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BBC apologizes for airing AIDS 'denialist' documentary

Three years after airing a documentary that claimed HIV-positive orphans were exploited in clinical trials of AIDS drugs, the BBC has apologized. The apology is a response to complaints by several prominent AIDS scientists that the video, *Guinea Pig Kids*, primarily aired the views of AIDS denialists, who don't believe that the HIV virus causes AIDS.

"The BBC has produced thousands of hours of current affairs programming since 2004. This was a blip, which is why it's been taken so seriously," says BBC spokesman Mark Ogle. The BBC has formed a committee to investigate "why these editorial lapses occurred," Ogle says, and the committee's findings will eventually be "prominently displayed" on the documentary's BBC website.

First aired in November 2004, the film denounced Incarnation Children's Center (ICC), a private nursing facility near Harlem that treats HIV-positive foster children, most of whom are African-American or Hispanic. From the early 1990s until 2002, 62 children living at the center took part in trials of AIDS drugs run by Columbia University Medical Center.

In 1991, after the first protease inhibitor AIDS drugs had been successfully tested on adults, pediatric clinical trials began in more than 30 US medical centers. "Children metabolize drugs differently," says pediatrician Arthur Ammann, who lobbied the US National Institutes of Health to sponsor the first clinical trials to test AIDS drugs in children. "Without those trials, there would have been literally hundreds of thousands of children given drugs in the wrong dose."

Guinea Pig Kids claimed that the ICC force-fed the orphans "lethal" experimental AIDS drugs whose harsh side effects did the children more harm than good. It featured Jacklyn Hoerger, an ICC nurse who had tried to adopt two ICC children, but was denied guardianship by the New York state government because she refused to give the children prescribed HIV drugs. The video falsely implied that her rights had been

stripped away because she refused to allow the children to enroll in the clinical trial.

"My only interest was investigating the very legitimate story of how vulnerable black and Hispanic foster children as young as three months old were being volunteered by the New York City authorities for drug trials," the filmmaker, Jamie Doran, wrote in an email to *Nature Medicine*. Doran says he "went to immense lengths" to interview the ICC caretakers and the doctors who administered the trials.

But AIDS researchers say the filmmakers only interviewed well-known AIDS denialists whose comments, according to the BBC's apology, "would fly in the face of mainstream medical opinion." The video did not mention the drugs' potential to save lives.

The ICC complained about the documentary to the director general of the BBC in March 2005, but the BBC "simply dismissed us," says ICC public relations counsel Gerald McKelvey.

Over the following 18 months, Nathan Geffen of the South Africa-based activist group Treatment Action Campaign and six other AIDS scientists and activists—many of whom are affiliated with the nonprofit AIDSTruth—filed complaints with the BBC. "It was important to us because so many people think the BBC is absolutely scrupulous and authoritative," says Jeanne Bergman, director of planning and policy research at New York's Center for HIV Law and Policy.

After two rejections from the BBC, Weill Cornell Medical College immunologist John Moore sent the letter to science journalists he knew at

the BBC. "They were just horrified," Moore says, and they passed the letter on to staff of the deputy director general. "Then the investigation was finally taken seriously," Moore says.

Moore and Bergman consider the apology a substantial victory, but others worry about the film's lasting impact. "The problem is that false information, backed by the BBC, got out there," Ammann says. "The apology won't."

Virginia Hughes, New York



Foster children took part in trials of AIDS drugs.

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