

7/10/88

JACQUIN SANDERS



Club hits you in the head with reality

They are determined, they are organized, they are the Tampa Bay Skeptics. And frankly, I am a little skeptical about them.

Is this new organization really necessary?

Yes, indeed, says one of the guiding lights, Dr. Gary Posner, a young physician who writes the 40-member club's newsletters and releases — and occasionally talks like them, too:



POSNER

"Polls show," he says, "that a disturbingly large part of the population — including the educated population — have difficulty in distinguishing the real from the unreal."

By the unreal, he means astrology, faith healing, UFO sightings and other "paranormal events and beliefs." These are a few of his least favorite things.

"Psychic surgery." He says the words coldly, angrily. This is an intrusion into his own professional reason for being; this is where he lives.

He mentions a Suncoast woman "cured" by a psychic surgeon. "Of course she wasn't," he says. And a patient who swore she had been "miracle cured" of leukemia. "I examined her. She still had the disease."

Posner shakes his head: "Sometimes the faith healers persuade them to give up their prescription medicine — medicine that could ease their pain or buy them time."

The Tampa Bay Skeptics held their founding meeting last month. Thus far the membership — or at least the six club officers — seems top-heavy with doctors, whether medical or philosophical. There are two USF psychology professors, an anthropologist, two physicians and a physics teacher.

But they want new members, and the main requirement is a healthy willingness *not* to believe. (If interested, write Tampa Bay Skeptics, 6219 Palma Blvd., #210, St. Petersburg 33715.)

To some, the club's range of skepticism might seem narrow; to others, very precise. At any rate, the membership doesn't bother to zero in on certain obvious targets. It doesn't seem to attack politicians, fast food or (up to now) columnists.

It goes after more overt charlatans, and people with no redeeming scientific value. Astrologers, for example. The club newsletter noted approvingly that every astrology column printed in the *St. Petersburg Times* is followed by the notice: "These predictions are intended for entertainment value only."

Posner came by his skepticism honorably, but maybe a little late. As a child in Maryland, he began reading about paranormal occurrences. And believing in them.

His grandmother was an influence. She always swore she'd seen a UFO flying over Frederick, Md. His uncle, later a dentist, also saw the thing.

"It looked like a stovepipe," they said.

"Later I was conned by the books of J. Allen Hynek, surprisingly an astronomer, not an astrologer, who became a leader of the UFO people. I wrote him, and he answered, but his so-called proofs didn't show signs of real scientific investigation."

Posner is sitting in his office at Cigna Healthplan of Florida Inc. in St. Petersburg. Framed diplomas and a Phi Beta Kappa certificate glint from the walls, picking up the angry glint in his eyes.

Not very happily, he admits he was in medical school and still trying to believe in UFOs. Another writer, Philip Klass (*UFOs: The Public Deceived*), helped him break free.

"My books don't sell," Klass told him. "I give a lecture at a college and I get a free meal, a free bed and maybe \$100. Hynek gives a lecture at the same college and gets paid \$3,000."

Clearly there is more money in belief than disbelief, and that is why the world needs a haven for skeptics.

Still, I can't help feeling that a real skeptic should be too skeptical to join an organization of skeptics.

— No such "requirement" was intimated by me.

Was told we had 65 members, and about 40 attendees at 1st meeting. Also that we are not a "club", but a public service organization.

Totally invented quote (we haven't even investigated the claim yet)

The patient had a malignant schwannoma (I even spelled it for him). Leukemia came up in a slightly different context... (different patient, who had probably never had the disease at all)

— I used the word "hoodwinked" rather than "conned", which sounds almost criminal. This so-called quote is a rough paraphrasing, as are most of the others. (His note taking was extremely sketchy.)

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July 12, 1988

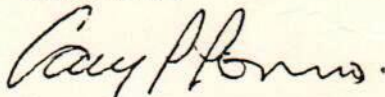
Letters to the Editor
St. Petersburg Times
P.O. Box 1121
St. Petersburg, FL 33731

Dear Sirs:

While I appreciate Jacquin Sanders' interest in our new group, and his generally favorable July 10 column, I must note for the record his use of "creative quotations". Most troublesome (literally) may be the manufactured one in which I appear to declare a reported "psychic healing" to be false ("Of course she wasn't [cured]"), even though our investigation of this case has barely begun.

As I stressed to Mr. Sanders, Tampa Bay Skeptics is committed to objective inquiry, and although we may not expect any such claims to be verifiable, our judgements will be rendered after investigation, not before.

Sincerely,


Gary P. Posner, M.D.