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## Unclear outlook for radical journal as HIV/Aids deniers evoke outrage

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By [Zoë Corbyn](#)

Publisher considers Medical Hypotheses' future in light of articles' 'implications'. Zoë Corbyn writes

It has published papers on everything from ejaculation as a treatment for nasal congestion to why modern scientists are so dull, but the future of Medical Hypotheses is hanging in the balance after a host of complaints from high-profile researchers.

The irreverent publication is the only Elsevier journal not to subject its submissions to peer review. Instead, its editor decides what to publish on the basis of how interesting or radical a paper is, and how well expressed the arguments are.

But its future is in doubt after editor-in-chief Bruce Charlton, professor of theoretical medicine at the University of Buckingham, published a paper from a well-known HIV/Aids denier.

The paper, "HIV-Aids hypothesis out of touch with South African Aids - A new perspective", was published online last July. It was written by Peter Duesberg, professor of molecular and cell biology at the University of California, Berkeley, and colleagues.

It argues that there is "as yet no proof that HIV causes Aids" and says the claim that the virus has killed millions is "unconfirmed".

Prominent Aids researchers contacted Elsevier to object to the article and wrote to the US National Library of Medicine requesting that Medical Hypotheses be removed from the Medline citation database - an act that would exclude it from the mainstream scientific-communication network.

Elsevier's response was to retract both Professor Duesberg's paper and another article - "Aids denialism at the ministry of health", by Marco Ruggiero, professor of molecular biology at the University of Florence.

This second paper, also published by Medical Hypotheses last July, argues that the Italian Ministry of Health seemed not to believe that HIV was the "sole cause" of Aids.

In a letter to critic Françoise Barre-Sinoussi, a French virologist who was jointly awarded a Nobel prize for the discovery of HIV, Elsevier says: "We share your concerns about the (Duesberg article) and particularly the implications of its wider dissemination for global healthcare."

The publisher adds that it has started an "internal review" of the processes by which the two articles were published, and is undertaking a larger review of Medical Hypotheses, including its future role in medical and scientific literature.

Professor Charlton this week accused the researchers who complained of taking "behind-the-scenes action" to exclude dissenting views and bring the journal down.

"The coercive and anti-scientific reaction shows exactly why it was right that these papers were accepted to be published," he told Times Higher Education.

He said Elsevier had to decide whether to close the journal altogether or whether to leave it alone, adding that meddling with its unique status would be "unacceptable".

Steve Fuller, professor of sociology at the University of Warwick, said that while peer review worked for "normal science", it also had the power to suppress radical ideas.

"Medical Hypotheses has never hidden what it set out to do, namely to provide a forum for bold scientific ideas that challenge the status quo," he said.

A spokesman for Elsevier said a panel of experts had been convened to review the journal's future, with a conclusion due by the end of the year. "We took this step because we received serious expressions of concern about the impact of the dissemination of these articles on global healthcare," he said.

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## Readers' comments

- **Seth Kalichman** 14 January, 2010

This is an important story. AIDS Denialists like Peter Duesgberg and his colleagues continue to undermine HIV prevention and treatment. They continue to claim that HIV does not cause AIDS and has not afflicted South Africa. Their retracted article is debunked yet again in a new study just published in the peer reviewed journal AIDS and Behavior. Nothing is more damaging than when AIDS denialists evade peer review and achieve the perception of credibility. Elsevier needs to fix Medical Hypotheses so that pseudoscience cannot be mistaken for science. Professor Charlton has a unique perspective on dissenting views in science. His anything goes approach that has been editorial policy at Medical Hypotheses has a place in newsletters perhaps. There is not a single scientist who would accept that paper as legitimate science. As the editor of a peer-reviewed journal I had a blinded review of that paper conducted to see for myself. The good news is it was retracted. The bad news is that the paper is widely distributed by AIDS Deniers online. Damage done and damage persists.