

The HIV Disbelievers

Christine Maggiore is a different kind of AIDS activist—one who tells people to forget safe sex and stop taking their lifesaving drugs. Why?

By David France
NEWSWEEK EXCLUSIVE

August 19, 2000 — One sweltering California afternoon a few weeks ago, Christine Maggiore was sitting in her cramped office, still jet-lagged from the long flight home from South Africa, where she'd attended the International AIDS Conference.

SHE HADN'T YET found time to answer the “hundreds and hundreds, perhaps literally thousands” of e-mail messages she'd received from people she'd met there who were looking for AIDS literature or doctor referrals, or simply wanting to pat her on the back. “All your work and dedication is appreciated!!!” a typical message declared. She doesn't know when she'll find time to catch up—her whole life is behind schedule because of her AIDS work. “My fiancé and I have been trying to find time to get married for years!” she says.

But Maggiore, who heads Alive & Well AIDS Alternatives in Burbank, Calif., is not your typical AIDS activist. In South Africa, some scientists spit nasty epithets at her. Protesters marching outside the meeting hall threatened to plug her and her galvanized followers with bullets. Why? Because Maggiore takes the strange contrarian stance that HIV, which has been blamed in the deaths of 18.8 million people worldwide, doesn't cause AIDS at all. She exhorts people to stop taking their medications and stop worrying about spreading their virus.

But Maggiore's influence here and abroad is swelling. The singer Nina Hagen wrote a song for her, and Esai Morales, the actor, is a big funder. The platinum-selling alternative rock band Foo Fighters promotes Maggiore's ideas on its Web site. And in South Africa, Maggiore met privately with South African President Thabo Mbeki, who endorses many of her beliefs. Mbeki's call for more research into whether HIV causes AIDS dominated headlines from the important biennial meeting. In response, 5,000 flabbergasted scientists signed a declaration calling the laboratory evidence “clear-cut, exhaustive, and unambiguous.”

Such consensus doesn't impress Maggiore, a bright and compelling former garment executive with no scientific training or college degree. Through emotional newspaper columns, e-mail postings and lectures in such disparate places as the University of Miami School of Medicine and the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network in Harlem, she continues to try to pick apart the scientific literature, a strategy that especially appeals to people with a beef against the establishment. “We're not saying that anybody is 100 percent correct or incorrect on this issue,” Foo Fighters bassist Nate Mendel told NEWSWEEK. “Simply, there's information out there that is being blocked out.”

Maggiore is convinced that the HIV doesn't cause AIDS. No medical journal has ever proved to her it is dangerous. She calls standard HIV antibody tests so oversensitive

that they can show positive “if you’ve had a flu shot or if you’ve ever been pregnant” (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention disagree), and she cobbles together reams of footnotes, anecdotes and package inserts to prove it.

Then how does she explain all the deaths that have marked the pandemic? Here’s where her argument takes a conspiratorial turn. In Africa, despite what health authorities say, people are simply not dying more than before, she asserts. And she thinks the 420,000 Americans who have died of AIDS are victims of the prescription drugs they hoped would save them. Or perhaps they died from recreational drugs. Or maybe they succumbed to “a profound fear of AIDS” itself. “We’re not saying people haven’t died of what is called ‘AIDS’,” Maggiore explained one afternoon in the sunny Burbank home she shares with her fiancé, a 31-year-old video editor named Robin Scovill, and her son. “We’re just asking what is at the core of this incredible human tragedy. And by looking at other avenues, might we better resolve this?”

“Christine is putting lives in jeopardy.”

— **SANDRA THURMAN**
White House AIDS policy director

There is no way to know how many patients she has persuaded to abandon their medications or condoms, but Maggiore’s detractors can barely contain their anger. “Many people will die because they will go untreated,” says Dr. Luc Montagnier, the co-discoverer of HIV. White House AIDS policy director Sandra Thurman says bluntly, “Christine is putting lives in jeopardy.”

Disbelievers—“flat earth” types who fervently doubt the conclusions of science—have been around since the Enlightenment. But they are staging a resurgence today, partly in reaction to the unparalleled role science plays in society. Disbelievers fear Big Science the way millennialists feared Y2K. Fragments of contrarian evidence are enough to shake their faith in everything from water fluoridation to global-warming statistics, childhood vaccine programs to the artificial sweetener aspartame, the Holocaust to evolution. Huge parcels of the World Wide Web are devoted to such exposes. “We’re at a moment for a lot of things where skepticism becomes a dogma,” says Michael Shermer, author of a book about the antiscience backlash, “Why People Believe Weird Things.”

But what’s in it for them? “The basis of denial is a need to escape something that is terribly uncomfortable,” says Boston College psychology professor Joseph Tecce, who has studied Holocaust deniers and AIDS dissenters. “If something is horrific, I might want to pretend it doesn’t exist.”

Christine Maggiore’s horrific event came on Feb. 24, 1992, when, she says, a routine blood test came back positive for HIV. She was 36 years old, single and a partner in a successful clothing wholesaler. A former boyfriend also tested positive. “I was mortified,” she says. “According to the conventional wisdom, I had just foolishly and irrevocably ruined my entire life.”

Maggiore was not immediately a disbeliever. Initially, the oldest child of a Los Angeles advertising executive sought the advice of doctors and planned to start treatment. But some scientific principles of the disease never added up to her. For one thing, she felt fine—and still does. How could she have a killer virus? “There was this empirical data from my own body,” she says. “I was ridiculously healthy.”

Ultimately she discovered the work of Berkeley virologist Peter Duesberg, whose belief that AIDS is caused by lifestyle choices like promiscuity and drug use rather than infectious agents have long been dismissed by his peers. One spring evening in 1994, as

she was sitting on a panel discussing AIDS prevention, it finally struck Maggiore that she no longer believed in the epidemic. "Being a practical person, it didn't seem to me after investigating this that there were good reasons for me to live my life as if I were dying," she says.

Now, nothing can dissuade her. Take the 1999 CDC report detailing the wild successes of protease inhibitors, the new class of AIDS drugs introduced in 1996. The study correlates a huge drop-off in classic AIDS-related infections with data on how many of the new drugs were prescribed. "Prescriptions don't mean people are actually taking the drugs," she objected. "Do you know how many people flush their drugs down the toilet?" (In fact, she says, the wholesale return to health is a direct result of that protest, in bathrooms across America.)

Today Maggiore is the most prominent foe of what she calls "the HIV equals AIDS equals death paradigm," having sold or given away 28,500 copies of her self-published booklet since 1995, in addition to the copies in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese. She founded *Alive & Well*, which has spun off chapters around the globe and is affiliated with dozens of like-minded groups representing perhaps tens of thousands of followers.

Their message has resonated among a number of gay men who, exhausted by 20 years of medical vigilance and daily toxic drug regimens, are increasingly receptive to Maggiore's exhortation to "live in wellness... without fear of AIDS." And they have reinvigorated long-simmering AIDS conspiracy theories. According to a 1995 survey of 1,000 African-American churchgoers, one third believed HIV was concocted by the government for racial genocide. When she spoke before a crowded room in Harlem in 1998, spellbound members of the audience likened her to the abolitionists, interrupting her with cries of "John Brown lives!"

"If you told me five years ago I would be promoting the notion that HIV does not cause AIDS, I would have said you were nuts. I believed adamantly that HIV was a killer and these drugs were saving lives," says Michael Bellefontaine, 34, a friend of Maggiore's who decided against taking anti-HIV medication years ago. Now he attributes his survival to being drug-free. Last month he attended a protest in San Francisco and chanted, "HIV is a lie! It's toxic pills that made them die!"

AIDS educators already hold Maggiore and her acolytes responsible for an upswing in new infections. San Francisco authorities just announced that new HIV cases in 1999 were nearly twice as high as in 1997. "People are focusing on the wrong thing. They're focusing on conspiracies rather than protecting themselves, rather than getting tested and seeking out appropriate care and treatment," says Stephen Thomas, who directs the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Minority Health.

HIV renegades sometimes seem as if their main goal is mayhem, not constructive discourse. For instance, the San Francisco chapter of ACT UP, once a major force lobbying for more money for AIDS research, is now run by dissenters who stage protests against other AIDS leaders—regularly bathing them in cat-box litter or spit. On Aug. 9, police charged two ACT UP members with assault and battery for allegedly striking city health department director Mitchell H. Katz and covering him with Silly String during a public meeting. Similar antics now prevail among a half-dozen ACT UP branches. "They're crazy," says Larry Kramer, who founded ACT UP in 1987. "They're undoing all we've fought for."

Picking over a black-bean wrap at her kitchen counter recently, Maggiore described herself simply as a person who asks questions others are overlooking. The fact that she provokes hostility only emboldens her. She sees only intolerance and recalcitrance among her detractors—they “smack of parental authority and religious authority,” she said. Her brother Steven, 41, calls her a modern-day Copernicus.

But she soon made it clear that her disregard for HIV is not just an intellectual gambit when her talkative 3-year-old son, Charlie, wandered into the kitchen after a midday nap. She talked about how she conceived him naturally and gave birth without drugs routinely given to prevent transmission. She continues to breast-feed him today, according to the family’s pediatrician. Her family supports her in this, even though HIV can be transmitted through breast milk and judges have charged mothers in similar cases with child endangerment.

Maggiore and Scovill, Charlie’s father, say they’ve never been curious to test the child for HIV (Scovill does not know his own status). Their pediatrician is not as sanguine. “I would not be opposed to testing his blood,” admits Dr. Paul Fleiss, who says the boy has been very healthy. “But she is.”

“He’s a perfectly healthy little boy,” says Scovill, bending to offer his son a macaroon. Charlie was skeptical. “They’re really good,” the father insisted patiently. “And for some reason they decrease viral load!” With that, both parents had a good laugh at the silly AIDS goblin. Such is the power of belief. © 2000 *Newsweek, Inc.*