

## Politics and pigs: African swine fever and AIDS

by W. C. McRae

American researchers are investigating African swine fever virus (ASFV), which causes a virulent and lethal disease of pigs, and its supposed relationship to AIDS. Some evidence suggests that infection with ASFV accompanies AIDS infections, or that ASFV could be the virus from which AIDS developed. Such speculation, and the Watergate-like story of obfuscation and intrigue that accompanies it, have not been welcomed by the scientific establishment or by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta.

Recent events in Belle Glade, Florida, have brought the ASFV/AIDS controversy to the fore.

### Pigs and AIDS?

Belle Glade, a small impoverished community of 15,000 has the onerous distinction of having one of the highest rates per capita of AIDS in the US. AIDS there has infected people with complete disregard to geographic distribution and conventional "high risk" categories.

Then, on May 28, the *Oregonian* reported that African swine fever virus had been found among swine in Belle Glade. (Although the USDA subsequently officially denied that ASFV is present in Belle Glade, two separate positive tests for the virus were obtained by each a private researcher and the Florida division of the USDA). ASFV is considered the most lethal and infectious disease known to swine. There is no cure; quarantine and slaughter of infected herds is the only means

of controlling the disease. It was first recorded in domestic swine in Kenya in 1909, where 99% of infected pigs died. Since then, the disease has spread to Europe, South America, and the Caribbean. ASFV is characterized by fever, swollen lymph nodes, skin lesions, immune-mediated pneumonia, and blood disorders. ASFV is spread through exposure to infected blood (and rare and uncooked meat), blood products, semen, and insect bites. ASFV has never been found in North America (until Belle Glade?) and has never been known to infect humans.

Is it pure coincidence that the first and only report of the deadly SFV in North America should be in Belle Glade, where entire families have contracted AIDS from no known source? Some researchers and commentators don't think so.

### ASFV/AIDS: the scientific connection

The controversy began in 1983 when Harvard Public Health researcher Jane Teas began an investigation into a connection between ASFV and AIDS. In the British medical journal *The Lancet*, Teas noted that in Haiti the first cases of AIDS were documented at the same time (1978) that ASFV was found in Haitian swine. She noted that the swine virus mutates quickly, and that in particular, the Haitian strain of ASFV seemed peculiarly atypical in that it had a low, accumulative virulence. Furthermore, the features of chronic infection with AIDS and ASFV are very similar. Teas suggested "the similarities in geography, symptoms, and timing between Haitian ASFV and AIDS are striking and deserve further investigation." (*Lancet*, 1983,i:923)

Response to Teas' inquiries was swift. Two research teams, one French, one Dutch, responded almost immediately. Neither found evidence of antibodies to ASFV in plasma

from people with AIDS (*Lancet*, 1983,ii:110; *Lancet*, 1983,i:1098). Researchers at Plum Island, the Department of Agriculture disease test facility, described any investigation seeking a relationship between AIDS and ASFV as "bizarre" (*New York Native*, Feb. 17, 1986). The CDC, busy with HTLV-3, chose to ignore the call for research.

This spring the controversy reopened with renewed vigor. In March, Teas, in conjunction with two other New England researchers, John Beldekas and James Hebert, published a letter in *The Lancet* which again introduced ASFV to discussion of AIDS research. Using haemadsorption and direct immunofluorescence tests, Teas, Hebert, and Beldekas claim to have found "evidence consistent with African swine fever virus infection in the plasma of US patients with AIDS or lymphadenopathy syndrome (LAS)." (*Lancet*, March 8, 1986,p.564). By seeking antigens rather than antibodies to ASFV, evidence of swine fever infection was found in 9 of 21 people with AIDS, 2 of 12 with LAS and 1 of 16 in the control group. Members of the test groups were Americans and had no previous association with ASFV.

This information is of interest for several reasons. The high percentage of AIDS patients who also test positive for ASFV (almost half) point to either a new strain of ASFV or to an AIDS-associated virus other than HTLV-3 that cross-reacts with ASFV. Either a new form of ASFV can mask in tests as the AIDS virus, or there is a yet unknown form of HTLV-3 that can test for ASFV.

ASFV's relationship to AIDS could be on-togenic (ASFV infection precedes, accompanies, or enables AIDS infections in the individual), or could be the pathogenic source of what has come to be the AIDS virus.

As recently as last month the Department of Agriculture claimed that African swine fever is not found in swine in the US. However, Beldekas', Teas', and Hebert's research indicates that a random sampling of American people display antigens from the virus.

What's to be made of this? Either the government or the researchers are not telling the truth or have been misled, or the USDA test for swine fever doesn't pick up new or variant strains of ASFV (for instance, the new low virulence strains). If the latter is the case, then it seems probable that American swine, and apparently a proportion of the American populace, are infected with a new form of ASFV.

From Teas', *et al.*, research, it is evident that ASFV is present in the U.S. It is then only a step to conclude that ASFV is not lethally infecting pigs in the U.S. (or not symptomatically so) but is instead lethally infecting humans.

### ASFV/AIDS: politically transmitted diseases

The following article appeared in the *Boston Globe*, January 9, 1977:

NEW YORK — With at least the tacit backing of Central Intelligence Agency officials, operatives linked to anti-Castro terrorists introduced African swine fever virus into Cuba in 1971. Six weeks later, an outbreak of the disease forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent a nationwide epidemic.

A U.S. intelligence source said in an interview that he was given the virus in a sealed, unmarked container at an Army base and CIA training ground in the Panama Canal Zone with instructions to turn it over to the anti-Castro group.

The 1971 outbreak was the first and only time the disease has hit the Western Hemisphere.

It was labelled the most alarming event of 1971 by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization. African swine fever is a highly contagious and usually lethal viral disease that infects only pigs, and unlike swine flu, cannot be transmitted to human beings.

From this humble, destabilizing beginning, ASFV, or as some would have it, AIDS, spread into the Western Hemisphere. Today, Cuba is experiencing incidence of AIDS at levels not expected in the U.S. until the 1990s.

New York Native publisher Charles Ortlev hypothesizes that ASFV/AIDS spread as follows: From Cuba, the disease spread throughout the Caribbean and into South America during the 1970s. Mass swine extermination programs (with financial aid from the US) are carried out in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The virus adapts to infect human beings in the Caribbean and South America. "In Haiti, the first to get the disease are from a red light district that is adjacent to a swine stockyard. In Brazil, the area of highest incidence of AIDS is one which also has the highest incidence of ASFV — Sao Paulo."

"Epidemics of AIDS in Central and East Africa, Haiti, and Brazil have all occurred after epidemics of new low virulence strains of ASFV in pigs" (*New York Native*, March 31, 1986).

When Cuban troops are sent to Angola in the late '70s and early 80s, blood transfusions to and from local, probably already infected African soldiers further ameliorate the spread of the disease. From American vacationers returning from the Caribbean, and from Cuban prisoners brought to the US during the Mariella boat lift (some of whom were gay), AIDS is introduced into the US.

By the way, Belle Glade has a large Cuban population.

The CDC has thus far refused to take the ASFV/AIDS connection seriously. To acknowledge it would be to recognize that the HTLV-3 virus is perhaps not the (sole) cause of AIDS, and that the virus is perhaps not spread solely by sexual contact and needles. Also, the CDC, headed by James Mason, a Mormon, and funded grudgingly by the Reagan administration, has a "moral" agenda to fulfill with AIDS that would be less effective if AIDS was proved to be related to a disease of pigs, and not the result of a "deviant" lifestyle. And, almost as important to the businessman who runs this country, to connect pigs with AIDS would interfere with a 10 billion dollar industry — the pork industry.

The New York Times was aloof to the controversy in an editorial printed June 3. While recognizing that the non-CDC investigators may be pursuing false leads, it acknowledges that "in science, even unlikely ideas are often worth pursuing."

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