

Does HIV mean certain death?

Neville Hodgkinson on a new film that challenges the tenets of the Aids religion and exposes the dangerous confusion at the heart of the industry

In the quarter century since the world was introduced to the idea that a new sexually transmitted virus was the cause of Aids, HIV has been generally regarded as one of the biggest killers of our time. HIV/Aids has not been the mass disease in Britain that people were led to believe in the 1980s, but the death toll from immune deficiency diseases ascribed to HIV in Africa has been staggering. The scale of death there is an ongoing tragedy that tests the moral resolve of the rich world. How much do we care? Enough to ask hard questions about it? Enough to challenge the orthodoxy about the treatment, diagnosis and even the causes of Aids?

Anyone who attempts to do so soon realises the limits of acceptable debate. The HIV/Aids industry has long had the characteris-

tics of a religion, but increasingly it is being revealed as a religion that has lost its way. Instead of fulfilling the legitimate purpose of inspiring charitable actions towards the millions in need, its most vocal representatives have become increasingly absorbed in denouncing 'heresies'. It seems their purpose is not so much to cure, but to close down debate.

A scientist, activist or politician who so much as questions the orthodoxy is swiftly labelled a fool; or worse, someone responsible for the deaths of thousands, even millions, around the world. Any suggestion that there might be more to the disease than simply HIV, particularly in Africa, was to risk, and increasingly to guarantee, swift denunciation as a 'denialist'. Once labelled in this way, the miscreant is considered beyond the pale of civilised society and scientific discourse. He is an idiot who can have his papers withdrawn, his funding cut off, and his contracts terminated. There have even been calls for denialists to be thrown in prison. This fervent self-righteousness, and the fear which accompanies it, has stifled scientific debate about Aids for years.

It is against this backdrop that Brent Leung, a young filmmaker, has released *House of Numbers*, a 90-minute documentary that presents such a strong and clear challenge to the orthodoxy that it demands our attention. It has picked up awards at five American film festivals, yet this acclaim followed a comprehensive trashing in sections of the mainstream media once the charge of 'denialist' was raised. It deserves to find a place in a wider scientific debate about Aids, rather than being lazily dismissed as a contribution to so-called 'denialism'.

Part of its power lies in the fact that it shows the lack of consensus about Aids and HIV. The founding fathers of the Aids-HIV link are interviewed, and shown to be dramatically at odds with one another, even over basic questions such as how to validate a diagnosis of HIV infection. Many of these leading figures tell us that infection with HIV means certain death: that once someone is infected through a single act of intercourse or a dirty needle, their immune cells are gradually killed off until they become defenceless against a wide range of conditions, eventually dying of full-blown Aids.

But this is dramatically challenged by Professor Luc Montagnier, awarded the

Nobel Prize last year for discovering what came to be known as HIV. Attempting to counter years of doom-laden interpretations of his team's findings, he tells Leung that a healthy immune system can quickly overcome the virus. His exchange with his interviewer is worth repeating here.

'We can be exposed to HIV many times without being chronically infected. Our immune system will get rid of the virus within a few weeks, if you have a good immune system,' the scientist says. Leung responds: 'If you take a poor African who's been infected and you build up their immune system, is it possible for them to also naturally get rid of it?' Nodding, Montagnier replies, 'I would think so.' Then: 'It's important knowledge which is completely neglected. People always think of drugs and vaccine.' Leung remarks that there is no money in nutrition. 'There's no profit, yes,' replies Montagnier.

When it comes to Aids, people also think in terms of statistics. The film takes its title from James Chin, former head of the World Health Organisation's global HIV statistics unit, who has been arguing for years that the United Nations figures have been inflated. Two years ago, the UN quietly admitted that this was indeed the case: Aids infections had peaked globally in 1998 and deaths peaked in 2005. At the time, Chin's verdict was that 'It's getting closer to what it ought to be, but it's still high. It seemed to me that that high-rise house of numbers had to crumble.' He estimates the total number of Aids cases at between 20 to 30 million — while the advocacy agency UNAIDS has claimed 42 million.

Many of the scientists interviewed — as I was — in *House of Numbers* have declared themselves opposed to the film. They did this without seeing it, on the basis of a trailer that made it clear Leung was not confining his narrative to the Aids orthodoxy as they had expected. Earlier this month, organisers of the Raindance film festival in London received floods of legal threats, emails, and hate 'tweets' opposing the documentary even being shown. Similar, though happily unsuccessful, efforts were made to have the film withdrawn from last month's Cambridge film festival.

I have much experience of being on the receiving end of the heretic hunt. As medical correspondent of the *Sunday Times* in the late 1980s, I reported Aids conventionally myself. I remember the missionary zeal with which I came back from the 1987 Global Conference on Aids in Washington. Aids reporting seemed more than a job; we actually had a chance to help save lives by warning that this deadly virus was spreading surreptitiously, gradually destroying the immune system of those infected, putting all sexually active people at risk.

On returning to the paper as science correspondent in 1991 after a two-year gap, however, it was becoming clear that the early predictions of spread were not proving accurate. Aids was remaining confined to groups with specific risks in their lives,

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An exclusive screening of the controversial documentary *House of Numbers* on Wednesday 28 October followed by a panel discussion during which the film-makers will face the leading medical authorities.



including drug abuse, promiscuous anal sex and multiple transfusions. I was sent to report from several African countries in an investigation lasting several weeks. In essence, I found that misdiagnosis was causing enormous distress, misplaced treatment, and tragic diversion of scarce resources.

Widespread misdiagnosis of a supposedly lethal infection has brought huge social disruption as well as tragic personal consequences. In poor countries, with the real causes of Aids often still not being addressed, much of the extra money is being spent on unvalidated test kits, inappropriate drugs, and condom campaigns that do not discriminate between safe and risky sexual practices.

Leung concludes in *House of Numbers*: 'The victims of HIV and the dedicated professionals combating it deserve our sympathy, compassion and respect. However, at journey's end, I find myself perplexed, bewildered at times, with an overall feeling of dismay and sadness. I found a research community in disarray over the most fundamental understanding of HIV, all the while presenting a monolithic public posture of authority and certainty.'

He goes further, claiming the HIV tests prove nothing, that some remedies kill, and that statistics have been manipulated to the point of absurdity. It is such conclusions that have drawn fire, but it is not only the interviews and the filmmaking that won the awards: Leung touches on a scientific critique that questions almost every aspect of Aids science, and which grips audiences that have been deprived for so long of any inkling that such questions have any validity.

This remarkable film offers a fresh opportunity for the scientific and medical communities to address the painful challenges it presents. Some \$200 billion of American taxpayers' money alone has gone into fighting HIV — in pursuit of the theory that HIV means Aids, which means death. Asking awkward questions, as Leung does, is free. But it is the latter which we still seem to have problems with.



'We're modernising the party.'

What makes them tick?

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David Moore is no stranger to success. This restaurateur has been awarded not one but three Michelin stars for his exclusive London eateries, Pied à Terre and L'Autre Pied.

But his career started off a long way from London. As a teenager in Blackpool he found himself catering for the elderly. 'I thought there had to be more to the restaurant business than that,' he says. So he enrolled on a HND course in catering at Blackpool College and quickly found himself working at the famous Box Tree restaurant in Ilkley, Yorkshire.

There Moore became friendly with the head chef. 'He told me that if I was serious about the restaurant business then I should get myself a job at Le Manoir.' And that's exactly what he did. 'I managed to get myself a job at Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir Aux Deux Saisons,' he recalls. 'Back in 1985 it really was the leading light in the catering world.' Six years later, with fantastic front-of-house experience behind him, it was time for Moore to set out on a restaurant of his own. Together with Richard Neal, a chef at Le Manoir, Moore opened Pied à Terre in Charlotte Street, London, in 1991.

'We were immediately successful,' Moore says proudly. 'In 1996, we achieved two Michelin stars.' But in 2004, a devastating fire shut down the restaurant until October 2005. But when it re-opened customers were impressed by the refurbishment, which saw the dining room extended.

Building on his achievements at Pied à Terre, Moores went on to open his second London restaurant, L'Autre Pied, with current business partner Shane Osborn, in 2007. This new venue in the capital quickly picked up a host of awards, including Best New Restaurant at the Time Out London Eating and Drinking Awards in 2008. But its highest accolade to date is the Michelin star it achieved in its opening year.

February 2009 saw the opening of Van Zeller restaurant in Harrogate, Yorkshire, whose chef, Tom Van Zeller, is backed by Moore. 'It's doing brilliantly,' says Moore. 'It's very popular and we're hoping it will achieve a Michelin star one day as well.'

David Moore's success can be put down to two qualities. The first is his motivation to make sure that he and his team achieve the best they can every day. 'We want to give the best possible service and the best possible food that we can. Coming to work is a joy. It's a passion: a vocation. And that's the same across all three restaurants.'

The second secret of his success may sound



simple, but Moore says it is crucial. And that secret is his timekeeping. 'I can't think of another industry where timekeeping is anywhere near as important as it is to the restaurant business,' he says. 'From the moment customers arrive in your restaurant, everything has to conform to a time frame. You have to be watching the clock constantly to make sure that everything runs smoothly.'



Moore has even introduced schedules for his front-of-house staff that insist on customers having their drinks order taken and their being presented with the menu within a strict time-frame — get this right and the customer is relaxed, on your side and has faith that the meal will go well, he says. Timekeeping in a restaurant is all-important. He adds: 'It's easier for a poor restaurant to be successful if it has good timing than a good restaurant that suffers bad timing.'

David Moore will feature as a restaurant inspector in the new series of Raymond Blanc's *The Restaurant*, which starts on BBC2 on Thursday 29 October.

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