Celebs and Bigwigs Not Founts of Science Wisdom

By ACSH Staff — July 12, 2004

Celebrity-worship and deference to authority sometimes overcome people's ability to think scientifically and rationally. ACSH's Jeff Stier has written about how celebrities influence research funding, for instance. Celebrity and authority can also be used to sell ideas the public wouldn't otherwise accept.

cTom Cruise is promoting a chain of "detox" centers for people exposed to the dust of the collapse of the World Trade Center. This is absurd on multiple levels. There is no evidence that the WTC collapse caused any unconventional, chemically-induced illnesses (as opposed to expected problems related to stress and smoke/dust inhalation). There is no credible scientific evidence that the purportedly toxin-cleansing regimen of vitamins, minerals, and sweating that Cruise is pushing has health benefits. And Cruise's detox program is in fact one that the Church of Scientology, of which he is a follower, has been pushing as a cure-all for years, ostensibly aimed at ridding the body of the accumulated toxins of the modern world in general.

Of course, should it turn out that the WTC collapse spewed out invisible, microscopic space aliens called Thetans that attached themselves to New Yorkers' bodies and began bombarding them with negative vibes, the Church of Scientology would be the first place we would go (money in hand) for help, since combating bodily invasion by Thetans is the real (though rarely publicly discussed) goal of the late L. Ron Hubbard's ludicrous cult. Hubbard and Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry were friends and fellow sci-fi writers, but at least Roddenberry's fans (most of them) know the difference between fact and fiction. Maybe the Scientologists should watch more Star Trek.

cSpeaking of celebrity gurus, the late Dr. Robert Atkins continues to haunt the nation's supermarkets, with virtually every food on Earth now coming in some low-carb form, in keeping with Atkins' scientifically dubious claim that carbohydrates, not simply one's total calorie intake/output, are the main cause of obesity. Atkins' diet has now inspired complaints that it causes smelly "Atkins breath" and a lawsuit by a man who blames the fat-intensive regimen for his clogged arteries. That hasn't stopped the trend, though: even a recent TV ad for breath mints contained what sounded like a hastily-inserted last-second voiceover saying "And zero net carbs!"

So if the Atkins breath complaints are true, at least you can combat the problem without consuming high-carb breath mints.

cJenny Lauren, niece of Ralph Lauren, used to be on an even more radical "diet" -- anorexia and bulimia -- and she has written a book about it called Homesick: A Memoir of Family, Food, and Finding Hope. Sadly, Lauren copes with her condition in large part by spending time with New Age alternative medicine hucksters in Santa Fe (see my take on Santa Fe here) and in the "healing sanctuaries of Brazil," trying everything from acupuncture to enemas, periodically wracked by sexual interest in her doctors and mentors along the way, lamenting that what the Freudians call
an Electra complex causes her to be attracted to father figures. She is taken in by, among others, a masseur/guru who tells her that mainstream surgeons who worked on her have damaged her "power energy center" by operating on her colon, and that he must endeavor to fix it (Lauren immediately accepts this as an explanation for why she had felt tired for the previous five years).

Lauren's heartfelt, pain-filled account is the sort of thing that makes even the most hard-nosed skeptic and science buff want to become a con artist who bilks movie stars and fashion moguls out of their hard-earned (or easily inherited) wealth. If you hear that I've become a professional astrologer in L.A. years from now, this book probably had a lot to do with it.

Meanwhile, in the weird borderland between pseudoscience and mainstream science, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (no friends [3] of ACSH, though I bear them no ill will) gives its Rachel Carson Award for Integrity in Science to Theodora Emily Colborn for her "groundbreaking work" studying endocrine-disruptors. So a group that gets press by condemning each imaginable type of food in turn (from Mexican to Quorn) as unsafe is giving an award -- named after the famous and revered chemophobic pioneer who inspired the tragic DDT ban -- to someone pushing the discredited theory that environmental chemicals may be messing with our hormones. Maybe CSPI should give a Tom Cruise Award for Advancement in the Art of Thetan Dispersal to one of Jenny Lauren's holistic healers for groundbreaking work on combating bad vibes.

Of course, it must be admitted that the mainstream science establishment also sometimes produces people who are off-kilter but famous and powerful enough to get away with it: Gro Harlem Brundtland, while General Director of the World Health Organization, reportedly refused to allow people to enter her office with cell phones, blaming their radiation for her headaches. How comforting that the health of billions is in the hands of such people.

Even a medical giant of our times, Dr. Henry Heimlich, is not immune to criticism -- specifically that Heimlich is tight with the animal rights front group Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine [4] and that he has exaggerated [5] the usefulness of his famed Maneuver in rescuing drowning victims.

But in the end, the nice thing about science is that, despite Isaac Newton's poetic phrase about "standing on the shoulders of giants," it doesn't really depend upon the giants so much as the standing. That is, what matters is not a few wise leaders' pronouncements but a gradual, piecemeal process of checking each other's work, pointing out errors, and seeing if reported results can actually be replicated by independent researchers. That way, even a planet populated by gullible naifs like us can fumble in fits and starts toward the truth.