Mailbox

February 1, 2001 By Staff

The Plot Thickens

Much praise to *POZ* for LeRoy Whitfield's "The Secret Plot to Destroy African Americans" (December 2000). The black population in this country has had centuries of experience in dealing with the white power structure -- leaving them with the message that things frequently are not what they seem. We have to deal with these perceptions, whether they are accurate or not. Whitfield's detailed and informed article helps to keep the discourse alive.

-- Frank Spring, New York City

I've been an African-American male for as long as I can remember, and I've heard conspiracy theories for nearly as long. I had written these off as paranoid and delusional, but LeRoy Whitfield's article forced me to rethink everything. I can't subscribe to the notion that the government is plotting to eliminate African Americans, but I no longer relegate conspiracy theorists to a padded cell. We formulate theories to make sense of the unexplainable. No one wants to be at odds with the rest of the world, but sometimes a truth looms larger than social acceptance. Whitfield's article opened my eyes.

-- Rodney Snell, Via the Internet

The story reads like a tense drama and provides useful information that I will be discussing, debating and passing on to others.

-- Chardell Lassiter, Brooklyn, New York

LeRoy Whitfield's article was informative, challenging and moving, but I can't say I enjoyed it. It was as depressing as many other parts of my job that relate to HIV. It frustrates me to hear that African Americans are being misinformed by their own leaders as well as by white folks like Peter Duesberg, and it shocks me to learn that 54 percent of African Americans view HIV testing as a plot to infect them. Within the HIV research world where I work, disinformation about HIV is considered fringe stuff that science doesn't need to address. It's tragic to learn that this "fringe stuff" has such lethal effects.

-- Brian Foley, Los Alamos, New Mexico

As a 22-year-old incarcerated HIV counselor, I was happy to read LeRoy Whitfield's article. I am

tired of people babbling about “HIV is biowarfare aimed to eliminate blacks” or “it comes from monkeys” or any of the rest of it. These babblers should help prevent the infection of our African-American youth -- who have the highest rate of infection -- instead of running their mouths. While they do, our future is dying.

It doesn’t matter where HIV came from. It’s here -- and the only way to stop it is education and prevention.

-- Melchion Eastman, Fishkill Correctional Facility, Beacon, New York

LeRoy Whitfield had the opportunity to tell the truth and he side-stepped that duty. A high percentage of black people believe their government is trying to kill them. I showed Whitfield my chart, which connects 20,000 scientific papers over 15 years, and which I believe represents the “missing link” in absolute proof of the laboratory origin of AIDS. He failed to mention it. He also cast me as crazy in order to demean the evidence. His article was written to mislead the American people about the concrete evidence of a federal virus-development program. His gross failure to try to verify my hypothesis only assists the continuation of AIDS, consistent with the “house Negroes” of slavery vintage. The truth is that according to her government, Precious ain’t.

-- Boyd E. Graves, JD, Cleveland

LeRoy Whitfield responds: *No doubt Graves’ claims deserve further investigation. However, the point of my article was to examine how the long history of government malevolence and the notion of black genocide affects AIDS treatment choices in our community -- not to answer definitively whether the government created the virus or not. As to Graves’ personal attack: I’m not serving anyone’s agenda, including his.*

Come Clean

We prisoners go through the same struggles as the people featured in “Clean, Sober...and Medicated” (December 2000). Kudos to Richard Elovich for highlighting the problems of those kicking drugs and using them to treat HIV at the same time. Many prisoners participate in drug programs, and if we’ve got neuropathy, TB or hepatitis, we’re on pain meds, too. And the drug programs almost always take a back seat to the need for the meds.

I’m lucky to have an outside sponsor who helps me through the tight spots. My hat is off to everyone on the outside who is trying to balance taking necessary meds with recovery.

-- Philip Duke Grey, Stiles Unit, Department of Corrections, Beaumont, Texas

Partially Positive?

“Mystery AIDS Cases” (“The Viral Lowdown,” December 2000) came at just the right time for me: I recently learned from my doctor that three separate labs have declared my case “indeterminate” after I’d lived with a positive diagnosis since 1992. Now I am asked to live with the huge question -- Am I or am I not? -- while the researchers stall until they can figure out how to make money off

my “scientific conundrum.” I am profoundly grateful to *POZ* for shedding light on a very dark area at this moment.

-- Loreen Willenberg, Los Angeles

Election Daze

I appreciated the fine coverage in *POZ* of the presidential election (November 2000). Though there wasn’t much of a choice, George W. Bush as president will be disastrous for PWAs. I fear that many HIVers are so wrapped up in themselves and their meds that they didn’t get off their asses to vote.

On another note, I get tired of reading about the HIV dissidents and those who always complain that the available meds are failing. Many of us have been on these meds for years and are doing well, so they’re not failing everyone.

-- Charles Moore, Evanston, Illinois

Rudy Toot

As soon as I got my November 2000 *POZ*, I read “As Cool As Ice,” Shana Naomi Krochmal’s article on Rudy Galindo. I admire Galindo for his skating and even more for his honesty about his HIV status. Four years ago, I found out that I am HIV positive, but I was lucky: My partner gave me a lot of support. He had AIDS and died in 1997, leaving me feeling very much alone with the virus. What keeps me going is my deathbed promise to him to dedicate the rest of my life to AIDS education.

One message for Galindo: Don’t worry about remaining single and celibate. There are plenty of people who love you for who you are. Being honest about being positive doesn’t have to be negative. And keep on tearing up that ice!

-- Harry Zelhofer, Madison, Wisconsin

Digs Riggs

Robert Penn (“Film Noir,” November 2000) perfectly described the experience of viewing Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied*: “I literally felt my isolation fade.” Watching the film, I realized I wasn’t alone and finally acknowledged the fear running through my blood. I discovered I was positive in 1986, and the film seemed to parallel my existence. It was the validation I needed to get involved, and my activism continues to this day.

-- Guy C. Madison, Sacramento, California

Slash and Sniff

Usually after I read POZ I am so disheartened and discouraged by all the bad news that I want to go out and buy a bouquet of camellias to sniff while I slash my wrists. The November 2000 issue was an exception. Many articles had upbeat themes, and those that didn’t seemed to temper their doom and gloom with more balance than usual. *POZ* should remember that there *is* life after a positive HIV test, and not all of it is spent in the doctor’s office! I’m positive since 1982, have had

AIDS since 1998 and don't plan on dying until 2041.

-- Tony Smith, New Orleans

Culture Shock

Emily Carter's column "Patriot's Day" left me irritated at such ignorance and arrogance (November 2000). As an African, I ask Carter to walk in my shoes before comparing American and African attitudes toward PWAs. Gugu Dlamini may have been physically killed by a bunch of hoodlums, but her real killer is the U.S. government. Until we have what American PWAs have, disclosure must not be forced on us. Stop the hypocrisy: People in the U.S. get killed for being black or gay, too, not to mention for having HIV. AIDS is a desperate disease, and it brings strange reactions from people all over the world.

-- Chatinkha Nkhoma, Silver Spring, Maryland

Emily Carter responds: *My piece was intended as satire -- an elbow in the ribs of my fellow Americans, pointing out how cushy we have it, to get us to stop whining.*

Top Chat

POZ should be commended for listing chat rooms and personal ads for HIVers searching for partners ("Love Connection," November 2000). Readers can also check out the Positive Living Room (an HIV support room) at PlanetOut. The room is hosted nightly and open 24 hours a day, and it welcomes people of all genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities and ages -- affected as well as infected. Join us!

-- PNO MYSTIC, Positive Living Room ChatHost, Via the Internet

Ain't That a Bush

I happened to be watching the Presidential debate and opening the mail at the same time. When I opened the November 2000 *POZ*, I came face to face with George W. on the cover. Timely, to say the least! Looking at Dubya, I shuddered to think that yet another Bush might move into the White House. The *POZ* cover was a reminder of whose hands are drenched in the blood of all those who have perished in this epidemic.

-- Michael Connett, Via the Internet

Never-Ending Gendin

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the photo of Stephen Gendin dead ("Missing in Action," October 2000). He was my hero‹a voice that always translated my feelings and thoughts. After all the years I've been reading POZ, Stephen was like a beloved friend. Deep inside me I will stay in silence for a very long time, remembering him. Kisses from Rio for all the staff.

-- Luiz Cludio Magalhaes, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

I didn't know Stephen Gendin, though our paths may well have crossed. Perhaps he visited friends on the AIDS unit at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City, where I worked as a staff nurse during the years when it wasn't uncommon to lose 20 patients a month. I will miss reading Stephen's insightful, fact-based skepticism, his relentless questioning that is so lacking in this age of complacent reliance on compliance.

Today, instead of teaching AIDS 101, I increasingly find a need for AIDS History 101. Few of my clients even know what ACT UP is. They lament being "guinea pigs" but have never been in a place where they needed to try anything at all to stay alive -- even stomach tubes to get meds into ravaged upper GI tracts. Like Stephen, I mourn the loss of activism that kept people alive and convinced me that there is a hell of a lot more to us than our physical feelings. From our weary bodies come the strongest spirits and the loudest roars. Once set free by relentless inquiry, the most horrific fears dissolve into boundless love.

-- Lee Raden, RN, ACRN, Manager, Client Health Services, Rivington House Adult Day Health Care Program, New York City

Reading of Stephen Gendin's death reminds us that access to AIDS treatments is not enough. From being positive we have learned that we have to stop fighting AIDS as a virus. AIDS is a syndrome. We shouldn't throw out HAART, but all the other pieces of the puzzle should be investigated, including the observations of dissident camps.

We've all become too complacent about death. We need a new kind of activist -- one motivated by compassion, not, as Larry Kramer says, by fear; one not easily subdued by marketing disguised as science or treatments du jour.

-- Rev. Alexander R. Garbera and James F. Taylor, West Haven, Connecticut

Taking Issue

Larry Kramer's comments ("Be Very Afraid," October 2000) made me even more fearful than usual. I am 39 and have been positive since 1987. I have been in countless anti-HIV drug studies, and I would like to think that as a result there are now drugs out there for others to try so they can extend their lives, too. I have had all the side effects: vomiting, loose bowels, no appetite and others I don't even care to mention. But with all of this I believe I have been able to extend my life.

In 1996, when I was near death, the thought of living this long was only a dream. Please don't allow Kramer or anyone else to undersell the contribution people like me are trying to make in the battle against HIV. I hope all the ups and downs of this journey will help some HIVer someday bear a slightly lighter burden because I was a guinea pig who took the first step.

-- Samuel McCormick, Laurinburg, North Carolina

I can't concur with Larry Kramer's call to arms. I don't think we honor Stephen Gendin's memory if we risk our health and the future of antiretroviral therapy by not taking our meds or participating

in research. As a member of ACT UP/Dallas in its heyday and now a clinical trials coordinator, I think we need to protest greed and inhumane drugs -- but we also need to recognize that we do have some friends in Big Pharma.

-- Sue Gibson, Dallas

Gap Rap

Joseph Sonnabend, MD, a founder of New York City's PWA Health Group, said that the group served its purpose and is no longer needed (Milestones, October 2000). I would say that the closing of the health group and its buyers' club has left a huge hole in the network of service for our community. When DAAIR (Direct Access to Alternative Information and Resources) undertook to fill the gap by providing the medicines and supplements once carried by the health group, we were inundated with phone calls and requests. It shows that no matter how much progress is made, there's still an overwhelming need for the help and services provided for us by our own grass-roots organizations.

-- Mark Niedzolkowski, DAAIR, New York City

Just for Fungus

"The Funky Fungus Among Us" (September 2000) might make some patients think they should not take antifungal therapy, such as itraconazole or fluconazole, because of resistance in candida. But at least one study *POZ* cited was performed before we had effective antiretroviral therapy for patients with advanced HIV disease. Patients today no longer suffer from chronic, persistent and recurring fungal infection, and no longer have to take the "azole" drugs continuously. That's why resistance occurred at the time of the study (though it was still relatively rare: about 5 percent). With the current lower likelihood of resistance, patients should be less concerned about the problem and should not avoid the drugs when they are needed. The "azole" drugs continue to have an important role in the management of fungal infections in patients with HIV.

-- William G. Powderly, MD, Co-Chief, Infectious Diseases Division, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, Missouri

Attitude Adjustment

When I tested positive in June 1998, I felt so alone and scared that I tried to kill myself. I began abusing drugs and got locked up. I still felt alone -- my attitude was "What are they going to do by locking me up? I'm dying anyway." Then a friend sent me *POZ*. I know now that I am not alone. I am grateful to everyone at *POZ* for giving me my life back again.

-- Russell Wayne Faschingbauer, Rosharon, Texas

Care to Share

I found a copy of *POZ* in a library here -- placed there, perhaps, especially for those of us who need urgent help. My twin sister tested HIV positive a year ago, but we cannot get the protease inhibitors and other drugs you have in America. Together we are trying to raise money to buy

these drugs so that my sister will live. We were only born two, and I do not want to lose her. I sign my name in tears.

-- Brenda S. Mukande, Tsumeb, Namibia

***POZ* Responds:** *"Share the Health" (December 2000) lists U.S.-based groups that collect and distribute AIDS meds to HIVers around the world, including the African AIDS Network, 530 Divisadero St., P.M. Box 256, San Francisco, CA 94117 (415.440.3722). Or email at lwildes@aiseti.org*

Corrections: *An editing error in Doug Ireland's "Grin and Cast It" (November 2000) misrepresented Sen. Joe Lieberman's voting record on needle exchange, reporting that Lieberman has voted against exchange in the past three years. In fact he voted for it, although he had consistently voted against it in the past.*

Sustiva Note: *In "Be Very Afraid" (October 2000) Larry Kramer's claim that "Sustiva is one of the most inhumane medicines ever launched into the bloodstream of man," struck fear in the hearts of some Sustiva-takers. For a fuller portrait of the pluses and minuses of this drug, see "Side FX 2000" (September 2000), or try Project Inform at 205 13th St., #2001, San Francisco, CA 94103, (415.558.8669), or click at www.projinf.org, or try the Sustiva site, www.sustiva.com.*

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