

## Director Andy Abrahams Wilson Uncovers the Lyme Disease Controversy

BY JOSE MARTINEZ PHOTOGRAPHY EMILY POLAR

**F**ilmmaker Andy Abrahams Wilson first encountered Lyme disease when his twin sister contracted it. Wilson, then unfamiliar with the disease (triggered by spiral-shaped bacteria similar to the microorganism that causes syphilis) mistook his sister as lazy and cranky, questioning, "How could anybody be so sick and yet look just fine?"

Today, Lyme disease remains difficult to test accurately as tens of thousands of people go undiagnosed, or misdiagnosed with such conditions as chronic fatigue, autism, multiple sclerosis (MS) or Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The Center for Disease Control admits that more than 20,000 people acquire Lyme disease each year (and possibly up to 200,000, considering many people are never properly diagnosed). And yet the medical establishment, with profound influence from the insurance industry, claims the disease is easily detectable and treatable, and that "chronic Lyme" is an unrecognized syndrome or a completely psychosomatic disorder.

Wilson's powerful documentary, *Under Our Skin*, examines the science and politics of the disease, as well as several personal stories of those whose lives have been affected and nearly destroyed by the debilitating illness.

"In some ways, the movie is my penance for the way I treated my sister when she was sick," the Emmy-nominated director confesses. "It's taken this journey to really understand not only the depth of the suffering, but also the political and economic issues involved."

Filmed over four years, with nearly 400 hours of footage, *Under Our Skin* pushes forward the debate of chronic Lyme disease.

"From the onset, I didn't necessarily have a point of view," Wilson recalls. "I wanted to tell the story but the story was unfolding and the story was something that I was researching. I was no more biased than anybody else around this issue when I started. It was the journalistic evidence that brought the film and me to this conclusion. Now the other side, people who are called the Lyme gatekeepers, would say that the evidence is not there, but it is there! That's the thing that is so shocking. They're controlling the disease definition and the

treatment, and yet all they have to say is that there's no scientific evidence, and the evidence is there, and people believe them because they're the Infectious Disease Society of America (IDSA).

Similar to Michael Moore's *Sicko*, Wilson's film probes into health insurance companies and their commitment to profits and loss over the care of people.

"You'd think any open-minded researcher would want to survey all the literature and studies and want to do even more studies about the issue," Wilson suggests about those medical professionals not willing to delve deeper into chronic Lyme disease.

A fan of Italian neo-realism with a Masters from USC in visual anthropology and film, Wilson is currently working on a film about the national AIDS memorial in Golden Gate Park, as well as *Alfredo's Fire* about an Italian gay writer who set himself on fire in the Vatican as a protest against the church's stance on homosexuality. With *Under Our Skin* Wilson hopes to catapult Lyme disease into public awareness.

"We admit this may be one of the fastest epidemics in the country, and if people aren't dropping like flies, nobody is going to pay attention. And maybe people are dropping like flies but we're just not noticing. We're calling it other things. We're calling it ALS, MS, and in some cases, congestive heart failure and all sorts of other things that people die from. My passion is really that all these people with other degenerative illnesses are suffering and declining, and in many cases dying, without ever having been checked for Lyme disease. My friend was diagnosed with ALS. What would have happened to her if she just accepted that diagnosis? She could be dead right now! This is really a life and death issue." ▼

*Under Our Skin* opens in theaters June 26. For more info see [www.underourskin.com](http://www.underourskin.com).

