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Christine Maggiore, AIDS naysayer

By Benjamin Ryan



Even her daughter's death from AIDS won't convince the prominent AIDS dissident that HIV causes AIDS.

In May 2005, Christine Maggiore's 3 1/2-year-old daughter, Eliza Jane Scovill, suffered from a

two-week bout with what her pediatricians thought was nothing more serious than an ear infection. Then, after one doctor prescribed the antibiotic amoxicillin, the girl took a sharp turn for the worse and died less than three days after her first dose. The autopsy, released in September, said the cause of death was AIDS.

Maggiore is skeptical of the coroner's report. In fact, she doesn't even believe HIV causes AIDS. After testing positive for HIV in 1992, she founded Alive and Well, a non-profit group devoted to challenging the medical establishment's positions on the disease. The Van Nuys, Calif., resident has since become one of the nation's most vocal leaders in the AIDS dissident movement. She has inspired many skeptics worldwide, including South African President Thabo Mbeki, who has frustrated global AIDS leaders with his stubborn resistance to support the distribution of HIV antiretroviral treatments to his people.

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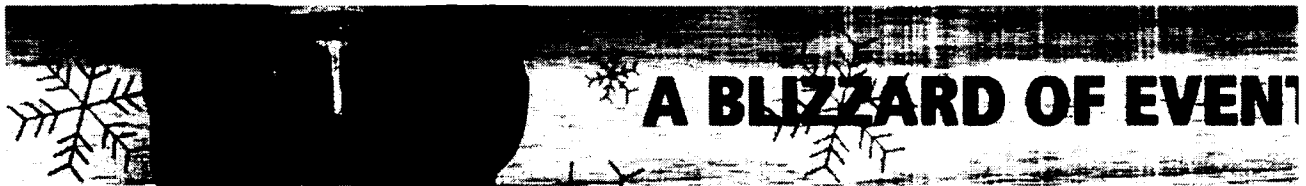


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In her book, "What if Everything You Thought You Knew About AIDS Was Wrong?," Maggiore claims AIDS is really caused by factors such as personal behavior or malnutrition, as well as by the very medications used to treat both the AIDS virus and AIDS-related infections.

Explaining why so many gay men have died of the disease, she presents theories that scientists took seriously only in the earliest days of the AIDS epidemic – that heavy drug use and repeated exposure to STDs are to blame. She claims that high numbers of gay men have had intestinal parasites and that the drugs used to treat them, as well as those used to treat STDs, damage their immune systems. She has written that even the fear of AIDS can cause AIDS.

In a May 2000 report titled "HIV, AIDS, and the Distortion of Science," (<http://www.aegis.org/topics/mdelaney.html>) Martin Delaney, founding director of San Francisco's Project Inform, lambastes Maggiore's theories.

"Nothing would be better than to discover that HIV is harmless and that the nightmare of AIDS has disappeared," Delaney writes. "But wishing will not make it so. The denialist view – based as it is on the distortion of science – is fundamentally dangerous, since it sets the stage for another wave of transmission and death."

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Although she developed an abnormality on her cervix in 2001 that is indicative of advanced HIV disease, Maggiore continues to refuse HIV treatment for herself. She did not take AZT during either of her two pregnancies, breast-fed both babies, and never tested Eliza Jane for HIV. (AZT can prevent mother-to-child transmission, and breastfeeding increases the likelihood of transmission.) Her son, Charlie, who is 7, only recently took his first test, which was negative. Her husband, filmmaker Robin Scovill, is HIV-negative as well.

The autopsy found that Eliza Jane was HIV-positive and died of *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, or PCP, an AIDS-defining infection.

Seeking what she has described as an "independent" opinion, Maggiore asked a toxicologist, Mohammed Al-Bayati, Ph.D, to review the autopsy. He concluded the girl died from an allergic reaction to amoxicillin.

Critics have brushed aside Al-Bayati's report as both biased and invalid. Not only does he sit on the board of Alive and Well and has written a book titled *Get All the Facts: HIV Does Not Cause AIDS*, but he is not a medical doctor and is not certified by the American Board of Pathology.

After the autopsy's findings called into question her highly public convictions about HIV and AIDS, Maggiore has waged a war of words in such media outlets as the *Los Angeles Times* and on ABC-TV's "Primetime," and on the Web site www.justiceforej.com. Frequently equivocal in her statements,

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she said she does not want to disprove the autopsy's findings, but is simply trying to find the truth about how her daughter died. She denied she is attempting to discredit Los Angeles County coroner's official James K. Ribe, M.D., who supervised the autopsy, although she has made inflammatory statements about his career. She maintains that Ribe is a "flip-flopper" who whimsically changes his opinion about causes of death when presented with new information from prosecutors. She theorizes that he may have concocted Eliza Jane's AIDS diagnosis only after he learned about Maggiore's HIV status and positions about the disease.

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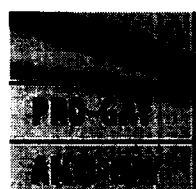
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In the meantime, the police may be building a case of their own, one of child endangerment. A spokesperson from the Los Angeles Police Department said that an investigation of Maggiore is "ongoing."

All three of her pediatricians are being investigated by the Medical Board of California for their involvement in Eliza Jane's treatment.

Maggiore maintains that her positions on HIV/AIDS are based on comprehensive inquiry into medical fact, although she has no scientific background herself and does not even have a college degree. With this scientific outlook in mind, she said her daughter's symptoms weren't indicative of pneumonia.

She reports that Eliza Jane started out with a runny nose and a cough. Each of the three doctors who examined the girl, all of whom knew of Maggiore's HIV status, pronounced that Eliza Jane had clear lungs, and the conclusion was that she seemed to have an ear infection.

It seems obvious to Maggiore that antibiotics were the cause of death, not PC pneumonia, because her daughter's condition worsened with each of the successive four doses of amoxicillin.

"PCP is not an acute disease," Maggiore said. "It doesn't suddenly come and sock you in the jaw; it develops over time. And I think that's established in the medical literature."

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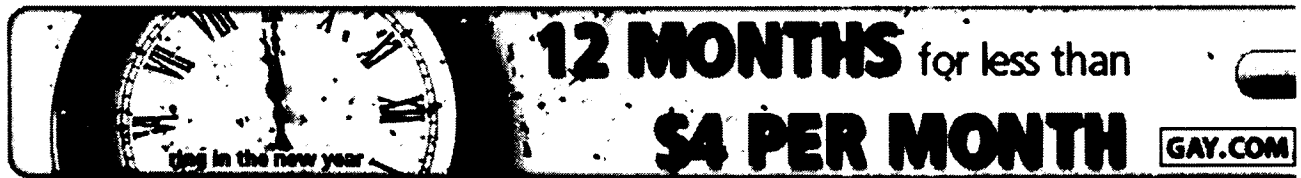


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Sandra Burchett, M.D., M.Sc., an infectious disease specialist at Children's Hospital in Boston and an associate in pediatrics and Harvard Medical School, disagrees.

"PCP in children can present as a cold and then suddenly develop severe respiratory distress very quickly," Burchett said in an email. "And unless the diagnosis is suspected and quickly treated, children can die. Autopsy findings can confirm PCP."

"In the U.S., it is very sad for a child to die of PCP since it can be prevented by routine use of Bactrim," Burchett added, referring to the common antibiotic. "Children who are diagnosed with HIV infection early and receive treatment for HIV can live not just better, but truly healthy, normal lives."

Maggiore says she has no doubts about her convictions or the choices she made about her daughter's care. Instead, she says, she is still searching for answers. After presented with information that could possibly explain how her daughter's symptoms and physical condition could in fact have been indicative of PCP, she said:

"This conversation with you only underscores my need to get clear, straight, logical, medical, scientific explanations as to what happened to my daughter, because what you're quoting me from these people, it's not happening."

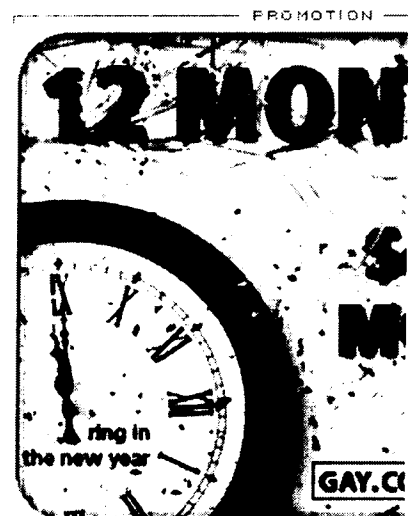
Benjamin Ryan is a freelance writer specializing in health coverage. A cum laude graduate of Columbia University, he worked as an HIV-test counselor in the university's health

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services. He lives in Manhattan. Contact him at benjaminryan@gay.com.

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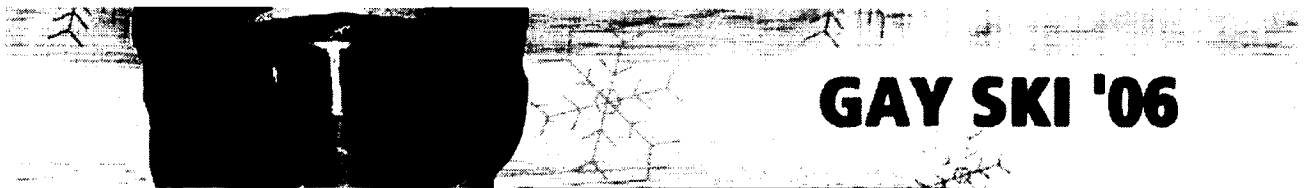
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