Harrumph

September 23, 2008 By Paul Dalton

I jealously guard my evening free time. So, however much I am an AIDS activist, I was not happy to find myself in the back of a nearly empty room at the SF LGBT Center, harrumphing and scoffing my way through an evening presentation by one of Dr. Matthias Rath?s soft-denialist henchmen. But I pulled my cranky pants on, and soldiered over to the Center to fight the good fight.

Why would a sane and perpetually busy AIDS activist like myself spend his evening with a dozen or so folks listening to a kindly-seeming gentlemen extol the virtues of vitamins and other micro-nutrients? Because denialism equals death.

Dr. Matthias Rath is what I call a soft denialist. Unlike their harder kin like Duesberg and Maggiori, Rath doesn?t outright deny either the existence of HIV nor its role in HIV disease and AIDS. Rather, he and his ilk take a more insidious, and probably no less harmful tack of championing the potential of ?natural molecules? over ?toxic anti-retrovirals? to treat HIV.

You would think I would be fairly sympathetic to this sort of thinking- I am a vegetarian after all, and as I wrote about here , my dearest friend is an acupuncturist. Indeed my friends are more prone to boil pots of noxious eastern herbs, or swallow droppers full of tincture of whatnot than to crack open a pharmaceutical pill bottle.

And in fact, I do not discount the healing power of plants. The other night, my roommate David and I were recounting the moment when he fully grasped the medicinal value of marijuana. It was back in 1996 or 7, and we were on a camping trip with my daughter and her Mother. We were on our way home, and stopped near a stream to have lunch. I was hurting. These were my Crixivan days, full of nausea, vomiting, and general feeling ickyness.

I snuck away from my young daughter down the stream a bit, and took a couple of puffs from a pipe. A few minutes later, my color was normal, and I was able to eat. My daughter?s Mom, Kim had reason to be quite skeptical of marijuana, having seen it suck much of the life out of her sister. But she, and David were simply struck my the stark difference the plant made.

Plants were the first pharmaceuticals, and many drugs in wide use today have their origin in the earth?s flora. And as someone who struggled to hold down food for years on end, I viscerally understand the effects of malnutrition.

But I didn?t go to see Rath?s acolyte to learn- I went to challenge and even to disrupt. Rath is a sworn enemy of South Africa?s Treatment Action Campaign, the worlds most important AIDS activist

organization. He and his henchmen tell people that anti-retrovirals are toxic, and unnecessary- that to be well all you have to do is, you guessed it, take their magic formula of vitamins and other micro-nutrients.

Rath himself wasn?t there, but one of his ?researchers? was. He was a bit of a stumblebum, possessing neither charisma nor scientific acumen.

He presented a hodgepodge of data purporting to illustrate the power of micronutrients. Most of the data were reasonable, but few of the conclusion he drew were. For example he cited a interesting little study about selenium supplementation. The study showed that giving people with low blood selenium labels daily supplements led to a stabilization of HIV levels and a modest increase in CD4 count. His slide said that daily selenium supplementation was proven to lower viral load and increase CD4 count.

I repeatedly challenged him throughout the night. At one point, a woman sitting close to the front of the room turned to me and told me to shut up. ?He is doing great work? she said, and raised he hands over head and applauded- a few in the audience joined in. I asked her why she thought he was doing good work. She said that it was because we are all brothers and that eating poorly and improper nutrition is the cause of all disease. I asked her point blank- do you mean that if people with HIV- like myself- were to stop taking our meds and just eat right (and I presume take Rath?s special vitamins) we would be better off. She said yes.

There are many other examples of similar numbskullery I could recount, but there is no need. There are two simple points for me. First, as I wrote about recently there is no such thing as alternative or holistic or western or eastern or natural or allopathic medicine- there is simple proven and non proven medicine. If scientifically sound, reproducible studies showed convincingly that rubbing mugwort on my pinky toe under a new moon reduced HIV levels by 1.9 logs, I would do it. Likewise, if there weren?t compelling evidence that convinced me that swallowing thousands of dollars worth of pills each year was keeping me alive, I wouldn?t do it.

My second point is that science can not be entrusted to true believers. People who have a vested interest, whether it be financial or intellectual, in the outcome of research can not be the final word on the subject. Speaking broadly there are two types of research- discovery and confirmatory. True believers can and often do perform solid discovery research- the type that illuminated a previously unknown piece of information. What happens then is that others need to come in and test the findings- people who do not have the same kind of interest in the outcome.

When the oil industry shows us research that exonerates them from any role in global warming, we are naturally skeptical. When a pharmaceutical company shows us research supporting one of their products, we are properly skeptical. The same skepticism should be aimed at the world of vitamins, herbs, and the rest of it.

Hank Wilson, an old school AIDS activist sat next to me throughout the talk. At one point he reminded the audience that prior to HAART, many people with HIV in San Francisco tried every kind of natural approach to HIV. In fact we had a vibrant and bustling buyers club (the Healing Alternatives Foundation) and virtually a week didn?t go by without a talk on some sort of natural approach to combat HIV. He also reminded the audience that what changed the game was anti-retrovirals.

If I was writing the script, believe me the heroes wouldn?t come from big pharma. It would have been great if an herb, or a combination of vitamins had proven truly effective in reversing the course of HIV

disease. Outside of the investment community, big pharma has few true admirers and I am not one of them.

The truth is however the truth. It was big pharma that got the job done, and for that I am grateful. The beautiful thing about science is it cares not who you are- proof is proof. That isn?t to say that the playing field is level- clearly big pharma has resources that the rest of the world doesn?t. But lest you think that there is a heroic battle going on between the forces of good (the vitamin folks) and evil (big pharma), remember- the vitamin and natural medicine industry is a huge, largely unregulated cash machine.

Back to my original point- denialism equals death. Rath and his cronies are wreaking havoc in South Africa. The have run illegal clinical trials and fought tooth and nail against TAC and others who would dare question their validity. Rath is a very rich man, who is contributing to the suffering and needless of death of many in the area of the world that can least afford it.

That is why I spent my precious free time being a gadfly.

On a related note: Mbeki?s days are numbered- according to the newspaper exactly 2. The harm cause by his dalliance with denial is profound. I only wish his downfall had come much quicker.

and one last note: lest anyone think that natural medicine is harmless see this story below:

(09-22) 11:42 PDT JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) --

Thirteen members of the same family, including a two-week-old infant, have been found dead in their home after apparently taking herbal medicine, the South African Press Association said Monday.

The report said the Mazubane family was taking part in a traditional ritual over the weekend and may have taken the wrong herbs by mistake.

“It is alleged that one family member who was trained as a traditional healer gave them a certain herbal medicine which is suspected to have been the cause of the deaths,” SAPA quoted police spokeswoman Zandra Wiid as saying.

She said it was believed that a 17-year-old family member, a trainee traditional healer, had administered the deadly concoction.

“We don’t know what the purpose was for taking it, or if the family had been sick at the time,” Wiid said.

Many South Africans use herbal medicine and consult traditional healers in addition to Western style doctors.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.