

# HIV/AIDS

## The Mbeki controversy

Thabo Mbeki has infuriated the medical establishment by lending his ears to dissenting AIDS scientists, who argue that HIV does not cause AIDS and might not even exist. It has been said that Mbeki is either "very stupid" or "very brave". Read VIVIENNE VERMAAK'S in-depth report and decide for yourself if President Mbeki is missing the point.

**"T**he HIV/AIDS theory is the biggest blunder of the 20th century. It is a massive industry. There are more doctors and organisations researching AIDS than there are people with AIDS in America. For these people to turn around now and admit

they were wrong will take superhuman courage and integrity. What President Mbeki is doing is very brave. Good luck, Mr President."

These are Californian biochemist, Dr Dave Rasnick's thoughts on President Mbeki's controversial decision to call an international panel of scientists to review AIDS science. Rasnick used to be an AIDS researcher, but withdrew. He says the AIDS industry is a massive medical Watergate, filled with "fraud, incompetence and flagrant lies."

Nobel prizewinner for chemistry, Dr Kary Mullis, came to the same conclusion while doing AIDS research in the late 1980s. "The more I learned, the more outspoken I became. As a responsible scientist convinced that people were being killed by useless drugs, I could not remain silent. We are dealing with a bunch of witchdoctors. It's scary, that's what it is."

President Mbeki has now given people like Mullis and Rasnick an official forum in which to be heard.

Mullis and Rasnick are part of a growing group of approximately 500 scientists who call themselves "the group for the scientific reappraisal of AIDS". The group was founded by former Harvard professor and molecular biologist, Dr Charles Thomas, in 1991. Its members include Nobel prizewinners, molecular biologists, physicists, researchers and physicians. They say they are not sponsored by any pharmaceutical or government concerns and that their motives are purely scientific and humanitarian.

"The group" has long been asking for an open debate on the most fundamental aspects of AIDS. They argue that there is no proof that HIV causes AIDS or that it is sexually transmitted — or that HIV even exists. They claim that AIDS drugs (like AZT) themselves are responsible for many of the AIDS deaths and that AIDS in Africa is not AIDS after all.

"If there is evidence that HIV causes AIDS, there should be scientific documents which either singly or collectively demonstrate that fact. There is no such document," declares Mullis.

Thomas is more direct: "The HIV-causes-AIDS dogma is the most destructive moral fraud ever perpetrated in the Western world."

When President Mbeki announced his decision to call the panel, the mainstream AIDS establishment reacted with horror. "Bewildering" and "dangerous", proclaimed the newspaper headlines. The American



government tried to censor a letter Mbeki sent to them, and ABC television in America asked with dismay: "What possessed a leader like Mbeki to even question something this self-evident?"

According to statements from Mbeki's office, contrasting statistics prompted him to start asking questions. In his controversial letter to world leaders, Mbeki quotes various statistics and points out the following contradictions: "As you are aware, whereas in the West HIV and AIDS is said to be largely homosexually transmitted, in Africa, including our country, it is transmitted heterosexually."

(Viruses normally don't pick sides when it comes to sexual orientation.)

President Mbeki also points out that AIDS in the West affects only a minimal proportion of the population (far less than 1%), while in Africa it is projected to soon be our number one economic enemy and the number one cause of death.

Mbeki argues that Africa would therefore necessarily have to take responsibility and find its own solution, which would be different from the Western methods, and that this is the reason he called the

where there is so much dissent as now with AIDS."

Top South African investigative journalist, Martin Welz has researched and published numerous articles on the AIDS debate. I wanted to know how he summarised the evidence from both schools of thought. Is it possible that it could have been a lie?

"HIV/AIDS and AZT. Is it a hoax, is it a scam or is it just a terrible mess, a mistake? I think it is all three. Anyone can make a mistake, but a scam? That's unforgivable," says Welz.

A deliberate scam? That would be very difficult to prove, but "terrible mess" is much easier. Our statistics are an ambiguous mess. After researching the debate intensively for a year, it has become clear that everything we thought we knew about HIV/AIDS is simply not as black and white as we have been led to believe. It is, instead, a murky grey area which becomes murkier as politics, racism, emotion and lazy journalism each contributes.

Our doctors and experts are badly informed and don't tolerate any questions. I could not get a single scientific reference or study or photo out of them which would quickly prove that HIV causes

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panel in the first place.

"A simple superimposition of the Western experience on Africa would be absurdly illogical," says Mbeki, and defends his right to listen to all points of view. "Let's bring all viewpoints together and see what the outcome is. It is very worrying that there is a point of view that is prohibited and banned, and considered heretic, and it's all said in the name of science and health."

"Dissident" scientists regard President Mbeki as a hero, a brave visionary politician on the threshold of a historic scientific turning-point in history — as momentous as when Galileo declared the earth was round and moved around the sun. But the South African media and medical establishment at large believe Mbeki is ill-advised and regard the rebellious scientists as dangerous "pseudo-scientists".

Are they? I ask Dr Graeme Baker, editor of *The SA Journal of Science*, the top science journal in SA. "Well, no-one can fault their academic qualifications, but just because someone has won a Nobel prize for science, does not mean he is correct." Baker also says that this heated debate caught him off guard. "I have never in all my years encountered a topic

AIDS. Generalisation and criticism however was plentiful. "This is bad journalism! There is a lot of evidence! Those are stupid questions!" Maybe my questions are stupid, but Welz assures me they're not and points out that in the history of AIDS, there were questions from day one.

### The history of the debate

In the early 1980s, a small group of homosexual American men died inexplicably of collapsed immune systems. Their sexual behaviour was somehow associated with the new syndrome, although no one could explain exactly how. The American government was under great pressure from gay lobbies to do something about the problem.

At a press conference in 1984, the United States government and an American scientist, Dr Robert Gallo, announced to the world that they had "found the probable cause of AIDS". (The discovery was made in conjunction with French scientists.) Gallo did not explain how he arrived at this conclusion, but it didn't matter. Word spread overnight. The existence of a new killer virus, which wipes out promiscuous people, became an international media drama. The



word "probable" disappeared quickly and Gallo patented the first AIDS test almost immediately after the press conference. (It was later discovered that Gallo had "stolen" the findings of the virus from the French, a virus they themselves never claimed caused AIDS.)

The result of this announcement was that all further research ceased, which meant that no possible alternative explanation was investigated. Every research dollar was spent trying to fight the new "virus" — with expensive drugs.

"It is now 16 years later. More American tax dollars have been spent on HIV research and AIDS medicine (about \$50 billion) than any other disease in history. And how many lives have they saved? Not one. They haven't been able to save a single life," says Dr Peter Duesberg in dismay.



Duesberg was one of the first scientists to object to the new virus theory. This molecular biologist from Berkeley University was a giant in retro-virology at the time and was himself nominated for a Nobel prize. (HIV is said to be a retro-virus).

According to Robert Gallo's original research on 72 patients (mostly homosexual men), he found traces of the virus in only about a third of them. Duesberg's objection is that one cannot claim that a virus causes a specific disease if less than half of the patients are infected with the virus. If 100 people have polio, then one should be able to extract the polio virus from all 100 patients. It is the same with all viral diseases.

Duesberg points out that many of Gallo's patients did, however, have something else in common — a specific lifestyle which became prominent during that time. Recreational drug use, regular anal sex, bad diet, exposure to many contagious diseases in the public gay "bath houses", repeated sexually-transmitted infections like herpes and syphilis, and repeated courses of antibiotics to fight and prevent such infections. "With or without a virus, a lifestyle like that will wipe out your immune system," argues Duesberg.

Duesberg accepts that Gallo found something in his laboratory, but posits that the virus is a harmless passenger — the RESULT of a disease, not the CAUSE of it. He predicted back then that AIDS would not become an epidemic in America and that it wouldn't really spread outside its original homosexual risk group.

The most recent statistics from the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) confirm Duesberg's predictions. In a variety of published studies and articles, Duesberg points out that many AIDS patients test negative for HIV while other HIV positive patients remain perfectly healthy for many years, without any molecular viral activity. One possible explanation for this is that HIV could be a new type of "slow" virus, which could take years before attacking.

"There are no slow retro-viruses, only slow retro-virologists," Duesberg hits back. Duesberg lost his R2 million research grant due to his outspoken rebellion against the AIDS establishment. Yet in 1990, Dr Luc Montagnier, one of the co-founders of the virus admitted that "there are too many shortcomings in the theory that HIV causes all signs of AIDS." Nobody paid any attention.

Independently from Duesberg, Dr Kary Mullis also started asking questions in 1988 while doing AIDS research in Santa Monica. Mullis won the Nobel prize for his invention of Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR). This simple, but brilliant technique made it possible for scientists to selectively pick and mass copy DNA



segments. PCR was the conceptual root of Michael Crichton's best seller, *Jurassic Park*, and is now used by police for DNA "fingerprinting". PCR revolutionised genetic sciences and Mullis was immediately hired to do AIDS research.

"In my report, I started with the statement: 'HIV is the probable cause of AIDS', when I realised I didn't have a scientific reference to support the statement. I turned to the virologist at the next desk, a reliable and competent fellow, and asked him for a reference. 'You don't need a reference,' he told me. 'Everybody knows it.' I disagreed," says Mullis.

"After 10 or 15 meetings over a couple of years, I was getting pretty upset when no one could cite the reference. I didn't like the ugly conclusion that was forming in my head. Finally, I had the opportunity to question one of the giants in HIV and AIDS research, Dr Luc Montagnier. I figured Montagnier would know the answer, so I asked him. With a look of condescending puzzlement, Montagnier said: 'Why don't you quote the report from the CDC?' I replied: 'It doesn't really address the issue of whether or not HIV is the probable cause of AIDS, does it?' 'No,' he admitted, no doubt wondering when I would just go away. 'Why don't you quote the work on Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV)?' the good doctor offered. 'I read that too,' I responded, 'but what happened to those monkeys is not the same as AIDS. Besides, I'm looking for the original paper where somebody showed that HIV causes AIDS.' This time, Dr Montagnier's response was to walk away quickly to greet an acquaintance across the room."

Duesberg and Mullis met later. In a move that infuriated pharmaceutical companies, both declared that AZT itself is responsible for many AIDS deaths. Duesberg pointed out that AIDS deaths rose dramatically during 1987 and 1993 — the same period during which AZT was prescribed in high dosages. "We can't understand why doctors prescribe a toxic drug called AZT to people who have no other complaint than the presence of antibodies to HIV in their blood," says Mullis. "In fact, we cannot understand why humans would take AZT for any reason. We cannot comprehend how all this madness came about, and having both lived in California, we've seen some strange things indeed. We know that to err is human, but the HIV/AIDS hypothesis is

one hell of a mistake."

Dissident scientists feel that politics and massive vested financial interests from pharmaceutical companies have a lot more to do with AIDS science than a possible virus. They point out that the American AIDS "epidemic" just happened to coincide with the period in which the American government withdrew funding for cancer research, because nobody had made progress. "HIV didn't suddenly pop out of Haiti or an African rainforest. It just happened to pop into Bob's (Robert Gallo's) hands when he needed a new career," says Mullis.

Yet, invented or not, what is AIDS? A big point of contention is the definition of AIDS itself. Originally, the clinical definition included two possible diseases — in the presence of HIV. Over the years, more and more diseases were added. Mullis explains: "The CDC has virtually doctored the books to make it appear as if the disease is spreading. In 1993, the CDC

enormously broadened its definition of AIDS. This was happily accepted by health authorities, who receive \$2500 from the government for each reported AIDS case."

Indeed, in 1993, investigative journalists from ABC television trapped the CDC into admitting that they were exaggerating figures for fundraising purposes. Today, AIDS is any one or more of 30 possible diseases (in the presence of a positive HIV

test). These diseases include diarrhoea, tuberculosis and pneumonia. Cancer was recently added to the list. None of the diseases are new.

In Australia, another group of scientists stirred the waters by publishing a series of hard-hitting papers. "There is no evidence that HIV exists," declares Dr Valendar Turner and bio-physicist Eleni Eleopulos, from the Royal Perth Hospital. In a meticulously referenced paper and a presentation to the international AIDS conference in Geneva, Turner and Eleopulos mercilessly attack Gallo and Montagnier's original research and describe the AIDS tests as useless.

"Nobody, especially not Gallo, has been able to isolate HIV as a separate and new entity," argues the Perth Group. That explains why there are no proper Electron Micrograph (EM) photos of the virus. Virus isolation is one the most contentious and most basic aspects in the HIV debate.

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