

# HUMAN RIGHTS

## Article and Discussion Outline

**Topic:** Human Rights

**Target age/grade level:** Grades 10-12

**Citation:** John Bohannon. "The Freeing of the Tripoli Six." Discover Magazine November 2007: 54-59.

### Part A

**Key Players:** Make a list of key (major) players in this article and describe (2-3 sentences) their roles in the story. And, don't just consider the major players mentioned in this article, also consider people or organizations that indirectly influenced issues in this article. Be prepared to discuss your list with the whole class.

- **Zdravko Georgiev (Doctor):** Accused of organizing the plot to infect 400 children with HIV. He was charged and only sentenced to four years in prison since he wasn't working in the Benghazi hospital where the children were infected.
- **Tripoli Six:** Six foreign medics, Zdravko's wife (a nurse), four Bulgarian nurses, and a Palestinian intern were all accused of intentionally infecting more than 400 children with HIV. They were charged with bioterrorism and sentenced to death by firing squad.
- **Libyan Police/Prosecutors:** The police were involved in beatings, rape, electrocutions, and other forms of torture to force confessions from the accused. The prosecutors attempted to build support from the public by claiming that the accused drank liquor in public and engaged in extramarital intercourse, both of which are illegal in Libya.
- **World Health Organization (WHO):** Sent several experts to the Libyan hospital to inspect the patient facilities and interview the medical staff. These experts found considerable evidence to support the hypothesis that the infection of over 400 children was accidental.
- **Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi (Libya's longtime dictator):** At an HIV/AIDS summit in Nigeria he made comments to world leaders and the press about how a group of foreign medics had created a new strain of HIV in a laboratory and used poor children in a Libyan hospital as their test subjects.
- **Vittorio Colizzi:** An immunologist at Tor Vergata University in Rome. He was contacted and asked to lead a group of European scientists being called together to launch an independent investigation.

- **Group of Libyan Doctors:** Refuted the testimony by Colizzi, claiming the investigation was “unscientific.” They didn’t seem to understand some basic terminology written in the report presented by Colizzi.
- **Nature:** A prestigious scientific journal that published several articles about the six foreign medics on death row. The journal Nature publishes articles that are read by scientist around the world. Some of the key players listed below might not have been involved in the case if they hadn’t read about it in the journal Nature.
- **Richard Roberts:** A Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist who compiled an elite team of fellow Nobel laureates to sign an open letter to Qaddafi urging the Libyan government to recognize the scientific evidence and describing the case against the Tripoli six as “a miscarriage of justice.” He got involved after reading an editorial in the journal Nature.
- **Oliver Pybus:** A world expert in using genetic markers to reconstruct the evolution of viruses. Along with other researchers from the University of Oxford, he proposed an analysis that had never been used before in the court of law. They analyzed the data using every molecular clock model available. The results were all the same; the arrival of the virus at the hospital predated the arrival of the Tripoli six.
- **Seif al-Islam (Qaddafi’s son):** He met with Richard Roberts to discuss how Libya would benefit if they did the responsible thing and released the Tripoli six. In their meeting that only lasted 45 minutes, Seif confided to Roberts that both he and his father knew the medics were innocent and there was no conspiracy.
- **Families of HIV infected children:** For the families of HIV infected children, this story will never end. The families of the initial 400 infected children were all compensated (1 million dollars each), but as mentioned in the article, the Libyan government denies that an epidemic has arrived and is not taking appropriate measures to prevent another similar outbreak. Therefore, it is very likely that more children will “accidentally” get infected with HIV or other pathogens and that must be a constant fear for any parent admitting their children to the hospital.
- **International Pediatric AIDS Initiative,** located at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, organizes the regular exchange of scientists and health-care workers between the U.S. and Libya. Baylor AIDS experts also visit Benghazi to train hospital staff.

## **Part B**

**Reaction Statements:** Read and respond to each of these quotes/short passages taken from the article. Be prepared to share your responses with the whole class.

Before the facts of the case had been presented some of the parents of the children were quoted as saying, ***“We do not know why the medical workers did this, but we do know that they infected our children, that they are guilty.”***

- Why would these parents say something like when the facts hadn't yet been presented?

The World Health Organization (WHO) made an assessment of the outbreak at the hospital, but the Libyan government decided to keep it secret. According to Kevin De Cock, director of the HIV/AIDS at the WHO, ***“sharing such reports is usually at the discretion of the government.”***

- List 2-3 reasons why you think the Libyan government decided not to publicize the assessment conducted by the WHO.
- Under similar situations, do you think the U.S. government would attempt to conceal a WHO assessment from the public? Why or why not?

In discussing the court proceedings, the author says, ***“The courtroom drama that followed was Kafkaesque.”***

- What does Kafkaesque mean?

The Nobel Prize-winning molecular biologist Richard Roberts went on to become a key player in the defense against the Tripoli six after he read an editorial published in the prestigious journal Nature. Written in that editorial was the warning, ***“Diplomacy has lamentably failed to deliver,” and “scientific leaders need to use all their influence” to persuade their governments to take action.***

- What did the editorial mean by “Diplomacy has lamentably failed to deliver?”
- In what ways did scientific leaders influence the outcome of the case against the Tripoli six?

Oliver Pybus, a genetics expert working to reconstruct the evolution of the HIV viral strains that infected the children said, ***“We were worried that someone might criticize us for hand-picking our methods to get the answer we wanted, so we essentially threw the book at the data.”***

- What did Pybus mean when he said, “we essentially threw the book at the data?”
- Should a world renowned geneticist from Oxford be criticized about his scientific methods?

At the start of the 45 minute conversation between Roberts and the Libyan dictators' son (Seif al-Islam), Seif stated that, ***“both he and his father knew the medics were innocent and that there was no conspiracy.”***

- If the Libyan government knew the medics were innocent, why didn't they release them?

During the same conversation, al-Islam also stated that he agreed that a necessary starting point for collaboration would be ***“a workshop between Libyan and international experts to come to a consensus, free of politics, on what exactly happened in Benghazi.”***

- What do you think he meant by “a workshop between Libyan and international experts?”

Even though the medics were eventually allowed to return to their homes there remains a ***“chilling effect”*** that the Libyan affair could have on international health care. Each year thousands of medical workers travel to developing countries to offer their services, ***“But who in their right mind would risk their neck working in a foreign country when the government might arrest you, torture you, and threaten to execute you?”*** asks Colizzi.

- Does this story change your perception of helping others in developing countries?

The Qaddafi Foundation invited Roberts to be one of their trustees. ***“It could be an opportunity to have a positive influence and do good, but my name could also be put behind things that I don’t agree with,”*** he says.

- What things do you think Robert’s referring to when he says “things that I don’t agree with”?

When Roberts was approached with the idea that he might consider a career as a diplomat, here’s what he had to say, ***“I don’t like the clandestine aspects of the job. I’m a scientist. I deal in truth.”***

- What do you think he meant when he said “I deal in truth?”

### **Part C**

**Question for Discussion:** Form groups (3-4 students) and discuss the following questions. Be prepared to share your responses with the whole class. You can answer the first two questions by applying what you learned about viruses from our class lectures, but for the remaining questions you’ll need to explore the article for answers.

1. This story tells of six people accused of infecting 400 children with HIV, but exactly how those children were infected remains unknown. Based on your knowledge of viral transmission and what goes on inside a hospital, what are some viable hypotheses for how the children were infected?
2. One of the key points of evidence presented by the defense was that the HIV virus had evolved in Libya before the medics arrived. Based on the limited information presented in the article about molecular clocks and what you’ve learned about the biology of viruses in class, what part or process of the virus do think the scientist investigated in order to acquire data about it’s evolution?
3. How is this story an example of a human rights issue?

4. If you are arrested for murder while providing services in a foreign country should your trial be held in that country or in your own country? Explain.
5. Oliver Pybus, the genetics expert that proved the strain of HIV virus that infected the children evolved in the hospital before the Tripoli six arrived decided to use every methodology known to science so he would not be criticized. Do you think all scientists should select their methods as if someone's life depended on it? Do you think this would improve or hinder the process of science?
6. In general, do you think governments should make decision based on facts provided by an international coalition of independent scientist, such as, those that were published in the journal Nature, or should they only confer with scientist working internally for the government?
7. One of the major blockades thrown in front of the defense team was that the Libyan courts would not accept their scientific evidence, even though the evidence presented was based on investigations conducted by independent scientist. If this evidence was presented in a U.S. court it would've been treated like gold. Why do you think the Libyan courts repeatedly rejected that evidence?
8. In what specific ways does the Libyan government differ from the U.S. government in terms of decision making? (HINT: Consider someone on our list of key players)
9. If you found out that some of your fellow Americans were being held as prisoners in a foreign country for a crime they didn't commit, what would you be willing to do to help?
10. The son of the Libyan dictator said there was no conspiracy. Do you believe him? Explain why or why not.
11. Libya is a developing country so some might say they expected this sort of thing to happen there. Do you think this sort of thing could also happen in a developed country such as, England, Japan, or the U.S.? Explain why.
12. If an HIV outbreak were to occur in a children's hospital in the U.S. in what ways would you expect the situation to be handled differently than it was handled in Libya?
13. Clearly, if it wasn't for the efforts by scientist around the world the Tripoli six would have been executed. Yet, the medics were knowingly working in a hospital under unsanitary conditions, which might be considered by some as a form of premeditated murder, after all, isn't science all about following procedures? So, who do you think was responsible for the 400 children getting infected with HIV?