

Did Merck Bring AIDS to America? No.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MTifzl8BOI> In an archival video recently posted on YouTube, former Merck vaccine developer Maurice Hilleman recalls the company's unwitting importation of AIDS-carrying African green monkeys during the early 1980's. "Oh, it was you who introduced the AIDS virus to this country?" jokes the interviewer, medical historian Edward Shorter. It's hard to tell exactly what's said [...]



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"Oh, it was you who introduced the AIDS virus to this country?" jokes the interviewer, medical historian Edward Shorter.

It's hard to tell exactly what's said next, since the person who posted the video – intelligent design supporter and Da Vinci Code interpreter [Leonard Horowitz](#) – tweaked the tape DJ-style, repeating the catch phrases over and over again.

Hilleman might have said, "Yup." He definitely said, with the air of someone telling a true but hard-to-believe tale, "This is the real story." And then the off-camera Merck researchers laugh loudly, and someone quips, "What Merck won't do to develop a vaccine."

It's clear that they're joking. Telling the truth about the infected monkeys, but joking about the implication of that. Sick jokes poorly told, and how anybody could find them funny is beyond me, but jokes nonetheless. There's absolutely no evidence that the virus ever made the jump from monkeys into Merck's vaccines and into people.*

Nevertheless, that didn't stop Horowitz from titling the video "Merck Vaccine Chief Brings HIV/AIDS to America", or science watchdog Vera Hassner Sharav, founder of the [Alliance for Human Research Protection](#), from repeating the transcript without any context in an email alert.

For Horowitz to do what he did is the height of irresponsibility. As for Sharav, though I don't always agree with her, I'm very glad for her activism – but in this case, she should have known better.

In the alert, Sharav goes on to describe how Hilleman acknowledges that a Merck-manufactured polio vaccine was infected by the SV40 cancer virus.

If anything, that part of the interview casts Hilleman in a slightly more favorable light – he discovered the contamination and angrily confronted the vaccine's lead researcher – but those facts, at least, are beyond question: from 1955 to 1963, about

100 millions Americans, and even more people abroad, received SV40-contaminated polio vaccine.

It's not known whether the vaccinations went on to cause cancer. Some studies say they did; other studies say those studies were flawed. The facts aren't clear. That the possibility even exists is scary and reprehensible. It underscores the vital importance of strictly regulating vaccine development and production. But should it, in Sharav's words, "prompt a reexamination of the advisability of US mandatory vaccine policies"?

No, it doesn't. Vaccines are one of the greatest advances in modern public health – and I'm saying this as someone who still thinks there could be a small but real thimerosal-autism link. In many places, that makes me an anti-vaccine crackpot. But I'm not so cracked as to be unable to distinguish between joke and reality, or to judge all vaccines by something that happened 50 years ago, or to suggest that we risk millions of lives on the strength of a few scientifically controversial reports.

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[Merck Vaccine Chief Brings HIV/AIDS to America \[YouTube\]](#)

** An earlier origin-of-AIDS theory brought under suspicion an oral polio vaccine distributed in central Africa during the 1950's. This was eventually discounted (scroll down to Oral Polio Vaccine theory.)*

Wikipedia reference [here](#).



Brandon is a Wired Science reporter and freelance journalist. Based in Brooklyn, New York and Bangor, Maine, he's fascinated with science, culture, history and nature.

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