

The Scientific and Medical Network at the BA

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Beyond the brain: making science personal

As detailed elsewhere on this site, the Network co-ordinated an event at this year's meeting of the British Association called **Beyond the brain: making science personal**. The three speakers were Network President Dr. Peter Fenwick on a new model for the dying, Professor Deborah Delaney on responses to remote cognition, and Dr Rupert Sheldrake on testing for telephone telepathy. As the title implies, a key question is whether science should accept the first person perspective and include personal experience in an expanded framework for a new science of consciousness. The talks were followed by the radio discussion chaired by Quentin Cooper, where the speakers were joined by the sceptic Professor Chris French from the Department of Psychology, Goldsmiths College.

The event has received extensive coverage in the papers with sensationalist headlines such as 'Theories of telepathy and afterlife cause uproar at top science forum' (Times), 'Festival attacked over paranormal "nonsense"' (Daily Telegraph), 'Scientists angry after conference gives platform to paranormal investigator' (Independent) and 'Telepathy work dismissed as fantasy' (Guardian). The British Association has come under fire for even allowing the event to occur, but committee member Dr Helen Haste defended the decision by saying that the BA should be open to discussions or debates that are seen as valid by people inside the scientific community, as long as they are addressed in acceptable ways.

Two prominent scientists were invited to comment on the session. Lord Winston is quoted as saying 'I know of no serious, properly done studies which make me feel that this is anything other than nonsense.' . Oxford's Peter Atkins adds, 'there is absolutely no reason to suppose that telepathy is anything more than a charlatan's fantasy. If telepathy were a real phenomenon, evolution and natural selection would have developed it into a serious ability.' Sir Walter Bodmer refers to the necessity of putting forward 'a more convincing view', thereby indicating his own predisposition.

Debate and views from these eminent scientists are welcome. However, there is an abundance of evidence, research and literature that shows a contrary view. These topics have been the subject of research in universities such as Edinburgh, Princeton and California Davis for decades, and results have been published in peer-reviewed journals. To ignore all this evidence is to put only one side of the argument.

The underlying issue reflects what philosopher Mark Woodhouse calls a 'paradigm war'. Modern science is based on assumptions of materialism and reductionism, and insists that consciousness is a purely physical expression of brain processes. The research presented at the BA challenges that fundamental assumption and therefore provokes a strong emotional response. Science has achieved its pre-eminent social position by displacing religion. It therefore tends to be suspicious of apparently non-physical or spiritual phenomena, which it brands as outdated superstition or charlatanism. The way in which we interpret evidence will inevitably reflect our basic philosophical orientation; and if this orientation is threatened by evidence, then it is likely to be dismissed or ridiculed, as has happened at the BA. As the speakers have proposed, we need an extended science that can incorporate these new findings.

Members of the Scientific and Medical Network have been investigating the interface between science, consciousness and spirituality for more than 30 years in a spirit of open-minded rigour. There is plenty of evidence on this site that readers can consider, as well as reviews of books in the field. Most recently, Dean Radin's *Entangled Minds* was reviewed in the summer issue of Network Review, and his book *The Conscious Universe* is a standard reference on laboratory parapsychology. You can also follow the link below to Rupert Sheldrake's web site – www.sheldrake.org