

THE ORIGINS OF AIDS BY JACQUES PEPIN



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Review

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It is now thirty years since the discovery of AIDS but its origins continue to puzzle doctors and scientists. Inspired by his own experiences working as an infectious diseases physician in Africa, Jacques Pepin looks back to the early twentieth-century events in Africa that triggered the emergence of HIV/AIDS and traces its subsequent development into the most dramatic and destructive epidemic of modern times. He shows how the disease was first transmitted from chimpanzees to man and then how urbanization, prostitution, and large-scale colonial medical campaigns intended to eradicate tropical diseases combined to disastrous effect to fuel the spread of the virus from its origins in Léopoldville to the rest of Africa, the Caribbean and ultimately worldwide. This is an essential new perspective on HIV/AIDS and on the lessons that must be learnt if we are to avoid provoking another pandemic in the future.

- Published on: 2012-06-05
- Binding: Printed Access Code

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Most helpful customer reviews

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The Prehistory of AIDS

By R. Albin

This well written and fascinating book is a cogent attempt to reconstruct the process that generated the great HIV pandemic. The author is a Canadian infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist with considerable experience in HIV-related research, including a good deal of work in Africa. Based on a careful synthesis of research and his own archival investigations, Pepin presents a synthesis of molecular epidemiology,

traditional epidemiology, and social history to explain the emergence of HIV.

Pepin begins with the generally accepted idea that HIV crossed from its chimpanzee ancestor in central Africa sometime in the early 20th century, very likely because of hunting of chimps for meat. This concept is supported by molecular phylogenetic reconstructions and the fact that the bush meat trade probably increased markedly in the relevant area of central Africa with greater demand for meat and greater availability of firearms. Pepin estimates the number of individuals affected in this way to be very small, perhaps as small as 1 - 2. These infections would have been a dead end without some amplifying mechanism, which Pepin suggests was the widespread use of parenteral treatments for several tropical diseases. In the first half of the 20th century, French and Belgian colonial governments pursued impressive public health campaigns to suppress Sleeping Sickness and other illnesses. Many of these campaigns involved indiscriminate use of parenteral treatments with reusable and inadequately sterilized needles and syringes, a fertile breeding ground of this type of viral infection. The result was an expanded pool of infected individuals in rural French and Belgian central Africa. Some of these individuals migrated to cities to serve as laborers or, in the case of many women, to participate in various forms of prostitution. In these environments, HIV began to circulate via sexual transmission, particularly in the linked cities of Brazzaville and Leopoldville-Kinshasa. The explosive growth of prostitution after Congolese independence in the latter particularly favored expansion of the infected pool. From these sources, HIV would disseminate throughout the world. Pepin provides an interesting analysis of the probable route for transmission from Congo to the western hemisphere via Haitians who worked in the Congo after independence.

Pepin supports this model with careful arguments and analysis of the existing data. His integration of the colonial medical experience and the complex social history of central Africa with the epidemiology of HIV is impressive. The emergence of the HIV pandemic is presented as the result of the interaction between interesting biological phenomena, a serial cross-species jump of viruses, and the enormous social changes resulting from European colonialism. A good part of his model is based on inference but all is plausible and the whole hangs together particularly well. Well written and illustrated, this is actually gripping reading.

20 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating and highly readable

By Sarah

HIV began as an obscure, poorly transmissible chimpanzee virus that may have infected only one person in an isolated part of rural Africa in 1920. How did it turn into a global plague? Pepin's book is a thoroughly fascinating, highly readable, and exhaustively researched account of how colonial public health efforts in central Africa during the 1920's-1950's amplified the virus. Tens of thousands of people were injected (often repeatedly) with unsterilized syringes in an effort to wipe out tropical diseases such as sleeping sickness and yaws. Meanwhile, urbanization and widespread prostitution in central African cities caused the virus to explode into the population. Ironically, STD clinics treating prostitutes and their clients in Leopoldville, in the Belgian Congo, may have played a crucial role in spreading the virus in the early years of the epidemic. This book serves as a good sequel of sorts to Randy Shilts' "And The Band Played On", which was written when much about the origin of AIDS was still a mystery. It would also be interesting to read along with "King Leopold's Ghost", which tells the tragic story of colonialism in the Belgian Congo. AIDS, it appears, is one of those restless ghosts.

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

brilliant, complex and tragic

By simpcity

from an injured bush hunter (or cook) in about 1921, SIVcpz (chimpanzee SIV) makes the leap to humans to become HIV. it was a leap that likely happened on more than one occasion. however, this time the european colonial drive on equatorial Africa had created conditions for a "perfect storm." how this one case led to tens

of millions is quite a story.

the colonials wanted to make tropical Africa safe for their civilizing mission. well, at least safe for europeans! this meant eradicating endemic diseases and resulted in inoculation after inoculation with syringes that were not sterilized. (who knew, huh?) additionally, the civil war in the [former Belgian] Congo after independence created such poverty and disruption in the capital Leopoldville as to create the perfect environment for sexual acceleration of the virus through a new [for Africa] kind of high-volume cash-based prostitution.

a single Haitian UN contract worker in the now independent Congo then brings the virus home. in itself, this simple act might not have lead to contagion in Haiti were it not for a shadowy international plasma trade that found perfect conditions to operate under the dark tyranny of 'Baby Doc' Duvalier. from a pool of impoverished and infected plasma donors the virus is again accelerated through the sex trade. the leap to North America is swift and efficient, with gay men and IV drug users the first bridgehead and blood products close behind.

an elegant hypothesis, nicely documented, thoughtfully stated. without finger-pointing or shame. just brilliant! a must read! thank you, Jacques Pepin.

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