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BLOG | Posted 03/02/2006 @ 3:49pm

Harper's Publishes AIDS Denialist

RICHARD KIM

The latest issue of *Harper's Magazine* contains a stunning 15-page article by well-known AIDS denialist Celia Farber (formerly of *Spin* magazine) that extensively repeats UC Berkeley virologist Peter Duesberg's discredited theory that HIV does not cause AIDS. Among the claims that Duesberg makes (and Farber recounts approvingly) are:

AIDS is actually a "chemical syndrome, caused by accumulated toxins from heavy drug use."

"Many cases of AIDS are the consequence of heavy drug use, both recreational (poppers, cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.) and medical (AZT, etc.)"

"HIV is a harmless passenger virus that infects a small percentage of the population and is spread primarily from mother to child, though at a relatively low rate."

"75 percent of AIDS cases in the West can be attributed to drug toxicity. If toxic AIDS therapies were discontinued...thousands of lives could be saved virtually overnight."

"AIDS in Africa is best understood as an umbrella term for a number of old diseases, formerly known by other names, that currently do not command high rates of international aid. The money spent on anti-retroviral drugs would be better spent on sanitation and improving access to safe drinking water."

The best rebuttals to Duesberg's hypothesis are here, here and here. Over at *Slate* science writer Jon Cohen has a piece examining the wave of "pharmanoidia" afflicting mass media. As Cohen and others point out, conspiracy theories like Duesberg's warp and exploit some of the best political interventions made by AIDS activists: that patients should be engaged with their medical diagnosis and treatment, that clinical drug trials should be grounded in sound ethical practices, that the emphasis on virology has circumvented immunological approaches to AIDS and that attention to the effects of poverty, malnutrition and other

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diseases is vital to preventing and treating AIDS.

It's a shame that a magazine as well respected as *Harper's* has shirked its duty to report on these issues and instead published Farber's article. South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign has put together [a comprehensive rebuttal](#) of Farber's article documenting over 50 errors. I also post here a statement from HealthGAP and a letter to *Harper's* from Gregg Gonsalves of GMHC.

HealthGAP: "Harper's Magazine has stooped to new lows in publishing a lengthy article that rehashes old distortions by a writer who does not believe that HIV causes AIDS. Harper's should immediately publicly retract this article, and devote the same space to an accurate piece of news about the global AIDS crisis. We are very concerned that this inaccurate article will be used to fuel government inaction outside the US, where some heads of state, such as the South African President and the Minister of Health, have invoked AIDS denialist rhetoric rather than prioritizing antiretroviral treatment access for the 800 South Africans with HIV who are dying unnecessarily each day."

Gregg Gonsalves: "Dear Editors, I have been a long-time Harper's Magazine reader. I am sorry that the March 2006 issue is the very last that I will read.

With Celia Farber's article "Out of Control, AIDS and the Corruption of Medical Science," your magazine has managed to destroy its 156 year-old reputation in 15 pages.

Farber is a well-known AIDS denialist and publishing her work is akin to giving the folks at the Discovery Institute a place to expound upon the "science" of intelligent design, Charles Davenport a venue to educate us about the racial inferiority of the Negro or Lyndon LaRouche a platform to warn us about aliens, bio-duplication, and nudity.

If Harpers was some fringe publication or supermarket tabloid then we could all laugh at Farber's weird conspiracy theories and pseudo-science. The sad thing is that unlike the hoaxes perpetuated on the New Republic by Stephen Glass several years ago, Ms. Farber's reputation as a crank is widespread. Thus, it seems that your editors, after careful research and despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, decided that Ms. Farber was a serious journalist with a real story to be told.


If you choose to report falsehoods as truths when it comes to HIV/AIDS, how can I trust the veracity of the rest of what appears in your pages?

Yours truly,
Gregg Gonsalves

April 2006





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Same Harper's just got "linked" a lot for their "Impeach Bush" editorial?

Posted by MASK 03/02/2006 @ 4:14pm | [ignore this person](#)

Speaking of crackpot journalism, does Carlin Romano still contribute to the Nation? Here's a line or two from an atrocious Islamophobic article he wrote in the Philadelphia Inquirer, citing gay neoconservative Bruce Bawer favorably:

According to Bawer, liberals in Europe, even more than their American counterparts, want to believe that most Muslim immigrants share Western middle-class goals: a safe place to live, opportunities for their children, and the like. That accounts, Bawer argues, for the odd mix in their attitudes to Muslims: joy in the "multiculturalism" that makes their previously homogeneous societies more "colorful," and a nativist desire to keep Muslims in their place as exotica.

Bawer asserts that the reality - confirmed for him by the resistance of European Muslims to assimilation, and the marked presence in their communities of honor killings, homophobia, polygamy, marital rape, forced marriage, and intolerance of democracy and pluralism - is that European Muslim leaders, with demographics on their side, still harbor the millennial hope of taking power in Europe, and see the European attitude as both weak and hostile. It is "political correctness," Bawer writes, that has "gotten Europe into its current mess."

Of course, Marc Cooper writes things just as embarrassing on his own blog.

Methinks the Nation Magazine should clean up its own act first.

Posted by LPROYECT 03/02/2006 @ 4:51pm | [ignore this person](#)

Great point, LPROYECT.

uh, what?

Posted by TJBREHNS1 03/02/2006 @ 5:00pm | [ignore this person](#)

"Many cases of AIDS are the consequence of heavy drug use, both recreational (poppers, cocaine, methamphetamines, etc.) and medical (AZT, etc.)"

So one more reason that people should not do drugs.

I can now teach my children that on top of all the other bad things that can and will happen to you if you start doing drugs, that if they start doing drugs they can be more susceptible to contracting aids.

Just say no...

Todd

Posted by OKSPORTSGUY 03/02/2006 @ 5:09pm | [ignore this person](#)

Awesome!! Now I can go back to unprotected sex!!!

Posted by PCR 03/02/2006 @ 5:21pm | [ignore this person](#)

Some of the comments really reflect the visceral contentiousness of this topic as described in the article. According to my read, Duesberg is not saying that HIV and AIDS are unrelated, but only that the classic scientific criteria for the demonstration of causality have not been met. Should there indeed be in excess of 4,000 documented cases of AIDS in patients who are HIV- as claimed, it would surely seem reason enough to revisit the science and at least ask "why?". In

any case, as a health professional and medical science writer for the past 20 years, I thought the article was both balanced and thought provoking. My subscription to the Atlantic was tossed long ago. I'll be reading Harper's as long as I'm alive and they're still publishing.

Posted by IGNATIOUST 03/02/2006 @ 5:28pm | [ignore this person](#)

I am always sympathetic to skeptics and contrarians, so I was curious to read Celia Farber's HIV articles.

In 1987, when I subscribed to Spin.

Since then, HIV denialism has been pretty thoroughly debunked. Whereas these questions were usefully provocative in 1987, they are much less useful twenty years later. Now they much more closely resemble IDers or global warming dissidents: fringe scientists who ignore the overwhelming evidence contradicting their hypotheses.

I studied a social science, and I am sympathetic to some of Farber's critiques, such as the sociological phenomenon of scientists protecting their income streams and positions, at the expense of unbiased critical inquiry. Like I said, that made me open-mindedly consider her critiques in the 80s. And based on my amateur study of the field, I wouldn't even be totally shocked if it turned out that HIV is highly correlated with AIDS but is not directly causally connected (last I checked, the causal mechanism has never been discovered).

However, overwhelming field and lab evidence suggests that the anti-retroviral (ARV) cocktails work. Maybe we don't understand exactly how HIV causes AIDS, but the ARV drugs work. We know this. Thabo Mbeki provided us with one of the world's most persuasive, most tragic field experiments when he denied ARV drugs to his HIV-infected citizens, after being convinced by Farber and Duesberg, then was forced by internal and international pressure to begrudgingly provide them, with corresponding life-saving results (somewhat mitigated by alleged governmental tail-dragging).

It would have made sense for Harper's to publish this in 1987 or even 1997, but not in 2006. Or at least not without also publishing rebuttals indicating just how contrary to overwhelming scientific evidence and consensus this position is.

Posted by LEFTBEHINDS 03/02/2006 @ 5:40pm | [ignore this person](#)

Ignatioust-

I hadn't read your reply before writing my reply.

Yes, I absolutely agree that the cases of AIDS without HIV are the strongest argument for a research program investigating this issue. My understanding is that that science is in fact underway.

I should say that I haven't read the full Harper's article, just excerpts here and elsewhere (as well as almost all of Farber's other work on this, which is extensive and repetitive). Maybe this article is more balanced than Farber usually is.

Posted by LEFTBEHINDS 03/02/2006 @ 5:45pm | [ignore this person](#)

Even if you have 4,000 people who appear to have the *syndrome* without the virus, all that should indicate is that there can also be other causative factors producing a syndrome similar to what the virus produces. After all, the symptoms of a cold can be from a cold virus - or from some other cause entirely. Yet cold viruses do clearly cause colds.

The telling fact would be the people with the virus who never develop the syndrome. It's been determined that they all share a genetic uniqueness, are all of European ancestry, and that the rare gene was selected for in the European population because it also protected against the Black Death. Everyone without that rare gene who harbors the virus develops AIDS within a decade. I'm not in medicine, but to not accept that as fact, excuse me, buggers belief.

Posted by UNNATIONAL 03/02/2006 @ 6:17pm | [ignore this person](#)

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