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In defence of sense

World Aids Day

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Three books suggest simple solutions may solve the most complex health issue of our time, writes Evan Shoul. A barrage of horror stories has blunted the public's response to reports on HIV and Aids.

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The red Aids ribbon is everywhere. We see it but we no longer notice it.

Some things have changed for the better from the early days, when it was seen as an enigmatic scare among gay men in big cities, largely ignored and dismally funded.

Today it is a widely recognised epidemic that has caused devastation in numerous social and ethnic groups the world over. The HIV and Aids message is to be found everywhere, and not just on government pamphlets.

Every soap opera on the planet has featured a story line with an Aids victim. All this is good news in the battle to fight the illness, but the downside is that relentless bombardment renders the message inaudible.

After many setbacks, South Africa now has one of the world's largest anti-retroviral programmes. But along the way the public has had to process countless tales of Aids orphans and untimely funerals.

In theory, this should strengthen the message, and yet the numbers don't seem to be dropping at all.

Even the innocent bystanders are suffering from Aids fatigue.

The key to countering this malaise is viewing it from a fresh perspective. Three recently published books provide a triple antidote to the contaminant.

Side Effects by Lesley Lawson concentrates on the history of HIV in South Africa, from its beginnings as "gay-related immuno-deficiency syndrome" (GRID) in 1983 under the National Party government, to the overdue anti-retroviral roll-out programme in 2003.

The book successfully distils 25 years of political responses, newspaper reports and major court battles into a punchy and highly relevant summary of why South Africa, a relatively well-resourced country with some infrastructure, should have such high infection rates.

The answer lies beyond the one- word summary: "Manto".

The book chronologically tackles the sagas of Sarafina II and the Virodene scandal, along with the Treatment Action Campaign's legendary battles with the Department of Health.

Accounts from doctors who documented South Africa's first sporadic Aids cases reveal a string of prophecies left unheard, giving the larger political events the air of Shakespearean tragedy.

Side Effects ends abruptly and prematurely with the roll-out programme in 2003 and Lawson blitzes the last five years into a few pages like an afterthought. What about Jacob Zuma's infamously take on precaution? What about the Rath Foundation scandal?

Helen Epstein's The Invisible Cure is a book written with a furrowed brow.

With journalistic tenacity, she travels through tireless investi-gative avenues as she tries to find the answer to a seemingly simple question: How did Uganda manage to turn around HIV infection rates in the '90s while other countries in the region fell victim to exponential epidemics?

Early on, Uganda's president, Yoweri Museveni, realised the problem was not the fabled "African promiscuity" but rather the concept of "concurrency": multiple simultaneous long-term relationships.

His government's information campaign, titled "Zero Grazing", flooded communities, churches and the media. The HIV message pervaded all aspects of Ugandan life.

Juxtaposed with the international efforts to understand HIV's path of devastation in nearby countries, this is a success story that may offer an indispensable example to other hard-pressed communities.

The Wisdom of Whores by Elizabeth Pisani gives the health industry an unapologetic and long-overdue kick in the teeth. Pisani, a journalist-turned-scientist, deciphers the befuddling statistics released by funding organisations.

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After some years as a Reuters foreign correspondent, she studied to become an epidemiologist working mainly among the she-male prostitutes of South-east Asia and she has many stories to tell.

And tell them she does, candidly. Realising her experience is understood by few, Pisani begins by demystifying the monolith that is UNAIDS, the only UN agency comprising representatives from other UN agencies and dedicated to the battle against Aids.

She tells of her boss, "Number-Cruncher-in-Chief", boots on desk, saying: "we've just saved about a million Nigerians" by changing the slope of an HIV graph's curve.

She garnered most of her insights in Jakarta and Bangkok, armed with clipboard and calculator in the underbelly of massage parlours and gay discos, where the lady-boys and junkies reveal their simple wisdom.

Use Condoms. Take ARVs. Don't sleep around. All logical ways of keeping the epidemic at bay.

Yet, she argues, because of funding politics, religious biases and the strangling political correctness surrounding "sex and drugs", governments and NGOs continue to launch ill-fated programmes.

The Wisdom of Whores should find its way into Barbara Hogan's Christmas stocking.

- Side Effects is published by Double Storey, R180; The Invisible Cure is published by Viking, R160; The Wisdom of Whores is published by Granta, R185

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