

REFLECTIONS ON A VISIT TO THE POISONED PASTS EXHIBITION: LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF THE MORAL INJURIES ASSOCIATED WITH MISGUIDED CHEMICAL & BIOLOGICAL WARFARE PROGRAMMES

Khulumani National Director Dr Marjorie Jobson (in her personal capacity)¹



Photograph in the Poisoned Pasts Installation of a Khulumani Protest outside the North Gauteng High Court where the trial of Minister of Law and Order, Mr Adriaan Vlok and three colleagues was underway, 17 August 2007. Photograph: Bronwynne Pereira

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: The Dilemma of a Medical Researcher who participated in Project Coast, South Africa's Apartheid Chemical and Biological Weapons Programme²

The POISONED PASTS installation at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Houghton, Johannesburg, is a collaboration between the Institute for Security Studies, where Dr Chandre Gould, is a researcher; the University of Exeter; Stellenbosch University; and Liverpool John Moors University. Dr Gould documented and reported on the prolonged trial of Dr Wouter Basson. The exhibition is open each weekday from 09:00 to 16:00 until February 2017. The installation includes photographs and press releases originating from

¹ Dr Jobson testified in aggravation of sentence in the Dr Wouter Basson Professional Misconduct Hearing. Dr Basson chose not to be present at this hearing, Day 2 of the hearing of arguments in aggravation of sentence.

² Catalogue accompanying the exhibition.

Khulumani, and interviews with Khulumani members, whose loved ones were abducted using agents produced in the laboratories established by Dr Wouter Basson.

THE APARTHEID CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS (CBW) PROGRAMME

Project Coast was set up in 1981 with Dr Wouter Basson as Project Leader, as part of then Prime Minister P W Botha's conception of a "Total Strategy" against an assumed intention of the Soviet Union to assert total communist domination over the world. Botha feared that Soviet expansionism would cut South Africa off from the Western economic powers. Botha sought to protect the "right" of white South Africans to self-determination (via apartheid) at all costs.

DR WOUTER BASSON'S MANDATE AS PROJECT LEADER OF THE CBW PROGRAMME

The instructions to Dr Wouter Basson had been to develop an offensive and defensive chemical and biological warfare capacity for South Africa. For this purpose, no costs were spared in seeking to recruit the brightest scientific minds and these researchers were provided with free access to the international scientific community and were provided with scales of remuneration different from those of the military which were regarded as not being sufficiently attractive.³ The background was a fear that South Africa faced a threat of chemical weapons being used against its troops in Angola and that the South African Defence Force was defenceless against this kind of attack.

DR WOUTER BASSON APPOINTS KEY STAFF TO SET UP THE FACILITIES

Dr Wouter Basson, at this time a specialist physician, approached Dr Daan Goosen, a qualified veterinarian, then Director of the H A Grové Animal Research Centre attached to the HF Verwoerd Hospital (now the Steve Biko Academic Hospital) in Pretoria, to become the first managing director of the biological warfare facility and Dr Willie Basson, then head of the Department of Chemistry at Pretoria University, to initiate the chemical warfare facility at the Roodeplaat Research Laboratories (RRL), north of Pretoria.

Dr. Daan Goosen understood, from the outset, that RRL was expected to do defensive research and development as well as offensive research, development and production. But Dr Willie Basson's instructions from Dr Wouter Basson were for him to develop a defensive capability to protect South African troops in Angola from threats of chemical weapons being used against them. Both scientists would receive requests and instructions from Dr Wouter Basson.

THE FACILITIES OPERATE ON A "NEED TO KNOW" BASIS ONLY FROM THE START

The norm "agreed very early and very clearly" was that they (the scientists) would never request the details of the targets on whom their products were to be used. "When

³ The role of professionals in the South African Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme. Chandré Gould, associate researcher at the Centre for Conflict Resolution, Cape Town and Peter Folb, Professor of Pharmacology, University of Cape Town, South Africa. *Minerva* 40:77-91, 2002.

asked to supply a substance, all they needed or wanted to know was the intended route of administration, as this could influence the dosage required.”

THE STATE SECONDS QUALIFIED YOUNG NATIONAL SERVICEMEN FOR ITS PURPOSES AND LEAVES THEM WITH MORAL INJURY CONSEQUENCES

National servicemen seconded to the H A Grové Centre in the late 1970s and early 1980s included qualified geneticists, microbiologists and a young veterinarian, James Davies who became responsible for evaluating assassination weapons that were developed by others in the chemical and biological warfare programme. He was also required to inject toxins into cans of soft drinks and beer for use by South African Defence Force operators.

When Dr Daan Goosen left being managing director of the laboratories in 1986 after three years of service, he was replaced by Special Forces dentist, Dr Wynand Swanepoel. Professional staff have described how under the leadership of Swanepoel, the scientists “found themselves without clear direction.” The lack of direction and an apparent lack of interest by the laboratories’ managements, prompted them to begin doing work that was of personal interest to them in the knowledge that if they attached the words, “would have potential military application”, to any proposal they made, it was likely to be approved.

EMPLOYEES PROTECT THE CLANDESTINE NATURE OF THEIR WORK

All the scientists were relied on to protect the clandestine nature of the work conducted at the laboratories. In interviews conducted at the time of the TRC, the scientists explained that they had accepted positions in these covert laboratories because they were attracted by the research possibilities; they believed that they were playing a necessary role in protecting the country from threats; and they were attracted by the high salaries offered. Once it became clear to some of the hired scientists that they were involved in work that was both offensive and defensive in nature, few refused to be involved in the work that was offensive in nature, such as the lacing of the cans of tinned foods with the poison. Alexandra Fuller, author of *Don't Let's Go To The Dogs Tonight*, in her investigations for her book learned about the estimated deaths of up to 10,000 villages living along the South Africa-Mozambican border from the contaminated tins of food that were dropped on these villages from aircraft. Scientists placed lethal anthrax spores on cigarettes and Clostridium botulinum toxin in milk, to create lethal murder weapons.

THE ‘MODUS OPERANDI’ OF THE CBW PROGRAMME IS EXPOSED IN A TRC HEARING

During the TRC Hearing into the Apartheid CBW programmes, information emerged about the contamination by SADF operatives of a water source in Namibia with cholera bacteria with potentially fatal consequences; the adulteration of chocolates with paraquat, botulinum toxin, organophosphates, brodifacum (a heart toxin), cantharadine and colchicine. All these agents are potentially lethal. The objective of the scientists in the chemical unit was to identify chemical agents that might reliably cause unexpected and sudden death when administered to humans and that would not easily be traceable post mortem. The instructions to the scientists involved were to develop substances that might kill individuals while making the death seem natural. The cause of death should not be detectable in a

normal forensic laboratory. The agents were tested at the laboratories on dogs and baboons. A new generation of tear gas was also developed as an agent with greater effectiveness in incapacitating crowds. Doubts remain that the substance was only for defensive purposes once the substance was loaded into 155 mm artillery shells. Questions remain to be answered about the long-term impacts of the chemicals in tear gas on the environment and on individuals.

PARTICIPATING SCIENTISTS EXPERIENCE MORAL COMPROMISE, BUT CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE

Once the scientists had become involved in these activities, most of them remained involved even although they realised that their personal codes of ethics were being compromised because they found themselves financially trapped once they had become accustomed to the higher salaries and incentives offered by their work in the CBW programme.

The exhibition catalogue highlights the struggle of one of the scientists involved in the work of the chemical laboratory up until 1991, who continues to carry secrets and struggles to “come in from the cold”. He continues to fear the reactions of his colleagues should he reveal the work he was previously involved in. Writing anonymously, he pens a poem for inclusion in the POISONED PASTS exhibition catalogue.

HOW TO ACCOUNT?⁴

HOW DO I COME IN FROM THE COLD?

We lay on sunny days listening to Forces Favourites
Of sweethearts writing to young boys “on the border”
Messages ending with “SWANK” and “KISS”

Then it was my turn to partake in this “ballet of men doing nothing”
We build equipment while playing chess
And then I was sucked in to earn for my family

Reading yellowed pages of stiff journals of wars past
Deciphering and guessing what lay beneath the inked out words of the “declassified”
We muddled and worked out what was needed to protect troops from gas

Then when they asked me things I would not do
I walked away, looking over my shoulder for a long time
So I was told

Before I left I had showed a young man how the equipment worked
And worried until I knew he was safe
That was 8 years on after Mandela had rescued us in the palm of his forgiving hand
Stories surfaced of activists pulling hair from their scalps

⁴ Published in the exhibition catalogue, POISONED PASTS: Legacies of the South African Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme

I asked to tell my tale
No-one was interested, everything was too new I was told

The Doctor was caught
Peddling tablets and our secrets
And shrouding the story in **a wall of mist and smoke**

Once a General and the soft-spoken blue-eyed Colonel had stood on a river bank
Their raincoat-wrapped soldiers waiting for gas
To fill their lungs with blistering choking vomit

They stared at me in stunned disbelief
Where was the equipment to protect us they asked
“It was here” I told them

And now I am trusted to work out why people become so ill
Working with individuals I so admire and who stood up to PW, Malan & Co
Often to their greatest cost

I watched in silence when they tried to charge the Doctor
What I could have told would have been denied – there is no proof you see –
And would have left me and those I love so vulnerable

They tell us between 5 and 15 thousand died “on the border”
But none of us have been told of this forgotten little war between the Bear & Stars-and-Stripes
I made things to try and protect those young men in brown

I am told these still help those who wear camouflage fatigues today
Perhaps one of the few things not warped to save a dying ideology
Is this good?

So how do I tell this tale to those I admire and who trust me?
A tale of ideas and knowledge twisted to harm those
Who fought so bravely for their place in the sun.

THE TRC REVEALS THE MORAL DECREPITUDE OF THE LEAD CBW PROGRAMME SCIENTISTS

While young servicemen recruited as staff for the CBW programme, were led to believe that they were serving a meaningful and patriotic purpose and that their superiors were professional and competent, a very different picture emerged in the TRC Hearing into the programme when the leaders of the CBW programme were revealed as “nepotistic, self-serving and self-enriching people” under the military command of Dr Wouter Basson who continued as leader even when doubts arose as to his trustworthiness. Amongst the findings of the TRC Hearings into the CBW programme was the finding that the military command “had been grossly negligent in approving programmes and allocating large sums of money

for activities for which they had no understanding and which they made no effort to understand.”

Dr J P De Villiers, at the time head of the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research's (CSIR) Applied Chemistry Division said, “Many research scientists may initially have moral observations about working on chemical warfare agents. But they will find chemical warfare a fascinating subject, full of intellectual stimulation and obscure by-ways and these will like any other intellectual problem rapidly intrigue them and seduce them from practical judgements”. De Villiers went on to argue that chemical warfare is impractical from the point of view that, “politically it is sensitive and it also has the problem of never being able to be used defensively.” He informed the audience in the hearing that chemical weapons had been banned, not because of the moral problems related to their use but rather because they are not effective weapons. For Dr de Villiers, the truth was “that chemical weapons were rejected for lack of potential and not on moral grounds.”

This shallow understanding held with remarkable political naivety, expressed by one of the leaders in South African science at the time, sustained for around ten years, a harmful and supremely misdirected programme that had left scientists such as the author of *How do I come in from the cold?* with unresolved moral injuries.

THE UNRESOLVED DAMAGE WROUGHT BY MORAL INJURY

For many young people on the frontlines of military conflicts conducted in the name of programmes to protect civilian citizens of particular countries, it is the moral injuries that result from deeply misguided programmes that violate the innate sense of morality of persons in military “control and command” situations that cause ongoing psychological, emotional and spiritual damage to individuals from which recovery is often thwarted.

Moral injury, as described by Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist who is involved in services to veterans returning from American military interventions overseas, is the result of participation in acts of war that transgress the deeply-held ethical beliefs of individuals. Moral injury to individuals “trapped” within command and control structures change the character of individuals, he explains. Moral injury derives from leadership malpractice and wrecks veterans’ lives when a legitimate authority orders them in a high stakes situation to conduct acts that compromise participating individual’s value systems. In being required to obey an immoral command, the protagonist loses his or her moral agency and their “good character” becomes distorted, leaving lifelong consequences for the person who is required to commit acts that they cannot morally defend. Most individuals in these situations, experience what Dr Shay describes as “a shrinking of their moral horizons with a loss of their ideals, attachments and ambitions”. They lose a capacity to care about the well-being of others, a consequence that can plague the interpersonal relationships of returned veterans and former combatants for the rest of their lives unless specific measures are taken to support the recovery of returned veterans. Dr Shay describes the power of communities of peers who explore possibilities of healing from their losses with the restoration of a sense of moral agency.

THE PROFESSIONAL MISCONDUCT OF DR WOUTER BASSON: THE APPARENT LOSS OF MORAL AGENCY OF A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL



Exhibition Panel Displaying the Counts of which Dr Basson has been Found Guilty

The long saga of demanding accountability from Dr Wouter Basson as a physician who accepted the command and oversight of the CBW programme he was tasked with setting up and managing, continues 16 years after the laying of complaints against him by forty professional colleagues.

The disciplinary committee tasked with deciding on the appropriate sentence for his grave professional misconduct, awaits the ruling of the North Gauteng High Court to which Dr Basson has appealed on the basis that the Health Professions Council Disciplinary Panel appointed for the disciplinary process, has demonstrated bias.

Dr Basson was found by the panel in December 2013 to have violated the ethical standards that guide the professional practice of all medical graduates when he was found guilty of five of the charges laid against him. His demonstrated incapacity to grasp the damage to the medical profession caused by his failure to assert his own moral agency as a medical doctor. He continuously argued that his actions were those of a soldier and not a medical doctor, despite being a specialist physician at the time of his involvement in the programme. His behaviour and lack of accountability for his actions as a medical specialist as he shrouded "*the story in a wall of mist and smoke*" reveals the extent of his own moral injury and his apparent incapacity to accept responsibility for the harm caused by the programme he ran for just over ten years in the dying days of apartheid.

Others who were the foot soldiers in the "war" have made efforts to engage the work of recovery towards returning to *the moral community* of which former President Mandela was the foremost promoter. Dr Theresa Edlmann in her involvement in the Legacies of Apartheid Wars Project describes how an estimated 600 000 young white men were conscripted to fight an "illegitimate war in the name of white South Africans" between 1968 and 1994, and in many instances are still trying to work through the trauma largely by themselves. On the side of the liberation armies, the estimated figure is around 60,000 individuals.

DR BASSON TENTATIVELY MAKES AN APOLOGY TO A SMALL GROUP OF THE MAMELODI MOTHERS OF THE DISAPPEARED: WHAT CONSTITUTES A MEANINGFUL APOLOGY?

During the first day of the hearing of arguments in aggravation of the sentencing of Dr Basson, a small group of the Khulumani Mothers of the Disappeared, and Dr Marjorie Jobson,⁵ were sitting together out of sight of the attendees of the hearing which had just concluded. They were approached by Dr Basson who told the group, that he was sorry for their losses. Dr Basson then walked away. Was this meant to be an apology? If so, was it a meaningful apology?

The Mamelodi Mothers of the Disappeared lost their children in 1986 through the actions of the apartheid askari Joe Mamesela who abducted the young student leaders in Mamelodi township under the false pretence of assisting them to go into exile to join the liberation movement. At one point on the journey, the young men were given chemical agents that caused them to lose consciousness. They were then executed and the kombi in which they had been transported, was set alight. Twenty-seven years later, Dr Wouter Basson, during his sentencing hearing, approached them casually and out of public sight, to render a seemingly perfunctory apology to them. The “mothers’ acknowledged Dr Basson. The impression left with our small group was that this was at least something.

WHAT WOULD CONSTITUTE A MEANINGFUL APOLOGY?

A meaningful apology comprises three elements- regret, responsibility and remedy.⁶ Dr Basson’s expression of regret for the loss of the lives of the children of the Mamelodi Mothers omitted many components of an apology that demonstrates authenticity and raises questions about its intention and purpose.

Basson’s “apology” came 27 years after the disappearance of the Mamelodi youth activists. He took no responsibility for the fact that agents produced in the chemical laboratories under his control and oversight were used to render the young activists unconscious. His apology contained no admission of guilt, a position he has maintained over many years from the time of the TRC, his subsequent criminal trial in which the evidence could not be proven beyond reasonable doubt and throughout his professional misconduct hearing.

Basson has at no time offered to contribute to repairing the damage he caused through his involvement in the CBW programme. Over the years in which the state continued his employment as a highly remunerated medical specialist, he at no point offered support to any of the initiatives to provide community-based healing for those affected by the activities of the institution he headed.

Eugene de Kock similarly only approached the family of Mr Bheki Mlangeni, the lawyer who received a booby-trapped headset that caused his death, some twenty years after the killing of their son. Bheki Mlangeni’s mother told Eugene de Kock that if he had

⁵ Dr Jobson, as a medical doctor, gave evidence in aggravation of sentencing.

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/liking-the-child-you-love/201412/the-three-parts-meaningful-heartfelt-apology>

really wanted to apologise, he would have done so many years before. The family's sense was that De Kock's concern was not for their family, but rather for the purpose of meeting the requirements of securing parole for himself.

Stephen Covey explains *"It takes a great deal of character strength to apologize quickly out of one's heart rather than out of pity. A person must possess himself and have a deep sense of security in fundamental principles and values in order to genuinely apologize."*
~Stephen Covey

The unethical activities of Project Coast created moral injuries that appear to have permanently changed the character of the individual who led these activities with terrible impacts on the lives and moral standings of those over whom he had command.

The estimated 600,000 young white conscripts to the apartheid military have struggled to deal with the moral impacts on their lives of the military exploits in which they were involved during apartheid. Former President de Klerk's admission that apartheid was a misguided social engineering experiment, failed the test of an authentic apology that could contribute to restoring trust and credibility.

The distortions of character that resulted from participating in the dishonourable activities of the apartheid-era security forces, has left many individuals unable to care about the well-being of others. This phenomenon is also a feature of moral injury suffered by members of the liberation forces.

The repair and restoration needed are requirements of the continuing journey that could constitute a shared agenda for nationalists from both the pre- and post-1994 eras.