

## THE DENIALIST

## ‘I’m a healthy person. Our children have excellent records of health ...’

Despite the death of her child and being HIV-positive, Christine Maggiore refused to believe she had Aids. BY DIANA WICHTEL

The image is confronting, as it's meant to be and, now, unbelievably sad. A vibrant woman sits smiling into the camera, flanked by her husband and small son. On her bare, pregnant tummy is painted a “No AZT” symbol. The cover line on an issue of *Mothering* magazine reads “HIV+ Moms Say No to Aids Drugs”.

I remember seeing that back in 2001. Someone called Christine Maggiore was the Californian HIV-positive mum in question and an Aids denialist. HIV was harmless, she believed, and didn't lead to Aids. She rejected Aids medication for herself, refused to get her husband Robin Scovill, maker of the dissident film *The Other Side of Aids*, or her son, Charlie, tested. “I’m a healthy person,” she told Connie Chung on ABC’s *20/20* in 2001. “Charlie’s a healthy boy.” When her daughter Eliza Jane was born, the baby wasn’t tested either. As with Charlie, and against best medical opinion, Maggiore breastfed Eliza Jane. Maggiore regularly put up her own good health, and her children’s, as evidence that the HIV/Aids “paradigm” was wrong. “Our children have excellent records of health. They’ve never had respiratory problems, flus, intractable colds, ear infections, nothing. So, our choices, however radical they may seem, are extremely well-founded,” she said, in a radio interview.

It seemed mad. I couldn’t help but

keep googling her and her organisation, Alive and Well, to see what she was up to. One such search revealed that, in 2005, weeks after that radio show, Eliza Jane was dead. After being ill for a couple of weeks, during which time Maggiore had her seen by three paediatricians sympathetic to her views, the three-year-old was rushed to hospital. There, Maggiore did not disclose her own HIV-positive status.

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“I wanted an unprejudiced evaluation of my daughter,” she told ABC’s *Primetime*.

The coroner found Eliza Jane died of Aids-related pneumonia. Maggiore commissioned her own report, from Dr Mohammed Al-Bayati, a veterinary pathologist who is on the board of Alive and Well. He claimed EJ died of an allergic reaction to antibiotics. That’s the story Maggiore stuck to. More websites ensued, though some postings on [www.ejlovetour.com](http://www.ejlovetour.com) proved unhelpful to Maggiore’s cause. She implied that her daughter had somehow chosen to “go home”: “Why our child – so appreciated, so held, so carefully nurtured ... How come what we offered was not enough to keep her here

when children with far less – impatient distracted parents, a small apartment on a busy street, extended day care, Oscar Mayer Lunchables – will happily stay?” The site was soon taken down.

Earlier this year, in an idle moment, I tapped in “Maggiore”. She was dead, too, aged 52. Her death certificate, it’s alleged, cited disseminated herpes viral infection, bilateral bronchial pneumonia and oral candidiasis, all Aids-defining conditions. But by now I knew how things would go. Her supporters didn’t dispute these facts, but have claimed she really died of an unusually strong detox regime, of taking antibiotics, or of the stress of defending herself after the death of EJ. In the wilds of cyberspace, dark forces were hinted at. Maggiore always said she was only after the truth. An autopsy might have settled the matter. None, it seems, was done.

Aids-denialist journalist and friend of Maggiore Celia Farber posted online an email from Maggiore about the state of her health. Maggiore talked about difficulty eating, sleeping, breathing. “I was feeling winded after the most simple task like making the bed.” She sought out a doctor “not at all into the HIV paradigm”. She died soon after. Farber somehow thought the email proved Maggiore didn’t die of Aids. That post also disappeared fast.

Alive and Well. By this time, the tragic ironies surrounding this case were beginning to accumu-



Defiant: HIV-positive Christine Maggiore appeared on the cover of *Mothering* magazine in 2001, pregnant with daughter Eliza Jane. By 2005, Eliza Jane had died of pneumonia resulting from untreated Aids.



late like a motorway pile-up. Maggiore’s book was called *What If Everything You Thought You Knew About Aids Turned out to be Wrong?* There was a certain amount of schadenfreude on websites where denialism is opposed. But no one would ever wish being this wrong on anyone.

It’s not difficult to see some reasons why Maggiore took the track she did. In 1992, Maggiore, a successful businesswoman, discovered she was HIV-positive. A former boyfriend in Italy tested positive also. “Life as I had lived, planned and hoped came to a grinding halt,” she wrote on the Alive and Well website. She talked of “shock and shame”, of feeling like a leper. She retested several times, getting negative, positive and indeterminate results. A meeting with Peter Duesberg, a professor of molecular biology who maintains that the HIV virus is harmless and doesn’t cause Aids, gave her what must have looked like the way out.

“Research since the early 80s has proven beyond all doubt that HIV causes Aids,” says the New Zealand Aids Foundation firmly. “Aids denialism has no visible support at all in New Zealand.” Yet Maggiore was the poster girl for a small but surprisingly influential global ideology. This is a world where, as with climate change or Holocaust denial, dodgy science and even dodgier logic abounds. No one claims to know everything about HIV/Aids. There are always shards of truth on which to erect the whole, shaky

edifice. Maggiore survived for a long time without drugs. “Mathilde Krim would describe me as a slow progressor,” said Maggiore, of a doctor interviewed on *20/20*, “as if to make ‘progress’ I need to become ill!” After EJ’s death, her son Charlie and her husband, Robin Scovill, both tested negative. Scovill and Maggiore had never practised safe sex. “I just never really bought into the premise that

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if you have sex with the wrong person, you’re going to be infected and your life as you knew it is over,” said Scovill on *20/20*.

As with denial of the Holocaust, climate change or any other inconvenient truth, this sort of “rethinking” is cast by believers as healthy scepticism. The myth persists that “dissident” thinking is ruthlessly suppressed. In fact, it infiltrates the mainstream surprisingly often. Neville Hodgkinson, former *Sunday Times* science correspondent, published articles in the 90s with titles like “Aids: The Plague That Never Was”. Celia Farber’s denialist work has

been published in *Harpers* magazine. In this country, Joel Hayward’s thesis claiming the Nazi gas chambers were “atrocious propaganda” was awarded first class honours. Climate change deniers are regularly called upon to give “balance”.

Maggiore was certainly no slouch at getting heard. She attended the 13th International Aids conference in Durban in 2000, where she had the ear of Thabo Mbeki. A 2008 Harvard study put an estimated 365,000 preventable premature deaths in South Africa down to the influence of denialists.

No amount of evidence, not the worst of personal tragedies, dented Maggiore’s certainty. “No cracks. No doubts,” noted an *Elle* magazine interview after EJ’s death. “This woman could lead armies.” On *Primetime* Maggiore described the scene the night EJ died. “My husband was on the phone with the paediatrician, and I started screaming: ‘She stopped breathing!’ Then, she collapsed right in front of my eyes. My baby! My baby!” As she became so ill herself, in precisely the ways medical science predicted, Maggiore must have known she’d got it wrong. You can’t help but be haunted by the choice she then faced. She might have saved her own life, and more besides, but that would mean backing down and accepting the chance offered by Aids drugs. A chance she denied her own child. If she ever wavered, no one is saying. Her supporters still hail her as a hero. ■