Review


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A second edition of the comprehensive handbook on HIV/AIDS in South Africa compiled by SS and Q Karim and published in 2005, is both timely and welcome. Some of the original contributors have updated their assessments of the major features and likely impact of the epidemic, and a number of the more recent researchers working in the HIV/AIDS field have joined them to make this not only a comprehensive overview, but one that indicates clearly the pressing HIV/AIDS issues that will require the attention of both health professionals and all concerned South Africans in the coming decade. What sets this volume apart from the usual ‘handbook’ is that, interspersed with the highly competent factual chapters, are a number of thoughtful essays of a more philosophical and intellectually challenging nature. These interrogate issues within our society that the AIDS epidemic has either spawned, or served to deepen. The editors are to be congratulated on this heady mix, which may well pioneer an entirely new level of both moral and political debate around HIV and AIDS in this country. In this review I draw attention to some of the contributions that will be of particular interest to readers from the Social Sciences and Humanities.

By and large the chapters in this collection will be accessible to a wide readership, and, in particular, to those who are neither medical professionals nor academics, but who feel the need to keep up to date with the impact of the epidemic on the country and with current prevention options and treatment regimes. Among these may well be people either living with HIV
or AIDS themselves, or those who are encountering HIV/AIDS among family or friends for the first time. For the latter, in particular, the approach and tone adopted by the contributing authors, together with the key references, which may be consulted for further information, is informative and non-alarmist in tone, but also satisfactorily detailed and thought provoking. For the parents of young children and teenagers the complex issues surrounding protection against HIV infection for the youth, and the available protective options, are clearly set out, described and assessed. Infection figures and trends are dealt with lucidly and the demographic and sociological background treated systematically and clearly. The influence of gender on infection is spelled out and so-called cultural and personal issues militating against HIV protection interrogated. In many of the chapters the major arguments are supported by vivid case material which not only illustrates the substantive and theoretical issues raised, but will also assist readers to identify parallels from their own experience.

As in the case of the first edition, this volume will be useful to employers regardless of the size or nature of their workforce and it is recommended that public libraries have multiple copies available, for both reference and loan. With one or two exceptions the chapters are short enough to be read in a library, and most chapters will be accessible to students in further and higher educational institutions. Non South Africans, and particularly those planning research in, or extended visits to, the country and those considering immigrating to South Africa, can do no better than consult this highly manageable review of the current state and likely trajectory of the South African AIDS epidemic in the immediate to middle term. Finally a number of the chapters in the collection recap something of the past history of the South African AIDS epidemic and Mark Heywood has contributed a useful chapter reviewing the tragic impact of the ‘denialist’ position on HIV and AIDS taken by the previous government’s leadership. In terms of the future, the editors’ final chapter is a well-considered and sobering summary of the likely trends in the most critical aspects of prevention, treatment and care. The chapter written by Salim Abdool Karim with Cheryl Baxter discussing in more detail possible new prevention measures against HIV infection is particularly welcome. At the macro level, economist Alan Whiteside provides a thoughtful assessment of the likely long-term economic impact of the epidemic on the country. He concludes that the effects of HIV/AIDS have become so much part of the fabric of society that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish its effects from those of other major negative impacts such as
inflation, lack of long-term food security or climate change.

In reviewing a volume with such a wide coverage, it is, perhaps, invidious to have selected only a small number of the 34 chapters for specific mention. All the contributions are of a high standard and readers with particular concerns or interests will easily find chapters addressing these, be they predominantly medical or social in nature. Some of the same ground is covered in more than one chapter, but each from a slightly different angle. This is useful as readers who have different needs and backgrounds are effectively catered for by such apparent overlaps. A case in point is the issue of reducing high-risk sexual behaviour which is addressed in a number of chapters. A particularly useful chapter on this topic is that by Landon Myer which, in reviewing HIV barrier methods, assesses their usefulness not only in HIV protection, but also in preventing pregnancy. This is a down to earth chapter detailing the current alternatives, and those still in the pipeline, but concentrating on current male and female condoms. He describes various condom designs, their manufacture and availability in this country, as well as their relative popularity and usage. Because relatively little local research data is available, he has, however, been forced to draw largely on international studies, many of which are nearly a decade old. Nevertheless, this clear and balanced assessment of the relative efficacy and acceptability of both male and female condoms in both HIV and pregnancy protection, will be useful particularly for young people and also the parents of children who may soon be experimenting with sex and require guidance rather than the still prevalent silence in many quarters on issues related to sex. Myer reiterates the point made by much HIV research that providing teenagers with information on sex does not automatically lead to either sexual experimentation or to excess. Indeed he points to recent work that suggests that peer-based social networks may be an excellent vehicle for spreading HIV awareness as well as condoms and other HIV prevention interventions. He ends with the timely warning that attention must be given to ensuring an adequate national supply of condoms, which, with the withdrawal of foreign aid, might, in the future, come under extreme pressure. This chapter constitutes a clear call for more local research to be undertaken and adequately funded.

In concluding this review I draw attention to three very different chapters that speak directly to a number of the concerns and interests of social scientists. The first is by Catherine Matthews and is an excellent companion piece to the chapter by Myer discussed above. Writing about sexual risk reduction, Matthews calls for theory driven social research, and her skillful
use of theory in the subsequent presentation and discussion of research findings justifies her call. Without the theoretical underpinnings and her striking conceptual framework, it is doubtful if the excellent and suggestive case material she presents would have had the impact it now has. The second noteworthy contribution is a speculative paper by Brian Williams whose use of modeling suggests ways to approach an understanding of some of the conundrums presented by differences in the magnitude, spread and progression of HIV/AIDS across the globe. He poses the philosophical problem, first of knowing ‘what questions to ask’ and following this, of collecting the appropriate data to answer these questions.

A third essay that I found particularly striking draws attention to a number of the ethical issues that often bedevil HIV/AIDS research. Authored by Jerome Singh, it begins by recapitulating the complex and heavily contested ethical terrain surrounding the use of a placebo arm in clinical trials conducted in South Africa in the 1960s. At this time the local standard of HIV/AIDS care for the majority of people in South Africa, and certainly for most of the research subjects, did not approach that enjoyed in the country from which the funding emanated, which in many instances were situated in the well resourced Northern Hemisphere. The South African case was not unusual in Africa, and nor in other underdeveloped Southern countries where national public health provisions did not, and could not, match the level and diversity of HIV/AIDS treatment and care available in the Northern countries which were funding the research. This is a situation that is often played out between the wealthy North and the poorer South. In addition, research is often conducted in Southern sites because field costs tend to be relatively low in underdeveloped countries when compared with the costs of research undertaken in the North itself. This review of the complex events and the highly acrimonious controversy to which it gave rise, comes as a salutary warning for future partnerships between rich and poor nations embarking on similar unequal research ‘partnerships’.

While the above case is important in itself, Singh uses it also as a useful springboard for an examination of the conflicts of interest that may arise when the roles of health professional and researcher coincide or overlap. His starting point is that the primary duty of care of all health professionals is to ensure the welfare of patients under their care. He describes this ‘loyalty’ to the patient, to whom they have ‘a duty of care’, as ‘one of the oldest paradigms in the ethics of healing’ (2010: 406). He argues that both clinicians and medical researchers may also have obligations to a third party – possibly
an employer, sponsor, funder or even the government. What he terms this ‘dual loyalty’ may conflict with, or skew, their loyalty to patients and possibly also to research participants when the two roles are combined. In fact he suggests that the traditional demarcation between therapeutic practice and research becomes increasing blurred when the roles of clinician and researcher merge, resulting in conflicts of interest that are possibly as insidious than the acceptance, for instance, of financial incentives or ‘kickbacks’ from industry simply because they are not always clearly recognised. Thoughtful examples are provided of situations that should be interrogated with particular care. The issue of obtaining informed consent in cases where a physician-investigator is personally responsible for enrolling patients in a study is also discussed, and the point is made that the overlap of roles might incline the investigator to play down how the experimental treatment differs from the ordinary treatment, the additional risks of the former or the lack of any direct benefit to the patient-participant of the treatment being tested. A final point raised returns the reader to the era of HIV/AIDS in South Africa described earlier in the volume by Mark Haywood when the then government refused to allow the use of antiretroviral therapy and associated treatments in state hospitals. Drawing on two major examples where doctors employed by the state refused to accede to government policy, he argues for what is essentially an activist position for health workers caught in such situations that might involve disobedience to state injunctions if these are, in their opinion, in conflict with the best interests of patients. He backs up this position by reference to nationally and internationally recognised ethical guidelines. While this call may be highly controversial, and may not be popular in many circles, it serves the important function of alerting health professionals to the debate so that they may be better able to make informed decisions should they find themselves in such situations. By and large Ethical Guidelines and Codes of Ethics can do no more than this, and Singh has done us a service in laying out the sides to this particular argument so clearly.

As suggested earlier, the coverage of this collection is broad and indicates clearly that much has been achieved in understanding the epidemic in the five years that have passed since the first volume was published in 2005. This volume looks cautiously, but with some confidence, towards a future in which HIV/AIDS in South Africa is brought under control.