Gorillas in our Midst

August 3, 2009 By Paul Dalton

This story from CNN.com announces the discovery of a new strain of HIV. Briefly, scientists have identified a 4th major type of HIV-1, this one originating from gorillas, unlike the previously identified strains that came from chimpanzees.

What does this mean? Likely not much, but it warrants keeping an eye on.

This discovery will likely be mostly of interest to few. It isn't likely to change the epidemic in any meaningful way- and if it does, it would take years and years before that became true.

It interests me because it deepens our understanding of the origin of HIV. Where HIV came from, how and when it jumped to humans and how it grew to a world wide pandemic are fascinating questions.

Many people favor conspiratorial approaches to understanding complex questions, I favor natural explanations. In the HIV world, we are beset by a group of flat-earthers who believe that HIV was cooked up in a lab by evil government or pharmaceutical or illuminati agents. This world view is not restricted to HIV- apparently as the Swine Flu epidemic is hitting Argentina quite hard, various forms of denialism are rearing their cretinous heads- saying either the virus was engineered by big Pharma, or by the vaccine makers, or as a social control mechanism- or all of the above.

To me this is anthropocentric hubris- the fatally flawed belief that humans are the center of the world. We are certainly special creatures- capable of much. But our influence is much more limited than we tend to think. The microbial world is more complex, varied and impactful than any of us can likely imagine. I like to point out to people that our bodies have 10 times as many microbial cells than human cells. Our planet is not really ours- we are just bit players in a much bigger, more interesting story.

I don't choose to see 'nature' or 'the earth' in human-centric terms (mother earth, gia, father sun...). We are of nature, it is not of us. I am certain that humans are capable of the kind of evil that would brew up a deadly virus and seek to use it to harm whole populations. I am also certain that viruses have been morphing long before human avarice was a sly glint in a troglodyte's eye. Again with Occam's Razor- the simplest explanation is most often the correct one.

So, we have another strain of HIV to study. And study it we will.

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