

## Mediawatch

### The origins of AIDS Bernard Dixon

“Chimpanzee meat blamed for AIDS epidemic” was the headline of a front page article in the *Times* on 1 February, which began:

“Chimpanzees slaughtered for food in west central Africa were the original source of AIDS.” The *Daily Telegraph* flagged the story in a similar way: “AIDS started by humans eating chimps.”

Strengthened by the UK’s recent climate of concern over food safety issues such as *Salmonella*, *Escherichia coli* 0157 and bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the implication was clear. Humans had first contracted AIDS by eating chimpanzee meat containing the virus. The television programme *Newsnight* on BBC2 continued the theme by comparing AIDS with BSE, and asking “What’s next?”

A paper given the previous day at a conference in Chicago by Beatrice Hahn from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, USA, was the trigger for these and many similar media stories. Previewing a paper in that week’s *Nature* showing the close sequence similarity between strains of human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) and a simian immunodeficiency virus strain (SIVcpz) isolated from a captive chimp belonging to a subspecies of *Pan troglodytes troglodytes*, Hahn had argued that close contact between people and chimps had probably allowed an ancestor of HIV-1 to cross the species barrier into humans. The bushmeat trade, associated with logging and deforestation, was under keen suspicion.

But the suggested route of infection was, of course, exposure to blood during hunting and butchering, not ingestion through the gut. This crucial point did not

come out strongly in any of the newspaper stories and was absent from some altogether. It appeared more than halfway through a lengthy account in the *Daily Telegraph*, near the very end of an equally prominent report in the *Guardian*, and nowhere at all in the *Daily Mail*’s story.

Most radio and television news bulletins, despite severe limits on time, provided more balanced coverage. Various using interviews with the authors of the paper and with Andrew McMichael and Sarah Rowland-Jones of the Institute of Molecular Medicine in Oxford — who are working on boosting immune responses to the virus — they were effective in explaining the implications of the discovery for our understanding of AIDS and the development of vaccines.

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#### “AIDS started by humans eating chimps”

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A live interview on *Newsnight* with Hilton Whittle, Deputy Director of the Medical Research Council Laboratories in The Gambia, was less successful. There is no reason why Whittle should be a charismatic TV personality: he is not, and that is not what the MRC pays him to be. The real problem was the interviewer’s bizarre steering of the story line. At one point, immediately after Whittle had explained that viruses probably moved frequently from animals to humans without causing illness, he was asked why the consequences were “always catastrophic.”

Even on the following day, when the *Times* published a second substantial piece, it failed to mention blood as the vehicle of infection. “The pace of destruction of African rainforests by logging companies and their employees, who poach hundreds of tonnes of primate meat, means that mass infections would be difficult to control,” the article said.

Yet it was also on the second day that the most illuminating article of all appeared. Writing in the *Guardian*, Paul Brown and Hilary Bower linked the new finding with the puzzle of Nairobi prostitutes who are repeatedly infected with HIV-1 yet do not develop AIDS, and explored the implications of this resistance for the inherently difficult task of immunisation against the disease. The work of McMichael and Rowland-Jones was again used to illuminate the issues.

This is by no means the first time that a national newspaper has produced a more thoughtful, more fully researched feature with the benefit of a further day’s work. The fierceness of the current circulation war makes the argument seem unrealistic at present, yet many readers would surely prefer a definitive piece later to an imperfect piece sooner.

To make this point is not to overlook the considerable skill that goes into the composition of newspaper articles which journalists are obliged to complete within a few hours of receiving the ‘breaking news’. Nevertheless, it is significant that on this occasion arguably the best of the first crop of reports, headlined “AIDS virus is thousands of years old,” was co-authored by Steve Connor in the *Independent*.

Connor has previously written not only a highly regarded book on AIDS but also many articles on the origin of HIV-1. He was thus ideally placed to put the development in context and highlight its key implications.

Describing the newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe in *My Northcliffe Diary* (Victor Gollancz, 1931), Tom Clark recalled that he insisted on “experts” for everything — “an electrical engineer to criticise the telephones, an American to describe baseball, a sailor to report yachting...” Sounds quaint — but not a bad principle?

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