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Where did the virus come from?

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Aids is now an epidemic

affecting thousands of people worldwide. The disease is still incurable

and the prospects for

its control in the near future are

still very slim.

Although Aids is a very recent

disease, nobody really knows

where it came from. Not that

such a knowledge would help alleviate the situation but, as with

any other calamity which affects

mankind, people always have this

urge to unravel its origins.

There have been speculations

and controversies concerning the

orgins of Aids and the virus

which causes it.

Earlier, rumours had it that

the Aids virus originated from

Africa, out of some weird interaction between the monkeys and

human beings, The story maintained that since the human Aids

virus had some resemblance to

the monkey virus, some rural Africans must have acquired the virus from the monkeys through

some blood mixing.

It was hypotbesised that since

some rural Africans ate monkeys,

the monkey virus must have had

an opportunity to infect man and

evolve into a form capable of

causing Aids in man.

This hypothesis caused a lot of

hostility and mistrust between its

propagators and the majority of

Africans, as it opened old racial

wounds which were thought to

have been healed. As it soon be

came clear that this African mon

keys affair would not help in

curbing Aids, en alternative theory about the origin of Aids came

up.

This second theory claimed

that Aids virus was tailored in

the USA army germ warfare laboratories. The theory came as a

relief to many people who found

the earlier ‘African monkey affairs’ theory a bit uncomfortable.

The supporters of this theory

based their arguments on the fact

that the advanced scientific capabilities of the USA Laboratories

were almost unlimited.

“If they can send people to the

moon and are now trying to patent genetically altered organisms,

then why can’t they tailor a simple Aids virus in the laboratory?”

the propagators asked.

But the question which remained in many people’s minds

was the motive. Why make the

virus in the first place? Was it a

conspiracy, a grand plan to eliminate some targeted enemies9

If there was a sinister motive

then why was the disease not tailored to spare its originators?

Another weakness with the germ warfare theory was its

testability. So it remained just

another wild speculation.

Now the most recent theory is

claiming that. Aids could have

been spread by polio vaccines in

Africa. In this years March and

May issues of Science, the weekly magazine of the American Association for the advancement of Science, there were strong debates about a controversial article originally written by Tom Curtis

in the Rolling Stone magazine.

The article hypothesizes that

the Aids virus first entered

humans in Africa via an oral polio vaccine

widely administered in the

1950’s.

According to the article,

as-yet-undiscovered simian

monkey) form of HIV-I may

contaminated a polio vaccine

manufactured by Hilary

Kaprowski, a former director of

Wister Institute in Philadelphia,

USA. That virus, the article continues “might have come from

the monkey kidney cells which

Kaprowski grew.”

The vaccine, we are further

told, “was tested in what is now

Rwanda, Zaire, and Burundi during the late 1950s where it was

spray-injected into the mouths of

several hundred thousand

people”.

To corroborate these claims,

positivity to HIV has been

be “ in the former Congo

Rwanda, and Burundi where the injection was supposed

to have been administered.

It is also in this region of central equatorial Africa “where

some of the earliest Aids cases

were retrospectively identified by

Western blot and Enzyme Linked

Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA),

says tom Curtis in a reply to his

critics contained in the May 1992

issue of Science.

Tom Curtis’ convincing story

may partly explain the earlier

speculations about the Aids’ origin from the African monkeys,

this time bringing in the US lab

oratories link.

As the saying goes, where there

is smoke, there is fire. This is

probably where the truth about

the origin of Aids will eventually

come from.

The Curtis story has caused so

much debate that possible ways

of testing his hypothesis have

been considered.

According to Cecil H. Fox, al8o

in an article published in the May

1992 issue of Science, serum

samples and vaccines from the

period between 1952 and 1982

can be tested for the presence of

immunodeficiency viruses.

The Wister Institute has an

nounced that it is forming a com

mittee “to evaluate the Rolling

Stone speculations.”

According to Thomas Folks,

chief of CDC’s retrovirus branch,

Curtis’ story is just a typical “fragrant case of selective editing and

journalistic malpractice.’

Folks charges that Curtis selectively ignored the epidemiologic

and laboratory data he was offered against the poiìo vaccine hypothesis.” .

to Gerald Quinnan Jr., deputy director of the food and drug administration branch that over sees vaccines, “It is not possible

for SIV (simian (monkey) immunodeficiency virus) to be present

in polio vaccines in any substantial amount”. Quinnan claims

that he deliberately tried to infect

monkey kidney cells with SIV

and failed.

And according to Kaprowaki,

the manufacturer of the original

Congo vaccine, Curtis only chose

to misconstrue the information

and “propagate a hypothesis without basis’.

After the press had picked up

the hot Curtis story in the US,

the CDC (centers for Disease

Control, USA) issued a terse

statement saying that “the

weight o scientific evidence does

not support this idea and there in

no more reason to believe this

hypothesis than many others

which have been considered and

rejected on scientific grounds”

Interestingly, some Aids researchers seem to regard Curtis

hypothesis favourably, though

with some reservations, SIV researcher Ronard Destosiera of

the New England regional research center says that “he’s never heard a good reason why the

hypothesis is not plausible.

Amidst all these debates, Tom

Curtis, the originator of the hypothesis has chosen to take a

neutral stand. He argues that he was simply trying to prod researchers into examining a testable hypothesis.

As we Kenyans would rightly

put it, we only hope that no stone

will remain unturned in the search for truth about the origins

of the yet unstoppable Aids. Lets

just wait and see.