

# Prescription for homocide

## Gays, AZT and mind control

B Y I A N Y O U N G

During that strange period of American history the 1950s, there was a twisted and virulently homophobic psychiatrist named Edmund Bergler. Like Dr. Goebbels, Bergler was a master of propaganda, and after an initial shot or two at writers and other dissidents, he directed his propaganda primarily at homosexuals. Homosexuals, he kept repeating, were all very sick people; they were "injustice collectors."

As a teenager, eager to read all I could on "the subject," I came across one of Bergler's books. I remember throwing it into a garbage bin in Queen's Park — partly out of disgust, partly because I didn't want any other teenager to read those lies about himself and believe them. I knew even then that what Bergler said was not true and that Bergler was evil.

But I have to admit that I was bothered for another reason too. I was bothered by the part of the truth that all good lies contain. Many of us — in those days and since — have been injustice collectors, self-identified victims. We had been programmed to be. We paid \$60 an hour (when \$60 was worth something!) to lie on Dr. Bergler's couch and listen to his hatred and cruelty every week, didn't we? Until one day the mind control finally detonated, and we jumped out of a window.

By the '80s, times had changed. By 1982 it was "not fashionable any more, let alone politically correct," wrote the New York poet and novelist George Whitmore, "to link 'self-destructive' and 'gay' in the same sentence." Nevertheless, he admitted, "the bodies piled up around me. The roster of gay dead lengthened." Times had not changed enough to stop that.

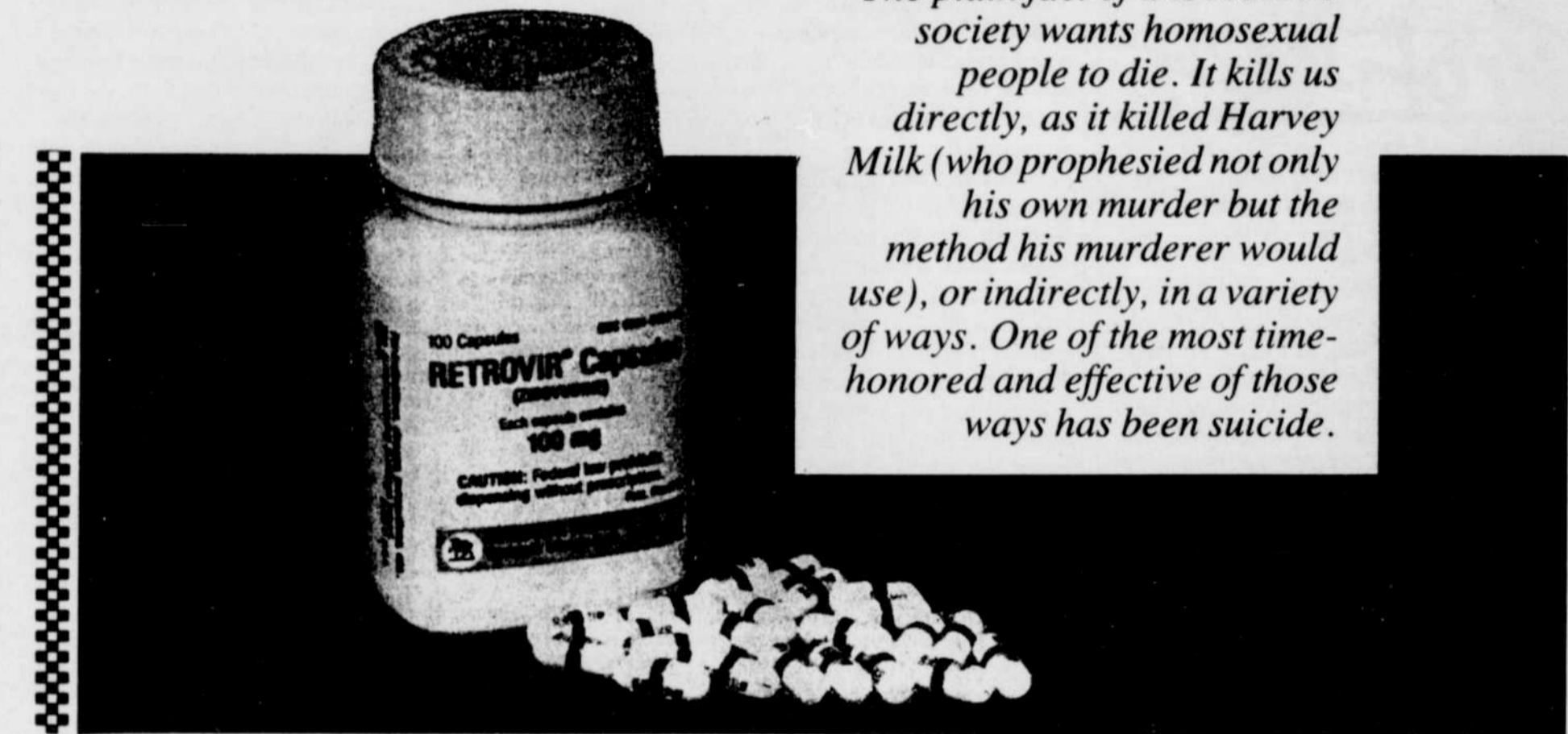
The plain fact of it is that this society wants homosexual people to die. It kills us directly, as it killed Harvey Milk (who prophesied not only his own murder but the method his murderer would use), or indirectly, in a variety of ways. One of the most time-honored and effective of those ways has been suicide.

The gay liberation movement was meant to stop all that. And things did improve. As World War II had done 30 years earlier, gay liberation ended the isolation of many gay people.

Unfortunately for many, emergence from the familiar closet into a starkly unwelcoming society was no liberation but only a change of loneliness.

Whitmore was able to describe that loneliness from the inside. In a 1975 article entitled "Living Alone" (published in the Allen Young/Karla Jay anthology *After You're Out*) he wrote about "an invisible piece of furniture in your apartment that you stumble over all the time — it's a mass of loneliness." And that loneliness itself became for many an addiction.

Whitmore realized then, as many of us did not, that "Stonewall might have coincided with Judy's death, and the party line might have dictated that there were no more victims, but the phenomenon of gay self-destruction, of course,



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did not disappear."

Whitmore saw what many less troubled observers preferred to ignore, and a 1982 article published in *The Advocate*, "After a 'Career' in Suicide: Choosing to Live," provided some painful insights into the condition of many homosexual men in this society, just as the AIDS epidemic began to impinge on the gay consciousness. Whitmore wrote of his own three attempts at suicide, the first when he was only 17. In one attempt, he overdosed on drugs prescribed to "calm" him. Suicide was something, he says, that he applied himself to "with dedication. . . . Like so many others, I was doing everything I could not to come to terms with an identity I'd been carefully taught to abhor."

The Mineshaft and other bathhouses and backroom bars wedded, in Whitmore's words, "nihilism to lust" in a kind of synthetic pornographic rebellion, in living color. For "how long," he asked, "could you live in the constant anxiety of placating a stern and unforgiving God knowing how warped, imperfect, how queer you were?" — until finally, with gay lib, we got the chance to act like rebels.

Few recognized as Whitmore did in those days that "this is how many gay men have misunderstood and internalized the message of gay liberation: sadly, losing themselves in the process. . . . Almost all our common commercial institutions have been set up to promulgate a Rebel lifestyle. The most visible aspects of gay life are his, and the ones glorified by most of our magazines and even our ideologues. This new lifestyle Whitmore called a "new kind of victimization, this unexamined life."

"We are now," he wrote, "a minority characterized more for our diseases and disabilities than for our achievements and aspirations; we are still handy victims, used to the role" and still "Not necessarily obliged to question" specific "substances or behaviors."

The AIDS crisis has delivered yet another generation of homosexual men, in the adversity of their illness, into the hands of the medical establishment. And that establishment is prescribing for us a drug (of course!), a drug called AZT, claimed originally to prolong life (a little, perhaps) for those who have been told their chances of survival are practically nil. If one chooses to look a little deeper into the facts about this drug, what one finds is pretty disturbing.

AZT, also known as Retrovir, was "discovered" in 1964 at a National Cancer Institute Lab in Detroit. Plans to try the drug as an anti-cancer agent were dropped when it proved far too toxic. (Although AZT kills cancer cells and some viruses, it also kills just about everything else.)

Twenty years later, one of the NCI doctors turned his research over to the Burroughs-Wellcome Company, a giant United States pharmaceutical corporation centered in England, and suggested the drug be used to treat AIDS. Burroughs-Wellcome took the opportunity and proceeded to gain control over the world's supply of thymidine, the raw material used in AZT. So, as Dr. Joel Lexchin put it in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, "Without a patent, or even unique know-how, Burroughs has legally ensured that no one else will be able to make or sell AZT."

Having cornered the AZT market, Burroughs-Wellcome then proposed the drug as an AIDS treatment — at a price of \$1,000 a month per patient, a price which, as *The Economist* puts it, "has more to do with the temporary monopoly which Burroughs-Wellcome enjoys than with research costs."

The U.S. government, not known for its independence from the huge drug corporations, effectively gave Burroughs-Wellcome "the final say as to whether a whole range of important studies involving the drug could be conducted at all," according to Lexchin. And

Burroughs delayed and interfered with a number of proposed studies while going ahead with its own studies of AZT by itself and in combination with other drugs manufactured by Burroughs.

After an aborted series of supposedly "double-blind" tests on AIDS patients, use of AZT was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The main report on the results of these tests appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (July 23, 1987) as a two-part article.

There is no space here for a detailed analysis of the report, but rather than being cause for optimism, it instead fueled a great deal of skepticism about the drug itself and the way the tests were carried out. Statistical tables included in the tests seemed to make no sense, and when asked by one researcher to explain the tables, neither of the principal authors of the report could do so. One author told the researcher, "Forget about the tables!" The researcher was John Lauritsen, a long-time gay liberationist trained in statistical analysis, and he decided to look more deeply into AZT and the suspicious testing procedures.

Project Inform in San Francisco had been able to obtain additional material from the FDA by invoking the Freedom of Information Act. Although this material had been heavily censored before release, Lauritsen was able to discover that it revealed "the dark underside of the double-blind, placebo-controlled trial; falsification of data, sloppiness, confusion, lack of control — things not even hinted at in the *Journal* reports." Lauritsen set out his investigations into AZT in some detail in the *New York Native*. (Reprints are available from the author, 26 St. Marks Place, New York, NY 10003.) Among his conclusions was the following:

"AZT is not a cure for AIDS. AZT's alleged benefits are not backed up by hard data, and are not sufficient to compensate for the drug's known toxicities. Recovery from AIDS will