

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Virus, Vitamins & Vegetables: The South African HIV/AIDS Mystery.* Edited by Kerry Cullinan and Anso Thorn. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009. Pp. 232. Price R169.95. ISBN 978-1-77009-691-2.

Political power and bad science is never a good combination. *The Virus, Vitamins & Vegetables* is a collection of essays that takes a look at the baffling government response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in post-apartheid South Africa and 'the failure of those in powerful positions to acknowledge that a crisis was unfolding ...'

At first glance the book could be slightly deceptive (candy-coloured pulp-fiction cover, snappy alliterative title, and strap line, 'The South African HIV/AIDS mystery'). So you might be forgiven for expecting to settle down with something a bit satirical, perhaps with a few swipes at the former Health Minister's promotion of the antiretroviral properties of beetroot.

The introduction, however, delivers a better clue to its content. Here the editors – 'long-time slow progressors' of HIV journalism from Health-e – describe how impossible it is to walk away or 'unsee' '... the matchstick-bodies; the listless babies; the rasping whispers of those whose throats are raw from thrush ...', i.e. the ravages delivered by untreated HIV/AIDS.

The authors, some of South Africa's key writers, activists and doctors, take us down the bewildering pathway of AIDS denialism (normally relegated to the rantings of a lunatic fringe) placed firmly at the centre of government policy in the face of a massive epidemic.

'In the beginning there was Viorodene' – the book kicks off with James Myburg's description of Mbeki and the ANC's involvement in the controversial research agenda of the industrial solvent dimethylformamide, 'Viorodene', promoted as an AIDS cure, though rejected by the scientific community.

Michael Cherry's chapter reveals how the giants of AIDS denialism were gathered together by government to make up the majority of a panel of experts, to 'explore all aspects of ... developing prevention and treatment strategies that are appropriate to the African reality' – meanwhile denying the provision of proven antiretroviral prophylaxis strategies to reduce perinatal transmission in HIV-positive women.

'Accidental activist', also known as paediatrician Ashraf Coovadia, explains how 'Becoming a doctor always felt right ... I wanted to use my medical skills to relieve pain, heal and, hopefully, make the world a better place. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that being a doctor in South Africa's state sector would turn me into an activist, mediator, negotiator and protester.'

He describes the hoops he had to go through, including an application to the Constitutional Court with a group of activists and medical professionals, just in order to be able to get on with his job of doctoring.

Kerry Cullinan examines the 'strange bedfellows' that government chose as experts above internationally renowned South African researchers, clinicians and virologists, in particular the vitriolic, dissident lawyer Anthony Brink.

Anso Thom and Liz McGregor tell tales of charlatan vitamin peddler Mattias Rath and 'Lazarus programme' (liquidised vegetables, lemon juice, olive oil, ProNutro, and a mysterious magic ingredient named African Solution) chief, Tine van der Maas. These chapters reveal the tacit endorsement of quacks and their cures by the Minister of Health and the inevitable consequences.

Former leaders of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) provide the closing chapters. Zackie Achmat remembers the decade as a time of great losses and great triumphs in a personal reflection of the years struggling for health, life and dignity for people with AIDS. Siphon Mthathi looks to a post-Mbeki and Manto era, with some trepidation about Zuma's chauvinism, calling for social and economic programmes to properly address inequality and poverty.

All this and more left me with an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. In addition to stating the obvious, that too many people died unnecessarily while government questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and delayed their effective treatment, too many clever and inspiring people were distracted during this time from what would still have been a monumental task without denialism in the mix.

The editors and authors are to be applauded in that little space is wasted trying to rationalise the irrational. In the introduction the editors explain that in many ways Mbeki's official biographer, Ronald Suresh Roberts, spurred them on to put the book together, with his revisionism of a 'poor misunderstood President', who had 'never been an AIDS dissident'. More importantly the book documents an era in an attempt to try, as Justice Edwin Cameron writes, 'to understand the extent of the calamity that befell us through the mismanagement of AIDS, and how it happened, so as to forewarn us against a repetition.'

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