Dead Denialist Redux

August 30, 2021 By Shawn Decker

In the late 90s and into the 2000s, the bane of the HIV positive community's existence were the denialists: people with HIV who denied the existence of HIV. Or if it existed, they claimed it was harmless. And they claimed that it was the HIV medications that had always made people sick, not the much-maligned and unfairly persecuted virus itself.

The strategy within the community was to ignore them. Sure, they'd prey on the gullible, the scared and the paranoid among us, but trying to convince a denialist of anything other than their Jenga-stable belief system and worldview was pointless. The most frustrating aspect was the breathless eagerness of the national media to put a microphone in front of these people, which amplified their message. Hell, at one point even perennial good guy Dave Grohl was intrigued by what they had to say. (The Foo Fighter distanced himself from them once he became aware of the insidious effect of their programming.)

In time, the most vocal of the denialists succombed to the effects of untreated HIV. Their faithful claimed their deaths had nothing to with HIV, or AIDS. They just had the misfortune of being blindsided by an opportunistic infection that someone with a healthy immune system would not die from. And that, my friends, is why most of the community steered clear of communicating with denialists. It was equally frustrating on face value and heartbreaking the more you thought about it.

I remember having a friendly discourse with a denialist over email. We communicated about a lot of things, but never got into HIV and denialism. Eventually, of course, he had to go there. After he brought it up, I explained that I'd be dead if I hadn't started on HIV drugs when I did. Which was way later than I should have- there was no need to lose 30 pounds and let my t-cells dwindle from 150 to 38. But as I've explained before, I come from the perspective of living with HIV that involves me being infected through blood product treatments for hemophilia during the earliest days of the epidemic. I'd also been infected with hepatitis B and C in the same manner.

So, naturally, at the time and being in my early 20s, I was a bit cautious where medical solutions were concerned. Still, there really was no decision to be made by the time I started on HIV medications, and truth be told, I was pretty lucky that I didn't pay a higher price for delaying treatment about four months longer than I should have.

Anyhoo, my denialists friend was going on about how party drugs, excessive sex and HIV drugs were the real reason why people got sick. I pointed out that I'd never done drugs, HIV or

otherwise, and I got sick. He stammered a bit before landing on, "... maybe you had low self-esteem." That pissed me off, because I was in my early 20s and at the time I thought I was pretty fucking awesome. The friendship fizzled after the exchange ended and we realized our attitudes on HIV were too big of a bridge to successfully continue our discourse on email.

Fast forward to modern times, and anti-vaxxers are the new flavor of denialism. Of course, AIDS denialists aren't entirely gone, they've mostly transformed into salesmen for bogus miracle cures... sound familiar?

Every day, it seems, I'm learning about someone's existence purely because of their demise. A champion of the anti-vaccine movement dying from the condition they said did not exist, or that the vaccine is what you should really be worried about. As an educator, it's hard not to be relieved on some level that their platform to distribute harmful information to a gullible, scared and paranoid audience has been vacated. Intellectually, I know that anyone who bought in to that messaging will just claim that it wasn't really COVID-19 that killed them... when your belief system isn't grounded in facts, it's easy to just uproot your base beliefs and replant them somewhere else.

As a human being, I'm always in search of the truth. I'm constantly doubting myself. If you asked me how many toes I have I'd say, "... ten?" because, well, my feet are under my socks and shoes and I shouldn't assume they're all still there. Also, is the big toe actually considered a toe? Or is it like the thumb, where it has a special designation, "digit", that seperates it from its neighbors? Also, I was watching the Olympics and the divers were doing handstands before they shoved off from the platform to work their spinny magic. "Look how stable she is in her arm stand..." the announcer said.

"ARM STAND?! That's a HAND stand!"

All the dives look like tens to me, a self-proclaimed cannonball expert, but by damn I know a fucking handstand when I see one.

And that's kind of the point of all of this, if there is one. I try to look at my own medical history and attitude about medication to understand why people are so fearful of a vaccine that so many other people have already received. I also realize how close to the end I came, because I was afraid of the side effects of HIV more than the effects of the actual virus which, in 1999 when I finally started treatment, were becoming all too clear.

That's why I try to temper my fleeting, initial joy at the news of a stranger's passing. The older I get, the less I think people can change. But I know, intellectually, it happens all of the time. Life is a strange journey, and when that journey ends for someone so does all of the possibilities or where their life could have ended up. I have family members that are conservative, and I love them because I know them on a deeply personal and soulful level. The people who have left this world as the echoes of their harmful misinformation campaign still resonate leave behind devastated loved ones...

Facts ground us all. Empathy and compassion are two human qualities that are more likely to bring us together than they are to tear us apart. I’m far from a master of my emotions, as evidenced above, but I try to think of the possibilities of the world we live in when the realities seem like a sledgehammer to the spirit.

In the end, we all want to be right about everything. But being wrong shouldn’t cost you your life when the solution is a carride to the drugstore away.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/dead-denialist-redux