

Conversely, there is no obligation on the part of a sick doctor to fulfil clinical duties: the trust has a legal duty to ensure that safe systems are in place to cover sick leave. Two doctors in the survey stated that they felt a sick doctor was better than no doctor. This is a dangerous concept when that sickness is severe enough to threaten patient safety and such a position has no legal or regulatory support.

Conclusions

Seniors and hospital managers have a responsibility to promote an atmosphere in which it is acceptable to be off sick when this is appropriate. Expecting doctors (explicitly or by not providing adequate cover) to work when too sick to

do so leaves doctors and trusts exposed to negligence claims and their patients exposed to harm. **BJHM**

The author would like to thank all the doctors who openly described their experiences and opinions in the questionnaire.

Conflict of interest: none.

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KEY POINTS

- A sick doctor is not better than no doctor.
- Sickness is not a legal defence for negligence.
- Doctors must take responsibility for not working when they are too unwell to provide adequate care.
- Trusts must not pressurize doctors into working when unsafe and must provide adequate cover arrangements.

IN THE PUBLIC'S VIEW

Dawkins tackles unreason

It was no surprise that I was completely on Richard Dawkins' side as he went after water dowisers, astrologers, and a variety of other psychic peddlers in Channel 4's *The enemies of reason* (13 August). But I do agree with the various television critics the following day, whose turn of phrase underlined what was wrong with the programme. Fish and barrels (in two newspaper), sledgehammers and nuts, lambs and slaughter, the obvious observation that the people he was confronting were 'bonkers': to quote the *Times*' Andrew Billen, 'If Oxford University's Professor for the Public Understanding of Science could not humiliate this lot, there would be something wrong. There wasn't and he did.' Billen's excellent suggestion was that Dawkins should be making a 13-part series on natural selection rather than gunning for intellectual inferiors caught in a media spotlight. I mean, is it worth anybody's time at all to discuss the spiritual 'rockness' of a rock?

Disappointingly, there was little of the evidence on which Dawkins laid such emphasis. Too much was conversational interchange, in which the challenged psy-

chics and mumbo-jumblers made all too easy excuses, which were variations on 'science can't explain everything'. Neil Spencer, the *Observer's* astrologer (I find it difficult to write that phrase without gagging), simply copped out with 'It's a deep dark mystery'. It's far less than that; it is sheer nonsense that the position in the sky of Saturn or any other planet can have any effect at all on a baby emerging from its mother's womb. There are far more important things to get upset about than belief in that sort of thing, such as much of complementary and alternative medicine, which Dawkins is tackling in a second programme. I hope that programme contains a real examination of evidence, rather than the usual soundbite disagreements and Dawkins' slightly bemused expression as he watches people stroking aura fields.

The best section of *The enemies of reason* was the randomized double-blind trial of water dowsing at a psychics fair. Dowisers were asked to spot which of six boxes contained a bottle of water, and did no better than chance. Some appeared quite shocked that they had not succeeded, but all those interviewed afterwards soon found reasons

for why the experiment was invalid. We should have had more of this, although I don't suppose the dowisers would have changed their minds.

As Dawkins said, a large source of superstition is the human failure 'to accept that things just happen': how readily can an intelligent, affluent, middle-class professor understand how somebody who is less well endowed views the world? It doesn't mean we should think those views are, citing postmodernism, correct; but it perhaps gives us the answer that it will take more than just a few television programmes to set things right.

Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* is currently the fourth best-selling book on Amazon, but overall books on astrology, spirituality and the like outsell science books by three to one. I couldn't find a review of *The enemies of reason* in the *Daily Mail*, but it did have a two-page extract from a book written by a blind psychic. **BJHM**

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