

Perfectly true, actually

By not hearing me out before branding me a liar last week, Hogarth missed the real story. In view of John le Carré's depiction of the criminal amorality of the pharmaceutical industry in his novel *The Constant Gardener*, I sent him a copy of my book *Debating AZT: Mbeki and the AIDS drug controversy* in mid-2001. The nub of his warmly encouraging two-page, handwritten response was: 'I agree with (the alas late) Donald Woods: [AZT] needs much more serious debate than Big Pharma and the usual club of fringe beneficiaries are permitting. There is simply too big a case to answer, and it's not being answered. Having said that, I suppose I look a bit of a fool because I'm one of the numberless well-intentioned people who have been championing cheap antiretrovirals for the Third World's afflicted etc. But the book worries me deeply, and, until the debate has been properly joined and fought, will continue to do so.' Le Carré suggested I use the last sentence as a pull-quote. Quoting him more extensively (as above) on the back cover of the manuscript of my forthcoming book *The trouble with nevirapine*, I sent him a copy late last year, expecting he'd like it equally. This time he responded furiously, the true reason for which I discovered afterwards. He was evidently concerned that I was about to compromise him publicly in the most awkward way.

Around the time his novel was published in January 2001, le Carré promoted it in the media by aptly denouncing pharmaceutical corporations as 'the criminals of capitalism'. The industry, he said, was 'spending a fortune on influencing, hiring and purchasing academic judgment to a point where, in a few years' time, if Big Pharma continues unchecked on its present happy path, unbought medical opinion will be hard to find'. Unbought literary opinion too:

Imagine my surprise to see a 'product placement' in *The Constant Gardener* movie of a certain pharmaceutical drug, not mentioned in the novel. For punting nevirapine, not once but twice, Boehringer Ingelheim would have paid the film producers a fortune, some of which drug money would have been recycled to le Carré for the purchase of the film rights.

As for John Pilger: on receiving *The trouble with nevirapine* he indeed emailed me a magnificent compliment about my political writing – which he later asked me not to quote. So I shan't.

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