



**#AusSkepCon**



**B**risbane Skeptics in the Pub was founded by Phil Kent as a way to meet local skeptics. Our first social meeting was in October 2011 at the Plough Inn, where we still hold social meetings every month. In early 2014 the group had grown to a size where we wanted to take on larger challenges, including our first SkeptiCamp, which we held in July that year. To achieve this we established the Brisbane Skeptic Society with Ross Balch as President, Gary Kelk as Treasurer, and Phil Kent as Secretary.

BSS has now hosted two SkeptiCamps, has four meetups each month around the Brisbane region, and a monthly guest speaker. We had our second annual Camping Skeptically at woo filled Byron Bay this last August. SkeptiCamp is a free, all ages event for skeptics, as is Camping Skeptically. Skeptics in the Pub, though, isn't as child friendly. BSS encourages family participation.

Our new podcast, The Skeptic RabbitHole, is recorded monthly (following our lectures in the pub series) in front of a live audience. It is a comedy panel show featuring skeptical and political themes. The regular panel includes Phil Kent, Ross Balch, Jake Farr-Wharton, and Cassandra Perryman.

We were delighted when we were invited to host the 31st Annual Australian Skeptic Convention! It has been a hectic few months getting the convention together, and would not have been possible without the endless work of dedicated volunteers!

Specifically, we'd like to thank:

Cassandra Perryman

Phil Kent

Gary Kelk

Ross Balch

Michael Phillips

Wendy Ingram

David Ingram

Chrys Stevenson

Kate Sievers

Hilton Travis

Chris Eichberger

Jake Farr-Wharton

Shosh Grounds

And special thanks to

Richard Saunders, Eran Segev, and the Australian Skeptics

for their support and contributions to this convention.

Most importantly, thank you for being part of the convention, and we hope to see you at an upcoming Skeptics in the Pub!

Sincerely,

BRISBANE  
**Skeptic Society**



The 31<sup>st</sup> consecutive  
**AUSTRALIAN  
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NATIONAL  
CONVENTION**

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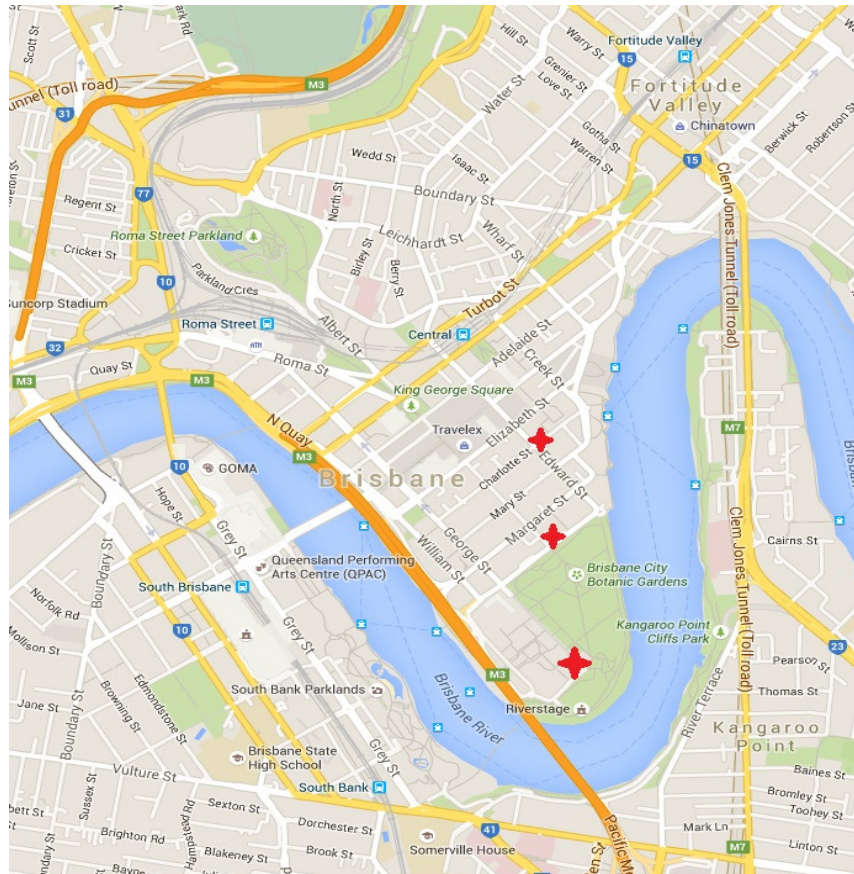
Brisbane, Queensland

October 16th - 18th



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## EVENT INFORMATION

### Pre-convention Welcome

Friday, 16 October

6–11 pm at The Stock Exchange

131 Edward Street

### Gala Dinner

Saturday, 17 October

7 – 10 pm at Royal on the Park

152 Alice Street

### Convention Day 1

Saturday, 17 October

9 am – 6 pm QUT Gardens Theatre

2 George Street

### Convention Day 2

Sunday, 18 October

9 am – 6 pm QUT Gardens Theatre

2 George Street



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	Saturday	Sunday
Raw Cafe (Coffee Cart)	7:30-15:00	Raw Cafe (coffe cart) 7:30-15:00
The Gardens Club	7:30-15:30	The Gardens Club 7:30-15:30
Burger Urge	11:00-18:00	Burger Urge 11:00-18:00
Origin Kebabs	10:00-15:30	Boost Juice 10:00-14:30
Lock Stock Salad	9:00-16:30	
Teppanyaki Time	10:00-15:00	
Aroma Cafe	8:00-15:00	
Boost Juice	10:00-16:30	

## LOCAL EATERIES

The lobby will have tea, coffee, and biscuits available during morning and afternoon tea.

Lunch is not available at the Convention venue but, worry not, there are two options!

First, there will be a secure place to keep eskies or lunch boxes, and you can bring your own food to eat in the Foyer of the theatre (there is no food or drink allowed in the theatre). Option two is that there are plenty restaurants nearby!

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CONFERENCE SCHEDULE  
AND  
ABSTRACTS



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## SATURDAY, 17TH OCTOBER

### 8:00 am

Doors Open for Registration

### 9:00 am

Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners and Introduction to the Convention

*Hosted by Chrys Stevenson and Jake Farr-Wharton*

### 9:10 to 9:45 am

Decision-making: Why it Always Seems Rational, Even When it's Not

*by Peter Ellerton*

The call to 'be rational' is usually not very effective. Not because it's pointless, but because everyone already thinks they are. No-one walks around lamenting or proudly proclaiming their lack of reasoning ability. Understanding how this sense of rationality arises is important in persuading people to particular courses of action, and failing to take account of it can consolidate dangerous and regressive views. In this session I will discuss the role of narratives and cohesion in Bayesian reasoning, widely regarded as a rational means of updating belief systems, and how the inertia of prior belief can be more effectively overcome.

### 9:45 to 10:20 am

The Greatest and Bestest Certifiably Non-Fad Diet... Ever!

*by Jake Farr-Wharton*

Jake Farr-Wharton will be reporting on several of the most popular diet trends, their evidence, and their applicability in the real world. Which is the best? Which is the worst? Which should we all be

following? Which should your skeptic-senses be tingling over?

### 10:20 to 11:10 am

Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia

*by Susan Gerbic*

Want to make a real difference in changing minds? Alone, it is difficult; together, with other like-minded people, you can affect what content people outside our "choir" see. Guerrilla Skepticism on Wikipedia works to improve skeptical content on the 10th most visited website, world-wide. The World Wikipedia project began in August 2012 to get skeptical Wikipedia pages up in as many languages as possible. The project "We Got Your Wiki Back" writes or rewrites the Wikipedia pages of skeptical spokespeople when they are in the news and they know hits on their Wikipedia pages will go up. Millions of readers world-wide have read and been influenced by the work completed by the GSoW project. We train and mentor, join us! For more information visit the GSoW YouTube Channel ... or the GSoW blog [guerrillaskepticismonwikipedia.blogspot.com/](http://guerrillaskepticismonwikipedia.blogspot.com/)

### 11:10 to 11:35 am

Morning Tea

### 11:40 to 12:15 pm

Professional Quack-Busting Just Got Personal

*by Dr Mel Thomson*

I have recently been diagnosed with tumefactive multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune disorder. This is the story of the addition of patient advocacy for invisible and incurable neurobiological disorders, to my professional career as a purveyor of evidence based medicine. It is a story of my renewed and constant science communications battle against pseudoscience



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and snake oil for the conditions that have deep personal consequences.

### **12:15 to 1:05 pm**

AIDS Denialism... Yep That's a Thing

*by Myles Power*

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic many bizarre and dangerous ideas were advanced regarding the origin of the disease and its cause. Since the discovery of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) these conspiracy theories, which once filled the void left by the lack of information, have all but vanished. Over the past three decades HIV has been the subject of intense scientific research which has resulted in effective treatments, rapid HIV tests, and promising cures. Yet unbelievably there are a small number of people who are sceptical of the "official story". Although these people are small in numbers they are extremely well funded and can pose a very real threat to public health. Many have chosen to spend their money on spreading their harmful theories, defend people who have irresponsibly infected their partners, and funded the documentary House of Numbers. In my talk I discuss some examples of the dangerous assertions in the documentary and explain how they have led to the death and suffering of hundreds of thousands of people. I will also talk about the failure of the DMCA and how it can be exploited by the proponents of pseudoscience.

### **1:05 to 2:00 pm**

Lunch Break

### **2:05 to 2:55 pm**

Parenting Sceptically

*by Alison Gaylard, Dr Dave Hawkes, Eran Segev, Jake Farr-Wharton, Jo Alabaster and Lauren Cochrane*

Parenting can be a stressful and scary endeavour. Every parent wants what's best for their child. Parents are bombarded with a whole host of pseudoscience which can be difficult to navigate. This panel discusses parenting skeptically from birth to adulthood.

### **2:55 to 3:30 pm**

Skepticism, Energy and the Human Brain: What a Bunch of Electrons Can Teach us About a Bunch of Neurons

*by Ketan Joshi*

The way we extract energy from the universe has become one of the biggest topics in contemporary science, particularly with regards to the consequences of burning fossil fuels, for human habitat. Contained within the scientific investigation of old and new energy types are a range of phenomena that can tell us an incredible amount about human thinking, and the ways in which we can best approach a disconnect between human reactions to science, and actual science. If our goal is to see a greater acceptance of scientific investigation in society, we need to understand why people reject science in the first place. The world of energy is a fascinating crucible for these human reactions

### **3:30 to 4:05 pm**

Crazy and Cruel Cancer "Cures"

*by Loretta Marron OAM*

Following her own cancer diagnosis in 2003, Loretta saw first-hand her fellow cancer patients being targeted by alternative practitioners. Loretta has since been concerned about improving the weak regulation which aids cancer charlatans, who range from those working alone to some medical doctors, who might even work in partnership with unregulated practitioners. Over the past decade, she has exposed many of them. This presentation looks at some of the more bizarre and extreme alternative cancer "cures". From High Street



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clinics to back street homes or via social media, interventions offered include radiofrequency devices, a range of pills, potions & lotions, intravenous concoctions, enemas and extreme dietary regimens.

Now, as CEO of Friends of Science in Medicine, her work includes liaising with the media to help educate the public and to contribute to "raising the bar" in consumer protection.

#### **4:05 to 4:30 pm**

Afternoon Tea

#### **4:35 to 5:10 pm**

A Skeptic's Guide to Thinking Like a Journalist

*by Signe Dean*

Back in 1987 Carl Sagan wrote that media are almost "uniformly dreadful" when it comes to skepticism. With the advent of blogging and social media the communication landscape for skepticism has changed. Meanwhile the coverage of popular science has advanced in leaps and bounds, too. Over-hyped and misleading stories do get published, but skeptics also have unprecedented access to journalists who can set the record straight. There is no homogeneous "mass media" devoted to misleading the public – instead, there are lots of individual media professionals. Can skeptics finally learn to view journalists as allies? And how best to get our message out there?

#### **5:10 to 6:00 pm**

Adventures in Skepticism

*by Joe Nickell*

Joe Nickell will be presenting tales of his many adventures investigating the paranormal all over the world.

#### **6:00**

Close of Day 1

#### **6:30 to 7:00 pm**

Pre-Dinner Drinks

#### **7:00 – 9:30 pm**

Gala dinner at Royal on the Park Brisbane

Corner Alice and Albert Streets

Brisbane QLD Australia 4000

*Hosted by Phil Kent, Cassandra Perryman, and Richard Saunders*

Enjoy a three-course meal with fellow Skeptics! The gala dinner is always a great event, have a meal and drinks, mingle with your fellow skeptics!





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## SUNDAY, 18TH OCTOBER

### 8:00 am

Doors Open

### 9:00 am

Welcome to the Convention, Day 2!

*Hosted by Chrys Stevenson and Jake Farr-Wharton*

*Special guest Eran Segev of the Australian Skeptics*

### 9:15 to 9:45 am

Theory of Mind: Emotion Expression and Deception Detection

*by Holly Warland*

Theory of Mind (ToM) is an intuitive skill allowing an individual to consider other's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and is vital in the context of complex interactions and group living. It comes naturally to most, but is difficult to grasp for those with autism spectrum disorder. The ability to read facial expressions and detect deception in normal and autistic adults was investigated by asking 788 participants to complete the Autism Quotient Test, the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET), and a Jokes and Lies Test. For the RMET, participants were instructed to identify the emotion or feeling expressed by eyes presented in a photograph, and the Jokes and Lies Test required the participants to answer ToM questions about different deceptive scenarios. The surprising results will be discussed in Holly's presentation.

### 9:45 to 10:20 am

Science's answer to science denial

*by John Cook*

Science denial in its various forms has many negative impacts on society, whether it be denial of vaccination,

climate science, evolution, or so on. The most common response to science denial is to throw more science at people. However, presenting scientific evidence is ineffective, or even counterproductive, with science deniers. Instead, a growing body of evidence indicates the way to stop the spread of science denial is, counter-intuitively, by exposing people to a 'weak form of science denial'. Decades of psychological research into 'inoculation theory' finds that by warning people of the threat of misinformation and explaining the techniques of denial, people develop immunity to misinformation. This approach may hold the key to neutralising the influence of science denial.

### 10:20 to 11:10 am

Skeptics Positive Psychology

*by Dr James C. Coyne*

There is no reason we cannot have a science of positive psychology, pointing to what we could do to increase our happiness and well-being. It would recognize the limitations of quick fixes and on our ability to raise and sustain our level of happiness. However, positive psychology has become a multimillion dollar industry selling to the unwary self-help books, life coaching, and lucrative corporate consulting. Its products are marketed with claims that range from exaggeration to bad science to simple quackery. This presentation will show how you can skeptically greet its propaganda with realism and confrontation with evidence.

### 11:10 to 11:35 am

Morning Tea

### 11:40 to 12:15 pm

Science Education - Research, Policy and Politics

*by Theo Clark*

Science education research tends to describe an idealised version of science in schools, and often



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ignores political and bureaucratic reality. Education policy in Australia has independence from politics. However, in reality education is a highly contested area in the media, and often in the public in general. Education policy is developed within the constraints of this political reality. These two issues inevitably lead to questions of authority, politics and values, which directly affects the curriculum teachers are expected to teach.

### **12:15 to 1:00 pm**

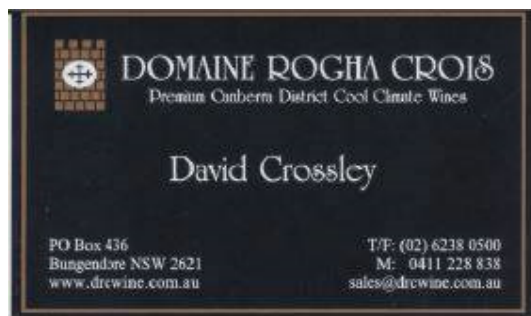
*Keynote Speaker, Nobel Laureate Prof Brian Schmidt*

Professor Schmidt is an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellow, and astrophysicist at The Australian National University's Mount Stromlo Observatory and Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics. He is known for his research in using supernovae as cosmological probes. This research won his team the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics.

### **1:00 – 1:10 pm**

Auction for a signed bottle of Professor Schmidt's limited edition wine! Many thanks to Domaine Rogha Crois Winery, Bungendore, NSW for donating the bottle!

Proceeds will go to Rotary International's PolioPlus program, which is close to eradicating polio worldwide. Every \$ gained will be matched by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation by \$2.



### **1:10 to 2:00 pm**

Lunch Break

### **2:05pm to 2:55pm**

Challenges in Skepticism

*by Myles Power, Signe Cane, Susan Gerbic and Ross Balch*

The skeptical movement has a long history. The internet age has helped expand the movement significantly but still challenges remain. How do we attract new members to the movement? How do we increase diversity? How do we navigate the legal challenges? How can we be more effective? How do we communicate our message? All of these topics will be explored in this panel.

### **2:55 to 3:30 pm**

Marijuana: Saint or Sinner?

*by Dr Cassandra Perryman*

Marijuana has had a bipolar past. From reefer madness to cure for cancer, anytime a news article talks about dear old Mary J, you know it will be political and intriguing (and have a picture of a snack). So, what is the reality? Was Nancy Reagan right, is marijuana a gateway drug? How about all the people who say that marijuana is non-addictive? Are there any indications to suggest that rehabilitation is needed for marijuana use? Is marijuana connected to schizophrenia, depression, or loss of work drive? Finally, how about the mother of all claims; can marijuana cure cancer? The reality behind all these questions is far more complex than any side likes to believe.

### **3:30 to 4:05 pm**

Mysterious Malaise: the Case of the Missing Microbes

*by Ross Balch*



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The internet age has seen the rise of the self diagnosis. Where once you had to pour through medical textbooks at the library, now one simply has to log on to google. Where there is worry there is a charlatan waiting to give you a diagnosis and sell the cure to go with it. In this presentation two cases studies will be examined that represent malaise conditions, the cause of which have so far eluded medical science. Both have been blamed on microbes but in both cases these microbes are nowhere to be found. I will also examine the role advocacy groups play in hindering progress towards research in these conditions.

#### 4:05 to 4:30 pm

Afternoon Tea

#### 4:35pm to 5:10 pm

Memory Palaces: Adding Rational Intellect to Stonehenge

by *Lynne Kelly*

The people who built Stonehenge, created the Nasca lines and erected the statues of Easter Island would not have survived had they lived in a fog of superstition as so often portrayed. Non-literate cultures need to retain a vast amount of practical knowledge. They need to memorise details of hundreds of animals (not just the mammals they hunt) and plants (not just the ones they eat), navigation, seasonal variations, genealogy, geology, astronomy, timekeeping, resource rights, rules and regulations ... the list goes on and on. How can they possibly retain all this information accurately when they are dependent on highly fallible human memory? This presentation will explain the amazing array of mnemonic technologies used – and for a bit of fun, how you can implement them in contemporary life.

#### 5:10 to 6:00 pm

Kitzmiller v Dover at 10 years: Lessons Learned  
by *Eugenie Scott*

In the United States, the first amendment requires schools and other state institutions to be religiously neutral. Courts have held for decades that any advocacy of creationism in science class is unconstitutional, but creationists have evolved new adaptations. One of the cleverer recent developments was “Intelligent Design Theory”, which grew in the 1990s and 2000s to challenge the teaching of evolution. In 2010 a Pennsylvania school district passed an ID policy, and was challenged in court. Evolution won as the teaching of ID was declared unconstitutional, and the case virtually stopped similar policies from being passed. But in the 10 years since *Kitzmiller v Dover* we have learned that eternal vigilance is essential. The creationist movement continues to adapt to its legal environment and has evolved new strategies. These call for teaching the “strengths and weaknesses of evolution” or the “critical analysis of evolution” which are creationism in disguise. A common form of these laws is “Academic Freedom Acts” in which the disguised teaching of creationism is claimed to reflect a students’ right to learn or a teachers’ right to teach.

#### 6:00 to 6:15 pm

Close of Day 2 and End of the Conference!



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