

## Eric Goemare

One day many years ago, when Eric Goemare was a young student at the university of Leuven in Belgium where he studied economics for four years before moving into medicine, a book was published in France which (even where it was not necessarily read) seems to have had significant impact on thinking in the French-speaking medical world. Entitled *La puissance et la fragilité*<sup>1</sup> the author made the point that as far as humanity is concerned, power and fragility walk hand in hand. Human beings, argued Dr. Jean Hamburger in 1972, have become steadily more powerful with increasing mastery over nature and yet, at the very same time, they have become more vulnerable and fragile. Twenty years later he revisited his thesis<sup>2</sup> only to find that it was more valid than ever before. In the intervening years human beings had mastered the capacity to change their very being by manipulating their heredity, or to cause human beings to be born using artificial procreation. Yet and in the same period they had become even more vulnerable and fragile not least due to the global spread of a previously unknown virus, disseminated largely by sexual contact, that was causing the death of millions of human beings around the world. Nor was HIV/AIDS the only sign of our increasing fragility as we became simultaneously more and more powerful ---including in our capacity to manage and rapidly transmit vast amounts of information with the rise of computers and the internet.

This theme of the co-existence of power and fragility is surely the essence that lies at the heart of the great medical organization to which Eric Goemare has contributed so much. *Medecins Sans Frontieres* [Doctors Without Borders] whose headquarters are in Belgium started setting up emergency medical aid missions around the world since 1971 and now works in some 70 countries. It is without doubt one of the most effective humanitarian organizations in the world, due in no small measure to the extent to which it understands and is able to work so effectively with the juxtaposition of fragility and power that is a fundamental characteristic of our age.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Hamburger, *La Puissance et la Fragilité: les métamorphoses de la médecine et de l'homme*, Flammarion, Paris, 1972

<sup>2</sup> *La Puissance et la Fragilité: vingt ans après*, Flammarion, Paris, 1990.

Eric Goemare, who was born in Belgium, has a formidable educational background. Besides an M.Sc. in Economics he spent 8 years in medical training, emerging in 1982 with a Doctorate in Medicine, Surgery and Obstetrics followed by further work in Tropical Medicine & Hygiene and in Epidemiology. His first big job with *Medecins Sans Frontieres* was in 1983 when, at the age of 30, he spent a year as head of the Pediatric Ward at Abeche hospital in Eastern Chad where war erupted with the invasion by Libya in September that year. The young doctor found himself co-ordinating an international team whilst completely isolated from the capital city, dealing with war surgery well beyond his experience and training whilst adapting the MSF programme to daily emergencies. It was a year, one might say, that was well designed to prepare him for his life's work.

For the next two and a half years [Dec.1983-May 1986] Dr. Goemare was head of the MSF mission in Mali at the time that the large Sahel famine was beginning to bite in the region around Timbuktu and elsewhere. The challenge was not only to feed 17 000 acutely malnourished children but also how to convert emergency care infrastructure into a permanent network of support for primary health care.

After a spell working for the UNDP as senior medical adviser to the National Health Minister in Laos Dr. Goemare returned for two years to Chad as head of the MSF mission to lead a major programme supporting basic health services in the country. Then back to Belgium for three years in charge of developing medical policies for the three-hundred programmes then supported by the Belgian section of MSF. This was hardly an office job as it involved field evaluations in a dozen countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America including Angola, Rwanda, Nicaragua and Vietnam.

Then, in May 1994 Eric Goemare began a five year stint as General Executive Director at the MSF Headquarters in Brussels where he was in charge of general policy and development of the largest MSF operational section with 110 permanent

staff in HQ and 420 field staff in different countries around the world. It is pertinent to note that at the end of this period, in 1999, Medecins Sans Frontieres was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

But it was at this moment that Eric Goemare decided that his work was only just beginning. South Africa was becoming suddenly aware of its fragility, together with the rest of the sub-continent, in the face of a virus that was suddenly and silently destroying the lives of many people but there was confusion as to what needed to be done. In August 1999 the General Executive Director of MSF Headquarters in Belgium moved to the new front line. Starting first in Alexandra township, Johannesburg he soon moved to Khayelitsha in Cape Town [829] to join the Provincial Preventing Mother To Child Transmission [PMTCT] pilot programme. Here during the past 10 years , working together with provincial and city health authorities and with a set of other no less remarkable NGO's including the TAC, ARK, Mother to Mother, Philani and Lovelife, MSF has transformed the reality of health care for HIV/AIDS patients through a well-organised roll out of Anti-Retroviral Therapy in the Western Cape. The Khayelitsha programme is now hailed by the World Health Organisation as a best practice HIV/AIDS programme with limited resources. But this of course is not enough and MSF has been involved in other ventures of no less significance. One has been the process, rooted in Lusikisiki, to roll out ARV treatment in one of the deepest rural areas of the Eastern Cape in a complex process described with great sensitivity by Jonny Steinberg in his *Three-Letter Plague*.<sup>3</sup> Another challenge relates to the emerging epidemic threat of multi-drug resistant TB.

Over the past 10 years Eric Goemare has played a major role in helping South Africa to begin to heal itself. We are deeply grateful to him and we honor him. We hope too that this recognition may enable our Department of Home Affairs to affirm his work by welcoming him as a Permanent Resident. It is surely ungracious for our country, to which he has contributed so much, to require that he apply every year for a work permit.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jonny Steinberg, *Three-Letter Plague: a young man's journey through a great epidemic*, Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2008.

Eric Goemare. Oration by Francis Wilson for the University of Cape Town, Graduation.  
Embargoed until Noon, Friday 13<sup>th</sup>. June, 2008

[1074 words]