

## NOTES FROM AFRICA: ETHIOPIA

A month ago landing in Ethiopia's International Bole Airport, I thought I was at Denver International Airport. It is immense, all sparkling clean and bright, chrome and glass, tall and light. The Sheraton driver greeted me with a ginger ale and whisked me off to the marble and glass luxury of my first night's first-class hotel, owned by a distant sheik, with internet access and an exercise bike in the room...What an unbelievable contrast to what was to come.

The next morning, after a quick flight from Addis Ababa to the second largest town, Dire Dawa (pronounced Deer Dwa'), Solomon greets me, smiling. Our driver for two weeks, also translator, guide, and cultural liaison, he quickly becomes our friend. In 45 minutes, winding up terraced hills, we arrive at the ancient walled town of Harar, the fourth most holy Moslem city. At Hiwot Fana Hospital, Sister Pat (nurses are called "sister") from Boston and I have four days to teach, evaluate and make friends with the local front line warriors in the war against AIDS. Free Anti-Retroviral (ARV) drugs have finally arrived and it is time to begin distribution.

Welcome to ancient lands: tents, camels and the aroma of the coffee ceremony. All the rainbow's colors in scarves covering mysteriously beautiful women in the tradition of the Queen of Sheba blend with the ancient robin's egg blue taxis and horse drawn carts. The air is filled with the drone of radio music and town-wide announcements of HIV information mixing with the call to prayer, the howls of the city's legendary hyenas and the roar of diesel trucks. The poverty here is beyond imagination. Even the water to drink, the water and soil to grow food, and shade from the sun are hard to come by. This desert hilltop is so dry; water comes in by truck, once a week. There is no running water in the hospital! Nor is there water in our hotel—except for an hour in the morning. Uganda is beginning to look like a resort to me in retrospect.

The local economy is based on "CHAT," a leaf grown everywhere around Harar and chewed all day by most of its inhabitants. It is a highly addictive amphetamine-like stimulant, sold openly in the markets. Chat's potency and value both deteriorate quickly, so dangerously overloaded trucks are seen each morning speeding recklessly towards the nearby Somalia border.

The food in Ethiopia is every bit as delicious as the Ethiopian restaurant in Boulder. It took a few days to learn how to order, however. "National food" (that sounded good to me) was four different preparations of goat!! I got exactly what I wanted only after I began to ask for "fasting food": Piles of delicious lentils, beans, vegetables, grains and spices on injira, the local spongy bread. "Fasting" is what Christians are doing here when they avoid meat and eggs. (How was a Jewish doctor supposed to know that? This was my kind of fast.)

The week is now a blur of scruffy, thirsty emaciated souls, the poorest of the poor, held straight with dignity and spirit, cared for with the warm smile and steady hand of young Dr. Brook, who has been posted to this "end of the road" before his residency training. He is "Acting Medical Director," attending on the gynecology ward and head clinician of the ARV clinic. He works tirelessly in the dark halls of the hospital, amidst the myriad of bad smells, the incredible suffering and the pervasive shortages. ("We have a CD4 cell counter, but no tubes to draw blood in. We have had free ARV's for 50 patients now for two weeks, but none of the forms the Ministry requires us to fill out.") Two wonderful male nurses, also smiling broadly, Akram and Girma, are well meaning and well trained to help this project get started.

There were many mini-crises. A woman who had walked 13 kilometers in the blazing sun to be told she was not eligible, her CD4's are 5 cells above the cut off, lost her temper and howled and cried. The days each ended with those not yet seen crowding and pushing around the closing door. The lab tech expressed frustration that all his training couldn't overcome the broken promises and broken equipment from the Ministry. But the real crisis, "Oops!!!", no one had thought through how to prioritize these free drugs, just enough for 50 patients for three months, for the hundreds of immune-suppressed people now coming forward. So along with side effects and liver metabolic pathways I found myself deep in discussions of ethics, transparent guidelines and gender equity. Ultimately a Hospital AIDS Advisory Board was formed with "Dawn of Hope," the local patient support agency, to help with this prioritization process. By the end of the week, 18 people have been started on free ARV's. Many more were in line.

The essence of the week was the indomitable spirit of all involved. Without water, official forms, flashlights, purple top tubes or ethical guidelines, competent, loving AIDS care was happening. The nurses and doctors were as thirsty for ARV education as the locals were for water. The World Health Organization, WHO, is rolling out ARV treatment with the slogan "3 by 5": 3 million people in the developing world to be

put on treatment by the end of 2005. But “3 by 5” is still one by one. It still comes down to one doctor, one nurse, one pharmacist, one hospital, one patient. One moment to decide what to do next. To decide who is next? “WHO” just forgot to specify “who?” in Harar. Who will be in the three million? 3x5, one by one.

Amisecanallo (thank you),  
Charles



Dr Brook and I calculating doses in Harar. Who needs a palm pilot when you have a palm?

If you wish to help our efforts, tax-deductible donations can be sent to:  
All Season's Chalice  
PO BOX 2180  
Boulder CO 80306

Please make your checks payable to ASC and memo your checks “PIAS” (which means Partners in AIDS Service. If you want to volunteer, or write to us, email us at [torkin@charlesandtorkin.com](mailto:torkin@charlesandtorkin.com) or [Charles@charlesandtorkin.com](mailto:Charles@charlesandtorkin.com). (Don't just hit reply, or it goes to our friend Ben who sends this out for us.)