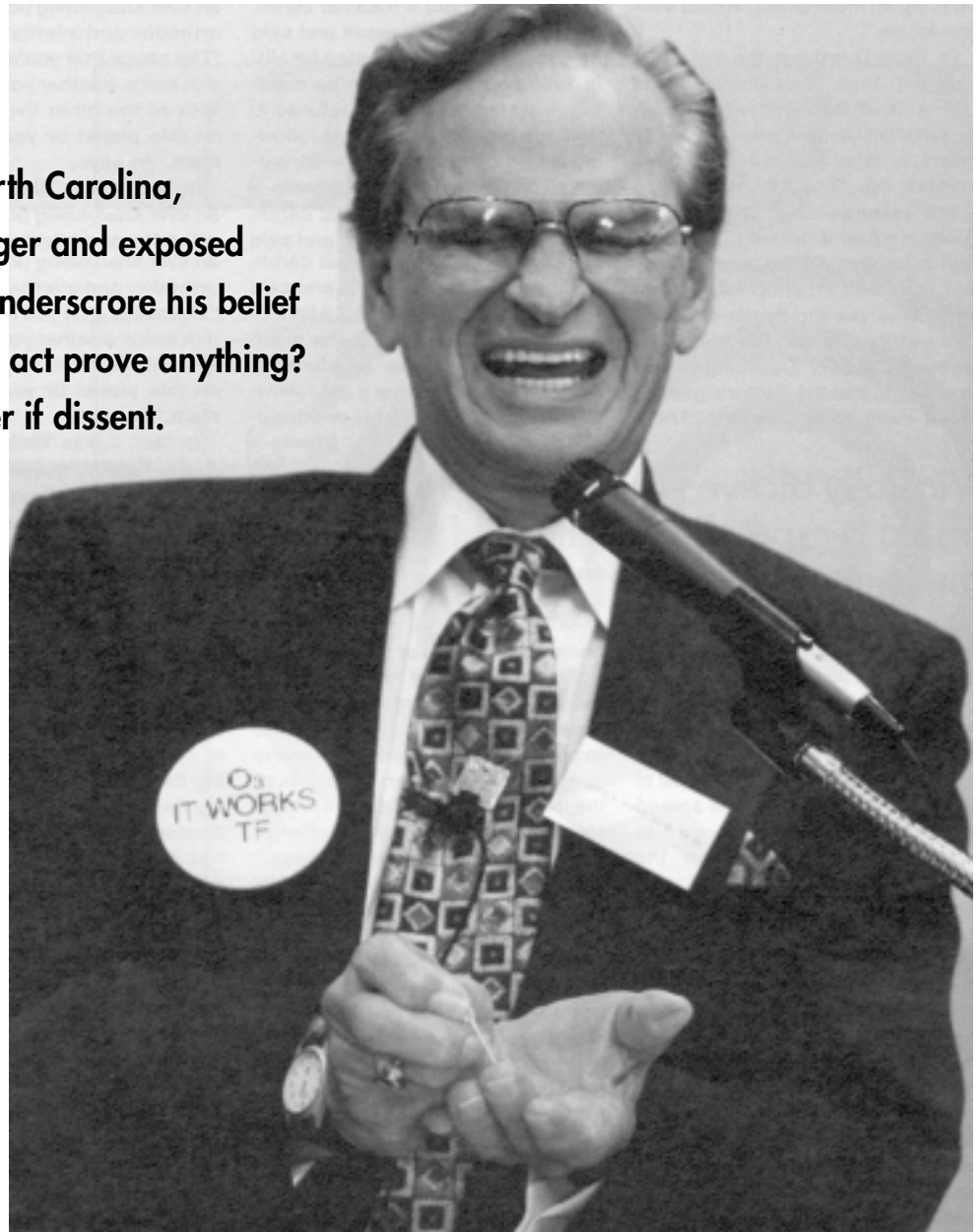


In front of a hushed crowd in North Carolina, Dr. Robert Willner pricked his finger and exposed himself to HIV-positive blood to underscore his belief that the virus is harmless. Did the act prove anything? Celia Farber examines this theater of dissent.



Dr. Robert Willner's big voice filled the small room. "This is not an act of bravery," he thundered, "but an act of intelligence. Come on, Andres." He gestured a little impatiently to a young man in a suit and tie, standing behind him at the podium. "Let's become blood brothers."

Andres stepped forward and held out his hand. Willner pushed his glasses onto his forehead, squinted, and jabbed the man's forefinger, drawing a trickle of blood. He then jabbed his own finger twice, turned to the audience and said with an ironic smile, "And I love life. I really do."

With that he and Andres pressed their fingers together. There was not a gasp heard in the room, only the steady clicking of cameras as the two men merged their blood. Andres is HIV-positive.

The strange event took place last October, at a press conference in Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Robert E. Willner, MD, Ph.D, a 65-year-old, formerly orthodox, now alternative physician, deliberately exposed himself to HIV-tainted blood in front of the media in order, he said, to prove "that the virus does not cause AIDS, and that AIDS is not contagious. 'I've decided this is the best thing I can do with my life to make up for 25 years of practicing misdirected medicine,' he says. "Misdirected is what MD stands for now in my mind. Except for surgery and reconstruction, and the acute situation in the intensive care unit, medicine not only fails miserably, it does more damage than good."

The North Carolina demonstration was actually the second time Willner had put his beliefs to

the test. Two years ago, while researching chelation therapy in Spain, Willner met Pedro Tocino, a Spanish hemophiliac who was HIV-positive, but otherwise healthy, and on AZT. Desperate to get Tocino off the drug, Willner confronted him. "I said, 'If I stick you

and then stick me with your blood, will you be convinced that you shouldn't be on AZT?' He stared at me for a full minute, then he smiled and said yes." Two days later, Willner was on the highest-rated television show in Spain talking about the stunt, and although the Spanish authorities were trying to drum up charges on which to arrest him, the call-in vote was four to one in support of him. Tocino reportedly remains in good health.

Is Willner suicidal? Insane? Is he willing to die for publicity? Or is he simply what he says he is: a

doctor so enraged with the medical establishment's handling of AIDS, in fact of all degenerative diseases, that he is driven to extreme gestures of protest to get his message across? After the Greensboro press conference, Willner set out on a whirlwind lecture and interview circuit to promote his new book and his ardent beliefs. *Deadly Deception: The Proof That Sex and HIV Absolutely Do Not Cause AIDS* was published by a small press, Peltac Publishing, and although it is written in a loud, passionate, unacademic style, Willner has managed to break new ground in a reluctant media. Even the *Washington Post* ended its apparent eight-year silence on the HIV debate with an article focusing on Willner and HIV dissidents. Now Willner has decided to continue "injecting himself" with HIV. "I will do it in every city in the world if I have to," he says, "to call

attention to this scam. In Spain they Aid they were going to bring legal action against me, which is exactly what I want because if it goes to court, no jury in the world, hearing information that's been kept from an inept press, would ever convict me."

Dr. Peter Duesberg, the molecular biologist from the University of California at Berkeley, who is perhaps the best-known critic of the HIV theory, is rather amused by Willner's meteoric rise. "The public likes these crude gestures much more than a subtle, logical argument," he says with a laugh. "Knives and swords and lions

"Virtually all live vaccines had to be tested by somebody who had the courage to inject themselves."

and crucifixions. Willner quite deserves the media attention he's getting. He did the thing that excites the public." Duesberg stresses, though, that the doctor's gesture is not mere showmanship. "There are legitimate precedents for self-experiment in science."

The most famous examples include the work of Walter Reed, a U.S. Army doctor who allowed himself to be bitten by mosquitoes in Cuba in 1900 to prove that the insects could spread yellow fever; he was soon able to eradicate the disease from the region. And in 1892, Max von Pettenkofer, a Bavarian scientist, exposed himself to cholera to see whether it took more than the cholera bacillus to cause the gastrointestinal disease. "Virtually all live vaccines," Duesberg explains, "at some point had to be tested by some human being who had the courage to say, 'Okay, I'll inject myself.'"

In fact, Duesberg kicked off the HIV debate in 1987 by offering to inject himself with HIV just after he published his first paper stating that the virus is harmless. Many of Duesberg's critics have expressed rage that he did not follow through, suggesting it proves he "doesn't believe what he is saying." Duesberg insists he is willing to inject himself, but only in a properly conducted, fully funded scientific experiment, with established parameters of proof. "It has to be accepted by the other side," he says. "You can't win Wimbledon in Forest Hills; you have to go to London. Since I'm still an 'orthodox scientist,' if I did something like Willner did, they would say it's meaningless. There would be a thousand excuses why it would be irrel-

evant."

In Greensboro, Willner fielded suspicions about his own demonstration. When reporters asked for proof that Andres was indeed HIV-positive, Willner pulled out a medical certificate confirming that result and said he himself had gotten tested for HIV in 1988 and was found to be negative. Until recently, Willner refused to undergo any diagnostic tests following his exposure because he considers all conventional measurements—immune-system tests as well as both of the commonly used HIV antibody tests—to be inaccurate and mislead-

ing. But after Duesberg, on a radio show, urged him to proceed with testing, he reluctantly agreed.

Some people who believe HIV causes AIDS argue that it could take numerous exposures for Willner to become infected, or that the long "latency period" of HIV—meaning the time between infection and illness—would make evaluation of the experiment impossible for many years to come. Steven Matthews of the New York City Department of Health calls the doctor's exchange of blood "a low level of risk," although it compares to that of IV drug users or health workers. "It would be different if he were injecting a syringe of blood," says Matthews. "But even then it would not be 100 percent certain that he would get HIV. We consider what he is doing to be the same as playing Russian roulette. Maybe Russian roulette with two bullets in the cylinder. We believe that what he's doing runs counter to accepted science. To the extent that he dissuades people from practicing safe sex and undermines the medical community's effort to control the spread of HIV, we disapprove. But he's entitled to his opinion."

That opinion began to form when Willner, the formerly orthodox family practitioner, witnessed his late wife's suffering from the toxic effects of cancer chemotherapy in 1978. He himself was diagnosed with bladder cancer 22 years ago, but recovered after following a protocol that today would be described as "alternative," namely a focus on diet and lifestyle changes. "It took 25 years for me to

make the transition from orthodox medicine to traditional medicine," he says. "I am convinced that you can prevent all diseases with diet, lifestyle changes, sanitation."

He is giving voice to one side of an ever-sharpening polemic between orthodox and alternative medicine. "The shape that you're in makes the difference whether you live at peace with all the other living organisms on this planet or you succumb to them," he says.

In fact, it was Willner's concern about the use of the toxic AIDS drug AZT that first propelled him into AIDS activism. "From 1984 through 1988, I believed everything that came out of the NIH [National Institutes of Health] on AIDS because I didn't know any better," says Willner, who was among the first doctors to treat AIDS patients.

Then in 1988, he was invited to a dinner held by the makers of AZT, Burroughs Wellcome. Margaret Fischl, the University of Miami Medical Center doctor who ran all the early studies advocating AZT, was the speaker. "In her talk," recalls Willner, "she mentioned that AZT had 56 side effects. Having done double-blind placebo-controlled studies [in which neither the patient nor the doctor is supposed to know whether the patient is taking the drug or a blank pill], I raised my hand. I asked, 'How do you do a double-blind study with a drug that has 56 side effects?' "It would be so obvious who was on the drug and who wasn't.

Her answer: "The placebo had 31." Willner was stunned. How could a placebo have side effects?

"I raised my hand again," says Willner. "I couldn't believe what I heard. And she said, 'I'm sorry, I can't take another question from you. I have to go to somebody else.' At that moment, it was so obvious that an incredible scam of some sort was going on. I didn't at that time suspect that the virus was a fake. But I knew the AZT study was a fake." A year later, participants in the study admitted they had pooled their pills so that many got both placebo and drug. That same year, Willner flew to Los Angeles to hear Duesberg lecture. "The logic, and the science backing it, was incontrovertible. This made sense, finally."

There is something endearing, almost old-fashioned, about the way Willner talks about the Hippocratic oath he took so many years ago. In this age of high-tech medicine and mega-science, accountability seems to have become a

thing of the past. "We're finding out how many people in science are willing to keep their mouths shut so they can pay for their houses, their cars, and put their kids through school," Willner says angrily. "Millions of people die, so their kids can go to school."

Willner himself is living in near poverty. He had worked as a general practitioner in Florida for 30 years, when his license was suspended in 1990. Willner had been conducting studies to determine whether people could more easily stick to a diet if they were taking the high-protein and high-fiber nutritional supplements spirulina and glucomannan. The Florida Board of Medicine cracked down on him for making medical claims for food products, but Willner argued that the Food & Drug Administration had specified that diet products were an exception to this rule. Willner was fined over \$35,000. On appeal, the sum was reduced to \$7,000, but Willner refused to pay what he calls "blood money" to get his license back. Today, he says, he doesn't want the license, because without one he can speak more freely.

Dr. Martin Dayton, a general practitioner who worked in the same town with Willner for many years, praises Willner and his commitment to the issues that faced his community, such as affordable health care. "He is a very intelligent gentleman, who is very dedicated," he says. "As far as I know, he has never done any harm to a patient. There are many patients who have praised him."

Although Willner ultimately may have done little to elucidate the scientific mysteries of AIDS, he has provided a much-needed spark to a debate that has often become overly abstract. Many protest movements culminate in some physical, self-inflicted gesture of dissent: Czech student Jan Palach setting himself on fire as Russian tanks rolled into Prague in 1969, for example, is one of the most famous. But Willner's act has added a twist of looking potentially deadly from one angle—to those who believe HIV causes AIDS—and harmless from another, to those who don't believe it, such as Willner himself. "All I ask for," says Willner, "is openness in medicine. Freedom to use our minds. And I'm willing to put my life on the line for it."

At press time, two months after Willner exposed himself to Andres's blood, his HIV test result came back negative. ☺