

# SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

A Science Service Publication  
Volume 126, No. 6, August 11, 1984

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Cover: Naked RNA molecules called viroids cause severe and sometimes lethal plant diseases. The coconut cadang-cadang viroid has felled huge numbers of valuable coconut trees on plantations in the Philippines. (Illustration: Gardiner Morse)



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Subscription Department  
231 West Center Street, Marion, Ohio 43302

Subscription rate: 1 yr., \$27.50; 2 yrs., \$47.50;  
3 yrs., \$67.00. (Foreign postage \$5.00 additional per  
year.) Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is  
required. Please state exactly how magazine is to be  
addressed. Include zip code. For new subscriptions  
only call (1) 800-247-2160. Printed in U.S.A. Second  
class postage paid at Washington, D. C. Title  
registered as trademark U. S. and Canadian Patent  
Offices. Published every Saturday by SCIENCE  
SERVICE, Inc. 1719 N St., N.W., Washington, D. C.  
20036. (202-785-2255)  
ISSN 0036-8423

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## Letters

### Mind healing with faith

Bower's review ("Psychotherapy on Trial: Mixing Art with Science," SN: 7/14/84, p. 29) of the alleged positive effects of psychotherapy includes a datum of central importance: "There are over 250 brand-name approaches" to psychotherapy. I doubt this includes several of the most effective "generic cost-cutters"—laying on of hands, prayer, visits to shrines, and other faith-healing practices. But that issue aside, what do 250 different approaches tell us, especially 1) when we also know that training, experience, theory and other criteria related to success in other fields prove to be unimportant while some, as yet undefined, trait of the individual therapist is, 2) when we have not been

able to develop either double-blind analyses or realistic control groups, 3) when the alleged positive effects found by the most partisan investigators are "statistically significant" but in practical magnitude border on the trivial, and 4) when for more than 30 years the charge that psychotherapy is ineffective—beyond a placebo effect—has not been effectively refuted?

It tells us that psychodynamic and behavior modification therapies are based on false assumptions. Unfortunately it does not tell us which assumptions are appropriate. So the proliferation of therapies will mount—and "secular priests" will continue to share the couch with their counterparts, the faith healers.

Ray H. Bixler  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Ky.

**Research on outcome** in psychotherapy has consistently demonstrated that brief is as good as extended, trained therapists as good as untrained, one technique as good as another, placebo as good as "treatment." Two recent papers . . . do not encourage any thoughtful scientist to regard psychotherapy as anything more than an interesting religious aberration.

As a practicing psychotherapist I regard the only possible ethical conduct as a clear, detailed, outcome-focused contract negotiated in an initial session that costs the patient nothing, and in which the effect of the transaction is specifically detailed. Interestingly enough, if I guarantee a result in Florida, I am guilty of a grand misdemeanor!

George von Hilsheimer, Ph.D., FR.S.H.  
Maitland, Fla.

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