

Brave boy who succumbed to a virus doctors knew little of

Last year I wrote in my "Diary" about an Aids symposium I attended in Maputo, Mozambique. The main topic at that meeting was the risk incurred by surgeons who – knowingly or unknowingly – operate on Aids patients.

In this respect, we in this part of the world are indeed at a greater risk. To bring a bold relief to this sombre subject, I also mentioned in a light vein what a colleague of mine had said at the same seminar. "And remember", he had pontificated, "if a surgeon gets Aids, it may be difficult to prove that he got it on-duty and not off-duty!"

Quite rightly the commonest mode of transmission uppermost in the public mind is the one that applies commonly. By and large this is self-inflicted. But there are others – albeit much less common but most unfortunate, such as through blood transfusion, infected needles and contaminated tissue fluids.

There is one such sad case recently related to me by Mrs Gatesby whom I briefly knew and who used to consult me on surgical matters when she lived in Kenya in the early Eighties. She came to see me then with a small stone in her kidney. I told her that being very small, the stone was likely to pass out spontaneously, though she may have to pay a small price for it.

"And what's that?" she asked jokingly suspecting me of mercenary motives!

"You may get a couple of attacks of kidney colic while the stone moves down. And these can be excruciatingly painful," I warned.

"Oh that's really a small price to pay, compared to an operation for removal of the stone," she replied with obvious relief.

And in time, the stone passed. But in the usual detailed history taking, something quite unexpected came out. She was 30 and I asked her if she had any children. She had already told me that she had been married five years.

"No," she replied.

"By choice?" I asked.

"Yes," she said in rather a clipped tone. Then suddenly as if she felt that she should relent, she added, "I would if your medical science could guarantee that I would have a daughter and not a son." Looking at my astonished expression, she elaborated, "My father is a haemophiliac and I am a carrier. I am therefore likely to pass it to my son."

I had to scratch my head to recollect my knowledge of this fortunately rare disease. I could easily remember the cardinal principle for surgeons in relation to this disease. That is – never to operate on a haemophiliac without special preparations because a haemophiliac's blood has no clotting power and therefore does not stop bleeding when he is cut or injured. This is because the blood of a haemophiliac is devoid of a clotting factor known as "Factor Eight".

There is no cure for this condition except to supplement the patient's body with this Factor, obtained by fractionating blood obtained from donors. The more interesting part of this disease is its transmission. It is a genetically inherited disease and the intriguing part is that though women carry the disease in their genes, they can only pass it on to their sons but, they themselves never suffer from it. Only sons suffer from it and daughters simply carry it.

"The genetic experts have told me that if I have a son there is 50-50 chance that he will suffer from haemophilia," Mrs Gatesby, having jump-started in my brain my limited knowledge of this disease, summed up her dilemma.

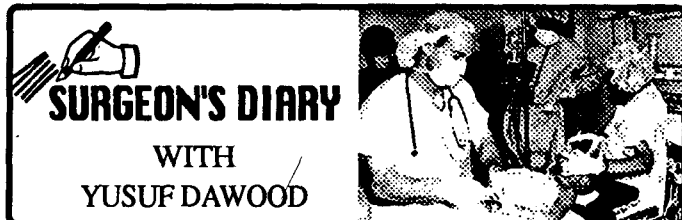
As prognosticated, she got two attacks of kidney colic, both of which by virtue of their severity necessitated her admission into the hospital for a couple of days. Looking like a prickly seed, her stone was ejected with her urine during her second stay in the hospital. Soon after, her husband was recalled back to Europe, from where he had come.

Before she left, on her final follow-up clinic attendance, she made the announcement.

"My husband and I have been agonising over whether or not to start a family, in view of the information I gave you. Now that we are going back home and there are better facilities there to manage blood disorders, we have changed our minds."

Then with a glint in her eye and a sparkle on her face she added; "My obstetrician having checked my urine tells me that I might just be pregnant!"

That was in 1982, and I did not see Mrs Gatesby until a few months ago. In the inter-



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WITH
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vening period, Aids had firmly descended on the world – in the earlier phase of this scourge, the disease was documented as occurring in homosexuals, heroin addicts, haemophiliacs and Haitians.

Further research showed that the transmission was by sex, – hetero or homo – blood transfusion and infected tissues. But until these were clearly crystallised, precautions were perfunctory and less rigid. There were many slips between the cup and the lips.

My fortuitous meeting with Mr and Mrs Gatesby took place in one of our game lodges. It was a long weekend and Marie and I took off to re-acquaint ourselves with the Big Five of our country. We had an afternoon drive in the game park and saw almost all the fauna and flora. A shower and then a drink by the pool as the starry night looked like a sequined canopy. A group of overseas tourists were noisily recounting their visual trophies.

A woman among them kept looking at me.

"I think the lady there fancies me but obviously finds you a deterrent," I said to Marie to tease her.

Before she could find an appropriate reparation, lo and behold, the woman started walking towards us.

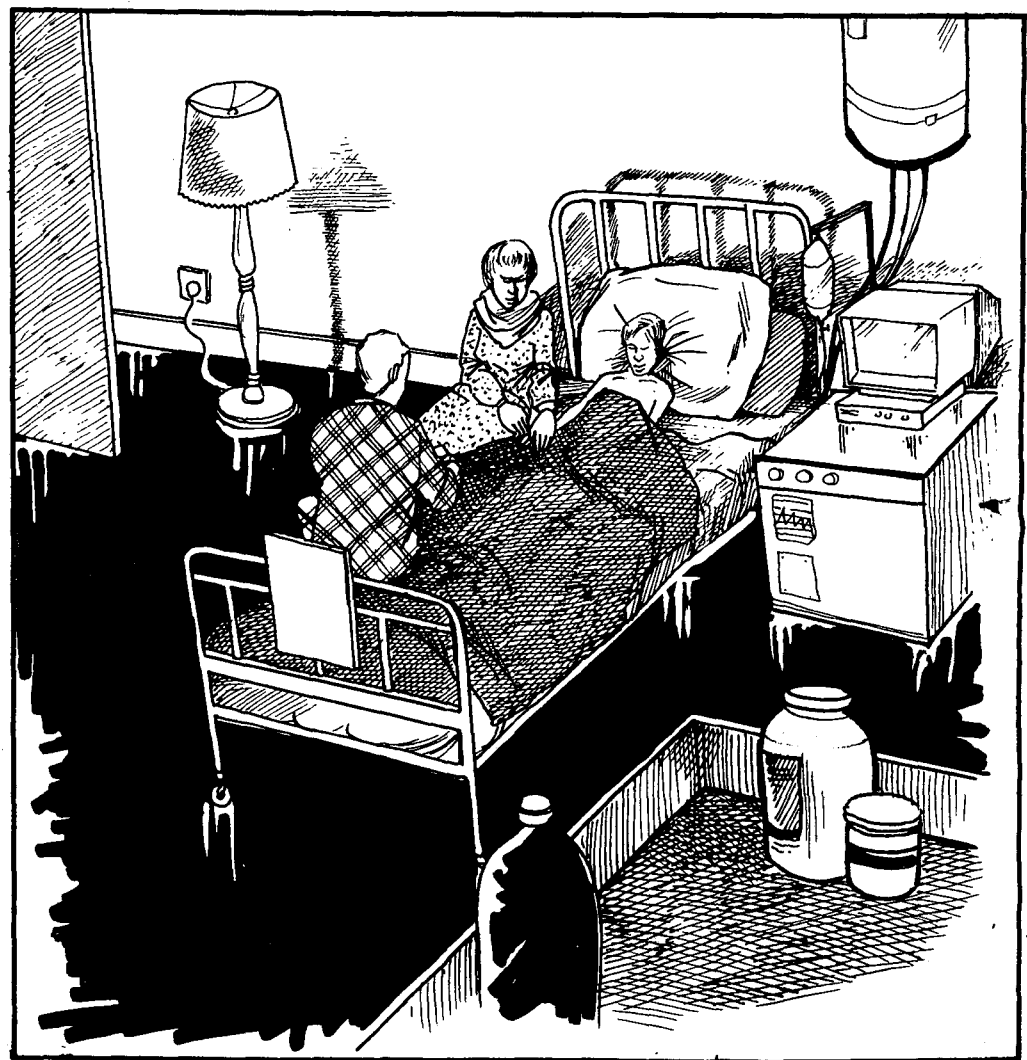
"Aren't you . . . ?" she asked with an uncertain smile.

"Guilty," I replied still in a frivolous mood.

I was wondering what skeletons from my cupboard she was going to bring out when she offered her hand to Marie. "Haven't had the pleasure of meeting you but your husband treated me when we lived here." She then pulled her hand back and added; "I presume he is your husband!"

As I relaxed at the end of conjectures on everybody's part, she walked away and brought her husband to meet us. To do our bit towards promoting tourism in our country, Marie and I invited the couple to join us for drinks.

"We are in a group but would love to join you for a drink," Mrs Gatesby said as the husband walked back and returned with their half full glasses. "Well," Mrs Gatesby said as



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she sipped a drink and realised that I was totally blank about her.

"You must see so many patients so I cannot expect you to remember each one of them but I am sure if I gave you one clue . . ."

"Hold on," I said lifting up my hands as if averting a blow on my head. "Haemophilia," I almost screamed.

From then on it was a long conversation which involved the Gatesbys temporarily abandoning their tour-group, sitting with us for dinner as well and ending the evening with a brandy goblet in our hands.

However, so as not to jar my readers and prevent the account from becoming a roller-coaster in style, I will put it down as if it was an uninterrupted monologue by Mrs Gatesby.

"Eight months after we left Kenya, we had our baby – it was a boy and we named him Michael. A month after his birth, Michael was diagnosed a haemophiliac. Though we were disappointed, we half expected it and took consolation from the fact that my dad had it and was managing it very well with regular injections of Factor Eight."

"In fact, a bond grew between Grand-pa and Michael and they often went out together – to watch football, to the aquarium, to car races. Grand-pa loved Michael and Michael adored Grand-pa. One day while they were in a children's playground, Michael hit his knee on a swing and the knee was swollen with obvious bleeding inside. Grand-pa rushed him to hospital and they gave him an injection of Factor Eight. Grand-pa often had such injections, so none of us thought anything of it."

"Three years later, in 1985 both my dad and my son went to a haemophilia centre for a routine blood check and two weeks later we were called. We were told Michael was HIV positive. Apparently he had contracted the disease from a contaminated batch of Factor Eight, obviously factionated from HIV positive blood. HIV and Aids had just started being widely reported in the medical and lay Press. All the precautions were not in place and we never thought it would even enter our lives."

"And then things got worse. A month later it was confirmed that dad was Positive as well – the source again being contaminated Factor Eight. From then on dad started losing weight – within a year he was a shadow of his original self. Dad wanted to protect Michael so he almost isolated himself. When he died, only my mother was with him."

"We had to discuss the matter of his HIV positivity with Michael. He was too clever not to miss the cause of his grand-dad's death and the commonality of his disease and treatment. After listening to what my husband and I had to say, Michael turned round."

"I am not scared of dying," he said, "and I want to talk about my funeral. I want to be cremated like Grand-dad and my ashes scattered in the sea as his were." That was the only time Michael talked about his illness and his death.

"We decided to make the most of everyday which we counted as a bonus from then on. Michael started getting weaker, his colds and cough lingered on him but we tried to give him all that we could. We took him on aeroplane flights, on train journeys and on short cruises. We had promised him that we would bring him to Kenya where he was conceived. He used to see the photographs and the movie films we had taken of our life in Kenya and was desperately looking forward to seeing the wildlife and the beautiful beaches."

"But that was not to be. A month before we were due to fly to Kenya, Michael who had been so brave all along admitted defeat. He realised he could not take the physical strain and then one afternoon his condition deteriorated and we took him to the hospital."

The doctor examined him and said, "I am very sorry but the end is imminent." We sat there holding his hand and kept talking to him about his cat, his bird-bath, his little fish pond, his miniature railway track – as we saw life ebb out of his frail body.

"And so I watched – first my dad and then my son die of Aids, not wilfully acquired by them," Mrs Gatesby broke down.

"Excuse me," she resumed after a while, "I was carried away."

We all drank the cognac in silence. No words could express our feelings more strongly than the mute silence which prevailed.

"We decided to do the journey we had planned with Michael," Mr Gatesby spoke for the first time. "Perhaps we could see through our eyes what Michael was destined not to see through his."