

We must overcome stigma to beat this disease

By Craig David

Craig David is a UK-based R&B musician and goodwill ambassador against tuberculosis

A few weeks ago, in Cape Town, South Africa, I met a 13-year-old girl whose experience with tuberculosis and the courage she has exemplified the word 'inspiring'.

Her name is Hermanique, and she is a pupil at the Pinedene Primary School. I had the privilege of talking to her and her classmates about TB in their school room. I wanted to learn about the disease through their experiences.

In a country where each year 500,000 people get sick with TB, often in combination with HIV infection, there was hardly a child in the classroom who had not been affected, either through their families, relatives, friends or schoolmates. They shared with me many stories about how it had touched their lives.

At one point, Hermanique, who had not yet spoken, stood up with great courage and said, "I had tuberculosis".

Later, I asked her how she found out she had the disease and how she coped with the treatment.

"I was coughing and went to the doctor for a test. He said I had tuberculosis but would not spread it," she explained. "Then he gave me tablets, which I had to take for six months. I already started feeling better after a couple of weeks."

I asked if her classmates knew about it.

"I didn't want to tell them because I was ashamed...but they found out. Every day they teased me in the playground."

With her parents' support, Hermanique began speaking openly with the other kids about TB, even though it was difficult. The more she talked about it, the less she felt afraid and stigmatised. She came away with a lesson she wants to communicate to young people everywhere:

"You shouldn't feel ashamed if you get tuberculosis."

Through Hermanique's story, I learned that beyond treating the millions of people who fall sick, there is a greater barrier we must break if we want to conquer the disease – that of silence and shame.

The following day I discussed the disease with a group of students at another local school – Westerford High School. "Tuberculosis is considered shameful in South Africa because everyone assumes that if you have TB you are also HIV-infected, and there is still deep stigma around HIV here," one student explained as the others nodded in agreement.

TB, even when it is not linked to HIV, engenders social stigma in countries where it is widespread. Fear of contamination, lack of knowledge that it can be cured and the failure of communities to discuss the disease openly all play a role in fuelling this fear.

My visit to Cape Town also showed me that with a strong will and some serious determination, attitudes can be changed.

I saw this first hand in Khayelitsha, one of South Africa's poorest townships. There, Mercy Nongongo has helped her neighbours tackle TB head-on. She delivers medication to people being treated, prepares food for them and makes her home open to anyone who wants to learn more about the disease – what causes it, how it spreads, how to prevent it and how to cure it.

While I was in South Africa, I was privileged to meet South Africa's deputy minister of health, Dr Molefi Sekuloro. He said something that will stay with me: "Statistics are just numbers without the tears." The faceless millions who become ill each year are individuals, each with their story of suffering, courage and hope.

As a newly appointed goodwill ambassador against Tuberculosis, it is an honour to lend my voice to TB patients. I will try to achieve in my way what Mercy has accomplished. I am committed to breaking down the barriers and inspiring people to think and act in new ways about TB.

I believe in the power of music to move people to a new level of understanding and awareness. I hope that people who feel inspired by my music will also feel moved by what I have to say about tuberculosis.

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