

Group Promotes Healthy Skepticism

By GREGORY ENNS
Staff Writer

St. Petersburg physician Gary P. Posner doesn't mind admitting that he used to believe in visitors from other planets.

"When I was 5 or 6 years old, my grandmother told me about a UFO she and my grandfather and uncle had seen in 1950, about the time I was born," Posner recalled Monday. "As a result, I became intensely interested in UFOs as a child and grew up with an intense interest in them. I grew up believing they were real."

Posner clung to his belief through medical school and his internship and only gave it up 10 years ago, when he met Philip Klass, the former senior avionics editor of Aviation Week and Space Technology.

"My thinking began to change dramatically when I discovered that the major unexplained cases really had been explained," said the 38-year-old Posner. "When the really strong cases are investigated, they just don't stand up."

Posner has founded the Tampa Bay Skeptics, an organization aimed at examining claims relating to astrology, ESP, UFOs, faith-healing and other paranormal claims from a "responsible, scientific point of view."

The Tampa Bay Skeptics held their first meeting Wednesday. The organization's mailing address is 6219 Palma Boulevard No. 210, St. Petersburg 33715.

"I think I can speak for the group when I say that most of us feel that that ability to distinguish what is real and what is not is not a totally useless ability," Posner said. "It has some value, I hope, and in too many cases people seem not to make that distinction."

Dr. Charles Mathews, medical director at Sarasota Memorial Hospital and an at-large member of the Tampa Bay Skeptics executive council, said he joined the organization "because I think there is a need to keep an anchor on reason in this day and age."

"I think their approach is a healthy laundering of a lot of the



Dr. Charles Mathews

unfortunate misbeliefs and mistaken beliefs that are foisted on the public," he said.

"There has been a tremendous growth in science," he said. "But at the same time, there's been a burst of the anti-scientific."

Nancy Reagan's reported use of an astrologer to arrange President Reagan's schedule is one example, he said.

"When the president's wife takes it seriously and it affects her husband's appointments, that worries the hell out of me," Mathews said. "I should add, I'm an active Republican."

Because of his medical background, Mathews has a particular concern about non-scientific claims involving health.

Mathews said he knows of a Sarasota woman who had breast cancer and spurned conventional treatment in favor of a Bahamas clinic that offered "immunotherapy."

"She came back a year later and she was loaded with cancer," he said.

According to Mathews, paranormal claims should be subjected to scientific inquiry.