

Good News from Botswana

Seven years after the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine sent its first representatives to Botswana, the nation's former president visited the Penn campus. Early in 2008, Festus Mogae stepped down after completing his second five-year term. Now 69 years old, Mogae studied economics at English universities. After returning to Botswana, he joined the International Monetary Fund. In 1992, he became vice president of Botswana.

Mogae's ten years at the helm have been widely celebrated. In March, he received the Grand Cross of the Légion d'Honneur from Nicolas Sarkozy, president of France, who praised his "exemplary leadership." About two weeks after his visit to Penn, Mogae was presented the 2008 Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, which comes with a large cash prize. At the Ibrahim ceremony, he was cited for "outstanding leadership" that has "ensured Botswana's continued stability and prosperity in the face of an HIV/AIDS pandemic which threatened the future of his country and people."

HIV/AIDS was Mogae's topic when he spoke at Penn in October. He was introduced by Harvey M. Friedman, M.D., professor of medicine and chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases, who directs the Botswana UPenn Partnership. Friedman emphasized that Mogae understood the danger facing his nation early on in his presidency and was determined to confront HIV directly. Ten years ago, nearly 40 percent of the people of Botswana were infected with the AIDS virus. Today, that number has dropped to about 4 percent. Antiretroviral drugs are now reaching some 95,000 of 100,000 needy people.

"I am honored to be standing here in front of you," said Mogae. With a touch of exaggeration, he confessed that he did not want to tell the people in the auditorium of the Biomedical Research Building what they already knew, because "so many of you have been to Botswana." What he decided to do was provide some historical context.

The first case of AIDS was in 1985. "We were all puzzled by it." With its rapid spread and without medicine to fight the disease, "there was a lot of fear and ignorance . . . and also, ultimately, stigma." Botswana's health facilities were overwhelmed. When the necessary medications were identified, "prices were way above what we could afford." The government began negotiations with pharmaceutical companies and indeed was given discounts up to 95 percent. Merck, the Gates Foundation, and the U.S. Government provided testing kits for HIV. But Botswana's doctors did not know how to treat their patients. "That's where Penn comes in," said Mogae. "You, here, in the University of Pennsylvania, with Harvard." He also thanked Baylor College of Medicine for providing pediatric care. What Botswana wanted was "more of your services and more of your expertise."

Today, things are much better. Mogae noted that some people with HIV "who would have died" have now lived for 10 years. But there is still stigma, and the current top priority is "a new campaign focused on behavioral change." The government must also fight against complacency.

Mogae acknowledged that President George Bush was "not at the highest of his popularity" at the time of his Penn visit. On the other hand, in Africa Bush was popular because of the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). A member of the audience

asked about possible constraints on the PEPFAR funding, citing its emphasis on abstinence. "We don't look a gift horse in the mouth," replied Mogae.

Two weeks after Mogae's campus visit, the University announced that the Botswana UPenn Partnership had received a \$2 million grant from the Tiffany & Co. Foundation, the philanthropic branch of the international jewelry company. Part of the donation will help support the building of a facility for treating HIV/AIDS on the grounds of the Princess Marina Hospital in Gaborone, Botswana's capital. Penn and the Botswana Ministry of Health are also contributing to build the facility. The rest of the Tiffany grant will support Penn's health-care initiatives in clinical care, education, and research. The Botswana UPenn Partnership is also helping to establish a curriculum for internship and residency training at Botswana's new medical school.

After his prepared remarks, Mogae noted the shortage of physicians and other health-care workers in Botswana. That's why the planned medical school will be invaluable. The school, said Mogae, "will depend on the good will of men and women like you."

Although those men and women came originally from the School of Medicine's Division of Infectious Diseases, the Partnership has broadened considerably and now includes many from Penn's other schools. In fact, on the day of his talk, Mogae met with nursing students who had been in Botswana during the summer. Both Penn's president and provost have also visited the country. At a campus meeting this fall, President Amy Gutmann said, "Our program in Botswana is a model."

As Harvey Friedman put it, "Much has been accomplished. Much more has to be done." ♥

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