Dr. Mark A. Wainberg (1945–2017)

Provocateur, Activist, and Champion for AIDS Care and Research

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IF YOU ARE READING this, you are probably a researcher or professor involved in HIV/AIDS research at an institution in the United States, Canada, EU, or just about anywhere in the world today. Most of us pour our morning coffee and start our day by reading email or talking with colleagues. Your discussions may relate to how badly the Chicago Black-

hawks are losing in the first round of the playoffs or that the Arsenal players are not worth the money. However, most conversations (in my department, at least) quickly turn to the state of government funding for research and healthcare. You may have noticed that the U.S. government plans to cut the NIH budget by 15%, decrease disease prevention initiatives, and reduce the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). To achieve the UNAIDS 90:90:90 goals, we need to increase U.S. and world investment into the global fund, and, of course, not cut \$292 million from the current PEPFAR budget. The Canadian and EU governments are no better with their cuts to AIDS community groups, cancelling vaccine research programs and reducing AIDS research funding in general. The public often has the perception that HIV/AIDS is no longer the crisis it once was, that treatment is universal, and that new infections are merely a problem of the past.

So What Are You Doing About It?

The general malaise in our research community is palpable and disheartening. We, as researchers, are often too afraid to speak out against our government when they propose cuts to funding, disease prevention, or treatment programs. Unfortunately, public outcries and complaints by researchers (if anyone is listening) can come with costs like accruing attention and wrath of our elected officials, being viewed as sniveling scientists hoping for more taxpayer money, or just the concern that "you are eating the hand that feeds you so don't complain about funding agencies."

I knew a scientist who had a soap box, had the gift of eloquence, who was willing to speak his mind, and to point

out the injustices suffered by people living with HIV/AIDS. He was unafraid to challenge world leaders, to question our perception of what could be done for the epidemic, and to be both a colleague and critic of the pharmaceutical industry.

Mark Arnold Wainberg was not a physician, not a leader in ACT-UP, not director of a big global organization or NGO, not a famous actor, not a billionaire software developer. He was a Montrealer, an Expos fan, and he supervised a laboratory doing molecular/biochemical research on the virus life cycle, on HIV-1 inhibitors, and on emergence of drug resistance. Aside from Mark, I know of only a handful of basic/translational AIDS researchers who have 500+ published articles. Despite his academic accolades, at the turn of the millennium, Mark decided to maintain an active research program while leading a quasi-movement within the AIDS community to help bring treatment to the masses. We forget the impact that the XIII International AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa, had on world leaders and the public in 2000. Mark, as the president of the International AIDS Society (IAS), wanted this meeting held in Africa, but the opposition in South Africa and among developed countries was great, and many scientists in high-income countries boycotted the meeting. I remember Mark being displeased with Nelson Mandela not giving an address at the Vienna conference 2 years before and letting Thabo Mbeki take the stage for the opening ceremony in Durban. Mark reacted and told Mr. Mandela that "apartheid was horrible, but AIDS may be worse." Do I believe Mark actually said this to Mr. Mandela? Unfortunately, both Mr. Mandela and Dr. Wainberg are no longer with us.

Before the 5000 scientists signing the Durban Declaration as a protest against the AIDS denialists, Mark Wainberg, serving as president of IAS, was interviewed regularly by news outlets around the world. He gained notoriety and criticism related to his harsh attitudes and statements aimed at distinguished cancer researcher Dr. Peter Duesberg, President Mbeki of the Republic of South Africa, President Moi of Kenya, ABC News journalist Nicholas Regush, and many others. Many of us, including me, were aghast by some of Mark's statements such as, "...Those who attempt to dispel the notion that HIV is the cause of AIDS are perpetrators of death. And I would very much, for one, like to see the Constitution of the United States and similar countries have some means in place that we can charge people who are responsible for endangering public health with charges of endangerment and bring them up on trial. I think that people like Peter

Duesberg belong in jail...” (The film, *The Other Side of AIDS* by Robin Scovill 2004) and “...These people are doing harm. Perhaps there might once have been good ground to dispute the linkage between HIV and AIDS. It’s indisputable now.” (May 4, 2000, *Toronto Globe and Mail*)

If Mark had not spoken out, if the Durban Declaration was not signed, if the general public and African population had believed the falsehoods perpetrated by these leaders, how many more people would have been infected, refused treatment, or died of AIDS? We forget this dark history of the AIDS epidemic, like when Christina Maggiore, diagnosed with HIV, met with Dr. Duesberg and later started the HIV denialists movement, *Alive & Well AIDS Alternatives*. After Maggiore’s daughter’s death of AIDS in 2005 and Maggiore’s own death in 2008, Dr. Wainberg was blunt in his statement, “Christina Maggiore and her daughter died because they didn’t get treated.... Their story is tragic, but the reality is, Christina Maggiore was so misguided in believing this concoction of bullshit, that it cost not only her life, which is her business, but also the life of her 3-year-old kid, and that is everybody’s business.” (www.mcgilldaily.com/2009/11/in_denial/)

Mark’s activism and outspoken nature did not stop with the AIDS denialist movement. As organizer of the XVI International AIDS Conference, Mark was highly critical of the Canadian government’s response and minimal participation at the opening ceremony stating, “Mr. Harper, the role of Prime Minister includes the responsibility to show leadership on the world stage. Your absence sends a message that you do not regard HIV/AIDS as a critical priority, and clearly all of us here tonight disagree with you.” (www.mcgill.ca/news-archives/2000/winter/wainberg/) He supposedly called the Prime Minister of Canada’s office more than dozen times before the conference and never received a response from Mr. Harper. However, I believe the political pressure applied

by Mark was effective and the Canadian government announced \$120 million in funding later that year.

I will end this tribute on a personal note. Mark was my PhD supervisor, my career mentor, a very close friend, and like a father to me. A few of his former students were sharing jokes and wine with Mark only 2 days before his tragic passing. We wanted to take a selfie but all of us were of the age wherein working cell phones under the influence was not possible. Mark has very proud of his family: his wife, two successful sons and daughters-in-law, and grandkids, but he was also proud and always available for his extended family, the more than hundred students, postdocs, and technicians who had worked for him. He was beloved by researchers around the world, more so than any other scientist I have come across in my 30+ years in this business. Mark Wainberg was not always correct, and he could be controversial, but he was never dogmatic in his research and he always had the best intentions in mind for the HIV/AIDS community. He was willing to confront and provoke world leaders to respond to the AIDS crisis. In Canada, we had no better advocate, colleague, activist, and HIV/AIDS researcher focused on the entire community living with HIV and AIDS.

Salut Chef et merci bien pour ton contribution à la recherche sur le SIDA.

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