



Viral Sex: The Nature of AIDS

Jaap Goudsmit

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The current worldwide AIDS crisis is about 20 years old, but the disease itself is much older. In fact, AIDS is only the latest chapter in the evolution of the complex retrovirus we call HIV. Where was HIV lurking before it emerged in the early 1980s? There is some evidence that the Western strain of HIV arose in Europe as early as 1939. There is even more evidence that HIV is a direct descendant of a virus which has long infected certain African apes and monkeys, a virus called SIV--simian immunodeficiency virus. But why is a virus that is harmless in monkeys so lethal in human beings? And why, after millennia of contact between African monkeys and humans, is SIV only now entering the human population in plague proportions?

In *Viral Sex*, leading AIDS researcher Jaap Goudsmit illuminates the origins and nature of the world's most lethal disease. He provides an eyewitness account of sciences effort to understand and control the spread of this deadly virus, in a fascinating journey that reaches from the deepest recesses of the African rainforest, to ancient Egypt and the mummified remains of Barbary apes, to pioneering research labs in the U.S. and Europe. A key idea in understanding the AIDS crisis, we discover, is the concept of "viral sex." We learn that HIV not only produces offspring that are almost exact copies of the parents, as do most other viruses, but that it can also reproduce sexually, creating a recombinant population of subtly varying members. This "viral sex" gives HIV an edge in adapting inside a foreign body, and this is why the virus could survive the leap from ape to man. But Goudsmit presents devastating evidence that the real villain of the AIDS epidemic is not HIV, but the ongoing destruction of the Western Equatorial rainforest and the wild monkeys and apes who once thrived there. Goudsmit argues that human encroachment on the African monkey habitat provided the opportunity for the SIV virus to jump to its new host, human beings. He also describes how humans then brought HIV out of the rainforest at the turn of the century, most probably to Cameroon. From there some strains went to German East Africa, where the virus evolved into the African AIDS virus we see today, while other strains left Cameroon for Germany on the eve of World War II.

Goudsmit is uniquely qualified to provide readers with vital perspective on this worldwide crisis.

Provocative, vividly written, and impeccably researched, *Viral Sex* instills readers with a new sense of the urgent need to contain HIV and other similarly lethal viruses before they spread beyond the grasp of even the most sophisticated science.

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