

Obituary for Cass Mann (17 October, 1948 – 18 April, 2009)

15 January, 2010, Singapore: Following his passing in April 2009 I've spent time trying to find out more about my oldest brother, Cass Mann. I knew him since I was a child however, due to the generational age differences and family disputes we never really connected. Perhaps without his realising, we made a few common friends and I followed his work quite closely. Cass was not the easiest person to communicate with and was someone with very firmly held beliefs. I have since realised is that he remained very true to what he believed in until his final days, and although his profile in the last decade was much lower key, he continued to work for change in what he felt was most important to him. I think that we would have communicated much better if we weren't brothers. More importantly there should be a positive legacy from his passing – if just a reminder that living a healthy life and looking after yourself are the best cures for any illness or condition, not just HIV and AIDS. One thing is certain, Cass never shied away from controversy, and even if a belief that was true to him went against the grain he would stand firm.

Cass was one of the first people to test HIV positive and his passing meant that he lived well into his third decade since his positive test and possibly much longer as it is unclear when he was first infected. This made him one of the longest HIV survivors and this should be a reminder to anyone facing up to testing positive – it's not the end of the world – you still have a life to live but if you don't live it well then it will be a short life; if you do live it well then the chances of growing older with your health intact is quite possible.

In the late 1980s Cass Mann was one of the most visible AIDS activists, not just because of his flamboyant attire but because of his stance against the Kübler-Ross model that was used for HIV counselling, which helps people through a grieving process and help them cope with imminent death. He formed Positively Healthy, which was the only charity for HIV positive gay men. Positively Healthy was formed as the result of the death of one of Cass Mann's closest friends, David Reichenberg, one of the world's leading baroque oboe players who played in the 'English Concert'. Following his death, Cass went into shock and decided he didn't want to see anyone else die like that. He also campaigned against the use of the AIDS drug AZT, sometimes known as Retrovir, due to the toxicity. He used himself as an example of someone who can live an extremely healthy life after testing positive and argued that the fact that he could live over twenty years without taking any drugs was a demonstration that his methods were a success. The toxicity of AZT is now well documented.

"I worked with Cass as a campaigner in the fight to alert the world to the toxicity of AZT. We were on a Committee called SCAM to bring the above issues to the attention of the general public (I can't remember what the acronym stood for!) and together we helped organise a conference in London called "AZT on Trial".

"Cass was immensely professional, highly organised and wonderfully articulate. His voice, with its perfect elocution, carried with it instant authority. He was also very attractive, with his tumbling black hair and exotic outfits.

"We (Meditel Productions) were making a documentary for Dispatches, Channel 4 called "AZT Cause for Concern" in 1991 and 1992. Cass was a huge help, regularly coming into our office in Covent Garden with new research and information.

"The programme was transmitted in 1992. Cass Mann was interviewed on the programme and I have found the transcript in the Immunity Resource Foundation archives.

"Introduction to Cass: "Cass Mann is a volunteer counsellor for Positively Health, the London based self-help group. It provides members with free information about AIDS and different treatments. Does he think AZT improves quality of life?"

"Cass Mann: "No. That is not true. I have never seen it improve quality of life. Certainly when people begin the drug, they begin with the best possible motive and expectation but after a period of time - there are of course people who claim it does - but I've known no one who's been on it for an extended period who would claim that."

"Just before transmission of the programme I was called in to Channel 4 to see the commissioning editor who had been warned by another contributor to Dispatches (deeply opposed to our work on AZT) that Cass should not be allowed to appear in our programme because of various scurrilous rumours that were about. We fought tooth and nail for Cass to remain in the programme, and won.

"The programme went on to win the British Medical Association Educational Merit Award *1992.*

"I shall always remember Cass and always miss him." Joan Shenton, Meditel Productions

One of the many myths that arose around AIDS in the early Nineties was that Cass Mann was an 'AIDS denialist'. He wasn't. What he objected to was the orthodoxy at the time that held that HIV infection inevitably led to a rapid death.

"I first met Cass Mann in the late 1980s when medical options for people living with HIV remained extremely limited. The polarization in the HIV community as described had at one extreme those who argued that AZT was a poison that would inevitably kill everyone who took it and, at the other extreme, those who argued that countless lives would be saved if the drug's use – then limited to those who were ill with AIDS – was expanded to otherwise healthy HIV-positive people.

"Both extremes were to be proven wrong. AZT is an effective anti-HIV drug but was initially used at doses that were far too high, causing serious toxicity. Moreover, when given as single-drug therapy its anti-HIV effect was short-lived, leaving patients with drug resistance that limited their ability to benefit from the much more effective multi-drug combinations that became available in later years. So while AZT monotherapy could indeed provide a short period of benefit for some seriously ill people, it would have been a disaster if those who advocated its widespread use by symptom-free people had prevailed.

"Some of the participants in these debates, on both sides, had utterly closed minds and seemed more focused on vilifying their opponents than seeking the truth in the middle ground. However, I always felt that Cass was fundamentally well-intentioned, motivated

by genuine concern for the well-being of HIV-positive people and a desire for them to be active participants in their health care. Over time, as the anti-AZT extremists retreated into increasingly deluded states of denial, such as the fantasy that HIV is harmless, Cass instead moved more towards the mainstream, stating on the front page of the Positively Healthy Web site that "HIV-1 is the sole, necessary and sufficient cause of AIDS in gay men... The progression to AIDS can be exacerbated by cofactors such as sexually transmitted infections, malnutrition, malabsorption, and recreational drugs, but without HIV there is no AIDS."

"I was sad to learn of Cass's death, which reminds us that even in the current era of effective treatments, HIV remains a potent threat to the gay community. His legacy should be to encourage us all to educate ourselves about this disease and to take responsibility for our own health and its maintenance.", Edward King

Cass didn't go as far as the belief, attributed to Louis Pasteur and picked up by some HIV sceptics, that 'The pathogen is nothing. The terrain is everything'. But, in common with the great American gay men's health campaigner, Michael Callen, Cass was vocal on the subject of lifestyle and environmental factors - such as indiscriminate and prophylactic use of antibiotics to ward off infections from unprotected sex; multiple sexually transmitted infections; excessive use of recreational drugs, particularly poppers; and the riotous clubbing, back-room and sauna scene at the time were wearing down gay men's immune systems and creating a biological environment that allowed HIV to get the upper hand.

"Although we had disagreements on some issues, in the early days of the AIDS pandemic Cass helped counter the then fatalistic attitude that an AIDS diagnosis equalled a swift and miserable death. From victim to victor, was his empowering, fight back motto. His holistic perspective gave hope and encouragement to many people with AIDS, boosting their morale. At a time when mainstream medicine could do little, Cass promoted alternative therapies to alleviate their symptoms. Although there were people who disputed some of the therapies he recommended, nearly everyone acknowledged that Cass was a lovely, gentle, kind-hearted person who did what he believed to be best to uplift the mental and physical well-being of people with AIDS."
Peter Tatchell, human rights campaigner.

Many gay men, rather than seeing this as an opportunity to live more healthily, objected vociferously to the possibility that enjoyment of their hard-won freedoms might be contributing to their rapid decline. This was, after all, the ultra-conservative era of Thatcher and Reagan, and the gay community were justifiably fearful of a backlash that threatened to reverse gay liberation. Only now, in more liberal times, have the medical establishment and the more health-conscious portion of the gay community dared to reiterate what Cass, Michael Callen, and other so-called 'dissidents' were saying all along.

"For a while in the 1990s I knew Cass Mann well – when we met in London or Amsterdam, and when we had long trans-Atlantic talks over the phone. He was quick and witty, fun to be with. He had a way of giving hope and confidence to others. Through his work in Positively Healthy he saved the lives of many people, by persuading

them to stop using poppers and other drugs, to stay away from AZT, and above all to disregard the "death-promoting" philosophy of AIDS counsellors.

His article, "Deadly Counsels: The Necrophiliacs of AIDS", was an outstanding chapter in the book Ian Young and I edited: The AIDS Cult: Essays on the gay health crisis (1997). He wrote:

I declare that the greatest danger to people living with "HIV" and "AIDS" is the wholesale pollution of "AIDS" counselling by the death-promoting and life-negating philosophy of such counsellors as Kübler-Ross, whose disciples have been placed in practically all the major UK "AIDS" counselling agencies, with tragic consequences. When people come to them for advice, the Kübler-Ross counsellors tell them to prepare for their own imminent death, which, they unscientifically claim, inevitably follows a diagnosis of being HIV-antibody positive.

...'Don't accept that having HIV or AIDS is a death sentence'; 'Question the medical knowledge and scientific accuracy of all AIDS data you have been presented with'; 'Find out what people living healthily with HIV/AIDS are doing with their lives'; 'Only have in your life that which supports and celebrates your aims and purposes, and detach immediately from everything that doesn't.' He concluded the essay by saying, 'for all those who have condemned us to die, the following message: LIVING IS THE BEST REVENGE!'

Farewell, Cass." John Lauritsen, author/editor

Cass remained faithful to this ethos both in his work at Positively Healthy and in his own life. Following his HIV diagnosis in 1985 he not only survived but lived a full and active life until his health began to decline 23 years later. We shall never know whether or not the Hodgkin's Lymphoma that killed him in 2009 was AIDS-related.

In 2010 AIDS is a very different terrain to that facing Cass and other newly-diagnosed people in the late Eighties and early Nineties. Back then, despite growing concerns about its toxicity, AZT was the only antiretroviral on offer and people with HIV and AIDS had to have nerves of steel not to accept the drug. As momentum grew among those, including Cass, who realised that the drug was potentially problematic, civil war broke out in the gay community, pitching anti-AZT and pro-AZT commentators against one another.

Nowadays, it is broadly accepted that iatrogenicity played a part in a significant number of those early AIDS-related deaths. But back then there was neither World Wide Web nor public dialogue between medical researchers and patients, and Cass was branded by certain quarters as a 'heretic' for questioning the status quo. Culminating in the 1989 libel suit brought by Duncan Campbell against the Pink Paper for that paper's support of Cass, this was essentially the battle that marked a fork in the road between Positively Healthy and the AIDS establishment. Cass followed the road less travelled, at enormous financial and emotional cost to himself and his supporters, yet, now that we are no longer at the foot of the steep HIV/AIDS learning curve, his views have prevailed.

"I first met Cass about 22 years ago, when he was leading holistic weekends for people affected directly by HIV, or indirectly through their friends or carers at the World's End Health Centre in Chelsea, London. I did not become friends with Cass until the Menergy Weekends a few years later, when the focus of Cass's focus was on gay and bi men and their spiritual and holistic need. These weekends were to lead the way for Alchemy, a week in the Lowlands of Scotland, where around 30 gay and bi men were invited to come and explore various issues surrounding their diagnoses of HIV, although again, the weekend was also open for people affected indirectly by HIV, their lovers and carers. On account of my participation and planning in some of these weekends and weeks, and also due to my own interest in holistic health, vegetarianism and healing, I was invited to become the chairperson of Positively Healthy, a charity aimed at promoting holistic health for gay men, especially for those affected by HIV.

"With the advent of HAART, many felt that holistic health no longer had a role to play in their lives and Positively Healthy's membership sadly declined. But this did not mean that Cass's dedication or commitment declined and he soldiered on, still trying to promote issues surrounding HIV that were often missed or neglected by mainstream health workers. Cass, however, was noted as a pioneer in alternative views surrounding the management and treatment of HIV and AIDS, quite often courting controversy, but his desire was always to ensure that gay men were not taken advantage of by pharmaceutical companies and that gay men had the best available information at hand in order to make the best possible choices for their health needs. He was also known for promoting vegetarianism and organic living.

"Sadly, last year in April, Cass passed away after a short illness. I know that Cass lived for Positively Healthy and judging by the amount of people who are still alive today who were once involved in Positively Healthy before the advent of HAART, I can safely say that Cass's lifework was successful and I hope and pray that his work will not be forgotten.

"On a more personal note, Cass was a great and dear friend for many years. Although he had a wicked sense of humour, he also had tenderness and empathy for his suffering fellow man that few could match or even appreciate. Despite living in London Suburbia, he often loved to spend time in the countryside, where he often felt more at peace than in the city. I will miss him terribly but his memory lives within me.", Paul H Barron

We are calmer now about HIV and AIDS. We know that there is still a long way to go before HIV can be conquered but if AIDS can be kept at bay for decades by the drug therapies available now then that is a very good start. Ironically, though, that progress is regarded by some as a licence to return to the risky behaviour of the Seventies and Eighties, and yet another virus, Hepatitis C, has taken the opportunity to 'crash the party'.

In his final years Cass was deeply troubled by the re-emergence of reckless risk-taking by gay men and he began to question whether anyone was still taking on board his message of self-respect and self-preservation. A year before his death Cass was commissioned by AIDS Videos to make a number of short films encapsulating Positively Healthy's message. The videos went live on YouTube in March 2008 to an overwhelmingly positive response and are now recommended by HIV/AIDS advocacy

organisations all over the world. Had Cass lived, I have no doubt that he would have been welcomed in from the cold by a new generation of gay and straight people living with HIV and AIDS. But he didn't, and he died tired and dispirited.

It is my hope that all who connived to make him a pariah will examine their consciences and have the good grace to honour Cass's achievements and prescience. If nothing else, please take on board Cass's ethos and live well and look after yourselves, whatever your HIV status, age, sexuality or circumstances. As Cass said, 'LIVING IS THE BEST REVENGE!'

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