

Sunday Independent

**LIFE**

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# THE SQUARE FELLA

**BARRY EGAN GETS INSIDE GRAHAM NORTON**

**MENTAL GURU: PART 1 OF A LIFE MAGAZINE INVESTIGATION INTO THE STRANGE LIVES OF TONY QUINN** **THE RAMONES**  
**FASHION MY FAVOURITE ROOM FOOD AND DRINK BEAUTY IT'S A MAN'S WORLD YOUR GUIDE TO THE WEEK'S TV AND RADIO**

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Cover Graham Norton in Dublin, September 2004  
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**4 SHUTTERBUG**

Life through a lens

**6 FIRST PERSON**

Mark McDevitt on New York's dogs

**8 LESSONS OF LIFE**

Anne Harris gets a hold of Gene Pitney

**10 BIG ME UP**

Julia Molony meets a pop princess

**12 WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...**

Sarah Caden on life after the Street

**28 IT'S A MAN'S WORLD**

Dr Maurice Gueret on boozy doctors;

GoodFellas, gadgets and gurus

**30 FASHION**

Designs on the 21st century

**34 STYLE NOTEBOOK**

The girl's guide to hunting for fashion

**36 IN THE STYLE OF**

Johnny Depp tries to distract us from his  
beauty — again

**38 BEAUTY**

Triona's going bald

**40 HEALTH**

Maura O'Connell's little treasure

**41 WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?**

Gary Collins answers your health questions  
and recommends complementary therapy

**42 MY FAVOURITE ROOM**

Mary O'Sullivan gets through to a woman  
who's always engaged

**44 FOOD AND DRINK**

Pasta masters, guides to guidebooks, and  
wining and dining

**48 WAKING HOURS**

Ciara Dwyer on a make-up-wearing builder

**49 TV AND RADIO**

Your complete guide to the week ahead

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20

⚡ **Super Quinn**

Part 1 of a two-part LIFE  
magazine investigation into  
the wacky world of unlikely  
guru Tony Quinn

24

⚡ **Ramone-ing on and on**

The late Johnny Ramone on  
why he hated his 'brothers'

14

⚡

Barry Egan meets the Cork  
Queer



# DR QUINN MEDICINE MAN?

Lifestyle guru Tony Quinn made his name by flogging everything from pills to philosophy to the famous Blueprint for Successful Living. But what was he really selling? In Part 1 of a LIFE magazine investigation, **Donal Lynch** uncovers the mystery man's early years

**B**efore I began researching these articles, I was only vaguely aware of Tony Quinn. Every so often, one of his flyers would fall through the letterbox, promising me anything from dramatic weight loss to a more successful lifestyle if I only bought a few pills or swallowed some of his hazy philosophy. Or I might have seen him on the TV, peddling the dubious merits of hypnotism and distance-healing. It all seemed harmless enough. I viewed him as part of the ignoble tradition of showboating hucksters who stood on podiums at 19th-century fairs (or, in his case, on podiums at self-help seminars in the RDS) and asked people to “roll up, roll up” and buy their special tonic. Maybe he can help that one that's born every minute, I thought to myself.

But as I began to delve deeper into what the man is about, I realised that Quinn cannot be laughed off as a benign new-age life coach. The truth is much darker than that. Strange tales I have heard, of fanatical devotees and broken marriages. And, at the heart of it all, a self-styled evangelist who denies reports that he has spoken of himself in comparison with Jesus.

One would think that “a genius who, like others before him, has not been recognised in his own lifetime” (or so says Colette Millea, one of his closest associates) would welcome closer scrutiny. But at every turn of this investigation I was thwarted. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I was asked again and again. Many of Quinn's former followers wanted to speak, but were reluctant to do so. “I have a wife and kids,”

Gerry Kerr, who has gone on *Liveline* to talk about his experiences, told me. “I have to think of them as well — we've been through enough.” “Who mentioned my name?” was the constant refrain from others. Even when I posted a message on an online discussion forum asking for help in researching the piece, I was met with a wall of silence — followed by a rash of new messages, questioning whether my Yahoo email address was secure enough for such incendiary material, and whether I was in fact a plant from the Tony Quinn organisation.

I could not get close to the big man himself. Media-shy but notoriously publicity-hungry, he sent word through his agents that he would not be available for interviews in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, by speaking to friends, former friends and many of those who have devoted their lives to his teachings, I slowly managed to trace Tony Quinn's metamorphosis from skinny teenager to the egomaniacal leader of a pseudo-cultish new-age empire.

Tony Quinn was born into a working-class family in Arbour Hill, on Dublin's northside. He was a skinny, gangling young man and, by his own admission, sought to emulate Charles Atlas, the American bodybuilder who had famously gone from nerdy schoolboy to Mr Universe through sheer hard work. By his mid-teens, Tony was already working out heavily. He left school early and found work, first as a salesman for HB ice cream and then, when he was 17, as an apprentice butcher in a slaughterhouse in Phibsborough. All the

while he retained his passion for fitness and the body beautiful, and eventually found work as an instructor at the Grafton Health Studio. With his physique developing nicely, Quinn also found part-time work as a bouncer with Club Go Go on Dame Street. Those who trained under him at the gym remember him as a magnetic character. “I had never met anyone like him,” says one former student. “He had women falling at his feet, and could wrap anyone around his little finger.”

Tony began to compete at bodybuilding competitions. He was remarkably successful, winning 12 titles at national level. According to one man who competed in these competitions, Tony steadfastly refused any steroids which might have given him a greater winning edge. Bodybuilding was still a very embryonic sport in this country at that stage, but, some 30 years later, Tony's pamphlets and brochures would show what appears to be present-day Tony's head attached to a mass of striated, overly tanned muscle, boasting as if he had just won an Olympic title.

At the advent of the Seventies, Tony was becoming interested in yoga. He began teaching Ireland's first-ever classes in the now-popular discipline in 1971, at a modelling agency, and then at 23 St Stephen's Green, before moving on to 20 Baggot Street. However, it was only in 1974, when the operation relocated once again, this time to Terenure, that the public began to take notice. A report appeared in the *Sunday World* with the headline “Yoga Cult Broke Up Her Home”. It told the story

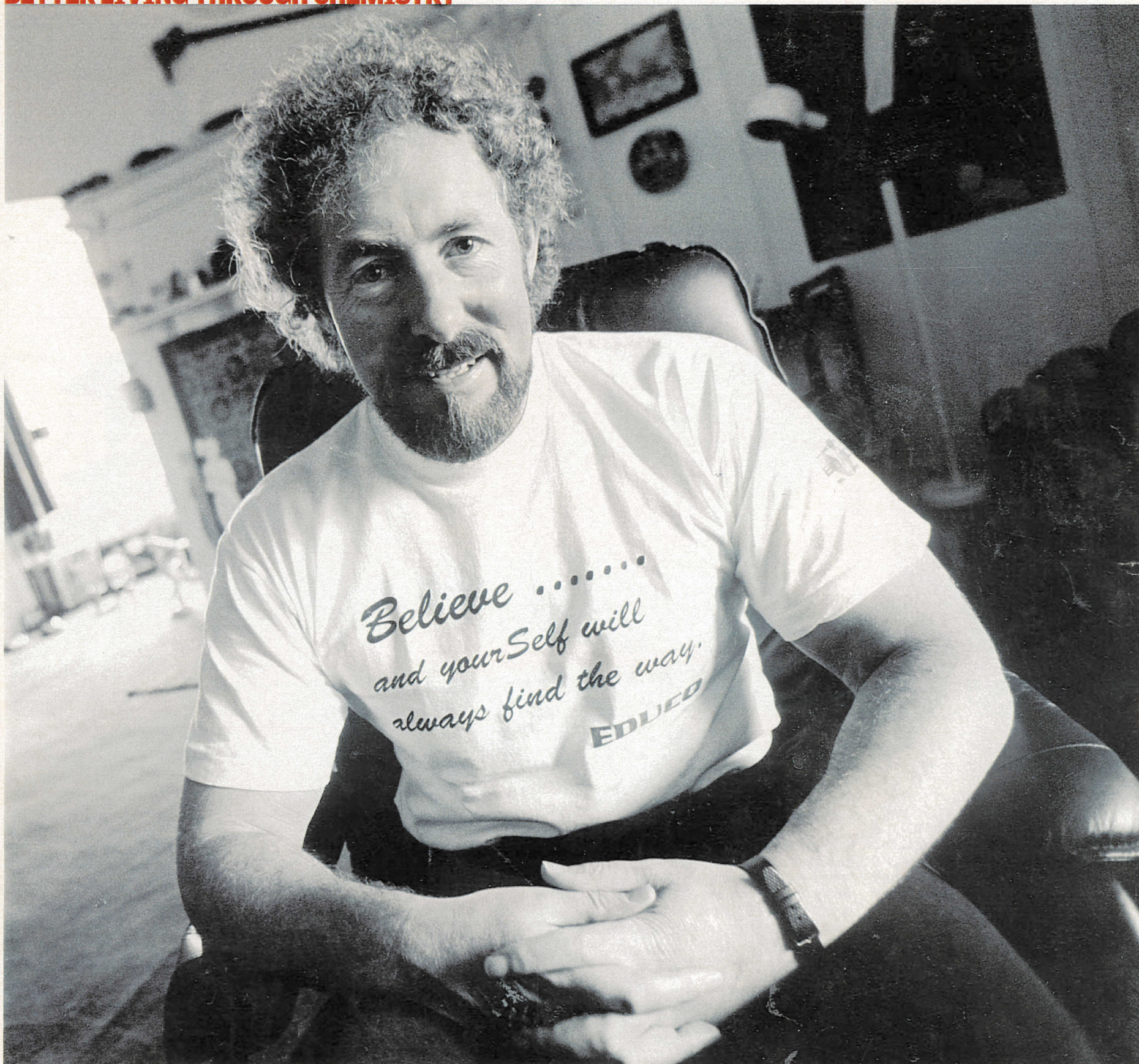
of a woman who had become immersed in Quinn's version of the yogic philosophy and had left her husband. This was long before the practice had received any celebrity endorsement (yoga, that is, not leaving your husband) and the hackles of Catholic Ireland were raised. Miles away in Cork, Bishop Lucey even denounced Quinn from the pulpit.

But if the cleric had known the full truth of Quinn's domestic set-up, he might have been a good deal more outraged. Some newspapers claimed that Quinn's acolytes lived together in a commune where the women all wore black. In fact, followers from the early days speak of a highly unconventional domestic set-up. Quinn has denied this, though he does recall a time when his lifestyle invited ridicule and suspicion.

For most of the Seventies, Quinn lived with his followers in Howth or in another commune in Kilbarrack. They were a self-sufficient, insular community, united by their belief in Quinn and the power he had over them. “He was a very charismatic character,” says Joe Hoey, a friend of Tony's and former commune-dweller. The people in the commune had plans to buy property in Meath, but there was very little money (“Sometimes there was barely food on the table,” confirms another former commune-dweller) and, to the disillusionment of some, it became clear that this was not going to happen.

Those who stayed at the commune were generally paying members, but Quinn financed his purchase of the buildings from his yoga classes. Throughout the





JOHN CARLOS

Seventies and early Eighties, Quinn continued to expand the numbers taking the classes. Mike Garde of Dialogue Ireland, an organisation which specialises in counselling ex-Tony Quinn fanatics, offers a succinct critique of Quinn's yogic philosophy: "If traditional Indian yoga can in general be described as otherworldly, then Tony Quinn's yoga is most definitely 'this-worldly'. Objectives such as business success and having thicker hair would sound very strange in a traditional Indian

yoga centre." His website goes on to point out that Quinn's teachings are much closer to contemporary new-age western culture than any of the eastern religions which form part of yoga.

Quinn's preoccupation with the body beautiful and worldly riches even alienated many of his early followers. Joe Hoey says, "It [his association with Quinn] was a great apprenticeship for me, but in the end we had a difference of philosophy. I had to get out." One woman I spoke to, whose

marriage broke down partially as a result of her husband's heavy involvement in Quinn's growing empire, was also relieved that she got out early. "Thirty years ago I was naive, and I thought it was wonderful," she told me. "But I had a small child, and as things got more and more heavy I knew I had to get out. I told my husband it was me or Tony Quinn, and I think it's pretty clear which choice he made."

Although relatively insignificant in the context of broken marriages, a sticking

point for some people is that Quinn does not have an officially recognised qualification from the Irish Yoga Association, founded in 1978. Joanne Douglas, herself an experienced yoga instructor, remembers taking a course that was offered by Tony Quinn in the Seventies. "They were giving a class for pregnant women and recommending a position which tones the pelvic floor. In fact, that would be dangerous for someone carrying a child." Nevertheless, is there not a

grudging respect for Quinn, who, after all, brought yoga to Ireland, I ask. "People were practising yoga privately even before he came here. He's a great self-promoter, but I'd hate people to think that that's offered in Ireland," she says.

Quinn's lack of official recognition is a subject that rears its ugly head time and time again. He promotes himself as an academic expert, but he left school early and most of his qualifications are of a highly dubious quality. In the Seventies he attended the British College of Naturopathy and Osteopathy in London, but inquiries reveal that the college has no record of Quinn as a graduate. According to his own literature, he claims to have earned "a doctorate in clinical hypnotherapy and counselling, a master of science degree in psychotherapy and numerous qualifications in mind technology, holistic medicine, nutrition and exercise". Richard Morrissey, an employee of Quinn's, told me that "he is the world's leading expert in the area of the mind, recognised by all the top universities in London."

In fact, Quinn's doctorate was awarded by the somewhat less-than-prestigious American Pacific University, now based in Hawaii, which specialises in distance learning. When I rang this college, none of the course directors was actually on site (there is no campus as such). By Irish academic standards, a doctorate would represent an original piece of research, which should be fit for publication in an academic journal, and which, crucially, has been defended in person by the scholar in a viva voce presentation. Dr Quinn's thesis has never been published anywhere, nor was he required to defend it in person before a board of experts in the field.

Rhoda Draper, spokeswoman for the Irish Institute of Counselling and Hypnotherapy, maintains that, by its very nature, hypnotherapy is unsuitable for distance learning. "Hypnosis is a very easy thing to learn," she says. "The reason people need to attend courses and spend time is because of the ethical concerns involved. We have been involved with helping individuals who were previously devotees of Quinn's."

All of these caveats to his doctorate would have been too cumbersome on a flyer (not that Quinn is averse to small print; early copies of his promotional literature contained the fine-print warning "Results shown may not be typical") and by the late Eighties he had a veritable alphabet of letters after his name and was putting his newly-acquired skills to good use on television. In an effort to gain a truly national profile, he hypnotised a series of patients who, live on the *Late Late Show*, then underwent their procedures without the benefit of anaesthetic. The show was without doubt the first of many PR coups for Quinn but, according to Draper, his results were not surprising. "It has been well documented that certain people who are especially susceptible to the suggestive nature of hypnosis can be placed in a trance-like state where they will not feel pain," she told me.

What the audience also wasn't told was that two of the 'contestants' were actually

employed by Quinn. Colette Millea is the most notorious hard-seller of Quinn's services and, with Tom McKenna, forms the first power couple of the Quinn empire. She worked with an accountancy firm in Dublin, advising Quinn on legal tax avoidance before coming to work for him. Demonstrating 'the power of the mind', she had her ears pinned back with only Quinn's heavy Dublin accent to soothe her.

Using paid guinea pigs has long been a standard Quinn trick. Personal testimony was crucial in launching his own branded range of supplements in the late Eighties and early Nineties. The pamphlets would boast that "none of those sharing their experiences were paid" but, in fact, many were not just paid, but long-time employees on the payroll. On one of the more recent brochures displayed prominently outside the Tony Quinn outlet in the Stephen's Green Centre, we are introduced to Martin who, through the use of Tony Quinn products and supplements, went from flabby and out of shape to tanned and muscular. What we are not told is that Martin is actually Martin Forde, longtime senior associate of Tony Quinn. As one former follower of Quinn remarked, "It would be like the senior stylist at Peter Mark saying, 'I only ever get my hair done at Peter Mark.'"

"Truly Amazing Results" such as these were featured alongside a host of Quinn services in his promotional newsletter, the now-infamous *Blueprint for Successful Living*. This was a magazine delivered to homes throughout Ireland from the mid-Eighties. It promised that, unlike all other newspapers, it contained only good news. And some of the news was so 'good', one had to continue to remind oneself that it was verified by numerous (unnamed, always unnamed) university studies, and therefore entirely believable. We learned of the fascinating Educo Postal Report System which "allows you to make a request for

**Healing could be conducted by post. Readers were invited to enclose £25, or £40 for a family**

yourself for success, healing or self-improvement. Working with the photograph of the person on a daily basis we use the Educo system. This can take place without us and the person meeting and can be conducted by post." Readers were invited to enclose £25 (£40 for a family) and Tony and his team would use their "positive mind power" to bring health, wealth and new-age happiness to your nearest and dearest. The new service was a remarkable success and one former associate of Quinn's spoke to me of "envelopes full of cash piling up on the mat each morning".

But though distance healing and vitamin pills were nice moneyspinners for Quinn,

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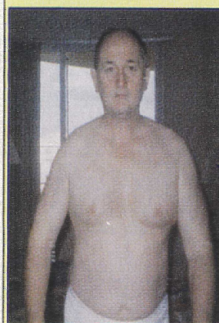
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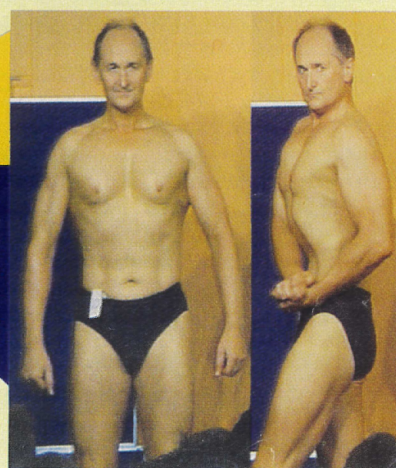


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**Previous page** Tony Quinn and his team would use "positive mind power" to bring his devotees health, wealth and new-age happiness

**Far left Tony Quinn** at home in 1995. His domestic arrangements were rumoured to be less than conventional

**Above A Tony Quinn food-supplements flyer promises extreme physical transformation, with little exercise, in less than nine months. The weight-loss candidate pictured in the flyer is Martin Forde, a longtime associate of Quinn's**

they would seem almost quaintly low-key when compared to the new line of business which would eventually win "the world's leading expert on the mind" infamy and adoration in equal measure. Because by the early Nineties, Dr Quinn's star was rising and he had found a much more lucrative and controversial forum for his brand of messianic proselytising: The Educo Seminar. **Q**

*Next week, in part two of LIFE's special investigation: Tony Quinn goes mainstream, deciding "Ireland is ready for him"; he becomes a boxing guru; how he helped get Steve Collins a world title; and former devotees speak out*