

Autism and Vaccines:

how bad science confuses the press
and harms the public

Dr. Steven Salzberg

Ten years ago, an article appeared in the medical journal *The Lancet* that suggested a link between autism and the vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella. The article was widely cited in the popular press in England, and vaccination rates began to fall. Further investigations revealed that the data in the study had been manipulated, and that the principal scientist had a major conflict of interest, with the result that 10 of his 12 co-authors repudiated the study's findings.

Numerous scientific studies since 1998, all done in response to the original *Lancet* article, have failed to find any link between autism and vaccines. Despite this, a few scientists and doctors continue to push the connection, often accompanying their claims with promises of "alternative" treatments for autism. The press keeps the issue alive by reporting "the controversy," often accompanying their reports with emotional testimonials from parents, including several celebrities. As a consequence of this publicity, vaccination rates are now falling in the United States, leading to alarming new outbreaks of diseases. Scientists and skeptics need to act to quell the rumors and educate the public, so that vaccines, one of the greatest medical successes in history, remain an effective tool in our fight against disease.

Dr. Steven Salzberg is the Director of the Center for Bioinformatics and Computational Biology and the Horvitz Professor of Computer Science at the University of Maryland, College Park. From 1997 to 2005 he was at The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR) in Rockville, Maryland, where he had a leading role in projects to sequence the DNA of many pathogens, including the anthrax bacteria used in the 2001 attacks. He contributed computational

tools and analysis to the Human Genome Project and to projects decoding the genomes of many other animals and plants. His group's computational tools are used around the world in a wide range of genome sequencing projects today. His current genomics projects include a large-scale study of the influenza virus, the development of new DNA sequencing technology, and studies of the bacteria living inside the human body. Dr. Salzberg received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Yale University and his Ph.D. from Harvard University.

Saturday, Nov 8, 2008
1:30 pm

National Science Foundation
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(Ballston Metro stop)

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National Capital Area Skeptics Public Lecture Series
20/20 SINCE 1987

Thank You, CBS and Warner Brothers!


Kudos to CBS for its new show, “The Mentalist” (produced by Warner Bros. Television). Its lead character (portrayed by Simon Baker) is “a psychic medium whose paranormal abilities he now admits he feigned.” One of the ads for the show features him saying, “A lot of people think I’m psychic, but there’s no such thing as a psychic. I’m just really good at noticing things.” The show’s web site at cbs.com includes a link to “Send a Fake Mentalist Reading to Someone You Know.” Encouragingly, “The Mentalist” is the most-watched new program of the season. A lot of viewers might also be learning something while being entertained. Tuesdays at 9:00 p.m. 

Science, Public Policy, & Planetary Community

The Center for Inquiry’s 12th World Congress “Science, Public Policy, and the Planetary Community,” will be held at the Hyatt Regency Bethesda, April 9-12, 2009. Speakers will include James Randi, Joe Nickell, Paul Kurtz, Christopher Hitchens, Elizabeth Loftus, and others. See <http://www.centerforinquiry.net/worldcongress/> for more information. 

Carnegie Institution’s Capital Science Lecture

Enrico Bombieri of the Institute for Advanced Study will present the 2008 Balzan Lecture, “The Shifting Notion of Mathematical Truth” on Tuesday, October 28 at 6:45 p.m. The event is free and open to the public at the Carnegie Institution, located at 1530 P Street NW (corner of 16th and P Street) in Washington.

NCASers can rendezvous at the bottom of the stairs near the front desk after the talk. The plan is to head to a nearby restaurant for dinner and conversation. 

Drinking Sceptically Comes to the DC Area!

Mark the date: Wednesday, November 5. Come to Jackie’s Restaurant at 8081 Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring at 7:00 p.m. to join fellow NCASers for the first DC-area Drinking Sceptically event. What is Drinking Sceptically, you may ask? (You are a skeptic after all, questions are expected.) Drinking Sceptically is an informal social event designed to promote fellowship and networking among skeptics, critical-thinkers, and like-minded individuals. It provides an opportunity for skeptics to talk, share ideas (and yes, drink) in a casual, relaxed atmosphere. We discuss the issues of the day and whatever else is on our minds. But most of all, we have fun while promoting skepticism, science, and rationality.



Don’t drink? Don’t let that stop you from joining us! Some of the world’s most famous skeptics are teetotalers, and we are happy to have you! <http://www.jackiesrestaurant.com>
<http://www.drinkingsceptically.org>

Remember that drinking sceptically means drinking responsibly. If there’s one thing science has taught us, it’s the effects of alcohol on the human body. 