How to spot an AIDS denialist

Rogues, pseudoscientists, snake oil peddlers – Seth Kalichman reveals the sinister tactics used by those who deny the link between HIV and AIDS

— by Seth Kalichman —

TUESDAY, 3RD NOVEMBER 2009
Imagine that you or someone you love just received an HIV positive test result. The news is devastating. After a short time you begin to face the diagnosis. You turn to the Internet for answers. Searching the words “AIDS diagnosis” brings up thousands of websites. A whirlwind of information spins your mind. One credible-looking website, Aids.org, reads: “There is no cure for AIDS. There are drugs that can slow down the HIV virus and slow down the damage to your immune system. There is no way to ‘clear’ HIV from the body. Other drugs can prevent or treat opportunistic infections (OIs). In most cases, these drugs work very well. The newer, stronger ARVs have also helped reduce the rates of most OIs. A few OIs, however, are still very difficult to treat.”

With a click of the mouse, an equally credible-looking site, Aliveandwell.org, asks: “Did you know … Many experts contend that AIDS is not a fatal, incurable condition caused by HIV? That most of the AIDS information we receive is based on unsubstantiated assumptions, unfounded estimates and improbable predictions? That the symptoms associated with AIDS are treatable using non-toxic, immune-enhancing therapies that have restored the health of people diagnosed with AIDS and that have enabled those truly at risk to remain well?”

Which do you trust? Which do you believe? Which would you want to believe? Would you choose to believe there may be hope offered by medical treatments or would you prefer to believe that HIV is harmless? This simple example illustrates the lure of AIDS denialism.

AIDS denialism tells us what anyone would want to hear – that HIV does not cause AIDS and that if you live a “healthy lifestyle” (whatever that is) you won’t get AIDS. None of which is true. In fact, there are an estimated 33 million people in the world living with HIV infection. In 2007 there were nearly three million new HIV infections and two million people died of AIDS. People are living longer and healthier lives with HIV infection as a result of earlier detection through HIV antibody testing and the remarkable success of HIV treatments. Indeed, countries that launched aggressive testing and treatment programs, such as Brazil and Botswana, have reduced suffering and prolonged life. In contrast, South Africa delayed testing and treatment programs as a result of former President Thabo Mbeki’s AIDS denialism, policies that resulted in over 300,000 unnecessary deaths and over 35,000 infants senselessly infected with HIV. There is no rational basis for disputing
these established facts, and yet rejecting the reality of AIDS is the mission of AIDS denialists.

AIDS denialism is one of several incarnations of denialism. All denialism is defined by rhetorical tactics designed to give the impression of a legitimate debate among experts when in fact there is none. Holocaust deniers claim that historians disagree about the evidence for Nazi mass gassings and systematic murder of Jews. Global warming denialists say that climatologists are torn by the evidence about climate change. 9/11 “Truth Seekers”, as clever a piece of branding as “pro-life”, say the collapse of the Twin Towers resulted from controlled demolition. Vaccine hysterics tell us that the science is split on whether vaccinations cause autism. And AIDS denialists say that scientists are in disagreement about whether HIV causes AIDS.

It is easy to be fooled by AIDS denialists. Not only do they tell us what we want to hear, they use methods of persuasion to create the illusion of debate. Just as HIV attacks our immune defences that would otherwise destroy it, AIDS denialists appeal to our sense of scepticism. Indeed, AIDS denialists refer to themselves as dissident scientists and sceptics. Denialists misuse science and rely on pseudoscience to call established fact into question. Denialists also exploit what is not known about how HIV causes AIDS to suggest that HIV may not cause AIDS at all. The more sophisticated efforts of AIDS denialism, like the “documentary” House of Numbers, are most disturbing because they use every trick in the denialist playbook to juxtapose pseudoscience with established science. The best way to recognise AIDS denialism is to know their common tricks of persuasion.

There are two sides to every debate. But just asserting there is a debate does not mean there is one. AIDS denialists rely on a small band of fake experts, mostly retired academics who proclaim that HIV does not cause AIDS. There is not a single instance of an “expert” offered by AIDS denialism that has ever actually done research on AIDS. In rare examples, denialist experts have a history of credible science only to have later gone off the deep end. The most credentialled AIDS denialists are Nobel Laureate Kari Mullis, who developed the PCR technology for sequencing the genetic code, and Peter Duesberg, Professor of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the University of California-Berkeley and member of the National Academy of Science. Although credentialled, neither is
credible. Aside from saying HIV cannot cause AIDS, though he has done no research on AIDS, Mullis has shared his experiences on LSD and encounters with an alien fluorescent raccoon, and Duesberg, who did important work on cancer in his early career, now claims that there is no genetic basis for any cancer. Both have demonstrated an outright disregard for scientific evidence.

But beyond these two high-profile mavericks most of the “experts” in AIDS denialism are out-and-out pseudoscientists. My favourite is Henry Bauer, Emeritus Professor of Chemistry and Science Studies at Virginia Tech University, who claims to have proven that HIV cannot cause AIDS. Professor Bauer is also a self-proclaimed international expert on the existence of the Loch Ness Monster. Detecting fake experts requires looking beyond college degrees and achievements from decades gone by. Do not confuse credentials with credibility. Saying that there is no genetic basis for any cancer, describing extraterrestrial experiences, and searching for big green monsters in Scottish waters should matter when examining the credibility of someone making important claims about the causes of a devastating disease.

In the 1980s legitimate scientists disagreed about AIDS. For AIDS deniers, everything old is new again. AIDS denialists rely on selected research findings from the days when not much was known about AIDS. The first tests for HIV antibodies were less reliable than current testing technologies. There were early debates about what caused AIDS and good ideas that turned out to be dead ends. The drug AZT was prescribed in massive and often toxic doses. But none of this is true any more. Though there remain many debates in medical science about how HIV causes AIDS, there is no longer a debate about whether HIV causes AIDS. Unfortunately, outdated scientific literature is not purged when new knowledge emerges. AIDS deniers use this information to create the illusion of a live debate. Denialists select old findings that support their flawed logic because they have no evidence of their own. Cherrypicking is another favourite rhetorical technique of denialists. This involves selecting a lone scientific finding, presenting the results out of context, and deploying it as evidence for their own conclusions.

Another popular denialist manoeuvre is to call for a definitive single study, analogous to the creationist demand for a definitive transitional fossil to prove evolution. Peter
Duesberg for example, asserts that “There is not a single controlled epidemiological study to confirm the postulated viral etiology of AIDS.” He is right about this. No one scientific study ever “proves” anything. Scientists are cautious to draw conclusions from even a series of experiments. To establish that HIV causes AIDS required countless laboratory, clinical, and epidemiological studies, all converging to a definitive conclusion. There is no single scientific paper proving that HIV causes AIDS, just as there is also no single physics experiment proving that a man could land on the moon, no single study that proves excessive exposure to the sun causes skin cancer or one study that proves smoking causes lung cancer. Rather there are tens of thousands of studies containing a wide range of evidence that, taken together, make an overwhelming case.

AIDS denialists will also demand even more specific evidence, only to change the demand once the evidence is produced. One example of this “pushing back the goalpost” technique was the former Sunday Times journalist and prominent AIDS denier Neville Hodgkinson’s claim that HIV tests are invalid because HIV has never been isolated. When scientists provided evidence that HIV has been isolated, the demand changed; Hodgkinson argued that the isolated virus was “impure”. Denialists now demand that the virus be isolated in “pure form”, that is uncontaminated by proteins. The demand for a pure virus devoid of cellular proteins is impossible to meet as it defies the biological nature of viruses. Such shifting of the grounds of debate allows denialists to claim that they are the ones following the evidence, and it is the AIDS establishment – an alliance of careerist researchers and greedy drugs companies – who are propagating pseudoscience.

All denialism is entrenched in conspiracy thinking. A spectrum of such thinking motivates AIDS denialism, covering everything from a government conspiracy to invent HIV for genocide against Africans and gays to a pharmaceutical industry conspiracy to sell toxic drugs. One of my favourites is the flamboyant conspiracy thinking of vitamin entrepreneur Matthias Rath, who said “The people and the governments of the world have to decide whether they are ready to stop being manipulated by the pharmaceutical industry and embrace instead the scientific knowledge that is now available to fight the global HIV/AIDS epidemic with effective, safe and affordable natural means.” The “natural means” Rath is referring to, of course, are the useless vitamins that he peddles to the
poor. Though Rath has now been prevented from marketing his phony cure in Africa, and famously lost his libel suit against Ben Goldacre when he exposed his fraudulent practices, great damage was done and he continues to agitate for AIDS denialism through his spurious Health Foundation.

But while some denialists are clearly charlatans out to make a quick buck out of other people’s misery, many are perfectly genuine, which is what makes them especially dangerous. They can be persuasive because they actually believe what they say. Evidence means nothing to them. Their thought process resembles what psychiatrists call an “encapsulated delusion”, where despite what appears to be otherwise rational thinking there is an intractable maladaptive belief system that is impermeable to contrary evidence. Many of these people have themselves been diagnosed with HIV, and cling to the hope that this is not a death sentence. This adds a particular poignancy to their claims. A potent irony also hangs over denialism; year on year AIDS deniers who have tested positive for HIV succumb to AIDS-related illnesses. The most visible of such cases was Christine Maggiore, the founder of the Alive and Well movement that claims there is no causal link between HIV and AIDS. Maggiore believed that HIV does not cause AIDS even after the AIDS-related death of her three-year-old daughter and right up until her own death of AIDS in 2008. AIDS denialists are therefore a mixed bag of rogue scientists, pseudoscientists, conspiracy theorists, and snake-oil salesmen. There are also vocal AIDS denialist activists, primarily HIV positive people who are in deep denial of their diagnosis and seek the insulating bubble offered by AIDS denialism.

So, what can we do about AIDS denialism? There will always be crazy people who say crazy things. AIDS denialists only do harm when people listen to them. The best defence against AIDS denialism is improved public understanding of science and medicine. We all need to know how to recognise cranks and crackpots and their sinister rhetorical devices. When searching for reliable information make sure it does not rely on old, most likely outdated, sources. Find credible sources of current information and trust them, but keep pressing them with questions. Familiarise yourself with the basic facts of HIV and AIDS and be sceptical of far-fetched conspiracies. Be informed and think critically, but don’t fall for global conspiracy hysteria or accept pseudoscience because that is what you want to hear.
We know that drugs companies make huge profits, and that scientists rely on research grants and can be fallible. This does not mean there is a global conspiracy to misrepresent the science. AIDS researchers and the pharmaceutical industry, believe it or not, are in it to save lives.

And finally, hard as it might be for believers in free speech and open debate, if you encounter AIDS denialism, do not enter into a debate. AIDS denialists want to create the impression that there is a debate regarding HIV causing AIDS and debating feeds the illusion. This debate was exhausted years ago. Now it merely serves as a distraction from the ongoing struggle to explain how and why HIV causes AIDS and trying to prevent it. In the words of The Who, and the title of Richard Wilson’s excellent book on scepticism, “Don’t Get Fooled Again”.

Seth Kalichman’s book Denying AIDS: Conspiracy Theories, Pseudoscience, and Human Tragedy is published by Springer/Copernicus - all royalties from the book are donated to buy HIV treatments in Africa.

The AIDS Denialist Hall of Shame

Peter H Duesberg is the most important figure in HIV/AIDS denialism because he is a credentialled scientist who claims HIV does not cause AIDS. In fact, Duesberg says that HIV is harmless, although he has never actually worked on HIV or AIDS. Early in his career Duesberg was part of a research group that mapped the very first cancer-causing gene. Soon after, he refuted his own work and proclaimed that no genes could cause cancer. Rather, Duesberg says that cancers are only caused by environmental factors that deform our chromosomes. Using the same logic, he claimed that HIV cannot cause AIDS. Over the years Duesberg has been proven wrong on both accounts. But despite evidence to the contrary, Duesberg does not give in. He appears to fully believe that there is no genetic basis for any cancer and that HIV does not cause AIDS.

David Rasnick is Peter Duesberg’s closest associate. Rasnick was trained as a scientist and had conducted research, although never with humans and never with HIV or AIDS. He also conducted “clinical studies” for Matthias Rath in South Africa in their scam to prove that
vitamins can treat AIDS – activities that have since been ruled unlawful by South African courts.

**Jody Wells, Huw Christie and Michael Baumgartner** published London’s *Continuum Magazine* which served as an outlet for AIDS denialism, including pseudoscientific “studies”. Continuum ended after the editors all died following long bouts with AIDS.

**Neville Hodgkinson** is a health journalist who worked for the Sunday Times in the 1990s, and was a driving force behind the Times’s infamous AIDS denialist coverage. He remains active in AIDS denialism.

**Gordon Stewart**, Emeritus Professor of Public Health at the University of Glasgow, has signed on to several AIDS denialist letters and has published conspiracy-oriented articles proclaiming the “HIV-AIDS model owes its popularity to widespread censorship.”

**The Perth Group**: Eleni Papadopulos-Eleopulos and Valendar Turner not only say HIV cannot cause AIDS, they say HIV may not exist at all. In an appeals hearing for a man who was fighting a conviction for knowingly sexually infecting women with HIV, the Australian courts found The Perth Group unqualified to express opinions about the existence of HIV.

**Henry H Bauer**, Professor Emeritus of Science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, claims that HIV cannot cause AIDS, based on flawed logic and misuse of AIDS statistics. He has published AIDS denialism papers with Peter Duesberg. Professor Bauer is also a leading authority on the existence of the Loch Ness Monster.

**Christine Maggiore** was founder of Alive & Well, claiming that HIV tests are invalid and HIV treatments are toxic poison. Her three-year-old daughter Eliza Jane Scovill died of complications from AIDS. In 2008 Ms Maggiore herself died of pneumonia and disseminated herpes, two AIDS-related conditions.

**David Crowe** is the President of the Rethinking AIDS Society and runs the Alberta Reappraising AIDS Society in Canada. He manages the most visible and up-to-date AIDS pseudoscience website on the internet, which posts numerous clippings from scientific journals out of original contexts and in support of denialist claims.
Kary B Mullis is a Nobel Laureate chemist who co-authored the essay “What causes AIDS? It’s an open question”. Mullis regularly questions whether HIV causes AIDS. He is widely regarded as an eccentric and has no credentials in AIDS research.

This article was brought to you by New Humanist, a quarterly journal of ideas, science and culture. To support our journalism, please subscribe.

A simple way to support the RA, share this article with friends

Got something to say about this article?

Log in (or sign up as a founder member) and join the conversation

Join: Albert Einstein & you
The Rationalist Association is independent, irreverent & non-profit. We are supported by our members.

If you value reason find out how to join us today