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### AIDS and $\overline{\text{AAA}}$ in Egypt?

**To the Editor:** A recent letter concerning Egyptian hieroglyphs on the disease  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  asks if this disease could be AIDS or an HIV-associated condition prevalent in Egypt during the time of the pharaohs (1). We believe this possibility is highly unlikely. Aside from conflicts with current thought on the origin and evolution of lentiviruses, there is a problem of linguistic interpretation. The initial hieroglyph in the series of hieroglyphs comprising the word  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$ , a picture of a discharging phallus, is a "determinative," indicating the class or category to which the word belongs. Although scholars once took this determinative to indicate a phallic connection with disease, even suggesting that  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  meant hematuria, consistent with schistosomiasis (2,3), it was later proposed that the determinative meant semen or poison, reflecting the Egyptian concept that diseases may be transmitted by an evil spirit in the form of an incubus, impregnating a victim with poisonous semen.

This interpretation is now generally accepted (4,5). The phallus-with-discharge thus came to indicate a deadly disease, and  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  a poisonous disease-causing substance introduced into the body by magic. The word  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  is used elsewhere in the Egyptian medical papyri in other contexts, such as " $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  of the heart" and " $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  of the belly and heart," and is not known to have been used in connection with the bladder or genitalia. While the determinative meaning may not be absolutely established, it is clear from its usage in other contexts that the phallus-with-discharge determinative can indicate fatal or serious illness. The notion that the phallus-with-discharge determinative refers to sexually transmitted disease is not consistent with its usage. To further argue that  $\overline{\text{AAA}}$  represents AIDS or HIV disease is not justified by the linguistic evidence. Without further archaeological or inscriptional evidence, we would doubt that HIV circulated in ancient Egypt.

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