

# African doctors write about Aids

1. **WHAT IS AIDS?** By Dr. F. I. D. Konotey-Ahulu. Published by Tetteh-A'Dome-no Company, P. O. Box 189, Watford, Herts, WD1 7NF, UK. Tel: (44923) 241 370. 227pp. £10.95 hardback.

2. **AIDS - THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE KILLER DISEASE.** By Dr. V. K. Agadzi. Published by the Ghana Universities Press, Accra. Distributed by the African Books Collective Ltd, The Jam Factory, 27 Park End Street, Oxford OX1 1HU, UK. Tel: (44865) 726 686. 206pp. £10/\$18 paperback.

In some way, humanity should be grateful that more expert writing has now been done on the disease - it all adds up to the education and knowledge we all direly need to stay on this side of the grave.

To Africans, these the latest two books on Aids could not have come at a better time. Written by two of Ghana's most experienced medical doctors, the books treat in detail - and sympathetically - the controversial issues of the origin of Aids and the grounds for the African paranoia about the disease.

They also cover the clinical epidemiology, features, diagnosis and global prognosis of Aids, including the possible economic consequences to Africa.

To be fair, no book has yet been written on the disease that, in my Afro-centric view, is more informative, more relevant, better researched and written in a lively, didactic, simple style than Dr. Konotey-Ahulu's *What Is Aids?* The brilliance of his work exposes, in a rather unkind manner, the mediocrity of many other books on the subject published before it.

Maybe it is unfair that Ahulu's and Agadzi's books happened to reach my desk at the same time, and by some design, I unwittingly elected to read Ahulu's first. It is a super book! And it made reading Agadzi terribly difficult.

The qualitative difference between the two books could be put down to budgetary allocation and, more importantly, to the commitment to do a good work.

Ahulu, educated in Ghana and Britain, Director of the Ghana Institute of

Clinical Genetics and currently a consultant physician at London's Cromwell Hospital, travelled to 16 African countries to collect firsthand information about Aids (he was refused a visa to Zaïre), and he had other valuable information from communicating with doctors in 10 other African countries that he could not visit.

Agadzi, until recently the chief epidemiologist of the Ghanaian Health Ministry, did not have the benefit of Ahulu's travels. Thus, where Ahulu quoted liberally from firsthand information collected during his personal field research, Agadzi was reduced to repeating a diet of "it has been reported", "it is suggested", "probably" etc. - which, in the end, took a lot from his work and makes his cover price - £10 paperback, as against Ahulu's £10.95 hardback - wholly unrealistic.

Ahulu, like Agadzi, dismisses the African-origin theory with disarming evidence that exposes the viciousness of the Western advocates of that theory.

A doctor of immense international stature, Ahulu starts his demolition work by citing examples where Western scientists claimed in the past that sickle-cell anaemia is a uniquely Negroid problem - when they knew that other, Caucasoids (in Greece and elsewhere) had had the disease for years.

He cites another example where some American scientists went to Ghana, claiming that urea could cure sickle-cell anaemia when drunk. At the time the scientists went to Ghana, US officials had thrown urea out as being of no value to sickle-cell patients.

## "Is our paranoia surprising?"

Ahulu asks: "Is it surprising, therefore, when it comes to Aids in Africa, its reporting by the media, experimentation with a vaccine and its origins, that Africans have become so paranoid?"

The authors, likewise, dismiss the notion that HIV-2, the so-called West African variant of HIV-1, is peculiar to the region. They provide evidence showing that Western scientists have themselves proved that some Italians and Portuguese who have had no dealings at all with West Africa or West Africans are known to have HIV-2.

The roots of African Aids, the two authors argue, come from outside the continent. Ahulu quotes British doctor Tom Stuttaford, who wrote in June 1988

that "two factors are all-important in the spread of Aids in Africa - money to spend and women to spend it on".

The regions in Africa with high Aids concentration, Ahulu shows, have all been associated with Americo-European tourism and African female migration.

The conclusions are that African locations frequently visited by non-Africans are most at risk. Examples are countries such as Zaïre, Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda and Burundi; African ports with a frequent and substantial foreign military presence, such as Mombasa in Kenya or Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire; highly frequented tourist spots such as Kenya, Tanzania, The Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal; sites of international industry and development, such as mining in Zambia and Zaïre; and cross-border long-distance lorry routes. "Thus, female prostitution for foreign exchange", Ahulu adds, "is by far the most important Aids-spreading factor in Africa."

## Not simplistic

His analysis might sound simplistic, but looking closely at the facts and figures on the ground, I find that his conclusions are not simplistic at all.

Many Ghanaian prostitutes work in Nigeria and in Côte d'Ivoire, but according to official figures not one Ghanaian prostitute in Nigeria has yet been repatriated with Aids to come home to die. Yet figures show that, apart from two Ghanaians sent home from West Germany with Aids, all the confirmed cases in Ghana have been prostitutes and pimps repatriated from Abidjan.

So why is it that Abidjan is such a hotspot for Aids while Lagos, with a far larger population, isn't?

The same question applies to Zaïre, which has the highest number of Aids cases in Africa at 11,732 as at April 1989 and which shares borders with 10 East and Central African countries. Ahulu, again, produces hard facts showing that the Aids crisis in Uganda and neighbouring countries has its roots in Zaïre and in the tourist havens of East Africa.

Space does not permit me to go any further from here, but if you want to read more about how "Africans are not allowed any longer to die" from the traditional diseases that killed them before the advent of Aids, then get a copy of Ahulu's book.

**Baffour Ankamah**