

It crops up most often in those areas on the edges of medicine, philosophy or psychology, outside the mainstream, where exhaustive cross-referencing of equality spurious sources is standard practice, and challenging any point of view or veracity of an author's statement equates to heresy. Perhaps more objectionably, it displays an inherent contempt for the audience, the belief that they are too simple-minded and indiscriminating to require any further elaboration on one's credentials. But whether it's from cynicism or insecurity that a writer styles themselves "Doctor" or "Professor" or "Reverend", without any other endorsement, it's a practice both harmful and deceitful, and it's time we called its bluff.

## **FALLACIOUS/IRRELEVANT PHDS READER BEWARE!**

Look on any bookrack in the self-help/esoteric/New Age section of your local library or bookstore.

Look closely at the authors' names. Notice anything?

How about counting the number of instances the letters "PhD" appear after the name?

For centuries academic credentials have been essential shorthand for authoritative writing, both inside and out of learned circles. But like any social activity there exists a hierarchy of respectability, and calling oneself “Dr” or “PhD”, in times past a safe bet for cowing the unlettered, is now no longer enough. Three questions to ask:

For starters, unless you’re a medical doctor, using your title outside an academic circle is a no-no.

Having a PhD is no guarantee that you are an authority on the subject about which you’re writing – you may be a groundbreaking authority on subarctic geological formations, but if your book is on Alternative Medicine or Psychoanalysis, your opinion may be no more informed than the next person in the bus queue.

And how did you come by your qualification? Was it obtained from an institution with a charter, or run off on someone’s Laser Printer for fifty bucks? Or was it conferred as an honour? Doesn’t Dr Robert Zimmerman of Aberdeen University carry a certain gravitas, if the rest of us didn’t know him as plain old Bob Dylan? (There’s no suggestion that he’s tried to pull any such stunt with his degree) Using academic credentials in this way is a relative of Hocus Pocus or Abracadabra; that former practice of travelling conjurors and purveyors of quack medicines who peppered their spiel with ersatz Latin and Arabic, in an effort to convey an air of authority. Many of them, too, assumed titles of dubious origin. A famous example in our own times is the litigious Dr Gillian McKeith in the UK, a favourite of Channel 4 and that nation’s health food stores. Earlier this year was taken to the ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) which ruled that using the title “Dr” in her advertising literature (for a variety of alternative treatments), given that it had been earned through a correspondence course at an unaccredited outfit in the States, could mislead the public. You don’t say!