Editor’s Letter

Body of Evidence

January 1, 2009 By Regan Hofmann

Since it was first discovered in 1981, AIDS has caused a storm of controversy and conspiracy theories. Did the disease originate from a government experiment gone wrong? Is it nature’s response to overpopulation? Or the brainchild of pharmaceutical companies trying to create a self-perpetuating world market? Are they hiding the cure? Enigmas have long been part of the HIV/AIDS legacy. And wherever there is uncertainty, there is room for interpretation—and speculation. Doubt is rich soil for the imagination.

Arguably, a tremendous amount of money could be made from not ending AIDS. Considering that an estimated 33 million people live with HIV around the world, most of whom will arguably require treatment to survive—every day, for the rest of their lives, which, thanks to treatment, could be long indeed—AIDS is lucrative business. Knowing that AIDS meds offer among the highest profit margins in pharmaceutical history (even after their research and development costs have been paid off), is it unreasonable to ask whether some people would like to see the epidemic rage on indefinitely?

Add to these questions the stigma that continues to swirl around HIV/AIDS—resulting in suggestions that people with HIV did something “wrong” or “deviant” to contract the disease and therefore deserve to die—and it’s no surprise that skeptics still wonder whether anyone’s really trying to stop this sucker once and for all.

Does it pay to cure AIDS? I’d like to believe that we live in a compassionate world. But I don’t have the definitive answer. So I posed the question to Kevin Frost, a man who is not afraid to admit his organization is actively looking for the cure. As CEO of the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR), Frost helms one of the richest foundations funding global AIDS research. As you’ll see from my interview with him, “Your Money or Your Life,” Frost believes it does indeed pay to cure AIDS—from both a humanitarian and a financial standpoint. The truth, he says, is that we simply cannot afford not to cure AIDS. The health care costs for people living with HIV impose a staggering economic burden on governments. And it’s getting more expensive by the day.

Even if, hypothetically, some evil mind helped spawn this disease for financial reasons—AIDS will create a $10.6 billion market by the year 2015—it has become clear that the cost of not curing AIDS far outweighs any revenue it generates.

Our other feature story, “Out on a Limb,” explores whether primate research is the most promising, and economically viable, path to new treatments—and the cure. New scientific developments and pledges for higher levels of spending on primate research by the National Institutes of Health have drawn our attention to this difficult topic. It is not easy for me, an HIV-positive woman who is also a huge animal lover, to process the many conflicts inherent in experimenting on animals to find a cure for a disease that threatens my life. Again, I don’t pretend to have the answers. I only know that it is important to ask whether we must use chimps (arguably, the very source of HIV infection if you believe the scientists) to help find the cure. And, if so, how can we best do that while inflicting minimal pain and suffering on primates in a research setting-—if that is even possible?

It’s time for the world to up the ante in the race for the cure. We must apply as much brain power, determination, compassion and cash as is humanly possible. Because when the cure for AIDS is found, the whole world will be richer for its loss.

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