



Elizabeth Holmes, right, the head of Theranos, in Silicon Valley, left, was worth \$4.5bn last year. Her head scientist Ian Gibbons, below took his own life

The fatal fallout of tech billionaire's 'health revolution'

British head scientist at US maverick's Silicon Valley start-up took own life over 'unworkable' technology

By Hugo Daniel in Palo Alto and Harriet Alexander in New York

IT ALL began with the best, if exceedingly ambitious, of intentions – to develop a machine that by a simple prick on a patient's finger could detect any disease known to man.

But it ended in the most tragic of circumstances, with the firm behind the invention crashing and a British scientist who had devoted himself to the project taking his own life.

Now his widow has spoken out about the treatment he suffered before and after his death at the age of 67, accusing his employers of heartlessness.

Ian Gibbons, a Cambridge graduate, had been appointed head scientist at Theranos, a Silicon Valley bio-tech firm in Palo Alto, California, that had developed the one-prick diagnosis machine.

The invention, pioneered by Elizabeth Holmes, a college drop-out who modelled herself on the Apple founder Steve Jobs, had helped to make her one of the richest women in America, with a net worth last year of \$4.5 billion.

The premise behind Theranos was that it would diagnose ailments from the biological information contained in a few drops of blood taken from the tip of an individual's finger. But Mr Gib-



'He was absolutely mortified by it – it's not like him to be associated with failure. They weren't listening to him at all about problems'

bons believed he had discovered a fundamental flaw in the technology which Ms Holmes had told investors – who contributed \$700 million in funding – would transform healthcare services and, in her words, “change the world”.

The British scientist, who had spent 30 years in the field of diagnostics, poured himself into his work, spending long hours trying to overcome the machine's apparent inaccuracies.

According to his widow, Rochelle, Mr Gibbons felt pressured to remain loyal to the company even when agencies such as the FBI began to take an interest in the accuracy of its tests.

“He was absolutely mortified by it,” said Mrs Gibbons, 69, speaking at her home in Palo Alto. “It's not like him to be associated with failure.”

Mr Gibbons's involvement with the company began in 2005, when he was headhunted by Stanford chemical engineering professor Channing Robertson, who had taught Ms Holmes and became a Theranos advisor.

Mr Gibbons was initially excited by his new job. But his enthusiasm rapidly diminished as he quickly decided the idea was unworkable. “They weren't listening to him at all about problems in the technology,” said his wife.

The American, who met her husband in the 1970s, when they were studying molecular biology at Berkeley, described a culture of intense secrecy at Theranos. “It was a really strange atmosphere,” she said. “There were lawyers all over the place who would listen to phone calls the whole time and she



[Holmes] would walk around and if she saw clusters of people talking together there would be a problem. I used to ask Ian what she did and it's confusing because nothing got done. You have hundreds of people ... working on what? He was mystified by the fact a 19-year-old would be given all this power.”

Eventually, Mr Gibbons decided to take his concerns to the board of Theranos – and was then fired. A few hours later they reinstated him – “to shut him up,” claimed Mrs Gibbons.

Dr Robertson disputed Mrs Gibbons's recollections.

“Ian was a good friend for many years,” he told *The Daily Telegraph*, in a statement. “As a brilliant scientist, he was accustomed to challenging assumptions and solving problems. In fact, he suggested to me on numerous occasions that what we had accomplished at that time was sufficient to commercialise.”

As Ms Holmes prepared to launch her machines in the Walgreens chain of chemists across the US in 2013, Mr Gibbons simply stopped turning up to work. He was then summoned to the office. On the eve of the meeting on May 16, 2013, and fearing he was about to lose his job, he took an overdose of painkillers. The scientist – who had recently been diagnosed with cancer – died in hospital a week later.

After his death his wife called Theranos to notify them – and was coldly told to return any company property. “I've been in lots of companies where

'It was a really strange atmosphere. There were lawyers all over the place listening to phone calls'

someone's died and they usually do something, they usually say something,” she said. “It's almost inhuman not to. So it really hurt.”

Theranos told *The Telegraph* in a statement: “Dr Ian Gibbons was a friend and colleague to many people at Theranos, and an accomplished, brilliant scientist who made important contributions to the field of diagnostics.

“Theranos made significant efforts to accommodate him while he was experiencing health issues.

“We continue to be deeply saddened by the loss of Dr Gibbons, and our hearts remain with his family.”

Federal regulators recently banned Ms Holmes from running a lab for two years and her company is under criminal and civil investigation.

Walgreens have ended their association with the start-up and patients who used the test and claim they received false results have begun suing them.

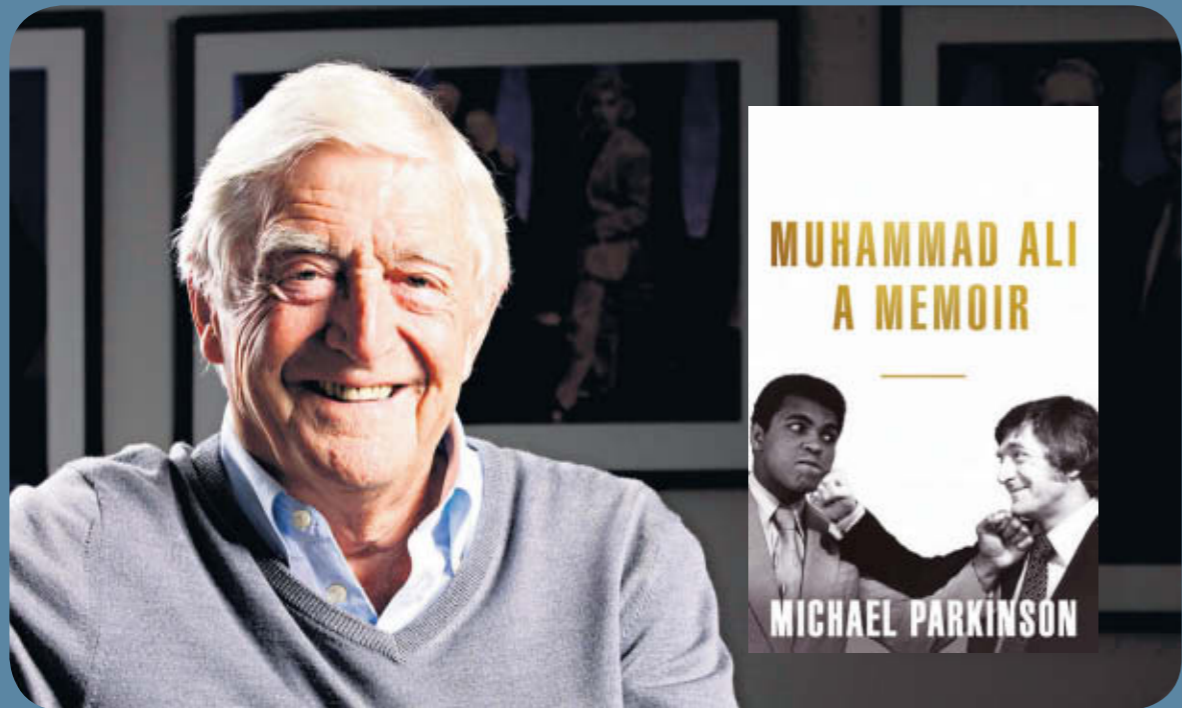
Theranos said: “We are disappointed that Walgreens has chosen to terminate our relationship. We remain fully committed to our mission to provide patients access to affordable health information and look forward to continuing to serve customers in Arizona and California through our independent retail locations.”

But Mrs Gibbons is sceptical. “Who would invest in them now?” she said.

The Telegraph

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