



Dan Wilson

## The Failure of Dowsing Under Test

— or, Keep It Simple And You Will Be Led Astray

**K**eep it simple" is a saying much favoured by folk dowsers – even one quoted in English by French dowsers. I don't doubt that many people have difficulty thinking about, or dowsing, complicated propositions, but there are some things in life that are not simple and while pretending that they are may well keep the sweat from your brow and your heart beats steady, it may well land you with the wrong story, or at best only half the right one.

It's one of the things I always thought that "scientific" chaps were being so foolish about when they praised "Ockham's razor", or the parsimony principle: that the best policy when looking for explanations is to choose the simplest possible theory. This would get a bushman picking up a transistor radio (still playing) precisely nowhere, since the simplest theory would be that it's a box with a spirit in it.

A case in point which I wish to examine here is the well-known tendency of dowsers to come badly adrift when placed under test. This is so marked that from time to time the Society is moved to warn members against participating in trials unless they know what they are at. It's not a universal problem – there are certain water-diviners who positively relish stuffing their results up the noses of drillers who scoff at their work, and there is no doubt that the nearer a test can be manoeuvred to a dowser's normal practice, the better the prospect will be for a normal set of good results.

In Internet discussions on this matter, I often quote the now celebrated success of dowsers when subjected to a very few onerous tests by the conjuror James Randi in his series "Psychic Investigator" for ITV in 1992. Randi is a prominent "skeptic" (the American spelling has become usual for this reverse-believing variety of sceptic, thanks to the journal *Skeptical Inquirer* which seeks not to enquire but to scoff behind impregnable walls of inaction) and for the best part of two years hosted these programmes in which psychics and seers became bewildered and distressed as their usual faculties departed from them, Randi remaining impassive and jovially dismissive as his own prejudices were repeatedly "proven".

Surely, I thought, reading a *Psychic News* account of one such disaster in 1991, he is going to get round to dowsers before long. We can't let this happen to us!

And nor did "we" – or rather Bob Harris and Michael Cook, who, when that duly occurred were two of the chosen dowsers. Before taking part, they held a short affirmation invoking "protection" from Randi and his powers. There's not room here to tell the whole very jolly story, alas – but to summarise, three of the four dowsing exercises were successful and when Bob Harris tried to suggest to Randi that Professor Hans-Dieter Betz's trials validating dowsing qualified for his (then) \$100,000 reward, Randi ordered the cameras to be turned off and was barracked by the studio audience. After filming, Randi tried to have the programme cancelled, without success.

Now, when dowsers discuss failure under trial, in my experience they almost invariably blame overt or unconscious hostility on the part of the experimenters.

What they don't know is that over in another neck of the woods, some others are getting worked up about failure in trials too – the complementary medicine workers. I run a natural health clinic in the famous "commuter town with strange energies" East Grinstead and take an intense interest in research worldwide into natural medicine. There's something seriously skewed about that too. If you run a clinic you know perfectly well that healers and therapists would not stay in the game if they got "success", however you like to pitch that, with fewer than around 75% of clients. Yet these studies, diligently reported by the Exeter University research digest FACT, repeatedly show astonishingly poor results with herbalism, homoeopathy and healing, down to pretty well nothing in some cases. What was happening? Were there clinics out there that genuinely had practitioners who regarded these figures as acceptable? If so, it was not surprising some doctors were remaining antagonistic to CAM (as the acronym now is – complementary and alternative medicine).

Our homoeopath made the dowsers look like doves. He was certain in his gut the researchers were deliberately falsifying the results. He was so disgusted he never read such things. But I did read them, and in many cases the trials were being run by the practitioners themselves - and still shooting the therapy dead in the water!

An extreme case arose in September 2002, when FACT reported a trial of dowsing at the Glasgow homoeopathic hospital, entirely conducted by the medical homoeopaths there. Dowsing is a touchy subject in medical (which is to say, medically-qualified) homoeopathy, partly because it steers the user away from classical homoeopathy in which single remedies are applied to carefully noted cases to achieve "provings" and so benefit the homoeopathic world as a whole; and partly because it is associated with the "rag-tag-and-bobtail" (as perceived there) of the radiesthetic homoeopaths and worse, the radionic and "vibronic" homoeopaths who dispense blank tablets that have been charged up in machines. Be that as it may, dowsing must have made huge headway in medical homoeopathy for this trial to have been staged at all.

The trial was far from being a true trial of dowsing in homoeopathy. It was more of a party trick thing. The homoeopaths, running the trial themselves, had repeatedly to identify unlabelled bottles some of which contained blank tablets (of lactic sugar) and some the remedy *Betony*. They failed to do better than chance.

Now, FACT does a very balanced judgement of trial procedures in its reports but lately, to be still fairer, it has been inviting the original study authors to comment on its own comments. In this case, the homoeopaths remained silent. I suspect, if they (or an influential few) had been using dowsing satisfactorily for some time, they were too devastated to think of anything useful to say.

So I thought I would say it for them, as it was time the whistle was blown on the whole business of trials destroying what is being tried. I admit now, I didn't do a global check of all the suspect trials I had read, I concentrated on this one study. Could it be that the

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homoeopaths, or some of them, were unwittingly, unconsciously, hostile to their own dowsing? What did a dowse say?

After giving a couple of examples of verified medical dowsing, here's what I said in my letter, which was published in FACT's issue for December 2002:-

What is different about trials, then? Dowsters always impute failure to interference in the presumed unconscious mental realm in which dowsing operates by unconscious hostility on the part of investigators. However, while the outcomes of isolated cases where supposed measures of "protection" were taken before the trial appear to support this idea, the intuitive faculty can be used to arrive at a less emotive conclusion.

This is that intuitive "mindstuff" operations such as dowsing and mental healing are conducted in, and require, a spirit of calm acceptance that the faculty works. Trials are conducted for the express purpose of finding out if it works; and the neutrality of the intent conflicts with the positive spirit the exercise might otherwise have. Experienced dowsters are very happy to have tests conducted on them in terms of audits of their normal work, where they are mentally geared to providing a service for a client and the exercise is conducted under their implicit control.

In the particular instance of this study, the homoeopaths were engaged in an academic exercise of identifying bottles whose purpose was neutral enquiry. Without taking dynamic and proactive precautions to maintain positive project "ownership" – or in esoteric language, "protect" themselves – they were fated to fail.

This effect can be detected as extending also to many, many orthodox-"owned" trials of CAM reported in FACT. Allopathic medicine operates under a belief system in which it is generally supposed that chemicals alone perform the healing. I was recently astonished to discover one doctor at least who had never heard of the term *vis medicatrix naturae* (natural healing energy) and when introduced to it, even mocked it. This mechanistic outlook unwittingly insulates allopathy from mental interference. CAM in contrast explicitly acknowledges a mental or psychological dimension to its power; and for any activity where the predominating group expectation can influence the outcome, experimenter effect can become its Achilles heel. CAM proponents beware!

Now, it might have been quite a coup to get any kind of discussion of this sort into an avowedly orthodox journal, and perhaps for a first stab it did help to have kept things really simple, but alas, they are not. Shortly after this, some tests were brought to my attention where nothing so straightforward, if dowsing was correct, was happening. The dowsters were plainly being thrown off their stride by more than an enforced neutral intent. After all, did not the experienced dowsters in Betz's now famous "plank-walking" experiment come and complain to him about the difficulty of it all? (Details of that, by the way, are in Tom Williamson's book *Dowsing: New Light On An Ancient Art*,

1993, Robert Hale, London ISBN 0-7090-5060-7.)

So only then did I sit down and look at all the tests of dowsing and healing, of which there are now a large number, and draw up a list of significant interfering or disturbing factors with their order of importance:-

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Percentage influence</i>
1 Lack of affirmative purpose of exercise	48
2 Unconscious hostility of exercise "owners"	32
3 Fear on part of testee of failure/ridicule	22
4 Lack of client to create a need to know and to "gear" the purpose	20
5 Testee forced by conditions of trial off usual successful field or mode of work	15
6 Personality clash between tester and testee other than factor 2	12
7 Background resistance to success from society	8
8 Fear on part of testee of success (see below)	3
9 Other disturbing factors (noise, interruptions etc.)	2

These categories have been defined by dowsing and both merge into and magnify each other, so are fuzzy in the extreme and result in a total greater than 100. Dowsters may care to check them, but they are unlikely to agree closely thanks to the different meanings given to words by different people (a major bugbear of that other soiled candidate for investigation, group dowsing).

Trials by "The Amazing James Randi" (to give him his full honorific) touch most of these buttons. He is overtly hostile to "paranormal" occurrences (2), he acts as a major figurehead for the "skeptical" sector of society (7), he guarantees an argument about success equating to proof for any testee so unfortunate as to succeed (8) and, most interestingly of all, his intense fear of anomalous occurrence undoubtedly guides him unconsciously to try and ensure the testee (5) does not perform in his or her chosen and familiar field of work – a vitally useful proclivity to possess when you have a million dollars to lose and the dowser is accepting your much trumpeted challenge. This last factor was even in evidence in the television trial when he successfully persuaded archaeological dowsters to pronounce on the supposed "cancer influences" in some streets in York, work which they pointed out they didn't normally do. (In the event they seemed to have been correct, all the same. The streets were safe and Randi was pretending they weren't.) And on top of all that, he has working for him the proven fragility of dowsing when subjected to the other trial abnormalities.

What is the way forward? Maybe for those aroused by a challenge, it will be the development of affirmations like that of Harris and Cook, but I prefer a certainty and would nail my flag to the mast of "audit" – being tested where I know I am strong, in my normal work for clients where a duty is created and where in some cases such as serious injuries sensed at a distance I must get it right first time every time – or else! Indeed, to undertake such apparently risky tasks at all is a kind of affirmation in itself. Really, this is the edge of a big subject, in which trials play only a small part.