

PERSONAL VIEW - LEARNING FROM THE PURI PURI MAN.

ANDREW TREVETT

Wellcome Visiting Lecturer in Medicine,  
Dept. of Clinical Sciences,  
University of Papua New Guinea.

Kairi was frightened. He had been bitten by a Taipan twenty four hours earlier in his village and brought into the hospital. He was envenomed and was admitted to the intensive care unit. Despite receiving antivenom, the poisoning progressed. As the neurotoxins began to affect his bulbar muscles, Kairi's struggling became more desperate and incoordinate. His blood stained secretions stuck in his throat and dribbled from the corner of his helpless mouth. He writhed as we aspirated, then lay still, exhausted by his efforts. Helplessly he watched us, turning his head and creasing his forehead in a bid to overcome the ophthalmoplegia and ptosis which increasingly shuttered his world.

I asked his relatives to translate for us. We tried to explain what was happening, to reassure him that we could help. Our words didn't nullify his fear. The process that was enveloping him was beyond our explanations. He was fighting with his misfortune, fighting the curse which had sent the snake to bite him. We had no part in this process with our drips and our injections , with our suction and antivenom. This was not a fight that we could win for him. It was a duel being fought on a plane we knew nothing about, a plane of right and wrong, of magic and vendetta.

He struggled when we intubated him. We gave him diazepam and morphine, subduing, but not eliminating his

angst. For us, at least, the endotracheal tube was reassuring. Behind miotic pupils he watched us, weaker now but frightened, so frightened. His daughter eyed us suspiciously, unsure whether to put her faith behind us or to share the turmoil of her fathers mind. She watched the ventilator. Why did her father need a machine to breathe? A village man all his life, a big man, now a pathetic figure wrapped in white sheets and the paraphernalia of an alien world. She fought the desire to rip the tubes from him as his hands implored her to. We fed him injections of diazepam to try to subdue his fear.

I found a conclave outside the intensive care unit. I recognised Kairi's son who took my arm. He pointed at an old man by his side. This was the medicine man, the "puri puri man" from his village he told me. Would I mind if he saw Kairi and treated him? I looked at the frail newcomer. He was probably in his 60's with a shock of white hair and myopic eyes behind fabulously thick spectacle lenses. He was barefoot, wearing only a laplap and a filthy tee-shirt extolling, somewhat inappropriately, or so it seemed to me, the virtues of Cairns. He carried a white plastic bag. An unlikely figure. What did the treatment involve I asked?

Kairi's son explained. In his village, there are a number of leaves which were believed to save a man who had

been bitten by a snake. When two snakes fought, the snake who won the duel would go into the bush and return with leaves in it's mouth. It would give these leaves to the vanquished snake who ate them and later recovered. An observer of this strange scene might recognise the leaves the snake collected for it's foe and leaves from the same plant would prove to be a powerful antidote for victims of snakebite. No, he hadn't seen these things himself but many of his people had. It was common knowledge in the village and the identity of the appropriate leaves had been passed on for generations. If the victim of a bite was able to, he ate the leaves the medicine man gave him, failing this, the leaves were rubbed over the victims skin. If this was done soon enough, he would recover. I had heard similar stories from several villages along the Papuan coast. I looked at the two men. How could I refuse their request?

They had already started when I went into the curtained cubicle. The old man ground the leaves between his fingers then rubbed the fragments over Kairi's skin from head to toe. He rubbed hard, grinding the dust into the pores. They registered my dismay as I looked at the mountains of leaf mulch which filled every crease of the white sheets. I saw my hard earned rapport with the nursing sisters vanishing before my eyes. I could sense the miasma of pathogens swirling around the intensive care

unit. We struck a deal with the sister in charge promising to clean up the mess. Kairi's son and the old man seemed anxious to please, and scurried and brushed like two zealous, if ineffective, housewives. I was subjected to the first of what would become a series of remarks from sister Pauline enquiring as to which particular banana boat I had arrived on. I busied myself with clearing up, trying to salvage some respect from the fiasco.

I am not a closet believer in eccentric therapies. I would refute accusations of being wacko too, after all, if I don't, who will? I find the story of a samaritan snake unconvincing and its corollary of a leafy antidote highly unlikely. I could propound innumerable reasons as to why such a therapy wouldn't work. Nonetheless, I learned a simple lesson from the myopic medicine man. When we had cleared up the mess, I looked at Kairi. He lay still, not sedated, not fighting his tube, just undistressed and calm. He knew now that he had been treated appropriately and seemed content to accept his fate. His paralysis remained to run its course, but from then on he made no effort to resist our ministrations. I looked at the puri puri man, he looked at me. He had plied his trade, I had plied mine. We shook hands. Sister Pauline just shook her head.