

Australasian Science

www.control.com.au

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Subscription prices

\$64 (personal), \$93 (schools) and \$209 (institutions) inclusive of GST. Refer to the subscription form opposite for details.

Advertising information

Available on the web site.

Backissues are available for \$8 each (incl. GST) from the web site.

Published 10 times per year. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the publisher.

Contributions

The Editor welcomes original articles of interest to the general public written by qualified writers on fields within their expertise. Writers' guidelines are on the web site under "Contact Us". Prospective authors should submit an abstract to the Editor prior to submitting a manuscript.

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Distributed by Gordon & Gotch Ltd

Printed by BPA Print Group, 11 Evans St, Burwood, Vic. 3125, Australia.

Print Post Approved PP 331379/0032. ISSN 1442-679X.

*RRP only \$7.40, inclusive of GST.

In the last issue of *Australasian Science* our *Naked Skeptic* column poked fun at homeopathy, a form of alternative medicine that takes a herbal remedy for an illness and dilutes it until there is not a single molecule of the active ingredient left. Homeopaths claim that the distilled water retains the energy of the active ingredient; the *Naked Skeptic* conjectured tongue-in-cheek that homeopathic alcohol would enable drunk drivers to beat the breathalyser – as well as a hangover the next morning.

Homeopathy is an alternative to alternative medicines like naturopathy, yet its acceptance is becoming increasingly mainstream. Some health insurance policies already cover homeopathy.

Yet if the principle behind homeopathy actually worked we would be sicker rather than healthier. Every glass of water we drink from our taps would be a homeopathic mixture of pesticides, fertilisers, livestock excrement and other toxins that have washed into our water catchments.

At present no reputable scientific journals have published evidence supporting homeopathy. With little enthusiasm among mainstream scientists, why isn't the thriving alternative medicine industry investing in large-scale, controlled, double-blind clinical trials that could validate its very existence?

Now the Victorian government has come to the fore, announcing a grant of \$500,000 for "Australia's first research centre for complimentary (sic) and alternative medicine". The Victorian Minister for Innovation, Mr John Brumby, announced on 24 November that the Australian Research Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicines (ARCCAM) "would assist research into the toxicity, quality and efficacy of treatments such as Chinese medicine, Indian Ayurveda, Arabic Unani, homeopathy and osteopathy".

However, \$500,000 isn't going to go very far in running clinical trials for such a broad range of practices. How thorough could ARCCAM's testing be with such a small budget?

A clue comes from the economic rewards that the *Innovation* Minister spruiked at ARCCAM's launch. "Australians spend around \$2.3 billion a year on alternative and complementary medicines," he enthused, "yet the effectiveness, safety and quality of most of these therapies is yet to be fully understood".

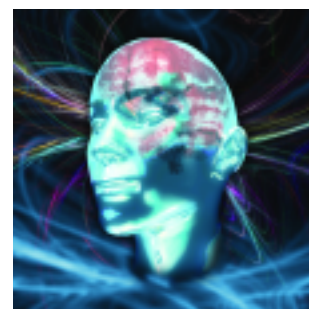
So why are Australians allowed to spend so much on "medicines" that are unproven? Will ARCCAM truly endeavour to conduct peer-reviewed research into alternative medicines that will be accepted for publication in reputable journals? Or will it merely conduct public surveys that harness the placebo effect to create positive PR for the tabloid media?

With the health of so many Australians falling into the unproven hands of alternative practitioners, research into the efficacy of these treatments is warranted. However, Brumby inspires little confidence in ARCCAM's resolve to achieve this when he states: "Victoria regards the market as a high priority".

Health and commerce aren't interchangeable objectives.

ABOUT THE COVER

This special neuroscience edition features articles on sensory perception and processing; determining personality from brain waves; the role of glucose regulation in learning and memory; the prospect of healing the brain with adult stem cells; the role of the brain in heart failure; and efforts to better understand diseases such as autism, schizophrenia, epilepsy, motor neuron disease and alcoholism.



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