Denying AIDS

Seth C. Kalichman

Denying AIDS

Conspiracy Theories, Pseudoscience,
and Human Tragedy

Foreword by Nicoli Nattrass

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Visit the author's blog at <http://denyingaids.blogspot.com/>

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“What mattered to me as person living with HIV was to be told that HIV did not cause AIDS. That was nice. Of course, it was like printing money when the economy is not doing well. Or pissing in your pants when the weather is too cold. Comforting for a while but disastrous in the long run.”

*–Winstone Zulu, Zambian AIDS
Activist and former denialist*

Author Disclaimer of Potential Conspiracy Involvement

Seth C. Kalichman has never taken financial support from any pharmaceutical company, although he has accepted pens and key chains from Pfizer sales reps at conventions. He has also not applied for or received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation; however, this book was word processed in Microsoft Word. Kalichman is also a U2 fanatic and purchases Product (Red) whenever possible. When he is not working to understand AIDS denialism, Kalichman conducts HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment research in Atlanta and South Africa. His research is funded by the National Institutes of Health but he has never met nor communicated with Robert Gallo. Kalichman is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Connecticut and is therefore an employee of The State. He is the editor of the journal *AIDS and Behavior*, published by Springer Science & Business Media.

The author is donating all of his royalties from sales of this book to the Family Treatment Fund administered by Massachusetts General Hospital to purchase antiretroviral medications for people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa. Visit the Family Treatment Fund website at <http://www.shallwego.net/ftf/index.htm>.

Foreword

HIV causes AIDS. This is not a controversial claim but an established fact, based on more than 25 years of science. Yet a small group of AIDS denialists claims that HIV is harmless, and that the antiretroviral drugs used to fight it cause, rather than treat, AIDS. They believe that the pharmaceutical industry has somehow conspired with thousands of doctors and scientists, to invent a disease as a means of selling harmful drugs. Such talk sounds to most of us like lunacy. But the sad fact is that AIDS denialism has emerged as a genuine menace to global public health including in the United States and, particularly, in South Africa.

AIDS denialism gained such currency with former President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa that his administration was, until recently, reluctant to expand access to antiretroviral drugs. This delay cost thousands of lives and to this day only a third of those needing antiretrovirals actually receive them. This response is poor by the standards of middle-income countries, but it is especially troublesome in South Africa, which has more HIV-positive people than any other country.

American AIDS denialists are partly to blame for South Africa's unfortunate history of AIDS policy. Peter Duesberg, the leading AIDS denialist, and his small band of supporters was invited by Thabo Mbeki to serve on his presidential panel on AIDS. These denialists rejected all the evidence presented to them about the efficacy of using antiretrovirals for the prevention of mother to child transmission. This resulted in policy deadlock and further delayed the use of antiretrovirals either for prevention or treatment. Even after the panel had completed its work, the Health Minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, continued to support AIDS denialists (even engaging one of them as an advisor), to promote unproven alternative nutritional remedies and to denigrate antiretrovirals as poison. Several prominent South Africans died of AIDS after opting to change their diets instead of taking antiretrovirals.

The health minister also failed to take steps against another AIDS denialist, Matthias Rath, for running illegal clinical trials in African townships in which AIDS patients were asked to go off antiretrovirals and onto vitamins instead. It was only after a protracted legal battle fought by the Treatment Action Campaign that these trials were recently declared illegal. In the past, South Africa's Medicines Control Council acted swiftly to curb such abuses but the power of this body was steadily eroded by the Health Minister. AIDS denialism now underpins a lucrative nutritional supplements industry that had the tacit, and sometimes active, support of the Mbeki administration.

By courting the AIDS denialists, President Mbeki has increased their stature in the United States. He lent credibility to Christine Maggiore, a Californian who campaigns against using antiretrovirals to prevent mother to child transmission, when he was photographed meeting her. Two years later, Ms. Maggiore gave birth to a daughter who tragically died at age 3 of what the coroner concluded was an AIDS-related infection. Mother-to-child transmission is now rare in the United States, thanks to the widespread use of preventive therapy and the activities of organizations like the National Institutes of Health and the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation. Sadly, this is not so in South Africa, where many children are born infected and then face short, painful lives.

Until recently, AIDS researchers and activists in the United States tended to regard the denialists with derision, assuming they would fade away. Unfortunately, this has not happened. Journalists like Celia Farber continue to promote the denialist view and keep them in the public eye. More disturbingly, she and Duesberg received awards during "whistleblower week" in Washington during 2008. This indicates that AIDS denialists have not only been capable of convincing vulnerable AIDS patients to go off their medications, but have also managed to win over certain public opinion makers with their misrepresentations and erroneous point of view. There is a real risk that a new generation of Americans could be persuaded that HIV either does not exist or is harmless, that safe sex is not important and that they do not need to protect their children from this deadly virus. A resurgence of denialism in the United States would have far reaching effects on the global AIDS pandemic, just as it already has in South Africa.

Who are these AIDS denialists and what motivates them to pursue their deadly campaign? Seth Kalichman tackles this difficult topic here in this very useful, timely and insightful book. He provides an engaging portrait of the key AIDS denialists in the United States, showing that they are, at heart, "suspicious thinkers" prone to conspiracy theories and other wacky beliefs. This exposé is very important because all too often innocent people are lead to believe that there is a genuine "scientific debate" over AIDS. There is not. We know more about HIV and how it causes AIDS than we know about any

other pathogen. AIDS denialists promote the illusion of scientific debate. Seth Kalichman shatters that illusion by pointing to their erroneous forms of reasoning and unscientific approaches. Everyone should read this book.

Nicoli Nattrass
Cape Town, South Africa

Preface

My strange journey into HIV/AIDS denialism started with a seemingly random event. As the editor of the behavioral science research journal *AIDS and Behavior* I sent an email to everyone who had ever been asked to provide peer reviews for papers submitted to the journal requesting that they update their contact information. Psychologist Kelly Brennan-Jones at the State University of New York in Brockport replied to my email and said that she had no idea who I was, why I sent her the request, and asked me to remove her from the journal database. How she got my email was simply that I had asked her to review a paper some time back to which she had declined. As an expert in the study of relationships, I knew her work dating back to my years in graduate school. I knew Kelly Brennan-Jones was trained at a superlative university by some of the best social psychologists in the country. When I reminded her of the request to review for the journal and asked if she would consider reviewing in the future, she promptly directed me to an internet link telling me to read the information there if I was interested in knowing what she thought of AIDS. The link was to the David Crowe's Alberta Reappraising AIDS Society website which posted her August 2007 article "The HIV/AIDS Myth: A Review of [Peter] Duesberg's *Inventing the AIDS Virus*". My reaction was one of absolute outrage. I mean I was really angry. I was in an emotional upheaval. I surprised everyone around me, including myself, by my seemingly irrational reaction. How could someone I knew to be intelligent, well-trained as a scientist at a respectable university and in a position of influence over college students endorse a book that everyone surely knows is outdated, biased, and of little more value than that worthy of a doorstop?

Having dedicated my entire adult life to preventing the suffering caused by HIV/AIDS, I realize that HIV disease is very complex. People who test HIV positive as well as those who care for them will gladly grasp at the idea that HIV does not cause AIDS. Who wouldn't? Peter Duesberg, and all the denialists who have followed him, offers that very false hope. Repackaged by what has become a movement of denialism and propped up by a

pseudoscientific enterprise, the idea that HIV does not cause AIDS has floated around for nearly 20 years. It just does not go away. In fact, the movement grows stronger in every country that is suffering a significant AIDS problem. For some, like many of us in the United States, it is easy to ignore HIV/AIDS denialism because its followers are invisible to us. For others, like my friends in South Africa, it is impossible to ignore. People living with HIV/AIDS in every country are vulnerable to the confusion and disinformation propagated by a small group of denialists whether by their books, brochures, or Internet postings. Reading that HIV does not cause AIDS can dissuade people from getting tested for HIV, lead HIV infected people to ignore their HIV positive test result, and persuade some to reject antiretroviral therapies in place of vitamins and nutritional supplements. These are not hypothetical situations. Real people are facing a life threatening disease that can be effectively treated. Realizing that all AIDS scientists should take action to counter the claims of HIV/AIDS denialism, I decided to write this book.

To understand HIV/AIDS denialism, I had to start from scratch. Like nearly every AIDS scientist, I have ignored denialism. I suppose you could say I was in denial about denialism. I knew it was out there, but I pushed it to the back of my mind. To begin my journey into the world of HIV/AIDS denialism I dived into books, magazines, and most of all, the Internet to learn all angles. Still, it seemed insufficient. Getting to know the denialists not just their papers seemed essential. So I started corresponding, conversing, and visiting the insiders of HIV/AIDS denialism. I posed questions and gained insight into the inner workings of denialism. Most of those I contacted responded to me. Not really knowing who I am, they took me under their wing to enlighten me about the truth about AIDS. I have been left with no doubt that the AIDS Rethinkers really truly believe that HIV does not cause AIDS. In their minds, the propagation of the HIV=AIDS myth is the product of a government conspiracy in cahoots with a multibillion dollar pharmaceutical scam. They actually believe that antiretroviral medications are toxic poison. In their minds, they have not been duped like everyone else into thinking that HIV causes AIDS and one day the AIDS orthodoxy will crumble on its own lies. I looked one denialist in her eyes and asked her if she really believes these things about AIDS and she said without any hesitation “yes I do”. It is through these cordial and inquisitive exchanges that I learned most about this problem.

My relationships with denialists created some complicated arrangements that allowed me to experience denialism face-to-face. I often felt more like a journalist than a scientist, giving me a glimpse of how it must feel when denialist journalists delve into science. Still, it is important that I say that the denialists who interacted with me did not seem evil. They are deeply skeptical

of science and untrusting of government and big business. Some are surely misguided and others seem to foolishly believe that they understand everything there was to know about AIDS. But I did not find them evil in the sense they were intent on harming people, even though their actions surely are. Of course, those I have come to see as malevolent – the vitamin pushers, con men, and angry academics are the ones who did not respond to my attempts to contact them.

I gained as much of an inside view of HIV/AIDS denialism as I could. Obviously, at times I have felt quite sympathetic to some of the denialists. I am not sure if these feelings reflected something of a Stockholm syndrome, where I was identifying with those who seemed to become my psychological captures. In retrospect, I think I was just struggling to understand them as best I could, an understanding I have tried to convey in this book.

Writing this book posed some rather unique challenges. I have tried to remain objective and balanced in my examination of what the denialists are saying and who they are. Difficult as it may be, I have tried to take these guys seriously; even if not what they are saying then why they are saying it. I have also tried to avoid ad hominem attacks by focusing more on what the denialists are saying than who they are. But that too was difficult. This book is a psychological perspective on denialism, so the denialists themselves are central to the story. In this case, the messengers may be as important as the messages. I also struggled with what to consider science vs. pseudoscience. Including someone and their work under the rubric of pseudoscience was never taken lightly. As a guide, I used standard definitions of pseudoscience and I spoke with colleagues and collaborators of those in question. I know that no one included in the discussion of pseudoscience, and denialist journalism for that matter, will appreciate these labels. Nevertheless, I believe that the categorization is valid and meaningful. In a related matter, I spend considerable time discussing peer review, for all its value and deficiencies. When considering work as scientific and pseudoscientific, I considered whether articles had been peer reviewed. For this, I also relied on co-authors as well as the authors themselves to tell me if their work had been peer reviewed. Although some of the articles I discuss as pseudoscience did appear in peer reviewed journals, it is my understanding that the specific articles did not undergo peer review.

Another element of this book that I particularly grappled with was managing its citations and sources. I found myself wanting to cite numerous studies that support the facts that HIV causes AIDS and that antiretrovirals extend lives and prevent babies from becoming infected to debunk denialist claims. In doing so, I would have lost my footing and the very point of this book. This is not a book about AIDS and how it is caused by HIV. Rather, this is a book about HIV/AIDS denialism. I did not write this book to answer the

denialist claims, but rather to offer insight into their wacky and destructive world. I have maintained an electronic library of all my sources that I used to write this book should any of the websites be terminated. Given the nature of the topic, a lot of my sources are from Internet websites. Knowing that websites come and go, especially those on the fringe, I printed all of my sources as portable documents. I am happy to share these sources. In the chapter notes, I do not always indicate dates of websites accessed because I verified downloaded websites on a single day, February 13, 2008, unless otherwise noted. To request my sources and to learn more about my experiences infiltrating the world of AIDS denialism visit the Denying AIDS blog at <http://denyingaids.blogspot.com/>

Personally, I have come to view this book as just one straw on the back of HIV/AIDS denialism. A back that will not break until the public is educated to differentiate science from pseudoscience, facts from fraud. Denialism is defeated when credible science is effectively communicated to a trusting and critically minded public. My goal has been to offer a psychological perspective on what is essentially a psychological and social phenomenon. I do not view myself as an anti-denialist waging war against denialism. To the contrary, I am trying to understand what the denialists are saying and why anyone would believe them. As my South African friend Nicoli Nattrass suggested, in writing this book I am offering a psychological autopsy of HIV/AIDS denialism. Although I find the problem of HIV/AIDS denialism fascinating, it is not my aspiration to immerse myself in the world of denialism any longer. I will now return to the less glamorous and mundane world of AIDS prevention and treatment research, where there are far fewer dramas and conspiracies to contend with.

Odd as it is, I find myself drawing this project to a close sitting and writing these words on the steps of Peter Duesberg's laboratory at the Donner Building in the shade of the beautiful trees on the lovely UC Berkeley campus. I suppose stranger things have happened, just not to me.

S.C. Kalichman
Storrs, CT

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In writing this book, I have also gained enormous support from a group of anti-denialists. I cannot thank them enough for opening their minds and pointing me toward invaluable resources. Nicoli Natrass at the University of Cape Town wrote the first book on HIV/AIDS denialism that inspired me to write this book and provided critical feedback on an early draft. Nicoli set a very high standard to follow and this book should be seen as an adjunct to hers. I am also grateful to Nicoli for writing the Foreword and providing a South African perspective. Thanks to John Moore of Cornell University for his insights into denialism and to Nathan Geffen of the Treatment Action Campaign for encouraging this project and pointing me toward Michael

Shermer and all those weird things that people believe. Other members of aidstruth.org, especially Nick Bennett, Brian Foley, and Bob Funkhouser were very generous in giving me their time and answering my questions. I also appreciate Mike Merson, Mark Wainberg, Jon Cohen and Martin Delaney for the time they took from their busy schedules to correspond with me about their views and experiences. I am grateful to Salim Abdool Karim, Glenda Gray and James McIntyre for sharing their experiences on the 2000 South African Presidential AIDS Panel and providing me with some valuable historically important documents. I am also indebted to the world's greatest political cartoonist, South Africa's Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro), for giving me permission to include his art in this book. I also thank the Starbucks in Storrs, the De Luca Café in Cape Town, and Berkeley Espresso for giving me the space to work. I am also indebted to Joey for taking me places I could not have otherwise gone. Finally, I want to thank the HIV/AIDS denialist mentors with whom I had numerous email exchanges and conversations. I will leave them unnamed to protect identities, but I cannot thank them enough for their willingness to take me in even without knowing who I am.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Dan Dunable, longtime Atlanta AIDS activist, HIV treatment educator, and compassionate advocate against AIDS denialism.

Note on Terminology

Throughout this book I refer to denialism with specific reference to HIV/AIDS denialism. However, repeated use of HIV/AIDS denialism made for a cumbersome read. I therefore use the term “denialism” to exclusively refer to HIV/AIDS denialism. When referring to other forms of denialism I clearly indicate doing so, such as Holocaust denialism or 9/11 denialism.

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