

◆ Scientology's Risky 'Purification Rundown'

By Lari Bishop & Sarah Hughes

Jerry Whitfield sat in his doctor's waiting room with his head in his hands. The news wasn't good. The medical tests showed that Whitfield's liver was damaged. It would never be fully functional again. What was less clear was why.

Twenty-five years ago, Whitfield had suffered from Hepatitis B, a possible cause of his liver ailment. But he also had been a member of the Church of Scientology for 10 years. During that time, he had undergone what is called the "purification rundown," a regimen that the church claims will "assist in releasing and flushing out of the body the accumulated toxic residue which may be lodged in the tissues."

The controversial program puts a subject through two or more weeks of running, lengthy sauna treatments, a special diet, and high doses of vitamins and minerals, including niacin. Participants are advised to consult a physician before starting, but often the advice comes from an in-house doctor who is a member of the Church of Scientology. Whitfield was not disqualified despite a liver that already might have been weakened by his bout with hepatitis.

"I was worried that the problems with my liver were connected to having taken niacin" in large dosages, Whitfield said in an interview. "I couldn't prove that it was the niacin, but ..." There were also the four-hour sessions in the sauna for a period of 30 days. "A friend of my wife collapsed from the heat," he recalled.

Since 1978, about 100,000 individuals have undergone this "purification rundown" and church officials defend the practice. According to John Carmichael, head of the church center in New York City, the "rundown" is "immensely useful" and has caused no "real problems that I've heard of."

But some church critics allege that the procedures are rooted in scientific quackery and put dangerous pressures on the body through a combination of physical exertion, heat and heavy ingestion of vitamins. The critics contend that the "rundown" endangers the health of trusting church members, including celebrities drawn to the church's promises of self-improvement. Last June, the supermarket tabloid *Star* trumpeted a story attributing ailments of 29-year-old Lisa Marie Presley, Elvis Presley's daughter, to a Scientology "cleansing" ritual.

The "purification rundown" was invented by L. Ron Hubbard, a popular science fiction writer who founded the Church of Scientology in Los Angeles in 1954. Hubbard, who died of a stroke in 1986, argued that toxins ingested and absorbed by the body -- from street drugs to food additives, from perfumes to radiation -- remain as harmful residue until they are removed through the purification process.

Hubbard expressed particular concern about LSD, which he claimed "apparently stays in the system, lodging in the tissues, and mainly the fatty tissues of the body, and is liable to go into action again -- giving the person unpredictable 'trips' -- even years after the person has come off LSD." [For more details, see Hubbard's *Clear Body Clear Mind: The Effective Purification Program*.]

But some medical experts question Hubbard's grasp of nutritional science as well as his supposed cure. They warn that the program's extremes -- long hours in a sauna after running and massive dosages of niacin and other vitamins -- can be harmful.

"I've talked with several psychotropic pharmacologists -- specialists in psychotropic drugs like LSD," said Michael Glade, a doctor with the American College of Nutrition

and coordinator of the college's Council on Endocrinology and Minerals. "None of them thinks there's very much of any psychotropic drug stored in fat. So there isn't much to release in the first place. And if you're going to say that someone is going to go on an LSD trip from burning or releasing LSD stored in their fat tissues, those people would have died long before of an LSD overdose."

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The Consortium is published biweekly by The Media Consortium, Suite 102-231, 2200 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. Its subscription rate is \$39 for one year (26 issues), or \$69 for two years (52 issues), or \$24 for six months (13 issues).

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Hubbard himself was no scientist, just a science fiction writer. In his public writings, Hubbard also never explained how he conducted his studies: how many subjects he used or whether he had a control group — data a trained scientist would be expected to provide.

Nonetheless, Hubbard's authoritative writing style, which made his 1950 book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*, a long-running best-seller, added seeming legitimacy to the program. After his death, Hubbard's theories gained an aura of dogma within Scientology as the church simultaneously grew richer and more combative against critics. Aggressive use of libel law silenced questions about the safety of the "rundown" and other practices.

Freeing Toxins?

Yet current medical opinion suggests caution, even over the milder parts of the "purification" regimen, such as 30 minutes a day of running to "get the blood circulating deeper into the tissues where toxic residuals are lodged." Though running is a popular exercise for many people, Dr. Stanley Wallach, executive director of the American College of Nutrition, argued that "making a blanket advocacy, not knowing the cardiovascular competence of the patient, can be dangerous."

Even riskier, Wallach said, was putting an individual who just finished a long run in a sauna for four hours or more at temperatures of 140 to 180 degrees Fahrenheit. Hubbard's theory was that heavy sweating could help purge the toxins. "The impurities which have been freed up by the increased circulation [from the running] can now be dispelled from the system and leave the body through the pores," Hubbard wrote. "So where one is doing the Purification program, one should be very careful to ensure that actual sweating occurs and in volume."

Safety standards for saunas, however, warn that a person should not exceed 30 minutes in a sauna and that anyone with poor health should consult a physician. Wallach called the lengthy sauna sessions "a dangerously excessive time," which could lead to hyperthermia, heat exhaustion, salt or potassium depletion and heat stroke.

Hubbard did include advice for coping with the potential health hazards, but medical experts view the home-style remedies as failing to grasp the seriousness of the conditions. For heat exhaustion, for instance, Hubbard wrote that "when a person gets too warm or begins feeling faint, should the body temperature get too high, the recommendation is to go out and take a cool shower and then go back into the sauna."

For heat stroke, a potentially life-threatening condition, Hubbard suggested checking a first-aid manual, putting the person in a gradually cooled shower and adminis-

tering fluids, salt, potassium gluconate or bioplasma. A trip to the hospital was not mentioned.

In an interview, Scientology leader Carmichael confirmed that there was no specific medical supervision of participants in the sauna program. But he added that people "do it with a twin, so that if there are any problems, somebody's there. If you fainted, you wouldn't be left lying on the floor."

Carmichael said he underwent the program himself and experienced some initial foggy brain, which he blamed on drugs he had taken in the past. "But eventually, my mind became clear and I could think clearly again," he added.

Educated Vitamins?

Others who subjected themselves to the "purification rundown" complained of more severe complications. "Two weeks after I had finished the program, my appendix burst," said Dennis Erlich, a former church member. "I also suffered from hyperthermia. Since then, I frequently break out into sweats for no reason."

As part of the cleansing process, Hubbard also recommended the drinking of large volumes of water and the ingestion of vitamin and mineral supplements. Hubbard called niacin the "educated vitamin" and claimed that "taken in sufficient quantities, niacin appears to break up and unleash LSD, marijuana and other drugs and poisons from the tissues and cells. ...

"I have seen a full-blown case of skin cancer turn on and run out on niacin dosages ... Other lesser manifestations that may turn on with niacin are hives, flu symptoms, gastroenteritis, aching bones, upset stomach or a fearful or terrified condition." The "purification rundown" recommends niacin dosages starting at 100 milligrams and rising to 5,000 milligrams.

But critics contend that the recommended high dosages were potentially toxic themselves and actually cause some of the ailments that Hubbard claimed were being driven from the body. "By the time you get up to 3,000 milligrams, you have a high incidence of very severe facial flushing," said Michael Glade of the American College of Nutrition. "A lot of people think that means they're purging themselves of some bad stuff. [But it is] an adverse reaction, not a desirable response."

Glade expressed concern, too, about recommended high dosages of other vitamins, particularly the levels of vitamins A and D. The Scientology program recommends a top level of vitamin A at 50,000 IU a day. Yet, according to Glade, vitamin A is toxic starting at 20,000 IU. "People who have been somewhat abusive of drugs or alcohol have enough liver function compromise that 20,000 IU a day for a couple of weeks could be fatal," Glade said.

High dosages of vitamin D also could hurt people over 40, Glade said. "That level of vitamin D [2,000 IU a day] for a couple of weeks will actually accelerate the person's next heart attack or stroke. It will interact with the average wear and tear of the aorta and the cardiac valves to form crystals and create hardening of the arteries."

Another questionable aspect of the rundown is the intake of oils or what the church calls the "Have-Waste Theory." By consuming clean oils or fats, the theory goes, people could replace older fatty tissues, which Hubbard believed contained toxins from drugs. To this end, the church recommends consuming a combination of safflower, soy, walnut and peanut oils.

But medical experts again question the validity of the theory. "If you're intaking the oils while you're doing the exercise regimen, then the oils that you intake will be burned first and the other, older oils will stay in your body," said Glade. "And if you're consuming them while not exercising, that oil will be stored, and it won't make any difference what fat burns when."

Some Disclaimers

The Church of Scientology does include some cautionary advice to participants. On its copyright page, *Clear Body Clear Mind* includes the disclaimer: "The Purification program cannot be construed as a recommendation of medical treatment or medication and it is not professed as a physical handling for bodies nor is any claim made to that effect. There are no medical recommendations or claims for the Purification program or for any of the vitamin or mineral regimens described in this book."

The church also marshal some doctors to support the "purification rundown," but often these physicians themselves have ties to the church. The church supplied us a report entitled "Summaries of Published Papers Regarding the Hubbard Detoxification Method." But of the seven journal articles listed, three were co-authored by Megan

Shields, a doctor who wrote the introduction to *Clear Body Clear Mind* and has close ties to the church.

Another cited article did not show up on two major indexes of medical journals which we examined. *MedLine*, an on-line database, draws from 3,500 of the most important medical journals, and *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory* contains information on 165,000 journals published throughout the world. The three other journal entries on the church's list did not appear on *MedLine*, but were listed in *Ulrich's*.

Another problem is the apparent confusion among some church members in distinguishing between Hubbard's religious views and his science-fiction fantasies. In the mid-1960s, according to some ex-followers, Hubbard taught that humans were made of clusters of spirits or "thetans" that had been banished to earth some 75 million years ago by a cruel galactic ruler name Xenu. Hubbard supposedly saw these thetans as a cause for human unhappiness which needed to be brought under control.

"If it had just been concerned with all of Hubbard's sci-fi rubbish, Scientology would not be so harmful," argued ex-member Dennis Erlich. "But the problem was that as the church became more established, the organization became more authoritarian and essentially dangerous. Those who disagreed with Hubbard paid the price."

Jerry Whitfield, the former church member with the damaged liver, blamed the church for holding to Hubbard's outdated theories and ignoring new medical evidence on vitamin intake. "They ignored the potential for liver failure within the program," he said. "I'm suffering the consequences of that."

Erlich and Whitfield are only two of many former church members who have criticized the Church of Scientology and the "purification rundown." But many other ex-members will not talk, because the litigious church has made examples out of other critics by suing them.

Many news organizations also appear hesitant to question the practices of the Church of Scientology, apparently for the same reason. ~

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