The Rath of Con

Vitamin guru Matthias Rath joins South African Leaders to further foil a long delayed HIV-med rollout

July 1, 2005 By Gus Cairns

Matthias Rath, MD, ain't your ordinary zillionaire Internet vitamin mogul. Since the mid-'90s, the German-born Rath has led a worldwide crusade to take down big pharma, pushing nutrients as an AIDS cure-all and dissing what he considers noxious meds. "Fighting for a medical breakthrough against existing interests and dogmas is like sailing on the ocean," the dapper Rath, 50, writes on his website (he wouldn't comment for POZ). "The wind that blows in your face becomes your compass." Since 2002, Rath has placed many pricey full-page ads in the New York Times and other international publications, insisting that the War on Terror and even the attacks of 9/11 were engineered by a drug cartel involving everyone from George W. Bush to the United Nations. The alleged cartel's goal, he contends, is to keep the world buying patented drugs. Now he's rejuvenating AIDS denialism—a movement that has long plagued both HIV-prevention and-treatment efforts by arguing that HIV doesn't cause AIDS—and befriending South Africa's government, where he's battling a lawsuit filed by AIDS activists and hindering a long-delayed med rollout. "Rath's disinformation campaign provides more openings for others who are undermining efforts to information campaign provides more openings for others who are undermining efforts to scale up treatment access," says U.S. Health Gap treatment activist Asia Russell. "When disinformation is spread at the [grassroots] level, treatment advocates worldwide have to band together and oppose it."

That the South African government should welcome Rath's preposterous theories—say, that micronutrients alone can cure AIDS—is hardly surprising. President Thabo Mbeki has long publicized his own doubts that HIV causes AIDS, and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, MD—who touts lemon juice, olive oil and beets as med alternatives—said May 5 that she was "not happy" that 42,000 positive South Africans were finally getting antiretrovirals (ARVs). (The nation has the world's largest number of HIVers at 5.6 million.) At a recent pro-Rath rally, 100 members of South Africa's Traditional Healers Organization showed support. One South African former nurse, Tine van der Maas, even claims to have treated 40,000 patients with lemon and olive oil. "[Anti-Rath activists] talk about how ARVs can slow the disease, but we can actually reverse it," she told Gay.com. "We've had patients with a CD4count of 1 whose count is now 780." Nathan Geffen of South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) responds, "I'm sure that if you give people proper nutrition and tender loving care, some will rebound for a while. But people need good nutrition and ARVs."

Rath is best known for his work in the ’80s with the late Nobel laureate physicist Linus Pauling, who was trying to prove that vitamin C could remedy everything from colds to cancer. Rath mounted ad campaigns in Britain, Switzerland and Germany from 2000 till 2002, claiming his $30-a-month multivitamins could cure heart disease and cancer. The UK Advertising Standards Authority censured his leaflets; the Swiss Cancer League called his claims objectionable; and in Germany, Rath is involved in an investigation with the death of a 9-year-old boy with bone cancer (he’d convinced the parents that his supplements worked better than chemotherapy). When South African authorities censured Rath’s ads for AIDS cure-alls there last summer, he leafleted townships, alleging that activist pioneers TAC paid demonstrators “to march against our government on behalf of foreign pharmaceutical multinationals.” Says Geffen, “At first we thought his ads were too insane to bother with. Then people started calling in and saying they’d stopped taking their ARVs because of Rath. We felt we had to take action.”

Led by PWA Zackie Achmat, TAC sought a court injunction to stop Rath from defaming TAC as a pharma front in his ads and also demanded his arrest for illegal medical experimentation. “We believe he has broken criminal law in distributing unregistered medicines and conducting a trial without the approval of our Medical Research Council,” Geffen says. (At press time, the hearing was about to take place.) But Rath has made other enemies, too: The World Health Organization, United Nations and UNICEF issued this statement on March30: “[We] have condemned the irresponsible linking of our names to claims that vitamins and nutrition therapy alone can prevent AIDS deaths.” While Rath has yet to seduce the American HIV community, he maintains an office in Santa Clara, California, and ran an ad in May in the New York Times headlined “Stop AIDS Genocide by the Drug Cartel.”

Rath’s South African spokesman Anthony Brink, a lawyer who has long campaigned against AIDS meds, says, “As a journalist, you’re either hip to colossal, murderous fraud or you’re not. Mbeki is; Tshabalala-Msimangis; and the highest level of [our government] is, thanks to the blood I sweated laying it bare virtually alone in South Africa for a decade—till this year when I ran into this radical doctor from Germany.”

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