

Notes for the launch of Witness to AIDS

Johannesburg Thursday 7 April 2005

I started my journey at 6.30am, 240 kms from Durban at Mtubatuba, taking a day off from a busy international scientific review team of the Wellcome Trust to be here.

I am however not here to review Edwin's book. I am here to give meaning and interpretation to the book and offer a picture of its significance to us in our struggle against HIV/AIDS. I am here and had to be here because it's special!!

Distinguished guests and colleagues, may I take this opportunity to thank Edwin and the Publishers, Tafelberg for this opportunity to share a few words on this wonderful occasion---the launch of Edwin Cameron's book -"Witness to AIDS". It is both an honour and a privilege to speak on this occasion

Firstly, like the title of the book, we are here to witness this launch and are therefore witnesses ourselves. But more importantly, we are here as friends, colleagues, admirers and people who care and love Edwin for the ways in which Edwin has touched, inspired, influenced, contributed and made the quality of our lives better. Edwin has done all of this by being friend, colleague, teacher, academic, brother, advisor, legal expert and of-course judge. His person and personality have been special to most of us—he has multiple identities almost like kaleidoscope.

Edwin's major contribution and 'legacy' to us has been through the clarity of his observations, the clarity of his articulation of these observations and more profoundly the clarity of the conclusions drawn from these. It is his ability and humility to open to us his personal struggles and the struggles of those he cares about that is so special. He has brought this strength to bear in his story and successfully brought us together as a nation (reconciliation) in "Witness to AIDS".

Many of us share a few things with Edwin---a history and experience of poverty and disadvantage, coming from a broken family and having to spend a part of his early life in children's home in Queenstown away from the love and care of his parents.

We also share with him the passion for honesty, integrity and the belief in meritocracy. He epitomises all these

We also share with him the pain of the national struggle against apartheid and HIV/AIDS.

Some of us share with him the background of having had the benefit of English education at that most of ancient Universities—Oxford. It is all these experiences in time, space and culture that have influenced and shaped Edwin just as it has shaped all of us.

Edwin has a special feature that we may not all have or share with him “he has not only a brilliant mind but also a beautiful mind too”. There is a huge difference to being brilliant as to being brilliant and having a beautiful mind.

Just like his dad, Edwin is also “handsome”, a feature not so common to many of us.

It is approximately 20 yrs now that Edwin has lived with HIV. Reading the book and reflecting on developments, it would be fair to conclude that Edwin himself at one stage must have many times thought he would never see a day like this—the launch of his book reflecting on a disease that continued to threaten his very existence. This day is therefore special because it is also a day of triumph; a day that reflects positively on human development and advances in medical sciences but more importantly on Edwin’s triumph.

As an 11 yr old in 1963, I had to witness my father’s life seeping and slipping away from us as family as a result of type 1 Diabetic keto-acidosis. At the time in South Africa and many parts of the world, insulin was not freely available and was just becoming available and no one was sure what it would do to an African teacher in rural South Africa. My father by chance and persuasion became one of the early subjects to try insulin in South Africa. He took his injections religiously at 7 am and changed his whole life-style. My father is today 83 and has never been to hospital and values each year as it passes often jokingly remembering that he could have been somewhere else 42 yrs ago. When one reads through Edwin’s book I could not escape this similarity separated by almost 20 yrs. In both situations a message of “meticulous adherence to details in terms of observations and how these observations are followed up and resolved is very crucial”. In both a total change in life styles underpins success. In both Edwin’s and my father’s case medical science has indeed made a difference to their lives and the lives of many others. However, in both their decisions and taking responsibilities for their destinies has been important.

In medicine and I guess in many other fields there is a saying that “a comprehensive and meticulous study of one person about their experiences” usually provides the best lessons and ways to illuminate some of the dark shadows associated with a particular issue or problem.

Edwin used his own predicament, his own struggle, his own trials and tribulations and his own search for answers and search for the truth to fight the course of justice, equity, dignity and mount a struggle for many other disadvantaged HIV infected and affected persons. He turned adversity into success, turned despair into hope and is a symbol for that which is good about humanity. He used his privileged position as Edwin to advance the course of others. His story counts as a true example of how humanity advances from single, personal, profound and powerful experiences of NR Mandela’s 27yrs imprisonment.

He particularly advanced the course of ART access in our country; he championed the arena to remove stigma, deal with the associated shame and the denialism that continue to plague our whole approach to HIV/AIDS. He fought the racialisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in his writings, speeches and activities. He brought dignity and human face to what appeared an irretrievable downward-spiralling situation. He did this with respect, compassion, clarity of articulation, building smart alliances eg with TAC and many important personalities here and abroad. He did all of this partly to understand his own situation but predominantly to advance dignity for all and ensuring that his compatriots enjoy and benefit from the new democracy and the way that he did from a position of privilege.

Denialism, Race, Stigma and the “associated shame” have been and are still some of the major obstacles in tackling HIV/AIDS in our country. As a nation, we have at times even denied whether HIV exists and consequently whether AIDS does exist at all. We have also denied that Africans like most species in biology practice homosexuality. Something so fundamentally biological became racialised. We have used such flimsy and unsubstantiated racialised reasoning to develop a false sense of belief that therefore HIV/AIDS is not there. We falsely thought that by believing it is not there, it will not be there or it will go away!!! How naïve!! Growing up in rural

South Africa we knew and were often warned of and about some men. I have often said that in 1990 both South Africa and Thailand had an HIV prevalence of 0.7%. Fifteen years later the prevalence in Thailand is 2% and ours is approximately 25%. We should ask “What choices did we make as a nation” as opposed to Thailand. Amongst others we chose to deny; we chose to vacillate and racialise reasons; we chose secrecy instead of openness about HIV/AIDS. We still continue to struggle with this “breaking of Silence”. Edwin has again leads the way for us all.

Witness to AIDS is a powerful and refreshing personal story which is written with clarity, eloquence, simplicity and understated humility and insight into one of humanity’s greatest challenge—HIV/AIDS. It appears to have been written by a pontiff with legal education or perhaps the other way round.

Its words illuminate the many dark shadows of this epidemic from an honest and detailed personal knowledge, analysis and reflection over 20 yrs of intimate experience with HIV/AIDS. It is unique and an intellectual treasure about this epidemic and this person—Edwin Cameron. It is a powerful story.

Of the many facets it addresses and confronts are the race, denial and the stigma that continue to plague rational thinking and delay progress.

This is for me a classic African Renaissance story of our time written as former State President Mandela said “One of South Africa’s new heroes”.

It is a major and landmark contribution that would assist individuals, public policy-makers, educators and the nation to move forward in concert and with the sensitivity and compassion in confronting, understanding and addressing HIV/AIDS. The story is uplifting, insightful and gives us all hope for the future. It is the story of Edwin Cameron as an individual, Edwin as a human being, Edwin as a South African and Edwin as our friend. It is a human story of immense contributions

“The plague or Black Death that preceded the European Renaissance reached Europe in 1347 and England by 1348, where it is said to have killed half its population. It was an episode of exceptional catastrophe. People said and believed, “This was the end of the world”. Does this not ring a familiar note with the current HIV/AIDS epidemic in our country? Today, the plague only exists in the sub-consciousness of the descendants of the Europeans; while HIV/AIDS boggles the consciousness of almost

every African parent and child (Magubane in African Renaissance). *Witness to AIDS* by Edwin provides an answer to this common story, common fear and common dilemma.

“If truth is beauty, this relentlessly brilliant and hopeful book is beautiful” Nadine Godimer.

Edwin’s story is truly “A Witness to AIDS”.

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07-04-2005