

AIDS and *The Sunday Times*

SIR — I was astounded by your two-page leading article attacking *The Sunday Times* for having the temerity to publish a series of articles that run counter to the accepted theory of the causative agent of AIDS. I am a reader of both *The Sunday Times* and *Nature* (and a microbiologist), so feel qualified to give a dispassionate view.

In my opinion, it is quite probable that HIV infection is an important factor that leads to AIDS. However, this does not excuse the behaviour of a respected scientific journal in devoting precious space to attacking a leading exponent of a different view. To say that the "public interest requires that *The Sunday Times* should not follow its perverse line on the causation of AIDS" is outrageous. There are too many examples in the scientific literature of the then-accepted scientific dogma being overturned by a few individuals with the courage and intelligence to question it.

Surely the point of *The Sunday Times* articles is not to discourage 'safe sex' by teenagers, but to discourage a completely blinkered scientific approach that is 100 per cent certain that there is no other possible explanation for AIDS than HIV.

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■ The following letter was submitted to *The Sunday Times* on 3 June 1993 but was not published.

SIR — The front-page piece about Wellcome ("Fears over the drug giant's funding of Aids research", 30 May 1993) muddles the very clear separation of the pharmaceutical company (Wellcome Foundation Ltd) and the charity (The Wellcome Trust). Even though your report says there is no suggestion that the trust has distorted its funding to benefit the company, it is full of implications that confuse the two, creating unjustified criticism of the trust.

In my research on components of the AIDS virus, I received useful assistance, in the form of experimental material, but no money or research resources from the pharmaceutical company — this research was funded by the Medical Research Council's AIDS-Directed Programme. I have also regularly acted as a referee on research proposals made to the Wellcome Trust, but I have never received any grant from it. Therefore I believe my comments are unbiased. I have personally observed the great emphasis in the trust on distancing itself from the pharmaceutical company.

When AIDS first became a disease of concern in the United States, the pharmaceutical company was in the enviable position of owning the only drug (AZT)

known to affect the progress of the disease and already approved for human use. Eight years later, it is now probable that although AZT changes the early development of symptoms, it has no favourable effect on the long-term prognosis. It was always known that it had harmful side-effects, but its long-term success in treating the disease could not have been assessed until recently.

It is wrong to criticize the trust for supporting research on AIDS. Other medical research agencies in the United States and the United Kingdom have rightly assigned large resources to the study and treatment of this important epidemic. As the largest source of medical research funding in the United Kingdom, the trust has a clear obligation to take part in this effort. Like other similar organizations (including the research councils which dispense government research funds), it invites scientists contemplating large research proposals to discuss them before making a formal application: but such applications are always evaluated by the traditional method of peer review and decided by an expert committee.

Research necessarily deals with uncertainty, and is undertaken because knowledge is lacking. To criticize trust support for Professor Anderson's epidemiological studies of the spread of the disease, or Professor Pinching's AZT trials, because they are alleged to have helped the sales of AZT, defies logic and betrays ignorance about the way medicine advances. If Mr Martin Walker believes the Wellcome Trust has used its power of patronage "to open doors for the company at the highest level" (in the words of his article), he will have to prove it in the face of strong evidence to the contrary.

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■ The following letter was written to *The Sunday Times* in September 1993, but was not published.

SIR — I am writing to ask you to consider the manner in which your newspaper is treating the issue of HIV and AIDS.

In response to the 29 August article by Neville Hodgkinson, I wrote to your letters section. I received an acknowledgement and an apology that there was insufficient space to publish. Naturally, you cannot print all the letters you receive, but I was surprised that last Sunday's edition gave equal weight to correspondence supporting and deploring Hodgkinson's article.

I cannot believe that the balance of mail was reflected by the selection of letters you published. Is it your policy to back up

your own journalist, regardless of how misleading and irresponsible his article may have been? If so, I would ask you to give serious consideration to the consequences of this action.

All indicators suggest that the incidence of HIV infection in the United Kingdom is relatively low at present, but its high prevalence elsewhere in the world should guard us against complacency. You will be aware of the government money that has already been spent to inform the public on this issue, and that Hodgkinson is undermining this message. Can this really be justified as a public service, or even a legitimate use of press freedom? Scientists and doctors involved with AIDS know just how nonsensical Hodgkinson's articles are, but are powerless to dispel the confusion he has created among those less aware of the facts.

As a personal acquaintance of the original "HIV doesn't cause AIDS" guru (Dr Peter Duesberg), I know all the false premises and bogus arguments only too well. The arguments are a rerun of the tobacco companies' favourite old chestnut "smoking doesn't cause cancer", are equally futile and potentially just as damaging to public health.

Is it your intention to seek advice from more reputable sources and to try to set the record straight in future *Sunday Times* articles on this important issue?

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■ The following letter was submitted to *The Sunday Times* on 14 December 1993, but was not published.

SIR — Following last Sunday's edition of *The Sunday Times* (12 December 1993), I feel compelled to write to you about the bizarre stance adopted by your Scientific Correspondent, Neville Hodgkinson, on the subject of HIV and AIDS.

Over the past 15 years I have been involved in several contentious issues which, on occasion, have brought me into conflict with the scientific establishment and members of my own profession. During this time I have always based my case on the scientific data available and, to this end, have organized conferences and edited books so that the data available can be properly evaluated. In addition, I have always invited co-editors who are regarded as pre-eminent in their field.

Many of the contentious issues in these different fields (biological effects of low-level lead, ionizing radiation, ozone depletion, global warming) have been resolved through communication, and common ground has been found between campaigners and the established experts.

I am sad to say that none of this applies