

Lecturer warns we are living
in a time of 'Endarkenment'

Anti-nutty professor

BY CHARLES LEWIS
in Toronto

David Colquhoun, a professor of pharmacology at University College London, has a shock of hair and slightly longish sideburns that appear to be stained by pipe smoke. He also looks ashen this morning, likely from an exhausting North American speaking tour designed to maximize jet lag with its swings west, east and then west again.

So he can be forgiven for half sprawling on a couch in the lobby of the Sutton Place Hotel, unlit pipe in his hand, as he prepares for two successive nights of lectures — one at the Centre for Inquiry, a local atheist group. But because there are a number of things that he finds utterly asinine — such as alternative

medicine, "managerialism," limits on academic freedom and religion — and because he believes we live in what he calls the Endarkenment, he is ready to speak, with a kind of mumbled enthusiasm.

Prof. Colquhoun, who is also a fellow of the Royal Society, is best known for his Web site, called DC's Improbable Science (www.dcscience.net). It has been described by Ben Goldacre, a British medical reporter and a physician himself, as taking on "dodgy scientific claims ... and examining the experimental evidence for them, in everyday language, with humour and verve."

His biggest target has been homeopathy, an alternative form of medicine based on the notion that the more you dilute a so-called healing substance, such as an herb or flower, the more powerful it becomes.

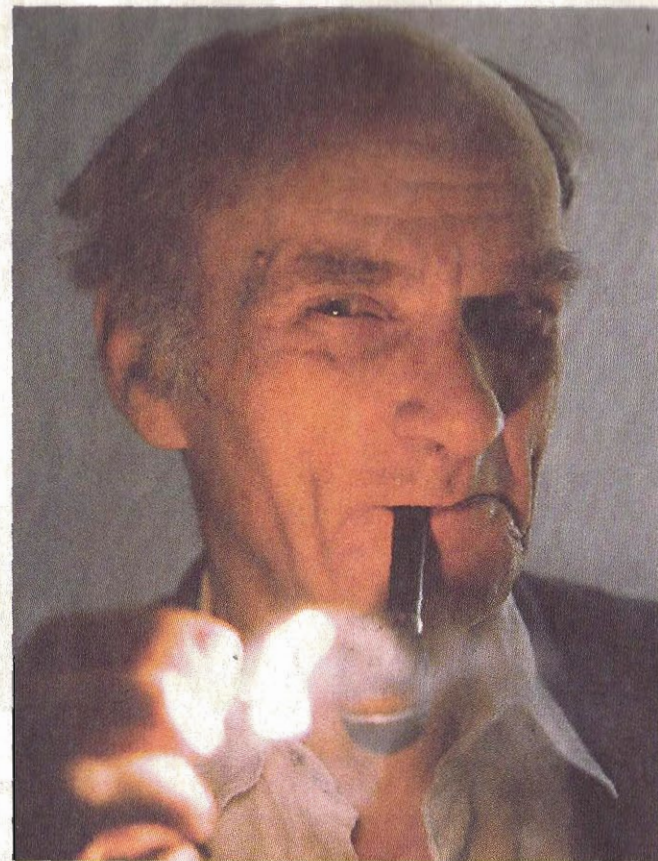
"It's completely nuts," he said. "The idea is the less you

take the bigger the effect. [It's like] if you want to get really drunk you dilute your beer in Lake Superior. Who could possibly believe that?"

He also has a healthy degree of skepticism for herbal medicines, of which he says there is no empirical proof that they work. Most annoying of all is that 16 British universities offer degrees in alternative medicine. He once described a BSc in homeopathic medicine as "world-class meaningless bollocks."

Then there was last summer's incident that made him a free-expression martyr. He ran afoul of two herbalists who claimed red clover was a blood cleanser.

"I said the term 'blood cleanser' doesn't mean anything at all. It's just gobbledegook. And they got very cross about this. You can say what you like on the Web about George Bush or Tony Blair



TYLER ANDERSON / NATIONAL POST

David Colquhoun says homeopathy is "completely nuts."

and you don't get into trouble. But upset some herbalists and you get legal action heaped on your head."

University College was threatened with legal action and the school asked him to move his Web site off its server.

Prof. Colquhoun said he was surprised at the number of letters that poured in, criticizing the school for caving. Even Richard Dawkins, best-selling author of the atheistic tome *The God Delusion*, jumped in. "He is anti-delusional-thinking, like me," Prof. Colquhoun said. "And religion

and homeopathy come in the same category."

(The university eventually asked him to bring his site back, but he decided to go it alone.)

Prof. Colquhoun's battle goes far deeper than alternative medicine. He believes we are now living in the Endarkenment, having replaced the Enlightenment with "dogma and irrationality."

He said Tony Blair's decision to buy into the idea that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction was an example of that kind of weak

thinking. "I'm skeptical about politicians but I don't think he decided to lie. I think he was suffering from the same form of delusional thinking that mistakes things which you want to be true for things that actually are true. Which discounts the idea of evidence — and the whole idea of evidence is the whole basis of our modern society."

Prof. Colquhoun said his main research is in how molecules are responsible for the transmission of nerve impulses. He calls what he does blue-sky research. "But you don't have to apologize for that because historically it has always given rise to the more important scientific advances."

Indeed, he believes that a university should only do two things: teach and conduct research. But he is concerned that a new form of management, called managerialism — the idea that all organizations are alike, and so they can be run in similar ways — is ruining that ideal.

"People now seem to think universities will be better if they're organized like Wal-Mart. The result is a removal of power over the management of science from the people who are involved in science. I think as soon as science is managed by non-scientists it becomes corrupt. They impose a kind of übercompetitive regime on people, which actually encourages dishonesty.

"Scientists are not perfect, but they know something about science and consequently the best way to get good results is to leave it to scientists, not MBAs."

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