent years writing for the public about science and medicine, tirelessly advocating for high scientific standards in health care. Together, and with contributions from other medical science writers, they will turn a critical eye toward all issues relating to science and medicine. They hope to make the Science Based Medicine blog a vital resource for consumers, providers, regulators, the media, and anyone interested in quality health care."

We will be carrying on our fight against quackery and pseudoscience, but we hope the blog will be much more than that. <http://www.sciencebasedmedicine.org/>

Harriet Hall, MD  
The SkepDoc



### The Michael Shermer Event

Sally Cramer, President of FSGP (Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia), has reported that the video of Dr. Michael Shermer's lecture from Jan. 15, 2008, co-hosted by FSGP and PhACT can be accessed using the following link:

[http://www.margaretdowney.com/michael\\_shermer\\_visits\\_fsgp\\_video\\_is\\_in](http://www.margaretdowney.com/michael_shermer_visits_fsgp_video_is_in)

Keep in mind that quality is compromised due to the large file size and length, thus it had to be compressed & split into two.

### Politics

"When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it."

- Clarence Darrow

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### Soundbites

Compiled by Becky Strickland

♣ "Many of the current attacks on science are predicated on the notion that because science does not include God in its picture of the universe, science is inherently evil. Science, however, has an ethical basis in honesty, open-mindedness tempered by healthy skepticism, full disclosure and anti-authoritarianism. The scientific method makes it possible for empirical reasoning to provide a basis for an ethical, even a moral world."

Lawrence Krauss, in an essay arguing that scientists should play an active role in opposing faith-based governing, *New Scientist*, January 5, 2008

♣ "On the broader question of 'science vs. religion', the authors are at pains to avoid conflict. Instead, the book

highlights the many religious leaders who do not interpret creation stories literally and do not view evolution as counter to their faith. [they also] focus on why understanding evolution is critical to agriculture, medicine and specifically to tackling viruses such as SARS and HIV. They stress that if Americans do not have a basic scientific literacy, which must include evolution, the nation will not be able to compete in the global knowledge economy."

From an editorial in the Jan. 12, issue of *New Scientist*, on *Science, Evolution and Creationism*, a new book published by the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine. The book is available from [www.nationalacademies.org/morenews/20080104.html](http://www.nationalacademies.org/morenews/20080104.html)

♣ The FairDeal Homeopathy website ([www.fdhom.co.uk](http://www.fdhom.co.uk)) is unintentionally hilarious. It is an online purveyor of homeopathic remedies that "help you feel better about yourself". It promises not to lie to customers (wow!) and states that its products are "guaranteed to be indistinguishable from all other homeopathic products", that there are no actual medical effects or active remedies, and that 'remedy' does not imply any curative properties because homeopathy works through the placebo effect. There is a link to testimonials (also unintentionally hilarious) that reserves the right not to publish vitriolic abuse. Incredibly, this appears to be a real company!

*Editor's note: FairDeal Homeopathy is indeed a real company in the UK, and they will happily take your money. Check out the Sense About Science website (<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php>) for more information about homeopathy, particularly as it is practiced in the UK.*

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## "Don't Drop The Soap"

by Paul Schlueter III

The Criminal Justice system is a group of institutions most people may prefer not to think about very much. The belief that criminals will be caught by the police, charged appropriately by the District Attorney, tried fairly in the Courts, and sent to prison for their due punishment and rehabilitation is drilled into us throughout grammar school and high school. We see TV shows and movies that affirm that the bad guy always gets his just deserts, and that "the system" provides so many protections to criminals that their rights are even more secure than those of crime victims. The Press reports legislative and court action, and we don't notice that much of that reporting is one-sided, and sensitive to the interests of "the Authorities." We believe that we're seeing an accurate picture of Justice, and that our own lives are safer and more secure because of the state's protection.

The TRUE scenario is somewhat more complex, and a true Critical Thinker may find value in a more thorough perspective on the realities. Yes, criminals are often caught and put in prison for things they've done. In all honesty, I personally believe that the dramatic majority of inmates I've dealt with did indeed have some role in, or responsibility for, a criminal act related to the crime of which they stand convicted (though I remain skeptical about various aspects of cases, on an individual basis.) Yet, the system is far from certain and effective, for a wide variety of reasons. If ordinary citizens abdicate their role of ensuring effective Justice, by simply assigning the chore to "the Authorities" and then averting their gaze in distaste, SOME Justice takes place... but sometimes those authorities also take advantage of the credulity of the general public, and in several areas Justice has become corrupted with greed, power lust, and protectionism.

One of the most serious fallacies in the system today is the belief that the Press can readily report on conditions inside Pennsylvania prisons. In the past, this was true, and both print and video media had access to the prisons, to inmates, and to the facilities paid for with your taxes. However, the PA Department of Corrections (DOC) policy handbook NOW states, "...the Department is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act." It claims special privilege as "a Pennsylvania Executive Agency" (a curious parallel with certain Presidential assertions.) See DC-ADM 003, or handbook p. 34. PA's own version of this access law, the "Right-to-Know Act", only makes a limited scope of materials available for inspection, at the viewer's expense. Press access to the prisons has been curtailed almost completely; a recent policy revision (DC-ADM 009) issued Feb. 17, 2005, made it all but

impossible for the Press to interview inmates inside the prison system, to tour the prisons, and/or to record/videotape what they see. EVERY news media interview/tour must be accompanied at ALL times by the prison's Public Information Officer, official supervision which obviously puts a serious damper on open dialogue. No "impromptu interviews" are permitted now (this refers to any interview not previously vetted for subject matter, inmate identities, etc., by the DOC.) In short, the DOC has made rules to protect itself from outside oversight, and whatever happens inside prisons can only be observed/revealed if the DOC permits. This leaves the sole means for learning about how PA's citizens are treated within her prisons that of personal letters, describing anecdotal evidence. Do you REALLY trust a government agency so well?

What are some of the ways in which the DOC abuses this trust? How can one responsibly question the official reports of financial expenses, rehabilitative programs, internal policy

Every time you stop a school, you will have to build a jail. What you gain at one end you lose at the other. It's like feeding a dog on his own tail. It won't fatten the dog. - Mark Twain, speech, November 23, 1900

compliance, treatment of inmates, and so on, when the ONLY party who collects, interprets, and distributes the statistics is the DOC itself? For instance, the PA DOC generally claims a recidivism rate (the percentage of released inmates who return to prison for other misdeeds, within 3 years of release) at around 50%, yet outside sources generally place it at closer to 66%. Certain inmate groups, such as those convicted of drug offenses, DUI, and other "non-violent offenses", tend to be on the HIGHER SIDE OF THE AVERAGE, but they're readily paroled, over and over. Meanwhile, those convicted of certain sexual offenses and (believe it or not) homicide are FAR LESS LIKELY TO RECIDIVATE than the average predicts, yet they are by far less likely to receive parole, even once.

Isn't it important to know how effective the prison system is at correcting criminal behavior? What about knowing how effectively the Parole Board can/can't predict which applicants will/won't recidivate? These two independent (but obviously related) state agencies are the "post-conviction face" of the Criminal Justice system. Can you trust them to accurately rate their own success? If an independent Press can't (or won't) make accurate, informed evaluations, who will do so on the Public's behalf?

Another frequent distortion of fact by the DOC goes almost unchallenged; overcrowding. All of PA's modern prisons were designed by professional architects, who carefully determined how much space was needed per inmate, how much infrastructure was needed (electrical, water, sewage, heat, ventilation, etc.) per inmate, and so on. However, prison populations have exploded in the past couple of decades (due primarily to political policy changes, not real changes in the crime rate.) The DOC has responded, in large



part, by simply turning the great majority of its single occupancy (by design) cells into DOUBLE occupancy shoe boxes. They simply take out the single bunk, and replace it with a double bunk; voila, "more room"! Then, the DOC coined a self-serving term; "operational capacity" is the number of inmates that the DOC feels it can get away with squeezing into prison cells. How does this serve the DOC? The commonly quoted statistic is that prisons are "operating at 115% capacity" today. The truth is, prisons are overfilled with well over 200% of the number of inmates they were DESIGNED to hold! Since prison budgets are based on the number of inmates held, not on the physical space available, there is a strong financial motivation to keep the prisoner counts as high as possible! Design capacity is a fixed number, and a matter of public record. Operational capacity is a "fudged" number, alterable at bureaucratic will, subject to political and fiscal motivation. The Press quietly looks askance every time the DOC distorts the facts with their own self-serving statistical manipulations.

For perspective, please consider this: This writer resides in a double-occupancy cell measuring 6' x 10', into which protrudes a double bunk, a single stool and desk, a 7.5 cu. ft. wall cabinet (double compartments), a sink & toilet, and the plumbing closet for them. Just to be gracious, let's quote the DOC's value; my cellie and I share 60 square feet. We're locked in together at least 15 hours per day, EVERY day. Al Capone, in cell #181 at Alcatraz, on the other hand, had 45 sq. ft. all to himself, and 64 sq. ft. during the time when he was in the psychiatric "bug house" cell. Go ahead; try to build a pen for two dogs on your property which encompasses only 60 sq. ft., and see how long it takes the SPCA to fine you for animal cruelty!

It doesn't take much insight to realize that the solution to overcrowded prisons would be to successfully motivate inmates to achieve rehabilitation, provide them with meaningful opportunities to turn their lives around, parole those who earn it in a prompt manner, and cut those recidivism rates by an order of magnitude. Another (admittedly controversial) public safety initiative would be to make many of PA's sentences "open-ended", rather than to have set "max dates" at which even recalcitrant hard cases must be released. Release those who don't need to be kept behind bars, and keep those who refuse to conform to laws; it seems simple, but the system has almost abandoned any PRACTICAL, RATIONAL procedures in favor of showy gestures of punitive "toughness".

Let's look at some of the other prison system misconceptions rampant among PA society, today:

- "Lifers get out after only seven years." **NOT TRUE.** There is NO PAROLE FOR LIFERS IN PA, primarily because the law which established the Board of Probation and Parole explicitly excluded lifers from their jurisdiction. Lif-

ers must first try to negotiate a politically-charged system of Executive Clemency known as "Commutation", to even become eligible to ask for parole. Under a 10-yr.-old constitutional amendment initiated by then-Gov. Tom Ridge, The 5-person Board of Pardons (which comprises the publicly-elected state Attorney General and Lt. Governor, plus an appointed Correctional Expert, a Psychiatric expert, and a representative of the Office of the Victim's Advocate) must UNANIMOUSLY recommend a Lifer applicant before the Governor may even consider the application. This has its main effect upon the single group of inmates LEAST LIKELY to ever re-offend, by statistics compiled by the Legislature itself (see "the S.R. 149 report, available from your legislator<sup>1</sup>"). Since that amendment (1995), only two lifers have had their sentences commuted and just seven were recommended by the Pardons Board to the governor<sup>2</sup>. There are over 4,300 lifers in PA at this time, all but a tiny handful of whom will NEVER see the outside again, no matter how "rehabilitated" they become. Lifers currently make up about 10% of the PA prisoner population, but the percentage is growing. The cost for the care and housing of Lifers, as they age and approach prison deathbeds, is as much as twice that of the typical inmate.

- "Inmates get free TV and cable, and they have free health care." **NOT TRUE.** Inmates are permitted to PURCHASE a TV from the prison commissary, out of their own account funds, and there is only one model which they may buy (a "cheapo", approved primarily because of its clear plastic cabinet, and fraught with quality problems.) The cable system is largely state-owned (some prisons are still

winding down private cable contracts), and EACH inmate, even those in double cells, must pay \$15.75 per month out of his own account for the service (for 45 approved "basic" channels,) if he wishes it. "Premium Channels" such as HBO and Cinemax are NOT offered; the state selects the channels according to standards which are curiously "morality-based", parallel to choices that church groups might approve of (curiously, UPN, the state's own network, is not among those provided!) As for health care, a visit to the prison infirmary costs \$5, and each prescription also costs \$5, plus a \$5 fee for most services (dental, eye exam, etc.) These "co-pay" charges have increased 250% in the past five years. The starting wage for an inmate with a prison job is only about \$30 per month, and the top pay rate is only about \$60 per month. Actual employment statistics are only available from the DOC, but only about 40% of inmates have a meaningful prison job. The skills learned in most prison jobs have little or no parallel in the outside world workplace.

- "Those convicted of crimes were proven guilty." **AMBIGUOUS.** In the legal sense, yes, everyone in prison is "guilty", under the law. BUT, legal proof is far different from rational or scientific proof! Don't be fooled by "the CSI Ef-

Let us reform our schools, and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons.

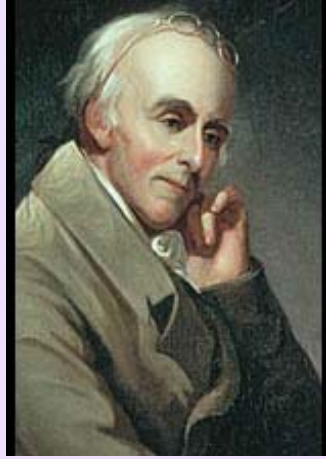
John Ruskin (1819 - 1900),  
*Unto This Last, essay 2 (1862)*

fect"; it's extremely rare that an unbiased forensic scientist has conclusively proven that a given bit of evidence ties a particular suspect to a specific crime. Especially when destitute defendants must rely on Public Defenders as attorneys, the State has every advantage in charging a person with a crime (according to the politically-motivated judgment of District Attorneys), obtaining the purchased testimony of "experts" who know full well which side of their bread is buttered, and collecting evidence through prosecution-oriented Police detectives. "Degrees" of various related crimes are selected by prosecutors, primarily by expediency rather than factual indicators.

Evidence of innocence can easily be "overlooked", "lost in the filing cabinet", or otherwise withheld from defendants. Co-defendants routinely offer damning testimony (which may or may not be exaggerated or falsified) in exchange for lenience in charging/sentencing, under bargains made with prosecutors seeking easier convictions. Juries are notoriously eager to convict the guy that the police/prosecution put in front of them, almost regardless of the actual facts (and untrained, inexperienced juries have the authority to decide which facts they believe, and which they DON'T WANT TO believe!) District Attorneys are equally notorious for "over-charging" a suspect with several severe, time-laden charges, to create a bargaining position that makes it necessary to plead guilty to SOMETHING, in exchange for taking away the unjustifiable (but very REAL) threat of unduly exaggerated punishment.

In truth, the system is manipulated, BOTH ways, so severely that there is almost no real assurance that a person's actual behavior is reasonably reflected by the sentence he receives. And, persons actually INNOCENT of the crimes for which they've been convicted continue to languish in prison; despite over 200 exonerations in this country after DNA evidence PROVED the convicts' innocence (6 death-sentenced Pennsylvanians alone<sup>3</sup>), an uncounted number of prisoners have cases in which DNA evidence has no probative value, or one of those in which the Courts now routinely REFUSE TO CONSIDER older convictions on "untimely" appeals.

- "Prisons are full of rapes, especially in the showers". **NOT TRUE.** Each prison is different, and I can only really



In 1787 Dr. Benjamin Rush founded the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, the first prison reform group in the world. Benjamin Franklin joined the group on August 13, 1787. This group survives today, more than two centuries later. Now called the Pennsylvania Prison Society, it promotes correctional reform and social justice. Photo: Portrait of Benjamin Rush by Charles Willson Peale, 1818.

relate what I've witnessed, but in 22 years of incarceration, I have NEVER witnessed a rape, in the shower or anywhere else. I have only heard RUMORS of a mere two or three, and they were one person's word against the other's (having taken place where there were no other witnesses). Sexual inter-

course exists in prison, and in many instances, parties who might not engage in homoerotic behavior on the outside find that it is more desirable on the inside, because of its nearly exclusive availability. A wide variety of activities occur, ranging from teasing and flirting to ongoing love/sex relationships, and everywhere in between. It is interesting to note that two men caught engaging in consensual sodomy are generally punished by 30-

90 days of restricted custody ("the hole", no pun intended,) while an inmate just caught caressing his wife's breast or buttock in the visiting room frequently receives comparable restricted custody time, and loss of visits for 6 months! THERE ARE NO CONJUGAL VISITS IN PA PRISONS.

Sex between inmates and staff/officials is another matter. It undeniably occurs, but state laws make it clear that the official is criminally accountable, due to the authoritative advantage they hold over inmates. Despite this, reports come out every few months of staff-and-inmate(s) sexual encounters which have come to light, leading to investigations, firings, and charges.

As for dropping the soap, it happens all the time. In our cellblock shower (24 shower heads, 140 men, 25 minutes per day) a dropped bar of soap is cause for a loud and silly bout of howling and catcalling, often followed by numerous punches in the arm from pals nearby. Then, the soap itself must be carefully washed off... you wouldn't want to touch your own body with the funk of 139 other guys, would you? The drains may or may not be working, and we frequently end up ankle-deep in dirty water.

A freethinking, responsible citizen might consider renting a P.O. Box for a few months, and corresponding with a few inmates in PA prisons. Only by finding out for yourself will you learn who we are, who live inside the walls and fences your taxes support. 90% of us will return to YOUR communities; do you think it matters what you'll encounter when we arrive?

Jails and prisons are the complement of schools; so many less as you have of the latter, so many more must you have of the former. - Horace Mann (1796 - 1859)





# PHACT

Phila. Assoc. for Critical Thinking  
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Lord Horatio Nelson  
(1758 - 1805)

Port, left

## Stephen Decatur sinks the frigate “*USS Philadelphia*”

Starboard, right

On February 16, 2008 Dr. Paul Orfit will be discussing Vaccine Safety and other issues in medicine and science with a PhACT audience here in Philadelphia. It so happens that exactly on that date 204 years before, in 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, in a legendary navel action against the Barbary Pirates, burned the Navy frigate *USS Philadelphia* which had been captured in 1803 after it had run aground.



Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN, (1779-1820)

The odds against Decatur and his crew of 75 were enormous but they did prevail, managing to board the *Philadelphia* and set it ablaze thus denying the Tunisians a 40 gun warship. Lord Horatio Nelson called the raid "the most daring act of the age." For his courage Decatur became the youngest naval captain in U.S. history.

Decatur's association with Philadelphia was much greater than sinking a ship of that name. He was born in 1779 in Sinepuxent, Maryland. At age 4 Stephen's family moved to Philadelphia where he eventually attended Episcopal Academy which at the time was located at Old Christ Church, founded in 1695, at 4th and Arch Streets. Decatur went on to study at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1798 he secured commission as a midshipman in the US Navy and rapidly rose through the ranks.

In 1820 Decatur was challenged to a duel by Commodore James Barron. In the duel both men were injured but Decatur's wound proved fatal. He was buried at St. Peter's Church in Philadelphia at Third and Pine Streets. George Washington was a regular attendee at that church.

Of Stephen Decatur, John Quincy Adams wrote, "*He was kind, warm-hearted, unassuming, gentle and hospitable, beloved in social life and with a soul totally and utterly devoted to his country.*"