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an educational resource on the paranormal, pseudoscientific, and the supernatural

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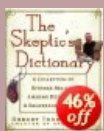
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## Touched!

Swift

Written by Penn Bullock

Wednesday, 24 February 2010 18:08

In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard, an obtuse but occasionally lucid postmodernist, wrote a book called *America* in which he noted some eerie goings-on. "This is a culture," he wrote with alarm, "which sets up specialized institutes so that people's bodies can come together and touch." I remembered Baudrillard's remark as I toured the Touch Research Institute in Miami, with its goal of eradicating strife and sickness globally.

For an organization that intends to save the world through massage, its facilities are small. Headquartered in a building on the University of Miami's School of Medicine campus, the Institute occupies a single tiny office crammed with mazy grey cubicles. I went there for a tour. Tiffany Field, the head of the Institute, greeted me at the door wearing a lab coat and a warm smile. She looked to be in her 50s, but wouldn't disclose her age. She had long brown hair down her back, deeply tanned skin, and thick racetracks of eyeliner around her eyes.

The Touch Research Institute was founded in 1992 on the whimsy of the CEO of Johnson & Johnson, Jim Burke. At the time, he sat on the board of 30 other corporations, a feat worthy of titans like JP Morgan and John Rockefeller. But he was no heartless, top-hatted capitalist. In fact, he had a bizarre and heartwarming utopian vision: to "cure the world of war and disease" through touch.

Jim Burke approached Field while she was working at the University of Miami. With a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of Massachusetts, Field had pioneered early research into the potentially vital effect of a mother's touch on the growth of infants. Burke was impressed by those studies and decided to entrust his utopian project with Field. He gave her a grant of \$250,000. In collaboration with faculty at the University of Miami and Duke's School of Medicine, Field turned the money into the Touch Research Institute. Further funding came through the National Institute of Health, which donates hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to the Institute annually.

The Touch Research Institute claims that massage therapy is a palliative for almost all bodily ailments. To demonstrate this healing power, Field handed me over to her assistant for a free massage. Soft-spoken and gentle, the assistant had just returned from a wedding in Mexico at the height of swine flu. She led me through a hall, past "Cytogenetic" laboratories unrelated to the Institute, into a darkened, disused boardroom. She directed me to undress to my boxers and lay down on a massage table.

Swine flu carrier or not, she was an effective masseuse. In the last few minutes I drifted into a magical, half-awake, nirvana-like state. I left the Touch Research Institute with looser muscles and a bounce in my step. I felt like I was prancing on the moon. But I had been underwhelmed by the Institute's office, and learnt little about their underlying research. It appeared to me that two doctors were running a massage parlor out of a shady boardroom. And the effect of the massage wore off in no time, as the stresses of the day reclaimed me. Could these fleeting, pleasant feelings substantially boost the immune system in HIV patients or prevent premature birth in pregnant woman? The Touch Research Institute says so.

Undermining its credibility, the Institute has embraced the whole dubious gamut of alternative medicine. On its website, it has compiled studies — conducted both by the Institute and other researchers — on massage therapy, music therapy, aromatherapy, acupuncture, Tai Chi, and Yoga. They invariably point to the same conclusion: that these methods are medicine. One study conducted by Tiffany Field claims that the brain chemistry of teenage girls is improved by rock music.

Another study concluded, in a blizzard of scientific jargon, that listening to Mozart can reduce skin allergies to latex. Asked about that study, James Randi flatly called it "bullshit." "Unless it was done double-blind," he said, "we have nothing to work with." The Mozart experiment wasn't done double-blind, but it did include a control group that listened to Beethoven. Quirkily, in the world of music therapy, Mozart's music is presumed to have healing power, whereas Beethoven's music (and the music of all the Romantic composers after him) is considered a placebo.

Field is particularly interested in the smell of lavender, which her studies in aromatherapy show has a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. "I don't know what it is about lavender, but it relaxes you, it lowers your heart rate, it brings your brain waves in a direction of higher alertness," she says. Stephen Macknik, a neuroscientist at the Barrow Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, one of the largest neuroscience hospitals in the world, is skeptical. "I study olfaction and I'm not aware of any credible evidence to suggest aromatherapy improves cognitive function whatsoever." When pressed, Field concurs. "It has no proven health benefits," she admits, a little sadly, on the phone.

For all their work in alternative medicine, Field and her team have focused mainly on massage therapy. Since 1992, the Institute has corralled groups of patients at hospitals on the UM campus and experimented on them with massage. Often enough, the studies come to the banal conclusion that massage lowers stress. That's a statement of the obvious, but it's nothing to sniff at: Stress is caused primarily by a hormone called cortisol, which is known to fetter the immune system and "do damage to the body and brain," as Macknik confirms. So relieving stress could strengthen the immune system and the body as a whole.

If all of Field's studies are to be believed, however, massage therapy helps with just about anything

and everything, starting alphabetically with aggression, Alzheimer's, anorexia, anxiety, arthritis, asthma, ADHD, autism, behavioral problems in preschoolers, blood pressure, breast cancer, bulimia, bum victims, cancer, carpal tunnel syndrome, cerebral palsy, chronic fatigue symptom, cocaine exposure in infants, cognition (learning), cystic fibrosis, depression, diabetes, down syndrome, fibromyalgia, headache, HIV, hypertension, job stress, labor pain, leukemia, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, preterm birth, posttraumatic stress, premenstrual syndrome, sexual abuse coping, sleep, spinal cord injuries, organ transplants, and even voice disorders.

That litany could well be a bill of goods, but Field emphasizes that massage is a complementary treatment and not a cure. Macknik, the neuroscientist at the Barrow Institute, reviewed some of their studies and said, "It looks like these are real — the only problem is that a lot of them aren't double blind, which is what I want to see if I'm to redirect my research in their direction. These are what we call preliminary studies, which need to be redone double-blind."

Field protests that double-blind studies are impossible in massage therapy. "We can only approximate double-blindness by having two different pressure massages — light pressure, which we know to be ineffective, and moderate pressure massage. The groups don't know which one is effective or which treatment they're getting. Light pressure massage is as close to a placebo as you get in any kind of live therapy." It's a reasonable argument. She further contends, "The only possible studies you can do with double-blind are drug studies, where the pills are the same color and you don't know that one's a placebo and one's not."

A skeptical, licensed massage therapist in Miami, who asked not to be quoted by name, cast doubt on the distinction between moderate and light pressure massage — a distinction that is the crux of most of the Institute's research. "You can't standardize a massage," he said. He points out that there are numberless varieties of the practice. The standard Western model was promulgated in the 1800s by a Swedish gymnastics instructor and physiologist, Pehr Henrik Ling, who derived what we know as the Swedish Massage from ancient Chinese texts. Adding to that, there are dozens or hundreds of permutations of massage in Asia and across the world. Massages vary individually too. The outcome of a massage depends on the particular strokes employed, the skill of the massage therapist, and the psychology of the patient. The variables pile up. If massage therapy can't be standardized, then is it viable as an across-the-board medical treatment? Maybe not.

But Tiffany Field and her colleagues at the Touch Research Institute would insist otherwise. The fact is, they purport, that massage therapy can prevent premature birth in pregnant women — and not just reduce it, but eliminate it altogether. "We found that the pregnancy massage lowers cortisol levels and thereby prevents prematurity completely," Field states matter-of-factly. (Conversely, in ancient China a specialized form of massage was used to induce abortions.) Massage therapy, she says, can also stimulate growth and activity in babies born prematurely: "With moderate pressure massage, we increased premature babies weight gain by 47% and lowered their hospital stay by 6 days and the hospital costs by 10,000 dollars." TRI has gotten plenty of press attention for those claims.

In 2006, the Touch Research Institute showed up in a *Today Show* segment on handholding. A couple was interviewed about their paw clutching habits and Field was brought on camera to intone that handholding is both romantic and good for your health. Touching, she said in a familiar refrain, applies pressure to the skin, which slows down the heart rate and relieves stress.

It was a strange segment. Why did America need reminding that holding hands is nice? Perhaps it's that the country has lost touch with itself, so to speak. An American can go months or years without touching another person. Accidental touches in public are avoided strenuously; there seem to be few things more awkward than inadvertently brushing a person's leg or foot under a restaurant table, for fear it will be interpreted sexually. Litigation, sexual harassment codes, and paranoia about pedophilia have cut down on touch. As Tiffany Field mentions in her book, *Touch*, in some preschools teachers are banned from giving hugs to students. Technology has also dried up intimacy. So much communication nowadays takes place on networks, leading Baudrillard, the Frenchman, to write: "Interface or interaction... has replaced face-to-face contact and action in America."

America is neurotic about and deprived of touch. So, in a perverse twist, touch ends up being administered to the population by utopian institutes, bankrolled by the government and the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. The Touch Research Institute in Miami is by far the least ridiculous of these outfits: At Harvard, touch researchers have investigated chakras and "energy fields" and touted the power of Reiki, a Japanese alternative medicine that clinical studies and trials have debunked again and again.

Is massage therapy a legitimate medical science, though? The idea shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. Hippocrates mandated, "The physician must be experienced in many things, but assuredly in rubbing." But that was 493 BC. Medical science has come a long way since then. The Touch Research Institute has floated some interesting ideas worthy of further investigation, but their findings are much too mixed up with hogwash about the magic of Mozart and lavender odor. As for war and disease, those banes aren't going away with more backrubs.

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...  
written by vino, February 24, 2010

I can't speak for the positive physical effects of receiving a massage, but I'm quite sure that giving a massage (to attractive young women at least) would DEFINITELY make ME feel good. 😊 I wonder if I could get a big grant to study this?

Votes: +3

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written by eternalcontrol, February 24, 2010

The stress released is in direct proportion to the opaqueness of the outfit of the the masseuse. I think I should get a grant to test my hypothesis. Oil or powder do not make any difference in the "outcome," in my learned opinion.

Votes: +2




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### pregnancy and massage

written by Galadriel, February 24, 2010

I took a course in equine sports massage. One of the things they taught was: one should absolutely avoid massage in late term pregnant mares, that a strong massage might actually trigger birth early.

Votes: +2

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...

written by MadScientist, February 24, 2010

Who doesn't love a good rub? Dogs love it, cats love it, pigs love it. After seeing a few bears rubbing themselves on trees I wondered what all the fuss was about so I tried it - my mom wasn't too crazy that I was wearing out my shirts so quickly.

Votes: +0

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...

written by TDF, February 24, 2010


Well, music seems to be able to trigger certain emotions but this is highly influenced by how and where you grew up (= Muscial Socialization). The idea of Mozart healing deseases would only emerge in a western-influenced country, because people there have grown up with the idea of major and minor scales. Hearing those would automatically result in a feeling of comfort.

However, in a few hundred years, this might have dramatically changed by music which is no longer based on a difference between minor and major, but on sound itself.

However, from my very subjective point of view, I would strongly agree to the idea of Rockmusic improving young girls' social life :-), but not anyone's brain.

Okay, okay. I have a Master's degree in composition. I have studied from Stockhausen to Bach to Beethoven and Popmusic in general. I am too influenced by those ideas, but reading the Mozart stuff above I really have to disagree. I know people who dislike Mozart so much, they would throw up during a therapy like that. :-)

Votes: +3

 vote up  vote down  report abuse

...

written by Elena Zvacek, February 25, 2010

@Galadriel

I took a course in equine sports massage. One of the things they taught was: one should absolutely avoid massage in late term pregnant mares, that a strong massage might actually trigger birth early.

Did they have any explanation why that is?

I seem to recall that labor is induced by oxytocin, which I similarly recall to be involved in bonding and released by things touching (among other things). It's an interesting link to explore; especially if it works with humans in the same way.

@article

Another study concluded, in a blizzard of scientific jargon, that listening to Mozart can reduce skin allergies to latex. Asked about that study, James Randi flatly called it "bullshit." "Unless it was done double-blind," he said, "we have nothing to work with." The Mozart experiment wasn't done double-blind, but it did include a control group that listened to Beethoven. Quirkily, in the world of music therapy, Mozart's music is presumed to have healing power, whereas Beethovens's music (and the music of all the Romantic composers after him) is considered a placebo.

Double blind tests may be the gold standard, but it simply isn't possible for all treatments (or pretenders to this name). You cannot double-blind test whether amputation is the best way to treat a patient with a gangreened limb. You can't even single-blind it, both the patient and the doctor will know there is a limb missing; it's hard not to notice a thing like that.

Testing the effects of music double blind would require finding researchers and subjects that don't know the music involved. And even then it is highly unlikely they don't notice some of the basic characteristics of the music; you can't avoid the subjects having some distinguishing knowledge of the "treatments". You'd just have to accept in the final analysis there are more confounding variables than in a double-blind trial. This doesn't mean such a study would be completely useless, just that the study would need more significant results to be taken as seriously. Comparing it to how other styles of music affect people is one way to get a bit more significance out of it; however, that doesn't mean they're the 'placebos' (But it may tacitly assume the placebo effects included in the effect of the music is the same for all styles).

Votes: -1

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...




written by Galadriel, February 25, 2010

@Elena Zvacek

The course I took didn't have a lot in the way of "X causes Y because Z"; it offered a lot more of "We often see when we do X, Y happens." There was a fair amount of anatomy, of course, what the body looks like under the skin, and also some speculation about why things happen as they do. But there was not a lot of underlying physiology, only speculation. I got the impression that sort of thing may not have been studied much, in animals or in people. (And I don't have access to medical studies to be able to look for more info.)

I do think it was interesting that we were adamantly cautioned against massage in late term pregnant mares, when this Touch Research Institute claims that massage is beneficial to pregnant women.


Votes: +1

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...  
written by CasaRojo, February 25, 2010

My cat demands regularly massages and seemingly gets jealous if she's in the room when there's massaging taking place and she's not involved. I totally understand her position. 🙄

Votes: +2




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...  
written by William, February 25, 2010

Penn captured the idea that massage does have a good effect if done right. Cure every disease? No. Not even the ones listed.

However, I'm more upset by the idea that my tax dollars are paying for someone to run a massage parlor!

Votes: +2

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...  
written by Kitty, February 25, 2010

I guess I'd be rather happier if the article had just skipped the eyeliner comment and the worry about the office being underwhelming. I was once at the corporate HQ of Wal Mart and the rugs were ratty, the desks falling apart and it was so underwhelming. I would never have guessed it was the nerve center of an evil empire! I've also heard people rather underwhelmed when they go to JREF. They expect armed guards and a huge building. Instead I at least found it welcoming and warm, very homey feeling. Some skeptics love that (like myself) others find it very off putting that it is not more "professional" looking.

I do know that with babies and young children, touch is of great importance. Think the wire monkey mommy! So, at least at one point in our lives, touch can make all the difference. The Skinner baby box ("don't touch the baby! You have germs!") model is OUT for baby raising. Instead what has won over the medical community (and parents) is the "hands on let your kid get germs while young to build up immunity let the dog lick the baby pass the baby around and hold as much as you want and as much as baby wants" model of parenting.

Children know this, which is why they love to have teddy bears or soft blanket to touch. The sense of comfort from a gentle touch is wonderful.

Not sure about anyone funding any kind of massage thing. It feels GREAT. But other than that, as an adult I'm not sure it does much good. That is enough to have people that want it pay for it on their own.

Votes: +2




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...  
written by markbellis, February 25, 2010

...specialized institutes so that people's bodies can come together and touch."

I think they used to call such institutions *maison de tolérance*, where quite a lot was tolerated, in France.

Votes: +0

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**Touche**  
written by pxatkins, February 26, 2010

Touch triggers locusts to swarm.

As star-drunkard Charlie Sheen's character in Two and a Half Men says to his chiropractor brother, "chiropractic is just a massage without the happy ending."

I'm not helping, am I? Hey it's Friday. Good article, Penn.

Votes: +0




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...  
written by verybig, March 01, 2010

I can see how a double blind test in this case might be difficult. But how about a test where one group gets a massage and the other a "dose" of therapeutic touch? When the results come in showing both to be equally ineffective then we'd know for sure that NOT touching someone has the same effect as actually touching someone. Or perhaps they could test massage by having one group

receive hands on therapy from the Touch Institute and the other group getting massages by untrained,ham handed,hairy louts(such as myself). Then I guess you'd be able to prove that massage therapy works(or doesn't)irrespective of any training in the "art" of massage.

Votes: +0

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