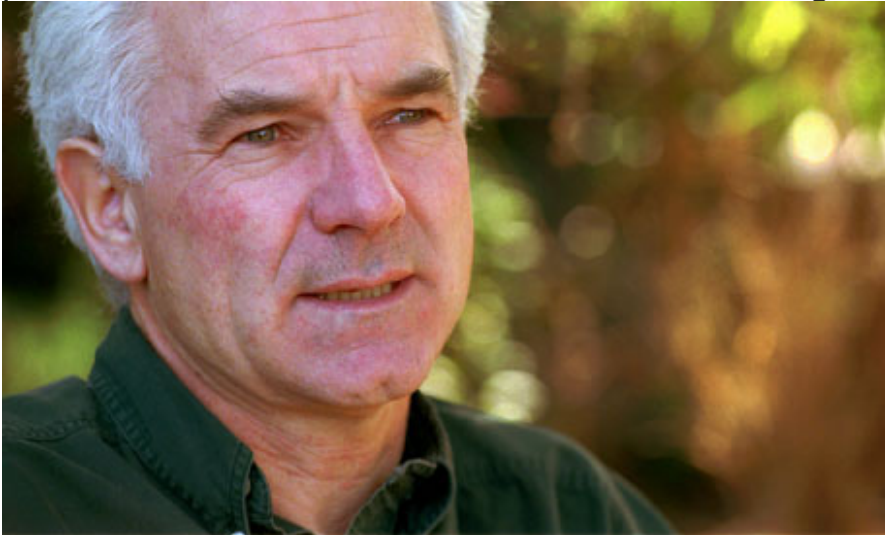


Death by denial: The campaigners who continue to deny HIV causes Aids

As each of their followers dies, those who campaign against HIV treatments simply move on to the next level of denial

[Karri Stokely](#) is a poster girl for a different way to look at health. After receiving an Aids diagnosis in 1996, at the age of 29, she was treated for 11 years with a cocktail of [drugs](#). But then she saw an internet video saying that HIV was a hoax, stopped taking her medicines – and felt terrific.

"I'm not getting any answers from the mainstream as to why I'm healthy, and why my husband is negative, and why I can quit these drugs," [she explains in her own video](#), which is currently being promoted online. "I think it's a crime. It's crimes against humanity."



Peter Duesberg in 1995. He still promotes the discredited hypothesis that HIV 'is not sufficient to cause Aids'. Photograph: Susan Ragan/Associated Press

Her doctor was aghast – HIV treatment is for life. "He looked me right in the eyes and said: 'You have done a very stupid thing, and you will be dead very soon,'" Stokely recalls. "My response to him was: 'That's funny, because right now I'm feeling pretty good.'"

That was in April 2007. She died four years later, so her comments are a postcard from the past. "Karri Stokely passed away on April 27th 2011," [explains a website run by London journalist Joan Shenton](#). "She said she wouldn't go quietly so we are keeping her moving interview below on our homepage."

But Stokely's path (via pneumonia) was already well trodden. Dying in denial is a phenomenon. The first traveller on this path I knew was an American singer, [Michael Callen](#), author of a self-help book, [Surviving Aids](#). It was published by HarperCollins in 1990. Three years later, Mikey died.

Shenton is Britain's premier critic of what she calls the "completely wrong" science of HIV. Her site offers as examples the cases of Jody Wells and Huw Christie, the first two editors of a fringe magazine [Continuum](#). Both chose not to follow medical advice and found death.

"We're waking up to the truth and the more of us that survive and live on in health to beat the odds, the more the lie will be shown up for what it is," Wells wrote in May 1994, 16 months before he passed away.

That was just before new therapies transformed life expectancy, and saw many young men who might have followed his denial path rise from their deathbeds and go dancing.

Shenton's site also showcases material on Christine Maggiore, a Californian businesswoman who helped found an international group, now called "Alive and Well Aids Alternatives". That was before her three-year-old HIV-positive daughter died of pneumonia and, in 2008, her own death.

"This was a woman of class, grace, integrity and wisdom," comments Stokely on an internet [memorial wall](#) put up after Maggiore's funeral. "From the time we found out 'the truth' surrounding the Aids debacle, Christine had always made herself available for help and guidance."

Here are intelligent, well-educated, idealistic people who wrestle their freedom from the grip of morbid sickness, big pharma products and despair. There's a heroic quality about storming towards your destiny, arms outstretched, eyes wide.

These crusaders' passing, however, gives paradoxical power to those who ushered them along in their journey. Like many health and science cranks (and shrewd defence lawyers), those who persist in the assertion that Aids isn't infectious brandish their embarrassments, thrust them in your face, before moving to the next level of denial.

Shenton, who is now archiving a quarter century of uninterrupted campaigning, assures me on the phone that "Karri is very important".

"I think she died from the side-effects of the drugs. She'd stopped taking them, but she'd been taking them for about 10 years before."

There's no answer to that, of course, but while Shenton comes across as the queen of denial, its pharaoh also has some words on Maggiore's fate. According to [Peter Duesberg](#), the scientist who fathered this philosophy, about 6% of deaths in the over 50s are from pneumonia, and "she is one of those."

"Big deal," he snaps about her death, in a frankly [barking podcast interview](#). "It's nothing. It's consistent with everything I know."

Two weeks' from now, Duesberg, 74, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, celebrates (and I have to suppose he will) 25 years of this stuff. For it was on 1 March 1987 that, in a [22-page paper](#), he set out his case that HIV is harmless.

"It is concluded," he declared in the journal [Cancer Research](#), "that Aids virus is not sufficient to cause Aids and that there is no evidence, besides its presence in a latent form, that it is necessary for Aids."

Thus was born the "Duesberg hypothesis", which his [critics say has led to sickness and death far beyond white, middle-class eccentrics](#). By some reckonings, in South Africa alone the denialist convictions of former president Thabo Mbeki led to [more than 300,000 premature fatalities](#) and 35,000 preventable infant infections.

In fact, Aids denialism predates the Duesberg hypothesis. It was born in the first months of the epidemic. Even in 1981, when [I wrote my first report](#), there were what I then called "two competing hypotheses" for the disease, which had just been spotted by US government

epidemiologists among East and West Coast gay men.

One proposed an infection, the other a crummy "lifestyle". And little has changed since then. Although science backed the first, the second limped on, blaming recreational drugs, pharmaceuticals and sexual practices in developed countries, and water, bugs and nutrition in Africa.

The website that features Stokely and Maggiore on its front page proclaims that it is "Rethinking Aids", but as 25 years have been torn from the calendar, little has been rethought. They still say HIV is harmless, or doesn't exist, and that leading Aids scientists are "criminals". Heterosexuals don't get sick from HIV and millions of Africans aren't infected. And there's apparently a global conspiracy to conceal this.

"My secret to staying healthy is really nothing magical," explains Stokely, meanwhile, in her, perhaps eternal, message in a bottle. "I think a very, very large part of it, as with any diagnosis you get, is the biology of belief. The mind is very, very strong on the health of the human body."

Brian Deer was named UK specialist journalist of the year at the 2011 British Press Awards