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Sludge and other theories: time to think

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May 1, 2008

A black man approached me on Guilford Avenue in Baltimore the other day and struck up a friendly, walk-and-talk conversation about Barack Obama. The conversation lasted only five minutes, and, remarkably, the stranger did most of the talking, ending with this parting shot: Don't dismiss the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's suggestion that the U.S. government created the AIDS virus to kill black people as the irrational ravings of an overwrought preacher. "I mean," the man said, "look at what Johns Hopkins did with that sludge. ... Think about it."

Yes, think about it.

A little thinking would be a good idea.

First of all, it wasn't exactly "sludge" that was spread in the yards of nine poor, black families in East Baltimore in 2000. It was compost, commonly available by the name of Orgro. It's an organic fertilizer. Since 1988, a composting facility owned by the city of Baltimore has been making the stuff, and it causes no harm, according to Johns Hopkins officials. It is used on lawns in the suburbs. It was used at Camden Yards.

Which gets to the second thing worth thinking about.

All due respect to the opinionated pedestrian I encountered the other day - and the Reverend Wright, who inspired the thought - but it does not appear that Johns Hopkins researchers were out to kill black people. In fact, it's clear they were trying to spare black children from lead poisoning - maybe even save lives - by using Orgro to combat lead contamination in the soil.

The dean of the Bloomberg School and the president of Kennedy Krieger, two pillars of the Johns Hopkins medical institutions here, pointed all this out in *The Sun* on Monday. They wrote an op-ed piece to present some facts and silence an alarm sounded two weeks earlier, when *The Sun* published an Associated Press story that revealed the 2000 experiment.

Was the whole thing a big secret until then?

Apparently, Hopkins told the families who lived in the nine homes what they wanted to do and why, and, apparently, the families gave Hopkins permission to spread the Orgro in an effort to combat lead poisoning. Hopkins found that the fertilizer effectively mitigated lead in the nine yards.

Of course, these facts did not stop certain community leaders, including those with the NAACP, from sounding more alarms and questioning the motives and methods of the experiment.



"Why did they pick this area? Why are the poor always being picked on for these kinds of tests? We just need more information," said Michael Eugene Johnson, state director of the Black United Fund.

OK, here's more information: The Hopkins researchers chose East Baltimore because that's where lead poisoning happens - and frequently.

"Lead poisoning of children in Baltimore has been a problem of epidemic proportions. Ingestion of lead - largely from old paint, but also from other sources, such as contaminated soil - can cause incurable neurological damage and other health problems," the two Hopkins officials wrote in this week's op-ed.

"At the height of the epidemic, physicians at the Kennedy Krieger Institute were treating thousands of East Baltimore children in their lead-poisoning clinic. Those doctors wanted not just to treat lead poisoning but also to help find ways to prevent it."

Imagine that: Doctors - thinking men and women - trying to keep lead out of the veins of children by turning some commercially sold organic fertilizer into the soil of the yards where they play.

We understand and appreciate why black American adults would have this kind of reaction, particularly given the sinister-sounding undertones of the original AP story. (And researchers gave the families who agreed to the experiment food coupons as an incentive? What's up with that?) I'll listen to anti-black conspiracy theories about the spread of AIDS and the CIA's importation of cocaine - up to a point.

Then I say: Think.

Don't feel. Think.

Don't leap. Think.

We live in the most opinionated culture in history. We've grown so used to hearing opinions we forget what facts sound like.

But, if you're going to accuse Johns Hopkins of exploiting East Baltimore as a laboratory and using its neighboring poor as guinea pigs, then you'd better have something more than racially charged rhetoric, damning assertions and reference to old tensions.

Conspiracy theories make great barbershop talk, great talk-radio talk and great blog entries. They provide intriguing distractions from the often tedious business of civic life. It's human nature to question the motivations of other human beings, and particularly so if the story runs along racial lines. Knowing your history is vital to knowing who you are. But, in the matter of Hopkins/Orgro, in the year of 2008, the people calling for a criminal investigation need to get real. The enemies in East Baltimore do not work at Johns Hopkins.

The enemies in East Baltimore, historically one of the most violent stretches of city territory, are poverty, ignorance, addictions and crime. It's the lack of jobs and opportunity, the limited academic achievements of children, the chronic use of heroin and cocaine by three generations of adults, the dysfunction of families with males with histories of incarceration.

Community leaders should ask what, besides serving as local redevelopment authority, Hopkins has been doing to improve the lives of its most distressed neighbors. We have the leading hospital and public health school in the world in the midst one of the most violent and drug-addicted sections of urban America. Let Hopkins and the Bloomberg faculty and staff launch the medical equivalent of the war on drugs, with treatment on demand, multiple therapies and holistic recovery. Let Bloomberg show the world that a medical war can work where the law enforcement one failed.

Now that would be something to think about.

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