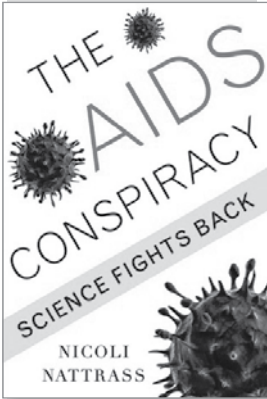


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THE AIDS CONSPIRACY:
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BOOK REVIEW

The AIDS Conspiracy: Science Fights Back by Nicoli Nattrass

History is punctuated with conspiracy theories, emerging anywhere from the fringes of society to its centres of power. With conspiracies around the moon landing, the Illuminati, UFOs, Elvis Presley and the assassination of John F. Kennedy to name a few, there seems to be a never-ending supply of people who ignore or reject scientific evidence. Some theories are more transient than others, and although many of them do deal with the death of one individual or another, the key difference between these and AIDS origin conspiracy theories is that they are generally not directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

AIDS denialism and AIDS origin conspiracy theories are nothing new. They have dominated the media and political discourse in the past, and are widely acknowledged as major contributors to South Africa's high HIV infection rate. The importance of Nattrass's contribution is a systematic analysis of the process, people involved and psychology of AIDS denialism. She examines the conspiracy theories related to its origins and the conditions necessary for them to spread.

As Director of the AIDS and Society Research Unit at UCT, and one of the few people to consistently make her voice heard against the rhetoric of AIDS denialism at a time when much of the South African academic community had become very quiet, Nattrass is eminently qualified to write a book on such matters.

The book is a substantial academic work, but at times still manages to read like a tale of intrigue. Packed with pages of detailed facts and analysis – not holiday reading – this book is an indispensable reference for those wanting to know more about the impact which catastrophic policy choices can make.

A general account of AIDS origin conspiracy theories, coupled with some of Nattrass's own empirical research, gives the book a platform to progress to detailing the often complex and interrelated dimensions of AIDS conspiracy theories and denialism. It is fascinating, but deeply disturbing, to read such a thorough account of the origins of AIDS conspiracy theories, their etiology, and the wind of whispers, half truths, delusion and pseudo-science that spreads the fire. Nattrass's detailed account of the scientific consensus on HIV and its origins is thus an important resource in this regard.

Progressing to the familiar story of Mbeki and his AIDS denialism, one can't be blamed for being overcome by frustration and depression when reading about the lunacy of the policy stagnation around this epidemic. It is difficult to know how to respond adequately to the debacle and the former president's involvement in it. One feels a mix of anger, disappointment and despair at the thought of what could have been avoided – hundreds of thousands of deaths. To be precise, Nattrass

notes that “about 180,000 new HIV infections and 333,000 deaths could have been prevented over the term of the Mbeki presidency”¹. She further explains that “this estimate of unnecessary loss of life only takes into account the cost of the delayed use of antiretrovirals. It does not include the ultimately unmeasurable impact that Mbeki may have had on the demand for antiretrovirals from individuals.”²

Nattrass discusses some of the possible reasons for Mbeki’s dissident behaviour and resistance to ARVs. Could it have been that government believed the drugs were simply not affordable, or that the ANC had a hand in the engineering of some sort of alternative remedy, or even that the whole thing just escalated out of Mbeki’s control, developing into a political power struggle between government and civil society? Regardless of these or more personal reasons, Nattrass notes that the fact of the matter is “South Africa’s AIDS policy tragedy is rooted in Mbeki’s involvement with AIDS denialism.”³ Whatever happened to accountability in all of this?

Although current leadership, under the watchful eye of civil society, appears to be reversing years of calcified policy on HIV/AIDS, there are clearly lessons for policy makers, not only in the arena of health. Peer reviewed scientific evidence must be carefully considered and skepticism and debate should be left to the academics. As Nattrass so clearly puts it, “It is one thing for academics to pose questions about different ‘ways of knowing’ and about the gaps and ambiguities within scientific ‘facts’ – but problems of an entirely different moral and social magnitude arise when policymakers adopt a form of postmodern skepticism to ignore or reject the best available evidence.”⁴

Moving on from Mbeki’s personal role in publicising AIDS denialism, Nattrass progresses to a discussion of the broader AIDS denialist community that keeps the movement alive, even if its propagators often end up prematurely dead (but of course none of them ever die of AIDS!). Nattrass divides the AIDS denialist community into four main categories, the ‘hero scientist’ who adds a measure of credibility, the ‘cultpreneurs’ (remember Mattias Rath) who offer alternative ‘solutions’ to ARVs, the ‘living icons’ who provide the proof that either the alternative therapies are successful or that AIDS doesn’t really exist anyway, and finally the ‘praise-singers’ who provide well-needed publicity for the AIDS denialist movement. Again, it is worth noting that not many of the ‘living icons’ are still around to tell their stories. Perhaps even more troubling are the many accounts of scientists and cultpreneurs who perpetuated the myths for their own financial gain, with scant regard for the damage caused, confusion spread, and potential for human death.

With South Africa’s new HIV/AIDS policy and heightened activity by the Department of Health to stem the tide of HIV infections, we might begin to feel that the era of AIDS denialism is behind us. However, from the recent debate in the letters section of the *Mail & Guardian*⁵ to the ill-informed utterances of a Zimbabwean MDC Senator advocating the need for women to dress less attractively, shave off their hair, bath less often and be circumcised in order to prevent the spread of HIV⁶, it appears that the struggle is far from over. As one *Mail & Guardian* letter writer states: “It takes only a few words to lie. It may take a lengthy, carefully constructed argument to refute the lie.”⁷ Nattrass’s systematic and detailed book provides just this type of important and much needed argument.

NOTES

1 Nattrass, N. 2012. *The AIDS Conspiracy. Science Fights Back*. Columbia University Press: New York, p89.

2 *Ibid*

3 *Ibid*, 105

4 *Ibid*, 77

5 ‘Letters to the editor: Back to denialism days’. *Mail & Guardian*, May 11 – 17 2012, p32.

6 New Zimbabwe. 12 May 2012. ‘HIV: Senator wants women to dress shabbily, bathe less’. Available from: <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-7947-HIV+Senator+wants+women+to+dress+shabbily,+bath+less/news.aspx> Accessed 14 May 2012.

7 ‘Letters to the editor: Back to denialism days’. *Mail & Guardian*, May 11 – 17 2012, p32.