

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE



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Skepticism's flames fanned by fire death

ST. PETERSBURG — As we all know, many medical ailments are spelled with initials. Cases in point include TB, MS, PMS, AIDS, HIV and SHC.

Wait a minute, you say, what's SHC?

Well it stands for Spontaneous Human Combustion, a condition where you supposedly turn into a sparkler. Although SHC hasn't reached pandemic proportions — yet — it allegedly made an ash out of local resident Mary Hardy Reeser on July 2, 1951.

Her fiery demise was recounted last Sunday on the front page of a local daily newspaper.

Gary Posner read the story, and his eyes rolled like Lotto balls upon coming across the term "fire from hell."

A St. Pete internist and board member of Tampa Bay Skeptics — an affiliate of a national organization that believes there's a logical explanation for paranormal claims — Posner finds nothing mysterious about Reeser going up in smoke.

But it sure wasn't the unholy smoke named as a possible cause, Posner says, adding that once again, the media has furthered the cause of myth-makers.

Hot stuff

Mrs. Reeser was a plump, peppy widow, 67 years old, and lived in an apartment at 1200 Cherry St NE. Shortly before her death, she put on a nightgown, swallowed sleeping pills, lighted up a cigarette and sat down on an overstuffed chair.

Sure enough, her body became ablaze, and when discovered the following morning, there wasn't much left of Mrs. Reeser, although the apartment sustained remarkably little damage.

Another Spontaneous Human Combustion-related death? Hardly, the Skeptic says.

Posner believes Mrs. Reeser simply fell asleep and that cigarette ashes ignited her gown and chair. Furthermore, body fat burns readily.

And don't accept these claims of a shrunken skull being found, says Posner. A small and roundish bony object found at the scene was probably a globular lump from where the neck meets the skull. The real skull probably exploded.

Tear tracker

Shattering myths has long been a hobby, if not an obsession, for Posner, and the Skeptics have a pending offer of \$1,000 to anyone able to prove the existence of such paranormal phenomena as ESP, demonic possession, UFOs, ghosts and, of course, Spontaneous Human Combustion.

"We don't totally discount anything," says Posner. "That's a misconception about Skeptics. We're the open-minded ones while the strongest believers are close-minded. All we have to do is see evidence that any of this exists."

Posner's open-mindedness notwithstanding, he still didn't endear himself to some of the area's staunchest Christians in 1989 when he questioned claims of weeping icons at the Greek Orthodox Shrine of St. Michael in Tarpon Springs.

No fewer than six of these things were supposed to be crying like Jim and Tammy, and the church was attracting thousands of visitors and dollars. Posner, however, claimed evidence of doctored photos. Whatever the cause, talk of miracles ceased and a priest was reassigned.

More recently, the Skeptics investigated UFO claims that turned out to be a hoax in the Panhandle, and chided ABC-TV for televising the exorcism of a Florida teenager. Those familiar with demonology say levitation is one of the classic symptoms of possession, and the exorcists tied down the alleged victim.

"There was their chance to show the devil exists," says Posner. "If only they had allowed her to levitate on TV, they would have convinced us there's something to this."

But they didn't, and though Posner doesn't dismiss the possibility of demons, he won't worry about them unless they make their presence known.

Besides, there are other things to worry about, such as asteroids.

For the uninformed, the universe can best be described as a big pinball game. Just imagine a lot of metallic balls, big and small, in perpetual motion. Some stargazers believe that it's inevitable that the Earth and an asteroid will eventually cross paths. It's almost happened.

"A couple years ago, we missed getting hit by just six hours," reminds Posner. "Funny, but none of the psychics foresaw it."

Another blown opportunity by people who probably were too concerned with Spontaneous Human Combustion, demonic possession and UFOs.