

TREATMENT INFORMATION GROUP

thinking about AIDS drugs

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PRESS RELEASE

WHAT KILLED MAKGATHO MANDELA?

Media reports of the death of former President Nelson Mandela's son Makgatho on 6 January 2005 have ascribed it to AIDS. This is incorrect. According to his brother-in-law Dr Isaac Amuah, quoted in the *Washington Post* on the same day, 'the immediate cause of Makgatho's death was complications from a gall bladder operation' on 30 November. He mentioned to the *Sunday Times* that he'd also suffered 'problems with his pancreas'.

Regrettably, the misconception that Makgatho Mandela died of AIDS originated from former President Mandela himself, as indicated in the headline of the article, 'Mandela Says AIDS Led to Death of Son'. The *Washington Post* quoted Dr Amuah adding: 'But he said that AIDS was a contributing factor and that Mandela was determined to portray the death as resulting from AIDS to demystify the disease.' Addressing journalists at his home, Mandela said that declaring that his son had 'died of AIDS ... was the only way to turn the tide and make HIV/AIDS an ordinary disease like any other'.

According to Dr Amuah, Makgatho 'had been receiving antiretroviral treatment for more than a year'. Pancreatitis and gall bladder problems, caused by lactic acidosis, are a well-known consequence of ARV drug toxicity. The gall bladder is part of the liver system; liver failure is now the leading cause of death among HIV-positive people treated with ARVs (Reuters, 19 November 1999 – see: <http://aras.ab.ca/haart.html> and <http://aras.ab.ca/azt.html> (search: 'pancreas', 'gall bladder' and 'liver'); and read *Debating AZT: Mbeki and the AIDS controversy* and *The trouble with nevirapine*, both posted at www.tig.org.za). Although the potentially lethal toxicity of ARVs such as AZT and nevirapine is abundantly established in the medical literature, this is little known by the newspaper-reading public due to their billing always as 'life-saving' by well-intentioned journalists, and, in the case of the *Mail&Guardian*, express editorial policy to promote the sale and use of these drugs and to black out any countervailing information.

On 26 November 2004, for instance, we published an invited article in the World AIDS Day supplement of that newspaper, in which we stated, inter alia, that 'Hundreds of studies have found that AZT is profoundly toxic to all cells of the human body, and particularly to the blood cells of the immune system' and that 'Numerous studies have found that children exposed to AZT in the womb and after birth suffer brain damage, neurological disorders, paralysis, spasticity, mental retardation, epilepsy, other serious diseases and early death.' We referred readers to shocking recent research findings in this latter regard, canvassed in our letters to the Medicines Control Council about this and posted on our website www.tig.org.za under the title 'Poisoning our Children: AZT and nevirapine in pregnancy'. This drew a barrage of hostile letters, three of which claimed

that such information could actually ‘kill people’. *M&G* editor Ferial Haffeejee reacted by apologizing for publishing our article, stating that it ‘should not have been carried’ and that such writing ‘will not be carried in the *Mail&Guardian* in future’.

After agreeing to publish our reply, Haffeejee spiked it just before going to press. Chief Operations Officer Hoosain Karjeiker explained that what was objectionable about it was our reference to ‘the side effects of extremely toxic pharmaceutical drugs like AZT and nevirapine’. ‘We are proponents of AZT,’ he said. ‘Once again the ad casts aspersions on AZT and nevirapine.’ ‘Do you mean it’s unacceptable to state that AZT is toxic?’ we asked incredulously. ‘Yes,’ he replied; it’s ‘dissent’. Haffeejee confirmed that the ‘position of the *M&G* is that everyone is entitled to treatment’ with ARV drugs, and announced that the merits weren’t open to debate. ‘Our newspaper has been at the forefront of the push for antiretrovirals in this country. Our brand has suffered because of your ad two weeks ago. The new ad contains the same message, albeit not as strong. Publishing it will continue to damage our brand.’ (Protecting the newspaper’s commercial brand, tied to the reputation of the toxic drugs it has uncritically championed, was deemed more important than readers’ right to arrive at their own informed opinions about them.) Reacting to news that the Treatment Action Campaign had gone on to complain to the Advertising Standards Authority about our article, the *Mail&Guardian* quoted Haffeejee repeating: ‘This newspaper has always supported the need for an effective anti-retroviral programme and will not in future carry any advertising which dilutes this message or creates confusion in the minds of readers.’

It has now become politically incorrect, unprogressive, ‘confusing’, unacceptable – even dangerous – to make the simple statement in the media that AZT and nevirapine are toxic, let alone caution, as the medical literature does, that they are potentially deadly. This explains why a major exposé in mid-December by Associated Press in New York concerning the HIVNET 012 nevirapine and AZT scandal went unreported in the *Mail&Guardian* – even as it made front-page news in more than a thousand major newspapers and science and medical journals worldwide. AP disclosed that ‘thousands’ of adverse events and numerous fatalities among Ugandan mothers and their babies given nevirapine and AZT were not recorded by the American researchers running the trial; and when independent audits revealed this, the US National Institutes of Health, which had sponsored the study, fraudulently suppressed the embarrassing information so as not to upset President George W Bush’s plans to spend millions shipping nevirapine into African maternity wards.

Just as Makgatho Mandela’s death was wrongly attributed to ‘AIDS’, so the AP exposé similarly related how the death of Joyce Ann Hafford – a healthy eight-months-pregnant black American woman killed in July 2003 by a couple of weeks of experimental nevirapine treatment given to her because she was HIV-positive – was also initially chalked up by her doctors to ‘AIDS’ instead.

We too very much regret the untimely death of Makgatho Mandela. It is doubly tragic that he should apparently have been killed by the very drugs that his father, former President Mandela, has been misled into promoting in South Africa; and it underscores the question we asked in the headline of our offending article in the *Mail&Guardian*: ‘Why should South Africans continue to be poisoned by AZT?’ And by similar toxic drugs? [Ends]