



Rational Inquiry

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 4

NEWSLETTER

AUTUMN, 2004

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry is dedicated to the encouragement of rational thought in all areas of human affairs. Composed of citizens from every walk of life, and with a variety of technical, scientific, legal, and humanistic backgrounds, the association strives to encourage rational discourse in the life of San Diego. For more information, see page seven.



The Amazing Meeting 3

The James Randi Education Foundation in association with the Skeptics Society is putting on a meeting in Las Vegas, January 13-16, 2005. A detailed list of presentations is not yet available, but the featured speaker is Dr. Richard Dawkins who “will celebrate with us the progress of knowledge and education all the way from Biblical mythology to the present day, stopping off *en route* to visit with Isaac Newton and various other geniuses who have enlightened us.” Other participants include the Amazing Randi, Dr. Michael Shermer, Dr. Joe Nickell, and Penn & Teller. Frederik Pohl, the famous science fiction writer will be answering questions, Magician Rick Maue and others will perform, and Julia Sweeney of Saturday Night Live fame will offer her newest contribution to sanity. Discount tickets to Lance Burton’s magic show at the Monte Carlo are available for pur-

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SDARI: A Brief Look Back

By Edvard A. Hemmingsen

In the fall of 1995, the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Amherst, N.Y., invited subscribers to *Skeptical Inquirer* in the San Diego Area to attend a meeting at the Hilton Inn. The purpose of this November 5 meeting, where CFI was represented by Barry Karr and Tom Flynn, was to encourage the formation of a skeptics group for the area. This idea was well received by the approximately thirty people present. Several subsequently became very active members of SDARI: Elie Shneour, Ernie Ernissee, Bruce Wallace, Jeff Hall, Bernhard Leikind, James Murray, David Noelle, and Barbara and Edvard Hemmingsen. The group agreed to meet again to decide on how to proceed with the formation of such an organization, and to work out the many details involved.

This organizational meeting took place on November 29, 1995. After some discussion, the purpose of the organization

was defined. It was decided that in addition to being an organization with roots in skepticism and rational thinking, it would be educational with outreach to the public and the media. A name was chosen: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Regular public meetings were deemed essential as was a newsletter and a website. Bruce Wallace was elected as the first president. He generously offered to perform the work and bear the expenses required to incorporate the association as a non-profit, public benefit corporation. His law firm, *Sullivan Wetz McDade & Wallace* in downtown San Diego, supported SDARI during the next six years, with secretarial help, bookkeeping, mailing, and duplicating services, as well as board meeting space. Kathy Upton, Signature Press in the Miramar area, provided newsletter duplication and assembly for a modest price that was within a limited budget. It is fair to say that SDARI could not have sur-

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SDARI to Host Center-for-Inquiry Conference

Partial arrangements have been made for SDARI to host a conference on behalf of CFI, International at Buffalo. The conference encompassing both secular humanism and skepticism will be held at the Holiday Inn at the Bay, across from the Star of India on the Embarcadero on Saturday, November 20, 2004.

Current plans call for it to start at 9:30 a.m. and run until about 5:00 p.m. Speakers will include, but are not limited to CFI International's Paul Kurtz, Joe Nickell, and Tom Flynn, and our own Elie Shneour and Keith Taylor.

Lunch will be included in the price of admission which will announced on a slow news day.



October's Meeting

Fluoridation: Does the Benefit Outweigh the Risk?

Fluoridation has long been a controversial issue in San Diego County. San Diego is the largest city in the nation that does not fluoridate its water.

October's meeting will provide an opportunity to hear pertinent scientific data regarding that subject. Our speaker, Eleanor Nadler, is executive director of the San Diego Fluoridation Coalition. She will come prepared to demolish all the old nonsense about fluoridation

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9/11 Article Strays from Rational Inquiry

By Dwain Deets

The lead article in the Summer 2004 *Rational Inquiry* gave some credence to alternate theories of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon. As author and editor, I see now that I was wrong. It was the wrong article, at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Extraordinary claims such as these should not be given

the benefit of the doubt, especially in a rational newsletter.

Several excellent websites are available that put strong and convincing counter arguments to the various conspiracy theories. Here are two of them:

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vived without this support and the willingness of various members to take on the job of transporting material between Miramar and downtown.

For our first mailing, CSICOP provided labels for all the subscribers in the greater San Diego area. Over 1000 copies of the first issue of the newsletter, *Rational Inquiry*, edited by Barbara and Edvard Hemmingsen were assembled and labeled by a team of members and mailed in late March 1996. The costs were borne by membership dues and donations from some of the founding members. The first public meeting was held on April 28, 1996. Bernhard Leikind spoke about "Mysterious and Amazing Atmospheric Phenomena". SDARI was in business!

However, SDARI was not the first organization for skeptics in San Diego. Elie Shneour, one of the founding members of CSICOP, and Ernie Ernissee (both became founding members of SDARI) spearheaded the formation of the San Diego Skeptics (SDS) in late 1985.

Both were regular in-studio guests on the Stacy Taylor radio show on KSDO radio, raising issues and answering callers' questions. They also managed to bring James Randi to San Diego for a memorable lecture, with magic demonstrations, at UCSD on March 8, 1986. Unfortunately, the SDS and its newsletter *Sanity* faded away after a couple or years because of the passiveness of most of its members.

Memberships in SDARI gradually grew. Public meetings were held every month, except July, August and December, usually with speakers from technical, scientific and humanistic backgrounds. The sizes of the audiences varied greatly. Michael Shermer's lectures on the holocaust deniers (September 1996) and on how humans believe (November 1999) drew large crowds. In contrast, a fine scholarly lecture by John Suarez on the assault on critical thinking by the religious right (January 1998) drew few people on a Superbowl Sunday. An amazing variety of subjects have been covered; the titles of all the lectures can be found on the SDARI website. I

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Rational Musings by the President

One day about 40 years ago the late Dr. Roger Sperry (Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, 1981) began a psychobiology lecture with a bold assertion: "There is no such thing as free will." I was startled! I looked around at other startled students, some unconsciously shaking their heads in protest. Dr. Sperry said that, from the simplest animal behaviors (the famous four 'F's: fighting, fleeing, feeding, and sex) to our most complex decisions and thought processes, all were responses to sequences of physical brain states and external stimuli. Consciousness itself, he said, was just an artifact of memory and the series of brain states. To this day, I don't know if he was serious or trying to get us to exercise our free will to think.

Dr. Sperry's teaching assistant, Mike Gazzaniga, was studying split-brain patients, people in whom the main communication channel between brain's cerebral hemispheres had been severed. This was a new and radical surgical cure for some severe types of epilepsy. Surprisingly, these subjects seemed to suffer no ill effects! They felt normal, mentally and functionally unimpaired. It is well known that the right brain controls the left side of the body and vice versa. It is also well known that the major speech centers are on the left side of the brain. Mike discovered that if information were presented only to the right brain, say by letting the subject hold and unseen object in his

left hand, he could not say what the information was. In fact, he would deny he had received that information. If then shown several objects and asked to point out the correct one, the subject could immediately do so, but only with his left hand. "Just a lucky guess," he would insist, again and again.

In other experiments, Mike found the right brain of split-brain patients to be more adept at certain non-verbal tasks, especially spatial ones, than normal volunteers. ("If Caltech students can be called normal," he qualified.) But the right hand kept clumsily interfering in these tasks, trying to take over. And the subject would make up plausible but incorrect explanations for his left hand's (right brain's) behavior. In one example, the word "STAND" was secretly flashed only to his right brain's visual field. He immediately stood up. Asked why he had done so, he said, "Oh, I decided to go get a Coke."

So was the "unconscious" part of the subject's brain (the right side) solving complicated puzzles and making decisions, while the "conscious" part (left side) did not even know what was going on, yet thought it was in total control? Or did the split-brain surgery somehow cause there to be two independent centers of consciousness, the right one mute and therefore unknown even to its twin on the left?

To the best of my knowledge, Dr. Gazzaniga (now Director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience and Dean of the Faculty at

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September Meeting Report

Penn & Teller Videofest at SDARI Meeting

September's meeting was a novel departure from the typical meeting. Attendees spent the evening watching Penn & Teller *Bullshit!* episodes, interspersed with lively discussions. Member Paul Wegner came up with the idea, and brought in several CD's of past year's programs. All sat around the TV, stretching their necks unless they arrived enough for a front-row seat.

Penn Jillette, and his sidekick Teller were a delight throughout. They tackled a wide variety of subjects, ranging from diets, to bottled water, to Feng Shui. The discussion between episodes was particularly enlightening. Some felt Penn was sloppy with some of the facts, but others felt it was OK because of the enhanced impact that it provided in communicating their message to a general audience.

In the end, everyone was entertained, but also went home with a better appreciation of the issues involved in communicating rational thought effectively to the general public. □

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causing us to glow in the dark, etc.

She comes off of some recent success. The Helix Water District just decided last month to prepare its treatment plant to add fluoride to its drinking water, but the chemical

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won't be put into the district's water until 2006. Eleanor will be able to explain some of the issues involved, such as the treat that opponents will later bring suit against the water district.



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chase. For more information or to register go to www.randi.org

The registration fee is \$285 per person, and a single day attendance costs \$100. The meeting takes place at the Stardust Hotel; low room rates are available (\$60 for Thursday, and \$90 for Friday and Saturday). Make reservations directly with the hotel by calling 1-800-634-6757, or going to www.stardustlv.com, and mentioning the group code: **amazing**.

A special workshop on "How to Communicate Skepticism to the Public" will be held from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursday, January 13, 2005. The cost for this workshop is \$69. The SDARI Board of Directors has made available one scholarship to this workshop: first come, first served. If you accept the scholarship, you must pay all other expenses involved in getting to and staying in Las Vegas, and in attending the Amazing Meeting 3. Contact Richard Uhrich or Barbara Hemmingsen by telephone to claim the scholarship.



Dowsing Proves to be All Talk – No Substance

SDARI was asked to prescreen a potential applicant for the James Randi Educational Foundation One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge. The applicant claimed an ability to perform a dowsing feat worthy of the coveted prize.

Richard Uhrich designed a test in which the self-proclaimed dowser would identify correctly the type of metal in each of five bags, a different metal in each. This would be repeated three times. The dowser would be told the five metals involved, but would have hidden from his view which metal was in which bag.

The dowser actually proposed a much more difficult and complex procedure involving 15 different

objects. He was confident he would get 100% correct.

Richard was joined by Keith and Bertha Taylor, and Robert Sheaffer to conduct and/or witness the test. Keith and Bertha actually administered the test per Richard's instructions, and Robert was witness and documenter.

The test revealed the so-called dowser to be no better than any random person could do through pure chance. The dowser agreed the test was fair, and explained the results as indication of some unknown equipment malfunction.

Robert recorded the test with his camcorder. A portion of the video was replayed for the audience at SDARI's September meeting.



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Dartmouth College) hasn't addressed the implications of split-brain experiments on the question of free will. But he did have a hypothesis that what he called the "left brain speech interpreter module" is the center of consciousness in the normal brain. Yet he notes that a decision to push a button, for example, causes electrical activity in the area of this region only slightly after there is activity in the brain area that actually controls the finger! It's as if the decision is made elsewhere, the action begins, and then the conscious says, "Oh, I decided to push the button."

I think the right brain of a split-

brain subject is not conscious, but can make choices, decisions. Can an unconscious decision be an act of free will? When a decision is made in a normal brain, is awareness of that decision the last step, literally an afterthought? Tentatively, I've decided I'll go with Dr. Sperry's bold assertion.

But I could be wrong.

Richard Uhrich



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<http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blflight77.htm>

<http://ourworld.cs.com/mikegriffith1/refute.htm>



July Meeting Report

Elie Shneour on Stem Cell Research

By Keith Taylor

The big news of the day is the stem cell controversy, and SDARI got out in front of it. On July 25th more than fifty people, including ten or so new faces, came to the Joyce Beers Center to hear SDARI's own Elie Shneour on the subject. He combined a scientific explanation of the research with the ethical questions surrounding the procedure.

It must be difficult for a scientist to explain a complicated scientific procedure to folks, many of whom don't know a blastocyst (a five-day old embryo) from a unicycle (half a bicycle). Fortunately Elie was up to the task. He explained stem cells and the controversy without talking down to the audience, and the audience was with him all the way. It evoked many questions, all right on the money. Elie later told me that he learned as much from the audience as they learned from him.

But the cells, can they be programmed to control some of our most dreaded diseases? Probably. If so how soon can we expect the results to help mankind? Not soon.

Are they to be protected because they may become humans? This is a judgment call but we should weigh the possibility of saving lives or curing diseases against destroying an immature embryo which will not ever become a human in any case. Why do we have to use embryonic stem cells? They are uncommitted and can be made to become whatever we want them to become. Also they can be made to reproduce indefinitely, become immortal in a sense.

What about the opposition based on the right to life? Elie avers that the question is the value of the life of a blastocyst weighted against the right to the life of a fully formed human.

Given the current political climate it isn't easy to stay neutral on the subject of stem cell research, but our first commitment is to science and rational thought, not neutrality. I'd just like have both presidential candidates sit down and listen to Elie Shneour's scientific explanation of this difficult problem.



August Meeting Report

Learning the Talking of Science

Dr. Teresa Larsen, founder and director of the Foundation for Scientific Literacy (FSL), spoke at the August meeting on the topic, "Talking Science." She discussed language in the context of science, and illustrated through several word games.

The La Jolla based FSL has the mission to educate, support and promote scientific literacy, emphasizing the understanding of scientific concepts and processes required for decision-making, participation in civic and cultural affairs, and economic productivity.



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have attended most of the lectures. Some have been very fascinating, and all have had something of interest to offer.

This newsletter, *Rational Inquiry*, has been published quarterly from its start, with Edvard Hemmingsen as co-editor and then editor to the end of 2002. Karen Graves took over for one year; Dwain Deets became the editor in 2004. Most of the articles, reviews and notes that have been written by SDARI members and been much appreciated by the editors. Multiple lead articles were contributed by Keith Taylor, James Enright, Elie Shneour, Ernie Ernissee, and Barbara or Edvard Hemmingsen. Some of these have been reprinted in skeptic's newsletters in this and other countries, thanks to the newsletter exchange process we have had with CFI. Much of the content of the newsletters going back to the first issue is available on our website.

The SDARI website was initially created by David Noelle, who was the webmaster until the summer of 1997. He was followed by James Murray. Both of these were young and enthusiastic graduate students at UCSD who contributed much to SDARI in the early years, before they continued their academic careers in other parts of the country. Ernie Ernissee became the webmaster for a while, before Harry Sutton, the current webmaster, took over the job in 2001. He has done a splendid job by redoing the site and

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keeping it up to date. The domain name, *SDARI.org*, was purchased and donated by one of the members, Robert Zeps.

SDARI's first real contact with the news media occurred in March 1997 when members of an organization called Heaven's Gate committed mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe in order to enter another "dimension of existence", or afterlife, and to rendezvous with a spaceship they believed was following the Hale-Bopp comet. In interviews with reporters, members of SDARI were pleased to offer their opinions about this event. Since then, numerous letters have been written by the members to the editor of the San Diego *Union-Tribune* and other newspapers, pointing out errors, misuse of facts and simple nonsense in published articles. Keith Taylor has been particularly active in contacting the *Union-Tribune* in various ways. Several of their writers have become familiar with SDARI and even have given lectures at our public meetings; on occasion reporters will call when our opinion is of interest to them.

Keith Taylor became our president in January, 1999. He was succeeded by Todd Rockhold in 2002; Richard Uhrich took over in 2004. Several new activities were added. Most notably, with Barbara Hemmingsen as the prime mover, SDARI became involved with the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair, held yearly for Middle and High School students. Prizes are given by SDARI to student projects that best demonstrate

"critical thinking" in the Junior and Senior Divisions. A special fundraiser was conducted in the fall, 1999, and the first prizes awarded in the spring, 2000. When Ernie Ernisee passed away in 2002, the SDARI Board of Directors decided to name the prize for the first place winner in the Senior Division, the "Ernie Ernisee Award", in recognition of his contributions to skeptical and critical thinking in the San Diego area. By participating in the Science Fair, and by manning a booth at the Earth Day celebration in Balboa Park, SDARI is providing meaningful outreach to young people and increasing its visibility in the community.

A fun event, organized by Harriet Turner, was held on Friday, October 13, 2000, in the Community Room next to the movie theater entrance at La Jolla Village Square. This event challenged superstitious beliefs in a light-hearted way. Informative posters were displayed, a ladder to walk under was placed at the entrance, mirrors were broken, tarot cards were explained, "predictions" made, and much more. Elie Shneur held forth under a sign that read: "All questions answered" and he was never stumped! The event drew a good crowd of puzzled moviegoers as well as those responding to our announcements. It was great fun and worth repeating in the future.

Our members appreciate that we must not become isolated from the general public, and that it is not enough for those already convinced of the value of critical thinking to meet to hear lectures on subjects about which we all agree. Thus, in



Visit the webpage of SDARI to get the latest information on lectures and other events sponsored by the Association. You also will find other interesting facts and links to other organizations with goals similar to, or related, to ours.

The Webmaster is Harry Sutton.

www.sdari.org

the last few years, Keith Taylor, our hard-working program chairman, has brought in speakers on such publicly controversial topics as street drug legalization, the attack on the U.S.S. *Liberty*, the story behind the movie *Heart of the Beholder*, and stem cell research. These lectures have sparked lively debates and always attract new faces to the meetings.

We hope that these activities are persuading the audience at our meetings and the readers of our newsletter about the value of critical, rational thinking by providing convincing examples and factual information. With the active participation of its members, SDARI will continue to do this into the future.

Edvard A. Hemmingsen is a former editor of *Rational Inquiry* and a member of the SDARI Board of Directors. □

Membership Application

I would like to join the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Enclosed is my annual membership fee of \$20 (\$12 for students, seniors, and disabled people, \$6 if younger than 18.)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip+4: _____

Special interests: _____

Expertise: _____

Mail to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Phone: _____
P.O. Box 623
La Jolla, CA 92038-0623 Email: _____

For more information contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or check our website at www.sdari.org

We need your support!

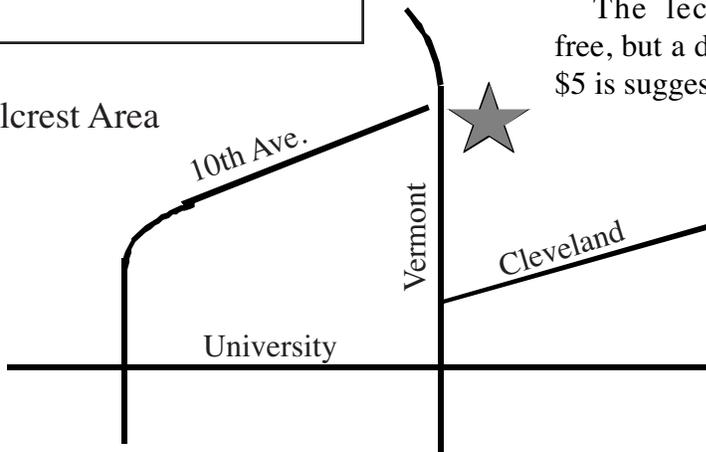
Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. SDARI has been granted federal tax-exempt status. Donations are deductible under section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code.

Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December.) The location of the meetings is the Joyce Beers Community center, at the intersection of Vermont and 10th Ave. in the Hillcrest area, near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets (in Uptown District shopping Center.)

The lectures are free, but a donation of \$5 is suggested.

Hillcrest Area



Submission of Manuscripts

Articles, essays, book reviews, letters to the editor, cartoons, and other written material may be submitted to *Rational Inquiry*. Pertinent announcements and clippings are welcome also. The submissions are subject to editing and abridgement. The approval of the author(s) will be sought for changes that materially affect the content. Published material becomes the property of SDARI unless copyrighted by the author. Submitted articles that contain copyright material must have the permission from the copyright owners before publication. Such permission must be submitted to the editor in writing. Anonymous material will not be considered.

Please send material for publication to the editor at dad2wrk@cox.net.

RATIONAL INQUIRY

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We are on the Web!

www.sdari.org

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Up-coming events:

In the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (see p. 7 for directions):

Sunday October 24, 2004, 7 p.m. Eleanor Nadler, executive director of San Diego Fluoridation Coalition, will speak on fluoridation in public water. Additional details on page 2.

Sunday November 28, 2004, 7 p.m. Meeting topic - to be announced.

Saturday November 20, 2004, 9:30 a.m. CFI International conference at Holiday Inn at the Bay. Additional details on page 2.

Join our meetings. Participate and be informed. Become a member of SDARI. The membership is tax deductible.