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Belfast priest Father Kieran Creagh (43) has set up Leratong hospice in a poverty stricken South African township. He talks to Judith Cole how he has gone to extraordinary lengths to fight AIDS
13 June 2005

I volunteered to have myself injected with the HIV virus 18 months ago because I had seen so many people dying in atteridgeville township where I set up a hospice.

It seems such a waste that just because they had sex with someone they should suffer so much. By risking taking this first, experimental, vaccine I believed it would challenge people in South Africa to think about, and maybe change, their behaviour.

The opportunity arose when a doctor friend in Soweto was working on a vaccine against AIDS and had reached the stage for testing in humans.

The vaccine was made up of the viruses HIV and Venezuelan equine encephalitis, although the bad bits were removed before it was injected into my body. Basically, my body thinks it has HIV, because it got a little bit of the shell of the virus. The hope is that my body will produce the right antibodies to fight the infection.

On the day I was to get my first injection, I was wondering what on earth I'd let myself in for. Many people came with me to the centre, said a prayer and sang. It was a very emotional day for everyone. A young girl, a counsellor on the vaccine trial, told me through floods of tears that she was HIV positive, and that it meant so much that I was doing this.

So we live in hope that something good will come from it. Ideally, the doctors want to develop a preventative vaccine with which they could inject babies or children, in the same way as you get the MMR and polio.

Of course, I'm bearing in mind that I could have been given the placebo injection of water and sugar!

I know that the Catholic church's teaching is against condomisation and it's true that if people would abstain from sex AIDS would disappear. If they were faithful to one partner it would also disappear, but that's clearly not happening.

I therefore believe that people who think they might be at risk should use a condom to protect themselves or the person they're with. Surely it's a bigger sin to infect someone with AIDS?

To think that a vaccine could prevent the excruciating pain and suffering which our patients endure is amazing.

Of the 125 people we've cared for, one in particular, Goodwill, stands out because he was in such agony and bore it with such grace.

When 33-year-old Goodwill arrived at the hospice he requested a private room immediately and when I saw him I realised why. Every part of his body was rotting and there were worms eating his flesh away. His face was badly disfigured and our matron described his feet as two huge cauliflowers - you couldn't make out where they started.

Our first job when he arrived was to clean him up. But we were struck by his lovely, gentle character. He would never complain. I sat with him most evenings and kept asking him if we could bring him anything. He said he'd love a glass of brandy so he had one every night. He

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was so brave and he taught us about caring.

I am glad that he was able to spend his final days in our sanctuary, which is such a contrast to the township itself, where people live in shacks made of corrugated iron and where disease and violence is rife.

I was in one such shack four years ago when the idea for a hospice came to me. As a priest, I am called out when people become very ill, and I was visiting a man named Ronald who was dying of AIDS. In the intense heat the stench of the shack was overpowering. His wife, also HIV positive, had been trying desperately to care for him.

Ronald died a pauper. But I was determined that people should not have to suffer the terrible conditions he did, and so you could say Ronald was responsible for the hospice being built.

I worked in a hospice in Dublin when I was training to be a priest and believed there was no reason why the people of South Africa should not have something like that as well. Three years after that initial idea, the hospice opened - on July 1 last year - and we took in our first three patients.

An architect friend from Cape Town designed the building - in an elaborate triangular shape - free of charge. We were fortunate to receive generous donations, including 100,000 Euro from Development Co-operation Ireland through the Irish Embassy; the same amount from an anonymous donor in Ireland; 200,000 Euro from the South African national lottery; and 150,000 Euro from a mining company.

Another huge boost was that seven nurses came out of retirement specially to train new staff, including our cleaners and caretaker, in palliative care, because I believe that the patient feels more comfortable if everyone knows how best to interact with them. We have three doctors, 15 carers, nine housekeeping staff and two clinical psychologists who visit once a week.

There are eight beds in each ward as well as a couple of visiting rooms for when the patients get really sick. We try not to let anyone die on the ward. The average age of female patients is mid-20s, and males, mid-30s.

When I arrive at the hospice each day I am still amazed that it's there. Leratong means 'where there is love', and it is a miracle from God. It seems such a long time since I first arrived in South Africa seven years ago. I vividly remember that first day: coming into the township, my heart in my mouth. I thought, what am I doing here?

At the beginning I was based at St George's Catholic Church, which is in a very noisy, crowded and dusty area.

I was so moved by the devastating effects of disease among the people. Nobody really knows how widespread AIDS is among the 17-40 age group, but doctors reckon we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Tragically, the stigma surrounding the disease is so great that families often banish the patient to an outhouse. And many do not go to hospitals for the same reason. But despite the locals being wary of us at first, we have great support from them now and it is wonderful to be able to help.

We have to do all we can to make life a little bit better for our patients.

It's very rewarding, but upsetting when people are dying all the time - there are up to two dying every day in the hospice. Of course, it is one thing dealing with the effects of AIDS, but there must be radical changes to stop its spread.

I have been struck by the plight of street children in South Africa and want to do something to help them. During an AIDS conference in Durban our matron, co-ordinator of counselling services and I were walking along the seafront one night and we stopped to talk to a child, and before we knew it we were surrounded by 20.

We had nothing to give them and although they are so neglected and sick they were delighted that somebody was talking to them.

I don't know whether this is God calling me but I feel very strongly that something needs to be done.

Really, I'm so glad to be working in South Africa, and I thank God for it because I feel that if I had stayed in Ireland, I might not be in the priesthood any more.

Although I wanted to be a priest from a very early age, I kept avoiding it because I knew it was an absolute commitment. I worked in the Bank of Ireland for several years, but eventually began training and was asked to go to South Africa when a priest took ill and had



to return home.

In Africa our services go on for three hours, with singing and dancing. There's a great spirit among the people and I think the church in Ireland has lost that. They are more tied up with doctrine and dogma, rules and regulations.

I think that the only rule of the church should be the rule Jesus gave it - to love your neighbour as yourself.

I was very moved by the Pope's funeral and, most of all, the simple wooden box he was laid in. But then we learned that this wooden box would be put into a casket which would be put into a marble thing - and that ruined the image. The site of all those old men walking around in big pointed hats and long robes does not speak to me of Jesus at all.

I find more contact with God walking up Cavehill or Tyrella beach, the Celtic spirituality of seeing Christ everywhere in nature. The institution doesn't speak to me at all. I am a priest because it allows me to do the work I do, and it is my calling.

÷Donations can be made to Leratong Hospice via the Bank of Ireland at 364 Lisburn Road, Belfast, account number 41856788. Fr Kieran Creagh and the Leratong Hospice will be featured in a DoubleBand Films production for BBC Northern Ireland to be screened later this year.

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