



Witness to AIDS
by Edwin Cameron
(Tafelberg, R128)

Close on 30-million Africans (including at least 4- to 5-million South Africans) are HIV-positive, the majority of whom will die of their condition within 20-30 years, unless immediate interventions are forthcoming. These should include the latest combination therapy of anti-

retroviral drugs – a simple “cocktail” which has been shown to keep patients alive for an indefinite period, and which is neither difficult nor expensive to manufacture. In countries where combination therapy has been made available, the infection rate of HIV/Aids has been reduced by as much as 90%.

Sadly, however, South Africa – currently cursed with the world’s highest infection rate – has lagged far behind the rest of the world in responding effectively to the HIV/Aids crisis. Moreover, international patents and trade agreements have enabled drug companies to price these essential medications beyond the reach of most infected people.

For this reason, Edwin Cameron – upon being appointed a South African High Court judge by former president Nelson Mandela – decided to publicly disclose his HIV-positive status, and become a bold voice for his millions of afflicted compatriots.

In revealing his condition, as well as his homosexuality, Cameron has shown rare and inspiring courage. The deeply-entrenched stigma attached to HIV/Aids has resulted in untold suffering for countless people who have done nothing to deserve the condemnation of others.

Cameron traces the epidemiology of the disease, debunks the myths surrounding its origins and protests – with eloquence and restrained, but well-aimed anger – the gross unfairness of the fact that he, on a judge’s salary, can afford the approximately R600-R700 which combination therapy drugs cost, while millions of others are doomed to die simply because they are poor.

By putting the virus in its medical context, Cameron restores perspective to a problem which – certainly in this part of Africa – has become tragically (and falsely) entangled with racial and cultural tensions. His innate compassion and irrefutable logic make his arguments compelling and his text profoundly moving. This is a book which needs to be read by all South Africans, whatever their HIV status.

Q&A:

How has the book affected your public profile as a judge, if at all?

The public conception of judges has changed a lot. Ten or 15 years ago, it would have been inconceivable for a judge to tell a personal story. But now the public’s ready for it. It’s important for judges to maintain some detachment, and not give too much of themselves away so that they preserve everything for the formality and rigour of the courtroom. At the same time, people want and need to know that there are people in public profile – whether they’re judges, showbiz celebrities or sportsmen – who have HIV/Aids. My colleagues have all responded very positively to the book.

What did you find most difficult while writing it?

The need to ensure that what I was disclosing about myself was actually functional to the book. It wasn’t meant to be an autobiography, but purely a book of advocacy in which I also account for my own survival.

Do you envisage any shift in policy within the foreseeable future in terms of health legislation and budgeting for HIV/Aids?

I do. History will not be silent for those government leaders who have played a positive part in the change. There’s already been a turnaround in policy, and there are activists who will ensure it continues. The downside is that we still don’t have an unambiguous, wholehearted commitment from our leadership on the HIV/Aids issue – but at least there’s a clear national policy in place.

Your chapter dealing with conspiracy theories and denialists – and the credence they’ve been given at the highest levels of government – is terrifying. Why haven’t other African countries fallen prey to the same disinformation tactics?

I believe denialism is a product of our virulently racist past in South Africa. It stems from the misconception that conventional theories on HIV/Aids involve a slur on race. Other countries are better able to see it simply as a virus which is sexually transmitted, without any racial inferences.

In your book, you offer hope for HIV-infected people, on the one hand, while highlighting the unattainability of the means to that hope, on the other. What can the ordinary, financially disadvantaged, infected South African man or woman do to change the situation?

First of all, take a risk by disclosure. If you reach out for love, support and acceptance, you’ll probably be surprised by how much of it you receive. Secondly, know that treatment is available. If you feel you’re falling ill, try to access it, either through the public health system or with the financial help of a relative or friend. Above all, remember that your condition isn’t the end. It’s only our minds that impose the stigma and isolation of HIV/Aids. The reality is that it’s a virus affecting our bodies – and at that level, it’s manageable.

Give-away

Five lucky readers can each win a copy of Edwin Cameron’s superb book, *Witness to Aids*. Send your details to: **TRUE LOVE/Witness to Aids Give-away**, PO Box 784696, Sandton 2146 before January 17, 2006.