

# ***A Review of Moises Velasquez-Manoff's "An Epidemic of Absence"***

by Donna Beales, MLIS  
For the [Helminthic Therapy Forum](#)

**Author Disclosure:** *The author of this review discloses that she holds stock in **Coronado Biosciences**, and was a client of **Autoimmune Therapies**.*

As a *tour de force* compendium of hygiene hypothesis studies, this book stands alone among other popular press collections. More comprehensive and up-to-date than Jessica Snyder Sachs' *"Good Germs, Bad Germs,"* it's also vastly more scientifically dense.

Moises Velasquez-Manoff has done a superior job in compiling hundreds of papers linking detrimental health effects to the removal of commensal organisms from the modern environment, but he has presented the information in a manner that may elude all but the most learned. Perhaps out of necessity for the sake of brevity, the author presumes a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the reader, for example making sparse attempt to define the parts of the immune system in lay terms. As a result, researchers and physicians will follow him readily, but others may find the exhaustive study analyses and sometimes complex conclusions about the science somewhat overwhelming.

This is really two books that in some ways don't gel as a juxtaposed whole. It's a work of considerable and laudable journalistic science, but it's also a personal account of the author's multiple autoimmune diseases and his experience of undergoing live organism therapy with helminths, a treatment he pursued outside the bounds of medical orthodoxy. The major premise of the scientific aspect of the work is that the absence of exposure to "friendly" microbes has precipitated the current epidemic of allergic and autoimmune diseases. Roughly 200 pages are devoted to the science of commensal biology. Adjunctively, his decision to self-inoculate with helminths, one of the symbiotic organism classes currently in clinical trials for various autoimmune states, seems fairly logical, borne out by promising albeit preliminary research.

Yet from the opening chapter to the book's close, Velasquez-Manoff seems deeply conflicted about his atypical medical choice and, in essence, his ambiguity at least partially results in undermining his major premise. At the end of the book, in a reversal almost stunning in its abruptness, Velasquez-Manoff seems to personally eschew everything he argued for previously based on his own mixed reaction to live organism treatment. At times, his self-deprecating comments greatly diminish his own considerable subject expertise and their jarring

interspersed leaves the reader to puzzle over the ambiguous implications of his self-experimentation. Researchers will be left wanting because his personal case description lacks important scientific details that might have afforded better overall context. Too, one case, especially a case that involves use of an investigational new treatment for a condition that has never been formally studied, does not solid research make, as Velasquez-Manoff undoubtedly knows.

Those in the helminthic therapy community will recognize many of the key players involved in what the author describes as a “movement.” Evocative prose paints colorful mental images of these men and women, both the respected researchers and the regulatory rogues; Joel Weinstock, MD of **Tufts Medical Center**, “Old Friends” theorist Graham Rook, MD, Garin Aglietti of **Wormtherapy**, Jasper Lawrence of **Autoimmune Therapies** and others are brought to life in vibrantly broad literary brush strokes.

Clearly, Velasquez-Manoff has little good to say about the unregulated helminth “providers” he dealt with in pursuit of unorthodox therapy, referring to Aglietti as a “medical school dropout” who dons a **Wormtherapy** lab coat before inoculating him (implication: Aglietti is “playing doctor”). He dismisses Lawrence simply and unpleasantly as a disingenuous “parasite.” The reader is left to wonder why, if he had such strong reservations, he didn’t simply enroll in a bona fide clinical trial or request compassionate treatment from those members of the research community he interviewed for the book.

The descriptive writing is strong, but some of the factual aspects of the author’s story seem weak. There are a couple of profound and marked absences within *Absence*. For example, Velasquez-Manoff heaps Aglietti with almost gleeful disdain but hardly mentions Aglietti’s affiliate, Jorge Llamas, MD, other than to deprecate him as a walking font of pseudoscientific nonsense. In the case of Lawrence, he entirely omits the existence of Marc Dellerba, PhD, Lawrence’s (then) Clinical Director, except to obliquely mention him as Lawrence’s “brother-in-law.” Based on Velasquez-Manoff’s mention of participation on the **Helminthic Therapy Forum** during the timeframe of his treatment, and his own statement within the book that he met Lawrence while sitting in Dellerba’s apartment, he can’t have been unaware of Dellerba’s existence, nor of Dellerba’s considerable expertise as a then regular contributor to **HT Forum** discussions. The omission is at best poor journalism, and is baffling from any perspective when the stated focus of the work is ostensibly on the science of commensalism and helminths.

Absent too is mention of another important entity in the helminthic therapy milieu, **Coronado Biosciences**, the company in part responsible for several of the Phase II *Trichuris suis* helminth trials currently rolling out in the US and abroad as of this writing. **Coronado**, which made its IPO in plenty of time for inclusion in the book, has steadily moved forward on advancement of TSO® through the *FDA*.

Without this important background information, Velasquez-Manoff's anecdote of self-infestation with helminths indeed comes across as irrational bordering on imbalanced—needlessly so. He does himself no favors by omitting the very contexts that would give his story greater meaning and import. His decision to pursue treatment at the hands of those whom he himself describes as dubious individuals seems to make little sense in relation to his obvious ability to parse out and evaluate research and by inference, make reasonable judgments. As a result, his tale, while interesting, may appear to some as merely a sensationalist sales “hook,” tacked on to the front and back chapters of what is otherwise truly solid scientific journalism. This is unfortunate because in many ways, especially in terms of the unified research he has brought together between two covers, his is a very, very good book.

The longstanding HT community will undoubtedly plow through this weighty tome if not for the research, then for the rich and sometimes fractious descriptions of its key luminaries. But ultimately, outside of armchair scientists, worm warriors, and perhaps medical school students, this book may have a hard time finding a large audience. The research community may be turned away by the unscientific personal treatment of helminthic therapy, and those looking for a titillating read could find the worm angle disappointingly short and lacking in horror-story appeal.

Still, *An Epidemic of Absence* is worth the effort for a good basis in the science of “Old Friends” theory. Recommended, with the aforementioned caveats.