



Scientists denounce 'nonsense'
of 'one man who spread Aids'

Shilts theory is nonsense!

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LEADING US scientists from the teams which first proved that Aids was caused by a mystery virus this week denounced the story of 'Patient Zero'. It was the so-called 'Patient Zero' - a gay French-Canadian air steward called Gaetan Dugas - who has recently been widely alleged to have single-handedly spread the HIV virus around America and Europe.

The top Aids scientist who first thought that Dugas might be a Patient Zero, Dr Bill Darrow of the US Centers for Disease Control, told me this week that now he 'cannot give credence' to the story, which was entirely based on Darrow's own 1982 research. San Francisco's top expert in the spread of Aids, Dr Andrew Moss of the University of California, added that the Dugas allegations were 'nonsense'.

But British tabloid newspapers may renew their attacks on gay men and Aids sufferers this month as the direct result of the publication yesterday (Thursday) of a new book on Aids by a gay San Francisco journalist. The book, *And the Band Played On* by San Francisco Chronicle reporter Randy Shilts, has just been published by Penguin Books. This week, Shilts has been touring Britain, including TV, radio and theatre appearances, and a signing session at Gay's The Word bookshop.

Astonishing Shilts' book has already made US bestseller lists, selling a quarter million copies, and has been the subject of major US TV programmes. Soon there will be an astonishing Dallas style mini-series

By Duncan Campbell
Investigative Journalist of the Year

about Aids, made by US network television. But Shilts' promotion of the Dugas story has damaged the struggle against Aids by providing the anti-gay lobby with a promiscuous if fictionalised figurehead - a 'Typhoid Mary' of Aids - who can be used to re-stigmatise and blame gay men for the Aids epidemic. Gaetan Dugas did exist, and was one of the earliest US Aids cases. Shilts claims that Dugas repeatedly went to bath-houses after he knew he had Aids, having been warned that he might pass it on. Then after having sex, Shilts alleges, Dugas would turn up the lights in the cubicle, show his trick the marks of kaposi's sarcoma cancer on his body, and announce 'I've got gay cancer and you'll probably get it too'. Dugas died of Aids in 1984, and could not therefore answer these allegations.

Despite such episodes, Shilts' book, 600 pages long, is primarily a profound, first-rate, damning critique of the Reagan administration's murderous inaction over Aids. But that's not how the British

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(Photo: Gordon Rainsford)

Toys for the boys

IAN Hall and cuddly toy (pictured) won the Wimbledon Area Gay Society (WAGS) Cuddly Tea Party prize of a box of biscuits at the William Morris Hall, Wimbledon, on Thursday last week. Ian is a catering worker from Colliers Wood.

Scientists denounce 'nonsense'

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press has seen it so far.

In Britain, until this week, the Patient Zero story has been the only news from Shilts' book to reach newspapers. It has been used in a way which has ignored the rest of what Shilts is trying to say. When Princess Anne obliquely attacked Aids sufferers with asides about 'self-inflicted injury' in opening the recent international Aids conference, and was criticised by Peter Tatchell and Nick Partridge of the Terrence Higgins Trust, and even the Health Education Authority, the *Daily Mail* trumpeted back "[Have they] not heard of the notorious French-Canadian airline steward . . . Patient Zero".

The book was first publicised in Britain by the *News of the World*, which last October featured 'The man who gave us Aids', with the caption 'First picture of gay who started world's deadliest epidemic'.

Simply untrue

But this story is simply untrue. The idea of Gaetan Dugas as Patient Zero is based on early research about what caused Aids, called the 'Cluster Study'. Dr Bill Darrow was the scientist who did the study. This week, Darrow specifically disavowed the validity of the assumptions used in his Cluster Study - assumptions which in the book Shilts uses to imply that Gaetan was almost single-hand-

edly spreading the virus causing Aids.

The 'Cluster Study' was not intended to define villains, but to show that a virus, rather than contaminated poppers or lubricants, was the likelier cause of Aids. Dugas appeared at the centre of the study because, according to researchers, he was co-operative, good at remembering and documenting his sexual relationships - and because he has Aids and, obviously, did infect some others with HIV.

Darrow's original report, repeatedly and prominently cited in the publicity for Shilts' book, found that 40 of the first 248 Aids patients in the US had had sex with Dugas or with someone who did.



Shilts: reckless?

But Darrow himself says that the study, although correct and very important at the time, is now known to be invalid. "We used an average of 9-11 months for symptoms [of Aids] to appear after last sexual experience (with an infected person)", he said. But it was now known that the average period is more like 8 years, and that major Aids symptoms usually take at least 3-4 years to appear.

Certainty

So when Shilts, quoting Darrow's research, states that certain men fell sick with Aids nine or thirteen months after sleeping with Dugas, the one thing that can be said with certainty is that they were *not* infected by Dugas. To continue to base the Patient Zero story on Darrow's 1982 research would be 'misrepresenting science', Darrow said this week, adding:

"Dugas probably wasn't the first person or the only person to carry the virus. I cannot give credence that he and he alone was responsible for taking Aids around America".

Both Dr Darrow and Dr Andrew Moss, the leading Aids epidemiologist at the University of California, San Francisco, pointed out that other Americans were now known to have been infected before Dugas showed up.

Dr Moss added "to suggest that he is Patient Zero is nonsense. If you've got to choose somebody, it



SIGN OF THE TIMES: graffiti spotted in Hackney

wouldn't be him (Dugas)".

Indeed, in the same month that *And the Band Played On* was published in the US, a teenager who died in St Louis in 1969 was identified as America's first possible Aids case. The way Shilts had used the Dugas story was, said Moss, "a soap opera. It's a romantic construction that personifies the evil of the epidemic in an easy way."

Darrow also pleaded with Shilts not to quote Dugas' name in his book, fearing that the confidentiality of his Center would be distrusted, and that the consequences for Dugas friends and family from depicting Gaetan as the evil Typhoid Mary of Aids would be horrific. They were, and the family faced death threats. This was, said

Darrow, "a bad decision . . . It was extremely embarrassing to his family and caused a great deal of pain".

Sexual appetite

Patient Zero has now become a larger than life TV and media character, a metaphor for the archetypal promiscuous gay man whose endless sexual appetite supposedly started the Aids epidemic. Shilts doesn't quite say that - but has said in TV interviews that Dugas is 'conceivably the man who brought the disease to the United States'.

This aspect of his book has received more attention than any other. It was the only part to be serialised in one magazine; and it

was the title and focus of the first TV programme to be made, based on the book. Shilts assures that media attention would be focussed in this way by naming Dugas, describing his life and even his alleged thoughts, at length. Gaetan Dugas is discovered in sexual encounters every few pages through the first half of the book, in order to set up the theory that wherever he went, Aids followed. Shilts' use of the Dugas story has undoubtedly significantly helped him earn his first million dollars from writing about Aids.

I asked Dr Darrow this week if he felt Shilts had been reckless in his use of the reconstruction of Dugas' life - "You may have something there".