

MISLEADING MOVIE SLATED

Films are often, deliberately, pretending to portray a truth that is stranger than fiction. But the largest hypnotherapy association in the UK, the National Council for Hypnotherapy, has come out against the recently-released *The Fourth Kind* as giving an inaccurate, unrealistic and unhelpful portrayal of hypnosis and hypnotherapy.

The council's concern is that films like this foster potential fear and mistaken notions among those suffering from sleep paralysis.

The film advertises itself as a fact-based thriller involving an ongoing unsolved mystery in Alaska, where one town has seen an extraordinary number of unexplained disappearances during the past 40 years. Aliens or the CIA are suspected and a doctor uses regression therapy under hypnosis on people in an effort to retrieve memories – sometimes with disastrous results.

Using hypnosis to retrieve memories of past events is rife with issues in the best of circumstances leading to false or confabulated memories being taken as real, says the NCH chairman Paul White.

"Showing hypnosis as able to retrieve memories of alien abduction will only increase the number of people seeking therapy and subsequently increase the likelihood of false memory syndrome - leading to increased distress for clients and their families - and these people mistakenly seeking out hypnosis as a way to retrieve accurate memories."

And in his overview of the film, Chris French, professor of psychology at Goldsmiths University in London, says the film frequently cuts between allegedly real footage of hypnotic regression sessions carried out by the psychologist (Dr Abigail Tyler) on her patients and dramatic reconstructions of these same sessions, sometimes employing a split-screen technique to show both simultaneously to 'prove' that the reconstructions are 100 per cent accurate. This approach seems to have backfired badly on the filmmakers as most reviews of the film are highly critical of this unconvincing 'archive footage'.

French says the reason he found this film so 'disturbing' was because experience shows that no matter how obvious a hoax may be to those capable of critical thinking, there will always be many who will accept at face value the film's claim to be based on true events.

He found it worrying that even though the 'case histories' featured in the film were almost certainly fictional, the accounts of individuals with disturbed sleep patterns seeing strange creatures staring at them and being attacked by unearthly intruders were made to appear as the truth.

"For that reason, this film and the manner in which it has been promoted deserve to be condemned as totally irresponsible," he wrote.

A recent committee report on hypnosis published by the British Psychological Society concluded that, there is considerable potential for harm when hypnosis is used on the

assumption that it facilitates the recollection of events when no conscious memories of these events exist in the first place.

Elizabeth Loftus, professor of psychology and adjunct professor of law at the University of Washington, has done extensive research on human memory, eyewitness testimony and courtroom procedure. Loftus has published 18 books and more than 250 scientific articles and has served as an expert witness or consultant in hundreds of trials.

Her research into memory recall and memory distortion discovered a great deal about the conditions that make people susceptible to memory modification. Memories are more easily modified, for instance, when the passage of time allows the original memory to fade.

She says the finding that an external suggestion can lead to the construction of false childhood memories helps us understand the process by which false memories arise. It is natural to wonder whether this research is applicable in real situations such as being interrogated by law officers or in psychotherapy. Although strong suggestion may not routinely occur in police questioning or therapy, suggestion in the form of an imagination exercise sometimes does.

“False memories are constructed by combining actual memories with the content of suggestions received from others. During the process, individuals may forget the source of the information. This is a classic example of source confusion, in which the content and the source become dissociated,” Loftus found.

As a result, she warns mental health professionals and others must be aware of how greatly they can influence the recollection of events and of the urgent need for maintaining restraint in situations in which imagination is used as an aid in recovering presumably lost memories.

And Loftus cites at least four cases in the United States where women developed memories about childhood abuse in therapy and then later denied their authenticity. Two resulted in multi-million dollar payouts after been taken to the courts.

White concludes saying Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis who introduced the technique of hypnotic regression, himself abandoned the technique within about five years, amid concerns over the accuracy of the memories he was uncovering, particularly those of sexual abuse.

He says the NCH is aware that some regression techniques that are used in hypnosis and are popular with some therapists, however he warns that False Memory Syndrome is a ever present complication and this type of therapy remains a controversial issue within the profession. The National Council for Hypnotherapy always advises therapists of the potential for False Memory Syndrome and the client should be advised appropriately before therapy.