

The x-change, Thursday 11 September 2008

Speakers:

- **Richard Wiseman**, University of Hertfordshire
- **Peter Buckle**, University of Surrey
- **Gael O'Neil**, Food Standards Agency
- **Charles Kingsland**, Liverpool Women's Hospital
- **Mark Stevenson**, writer and science comedian



Host: **Sue Nelson**

Psychologist and magician Professor Richard Wiseman kicked off the final x-change of the Festival by discussing his latest project - teaching magic to kids to improve their self esteem. Despite his own 'bumbling fool' stage persona (entirely faked he assured us), Professor Wiseman's research showed that teaching kids magic tricks boosted their self confidence more than established techniques. Describing psychology as the 'only tool a magician has', he demonstrated how a classic coin disappearance trick works and assured the audience that other magicians don't mind him explaining some of their secrets for scientific purposes, thus explaining why he has been a member of the Magic Circle for over 24 years!

Peter Buckle from the University of Surrey was next up to explain how we can keep older people working longer. Only two members of the audience admitted that they would love to keep working to the age 75, funnily enough they were a science magician and a comedian respectively! Peter emphasised that employers often do not value older workers or understand why older people work, but that things are improving in the UK.

Gael O'Neil from the Food Standards Agency (FSA) revealed that food-borne illness still cost the UK £1.5bn per year, despite the rarity of issues such as the red lead in cheese and diseased donkey meat that plagued food-lovers in the 1800s. Advice dispensed during the talk included lots of hand washing, but not necessarily chicken washing (which can spread bacteria several feet from the sink via water splashes); and proper refrigeration alongside thorough reheating of food. The audience demonstrated their food hygiene knowledge by agreeing that chopping raw meat followed by ready to eat food on the same chopping board was a bad idea (at least all except one, but so far he's lived to tell the tale!).

Consultant gynaecologist Charles Kingsland firstly recalled fond drunken memories of his Liverpool student days in the x-change venue, the Saro-Wiwa Bar. He proceeded to reveal that 70% of infertility is due to males and, while men are sperm factories, producing the little guys throughout their life; the average sperm count in Liverpool has reduced by 50% in the last 75 years. During audience questions it arose that this may be partly due to the level of oestrogen (a female sex hormone) in the water supply and some foods. Charles cited the main problems for women as ageing, with fertility almost over by the age of 40; infectious diseases such as Chlamydia and rising female obesity.

Last up was Mark Stevenson, a science comedian who finds number theory and quantum physics fascinating. He is single. He uses laughter to help people think about science and achieves this through focussing on the most widespread of human interests; football, sex and drinking. A particularly popular routine involves Dutch brain scanning experiments on couples having sex in an MRI scanner, which he describes as 'dogging for geeks'. He recalled particularly tough gigs being jokes about particle physics and a recent booking at a conference on monkey pathology. Mark is soon to embark on a scientific round-the-world trip to write a book 'The World Tour of the Future'.

Jenny Molloy