

Malignant Narcissism in the Cancer Lab: Duesberg's AIDS Denialism Is Driven by Ego Inflamed by Professional Failures

Peter Duesberg, a professor of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of California, Berkeley, is widely regarded as the founder and core proponent of HIV denialism. When other scientists and clinicians who were initially cautious about accepting early reports that HIV exists and is the primary and necessary cause of AIDS were persuaded by the mounting evidence, Duesberg dug in, insisting without data that HIV is a harmless passenger virus. He attributed the explosive epidemic of compromised immune systems and AIDS-related illnesses and deaths in widely disparate populations with nothing in common but the virus—gay men, hemophiliacs, injection drug users, surgical patients who received transfused blood, infants born to women with HIV, health care workers stuck by needles, heterosexually active South Africans—to a variety of other discrete causes. Duesberg was the first to make many erroneous assertions that have been repeatedly debunked and yet are persistently reiterated, without evidence or reason, by other denialists.¹

Because Duesberg is associated with a great university and has worked with viruses, the disinformation he has spread has carried greater weight than that of other HIV denialists, many of whom are associated with other pseudoscientific beliefs (creationism, alien abduction, vaccination as the cause of autism, etc.). Duesberg's institutional authority and persistence have resulted in countless deaths of HIV-positive people from AIDS—those who believed his claim that their health would not be impaired by their HIV infection, and those who were denied access to treatment when their government (as in South Africa) or their parents (as in California) were influenced by him. Yet denialists portray Duesberg himself as a victim whose professional career has suffered because he maintains his position against the “AIDS establishment”— he refuses to admit that he is dead wrong.

What drives Peter Duesberg to act with such professional recklessness and social irresponsibility? His fellow denialists regard Duesberg as a hero who has used his scientific training bravely to combat an oppressive “scientific establishment.” With little or no knowledge of Duesberg's personality, character and history,² they liken him to Galileo Galilei; they compare Duesberg's struggles with “the scientific establishment” to Galileo's early 17th century challenge to Rome's dominance in astronomy and philosophy. But, as Bob Park has noted,³ “to wear the mantle of Galileo, you must first be right.”⁴ And Duesberg is woefully wrong on the science of HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Galileo's motivations were honorable, a defense of scientific thought against the reactionary forces of religion. In marked contrast, Duesberg's motives, as many senior scientists of his generation can attest, are questionable at best: he is driven not by science but by an insatiable ego.

One of the most evocative descriptions we have heard of Duesberg is that he is a “malignant narcissist,” a man who cannot tolerate the greater career success of his peers. It should be recalled that Duesberg had seriously damaged—and arguably destroyed—his own potentially world-class scientific career some years before AIDS first came to the

attention of the public. He did this by attacking, with no justification, the work of scientists of the caliber of Harold Varmus, Michael Bishop,⁵ and others whose work on viral oncogenes and cancer was later recognized with the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1989. Dissatisfied with his own progress and the resulting relatively meager recognition of his work, Duesberg resented these increasingly renowned scientists and criticized them privately and, later, publicly.

Duesberg's Cancer Research Is Ignored

The trajectory of this ego-driven criticism may be traced in the scientific literature and peripheral documents. Once exemplified by tedious, behind-the-scenes quibbling about the nomenclature of oncogenes (see, for example, this self-indulgent letter in the Harold Varmus collections: http://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/MV/B/B/G/V/_mvbbgv.pdf⁶), Duesberg's private arguments and frustration soon spilled over into the public arena. During the mid-1980s, Duesberg's published reviews on oncogenes and their role in cancer became increasingly shrill. At first, his criticisms were posed as simple questions. "*Retroviral transforming genes in normal cells?*"⁷ was the title of a 1983 review. Quickly, the questions became loaded and increasingly insistent: "*Are activated proto-onc genes cancer genes?*"⁸ and "*Activated proto-onc genes: sufficient or necessary for cancer?*"⁹ By 1987, we observe in his titles the Duesbergian denouement: absolute certainty, the pronouncement *ex cathedra*, the statement of belief as (untested) "fact": "*Cancer genes generated by rare chromosomal rearrangements rather than activation of oncogenes;*"¹⁰ "*Latent cellular oncogenes: the paradox dissolves;*"¹¹ and "*Cancer genes: rare recombinants instead of activated oncogenes (a review).*"¹²

Even assuming, generously, that Duesberg had any valid scientific points at the outset of his descent into dissent for dissent's sake, he tossed them aside to make way for empty rhetoric and overblown claims. Dismissing the progress of decades as worthless, Duesberg decided on his own, against the published evidence, that oncogenes and mutations had no role in cancer whatsoever.¹³ Because he was both transparently wrong and immoderate in making his claims, Duesberg burnt many bridges to the scientific community at that time. He was, accordingly, already regarded as a controversial figure, and worse, when people began dying from AIDS and research into the cause of the destruction of the immune system began.

Duesberg's HIV Denialism: Egotism without Expertise

When it became clear that Robert Gallo had made major scientific breakthroughs in the early years of AIDS research, Duesberg's ego was inflamed again. He was unable to tolerate the success and public recognition of another member of his scientific generation of virologists.¹⁴ So he attacked, again aiming to belittle and criticize a former colleague whose research was receiving vastly more public and professional attention than his own. Duesberg's aggressive actions were not really about the science of HIV and AIDS; they were merely packaged as such. In reality, they were personal attacks on Bob Gallo's leading role in this new field, attacks born of a jealous rage,¹⁵ just as his criticism of Varmus, Bishop and others had been only a few years earlier. In 1993, "Duesberg charged that the authors of a study in *Nature* showing that only HIV positive drug users developed AIDS had fabricated data; the charge was found to be groundless by an

independent panel at the University of California, Berkeley.”¹⁶ One of the authors of the Nature paper, Warren Winkelstein, describes the bizarre behavior of Peter Duesberg in a published interview in the Online Archive of California:

<http://content.cdlib.org/xtf/view?docId=kt7w10060s&doc.view=frames&chunk.id=d0e5140&toc.depth=1&toc.id=d0e5140&brand=oac> .

Duesberg’s HIV arguments did not even issue from any claim to scientific specialization. He had criticized oncogenes, however erroneously, from the perspective of a cancer researcher. But he was not a researcher in the HIV/AIDS field, and he presented no experimental results to support his objections. Even today, by the standards of Judge Sulan’s verdict in the recent Australian legal case, *Rex v. Parenzee*, Duesberg would not be classified as an “expert witness” on HIV/AIDS: see paragraphs 50 and 51 of Judge Sulan’s verdict and the subsequent definition of what a true expert witness is (<http://www.aidstruth.org/Supreme-Court-of-South-Australia.pdf>).¹⁷ Rather, Duesberg exploited his membership in the National Academy of Sciences by publishing several rambling reviews on HIV. His arguments were based on misunderstandings and misreadings—perhaps intentional—of the existing literature. The scientific community roundly rejected his half-baked ideas, and, as years passed, Duesberg was forced to stoop to second-tier, then third-tier journals and worse to find an audience. Sadly, some of his readers were not trained in science, and many of those fooled by Duesberg’s sophistry were the very individuals who stood to lose the most from believing him. For a few examples, see <http://www.aidstruth.org/The-Consequences-of-HIV-Denialism.pdf> and <http://www.aidstruth.org/aids-denialists-who-have-died.php>.

It is possible that Duesberg anticipated neither the firestorm he would ignite by his actions, nor the consequences for the health and lives of other people that we noted above. That firestorm consumed what remained of Duesberg’s scientific career. But the professional loss, of course, is inconsequential beside the lives forfeited, the health compromised, in the 20 years since Duesberg’s ego caused him to turn from science to pseudoscience, from inquiry to deception.

Duesberg’s Aneuploidy-Based Cancer Test Is a Dud

Duesberg’s ideas about cancer and his HIV denialism are connected not only by narcissism but by money and people as well. Duesberg’s conference on cancer and aneuploidy in San Francisco in 2004 was underwritten by Robert Leppo, a right wing Republican venture capitalist and HIV denialist who was also the executive producer of the film “The Other Side of AIDS,” made by Robin Scovill and featuring his wife, HIV+ Christine Maggiore: Scovill and Maggiore allowed their 3-year-old daughter to die, untested and untreated, of AIDS in 2005. Leppo also bought the building used by the AIDS denialist fringe group ACT UP/SF and paid for the publication of a denialist tract by Anthony Brink.

Duesberg and his long-time sidekick, David Rasnick, are in business together with a test they claim will detect all kinds of cancers. Both Duesberg and Rasnick, of course, were influential in shaping South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki’s views about AIDS and thus Mbeki’s deadly policy of refusing to provide South Africans with AIDS access to

antiretroviral drugs. Until recently, Rasnick worked for Mathias Rath, the vitamiquack/magnate/denialist (see the recent article by Michael Specter in The New Yorker for more on Rath and Rasnick¹⁸). Their company was called Boveran, and the test was called "iCyte" until they ran into trademark issues regarding the name and changed it to "Anucyte."

In October 2006, Rasnick and Duesberg sold Boveran to Modern Technology Corp for half a million dollars—all in stock, no cash. Modern Technology Corp is a disreputable little biotech acquisition and marketing company (and alpaca farm) that lists an address in rural Mississippi. It trades as a penny stock under the symbol MODC, and has steadily lost shocking amounts of its investors' money. Any research at all, let alone due diligence, would surely have revealed to Duesberg and Rasnick the company's shaky financials and questionable management—but perhaps they found it a good fit, or couldn't find any other buyers for their invention. The CEO of Modern Technology Corp, one Anthony K. Welch, is hard to locate and may be hiding offshore somewhere—possibly Jamaica, possibly the Bahamas. The corporation is registered in Nevada, which boasts that it offers the strongest protections of any state from lawsuits by irate investors.¹⁹

Boveran was renamed Insight Medical Group, and became a wholly owned subsidiary of MODC; Duesberg and Rasnick are still the primaries. Insight Medical Group claimed to be establishing its cancer diagnostics lab in Freeport, Grand Bahama Island. This allows them, they boast, "to offer our services free of bureaucratic interference and to "leapfrog" countries that continue to use entrenched, antiquated screening techniques for detecting common cancers":²⁰ that is, to evade the burdens of clinical trials, FDA approval, of research and evidence.

On March 29, 2007, Modern Technology Corp announced that Mexico-based ex-scientist Harvey Bialy, an exceptionally bizarre and floridly homophobic member of the denialist cadre (see examples of his behavior at <http://aidstruth.org/bialy-quotes.php> and <http://aidstruth.org/RA-dis.pdf>), had joined Insight Medical Group's medical advisory board for the cancer test, now renamed "Anucyte." Bialy is the author of a hagiographic biography of Duesberg and was "retired" earlier this year from his last academic affiliation at UNAM in Mexico.

Another recent addition to Modern Technology Corp's cadre of experts is an eye doctor named Marc Rose, who expanded his interests from sight preservation to male menopause, anti-aging and "life extension." He is active with the Cancer Control Society, which among other things organizes bus tours of Tijuana cancer clinics that sell laetrile and other unproven nostrums to desperate people. Rose will bring this expertise to the further development and marketing of the Anucyte test.

The CEO of Modern Technology Corp, Anthony Welch, says he studied Electrical Engineering for 2 years (1986-88: he does not claim that a degree was awarded) at the University of Mississippi, and now claims to be a law student at Concord School of Law. (Concord School of Law is an on-line school that does not accept students without

degrees.) Despite extraordinary financial losses, deep corporate debt, consistent failures to earn promised revenue, and many complaints to the SEC from angry investors, Welch has been paying himself a very hefty salary—almost \$300,000 for the 2006 fiscal year. His CFO, Robert Church, resigned from the company June 2006, reportedly because financial statements required by the SEC were always late. Welch reportedly took over these duties himself.

Insight Medical Group promised "to provide ongoing financial support to Peter Duesberg's lab ... [which] ...agrees to work closely with Insight Medical Group to improve products and technology"²¹ That is to say, Duesberg is a principal of a subsidiary that has as its sole asset an offshore lab (which may or may not exist) for a cancer diagnosis technology that has not been clinically tested or approved by the FDA or any other objective institution. The CEO is regarded by investors as unreliable; the company is, at best, poorly managed. Perhaps Duesberg, Bialy, Rasnick and Welch thought that Duesberg's article about his aneuploidy theory in *Scientific American* in May, 2007, would at least temporarily inflate the value of the stock of the company, which they could then dump (see this critique: http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2007/04/peter_duesberg_chromosomal_chaos_and_cancer.php of Duesberg's article). But the *SciAm* article has not helped Modern Technology Corp's stock price at all: it's down to \$.004—that's less than half a cent—a share from about \$1.50 a share two years ago. (In fact, the loss is much greater when a "reverse split" is calculated in.)

In early August, 2007, the Securities and Exchange Commission (the SEC) revoked the corporate charter for Modern Technology Corp, and the company's right to transact business has been forfeited. It seems the intellectual property of the super-duper cancer detector had already been returned to Duesberg and Rasnick in the wake of the stock's death spiral—the half million in stock they got is now barely worth pennies on the dollar and they must have felt humiliated, cheated, and angry. Modern Technology Corp, however, retains the marketing and distribution rights, leading to new alliances with the immortality gurus at the "Life Extension Foundation." ("The Foundation's objective is to develop methods to enable people to live in health, youth and vigor for unlimited periods of time."²²) The company has also scheduled a presentation of the AnuCyte cancer test at the quackery conference of the "Cancer Control Society" in September 2007.²³

Given Duesberg's malignant narcissism and his history of lashing out when he is professionally humiliated, the pathetic failure of his foray into entrepreneurship with AnuCyte and the product's current association with most abased forms of pseudoscience—eternal life, magical cancer cures—may well provoke another wave of scientist bashing from HIV denialism's most prominent proponent. We'll be watching for it.

¹ For example, Duesberg stated that HIV could not be the cause of AIDS because it does not fulfill Koch's postulates, a 19th century 4-part test for establishing causality. HIV does fulfill Koch's postulates (see Tim Teeter's "HIV Causes AIDS: Proof Derived from Koch's Postulates" at <http://www.thebody.com/content/art2654.html>). Nevertheless,

denialists have robotically claimed that it does not since Duesberg's 1988 article "HIV is not the cause of AIDS" (Science 241: 514-516).

² Duesberg's biographer, Harvey Bialy, constitutes a possible rare exception. Most of Duesberg's "allies" do not know him at all, much less so than the reputable scientists with whom he worked for many years and who are now some of his most authoritative critics.

³ <http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN95/wn101395.html>

⁴ This tactic is known as the "Galileo Gambit" (<http://oracknows.blogspot.com/2005/03/galileo-gambit.html>) so often employed by pseudoscientists of all stripes; see also this satire at <http://www.aidstruth.org/crank-how-to.php>.)

⁵ The contempt in which Duesberg and his allies hold these highly-respected individuals is evidenced in Harvey Bialy's biography of Duesberg, where Michael Bishop is faulted, among other things, for having an "Anglican priest" as a father. (*Oncogenes, Aneuploidy, and AIDS. A Scientific (sic) Life and Times of Peter H. Duesberg*, Harvey Bialy, The Institute of Biotechnology of the Autonomous National University of Mexico Press, 2004, p. 10.)

⁶ Here, Duesberg argues testily and at length about nomenclature, declaring that he does not, and will never, use the terms proposed by Varmus and colleagues. Later, Duesberg himself both accepted and employed the apparently objectionable formulations.

⁷ Nature. 1983 Jul 21-27;304(5923):219-26

⁸ Haematol Blood Transfus. 1985;29:9-27

⁹ Science. 1985 May 10;228(4700):669-77

¹⁰ This title appeared both in: Haematol Blood Transfus. 1987;31:496-510' and in: Med Oncol Tumor Pharmacother. 1987;4(3-4):163-75

¹¹ J Cell Sci Suppl. 1987;7:169-87

¹² Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 1987 Apr;84(8):2117-24

¹³ The association of cancer with aneuploidy has been recognized since the dawn of modern cancer research a century ago. Duesberg is not the first, nor remotely the most important, contributor to knowledge on this front. Duesberg has distinguished himself, instead, by his curiously unswerving—and, many would argue, unscientific—insistence that aneuploidy is the be-all and end-all of cancer, to the exclusion of all other factors. See an Internet critique of Duesberg's views on cancer, including a reference to a related biotechnology company in which Duesberg and his close friends now have a financial interest (http://scienceblogs.com/insolence/2007/04/peter_duesberg_chromosomal_chaos_and_cancer.php).

¹⁴ Reportedly, Duesberg's envy of Gallo even prompted him to impersonate his perceived rival. According to Harvey Bialy, Duesberg first met his current wife while pretending to be Robert Gallo at a conference sign-in table. (*Oncogenes, Aneuploidy, and AIDS. A Scientific (sic) Life and Times of Peter H. Duesberg*, Harvey Bialy, The Institute of Biotechnology of the Autonomous National University of Mexico Press, 2004, pp. 180-1.)

¹⁵ Duesberg admits as much in a statement recorded by his close friend and biographer Harvey Bialy: “It was largely a personal matter. I could not refrain from looking hard at any hypothesis Bob [Gallo] was behind” (*ibid*, p. 61).

¹⁶ <http://www.sciencemag.org/feature/data/cohen/266-5191-1648a.pdf>

¹⁷ From Judge Sulan’s verdict. What the Judge says about Turner and Papadopoulos-Eliopoulos would apply equally accurately to Duesberg, as he too has performed no experimental research on HIV/AIDS. Another significant feature of the evidence presented by the appellant's witnesses was their failure to provide an alternative theory to explain the observations that led to the discovery of HIV/AIDS. Rather, their evidence sought to demonstrate that the HIV had not been proven to exist by critiquing the work of others. As such, the appellant's witnesses did not criticize the conduct of HIV research on the basis that it conflicted with their own research, experiences or observations. Instead, their evidence was in the form of a critique, in which they identified perceived flaws in the scientific process and research findings that had led the mainstream scientific community to accept the existence of HIV.

¹⁸ http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/12/070312fa_fact_specter

¹⁹ For background to MODC by technology writer Julie Jacobson, see

<http://www.cepro.com/news/editorial/7779.html>.

²⁰ <http://www.insightmedicalgroup.com/index.htm>

²¹ <http://www.primenewswire.com/newsroom/news.html?d=111522>

²² <http://www.moderntechnologycorp.com/index.php?pg=article&newsid=246>

²³ <http://www.moderntechnologycorp.com/index.php?pg=article&newsid=245>; see also <http://www.cancercontrolsociety.com>