From research to running a charity

After qualifying as a vet, Koen Van Rompay knew that working in practice would not be for him. He was accepted for postgraduate studies at the University of California, Davis, and became involved in HIV/AIDS research. As discussed in a ‘Ten-minute chat’ on p ii, he also set up a charity, Sahaya International, which supports grass roots educational and other programmes in Asia and Africa.
anti-HIV drug could prevent infection, and this created high enthusiasm. Our data helped guide the clinical trials which in 1994 demonstrated that providing AZT to HIV-infected pregnant women and their infants reduced the likelihood of HIV transmission by two thirds. This was a major breakthrough.

This first success sparked our interest to further develop this animal model to test novel HIV drugs. This was timely as AZT by itself was relatively weak and toxic for people who were already HIV-infected, and the benefits were transient as the virus became drug-resistant. In 1995, Dr Pedersen introduced me to Norbert Bischofberger of Gilead Sciences, who were already HIV-infected, and the benefits were transient as the virus became drug-resistant. In 1995, Dr Pedersen introduced me to Norbert Bischofberger of Gilead Sciences, which at that time was a small start-up biotech company in California. It had obtained the licence for the clinical development of a novel category of HIV drugs that were active in vitro, but it lacked the preclinical data in animal models that were needed to move forward into human trials. We decided to test one of the compounds, tenofovir, in macaques that were already SIV-infected. We were surprised by the results as its efficacy was unprecedented.

Since then, I have spent much of my research efforts studying the different aspects of the drug, like drug resistance, prophylaxis, and long-term efficacy and safety, including during pregnancy. It is satisfying that our observations in macaques were predictive of the results obtained in human clinical trials. Tenofovir was approved by regulatory agencies in the USA and Europe about 13 years ago, and has become the most widely used HIV drug in the world, as part of combination regimens that are now treating millions of HIV-infected people, and recently also as a pre-exposure prophylaxis regimen to protect uninfected people who engage in high-risk behaviour.

While our research is only one link in the long chain of the clinical development of a medical product, it has been a humbling experience for everyone in our team to be part of. We hope our journey helps people understand the impact that veterinarians can have on global health, and inspires young people to consider biomedical research as a career option.

**Ten-minute chat**

**While presenting his research at an AIDS conference in Chennai, India, Koen Van Rompay was struck by the poverty there and felt he wanted to help. After a modest start, he set up the charity Sahaya International.**

**Tell us about the charity.**

Sahaya International is a diverse network of friends, who are committed to making a difference and improving the quality of life in developing countries. We are volunteers, so most of the funds raised are sent overseas. To achieve our goals, we collaborate with local grass roots organisations that run a variety of educational and socioeconomic development programmes to empower underprivileged and marginalised people in their communities. We are currently active in India, Kenya, Vietnam, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

**What does Sahaya mean?**

Sahaya means ‘help’ in sanksrit, the old language of India.

**What led you to set up this charity?**

In 1997 I was invited to present my research at an AIDS conference in Chennai, India. I was shocked by the poverty. I felt I could not just leave and close my eyes; I had to do something, no matter how small. At the conference I met a social worker who had started a small organisation in a remote rural village to help his local community. He was trying to raise funds by selling embroidered greeting cards made by women’s groups. I felt: ‘Wow, this is a way in which I can help; I can make a difference by selling these cards to my friends and family, in the USA and Europe.’ Over time, more people joined our efforts. As I noticed the rewards of making a difference, we decided to take it to the next level. That’s how, in 1999, Sahaya International (www.sahaya.org) was born in the USA. In 2008, we registered a sister organisation (www.sahaya.eu) in Belgium.

**How has it changed your life?**

Although I dedicate nearly all my free time and personal resources to this work, the rewards far outweigh the input. I have learned so much about the meaning of life. In our modern society, we are bombarded by messages that try to indoctrinate us that happiness is reached by accumulating material wealth and fame. However, the pursuit of this is often only a source of stress and a waste of our precious time. I have learned that once one has a basic level of comfort and health, what really gives happiness is love and friendships, and sharing one’s resources to help others to meet those basic needs. For example, when I am in the villages in India, and I’m playing games at the local school playground with the local kids (whose lives we’ve been able to change by putting them or their HIV-infected parents on lifesaving medicines), I feel totally happy. At home in the USA, I talk by phone or Skype with some of the orphans in India that I’m supporting with their education, and I listen to their stories – those moments are priceless.

Through Sahaya, I have met and befriended so many inspiring people all over the world. I am truly blessed to be a humble link in this work.

**How do you raise funds?**

While we receive grant support from established organisations, our largest support comes from the general public via direct donations and a variety of fundraisers. Examples are slide presentations, dinner events, the sale of handmade greeting cards, our annual Sahaya Walk events, yard sales, and mountain-climbing adventures. The creativity of our volunteers is beyond limits.

**How can people volunteer?**

Volunteers can assist in many ways, even from the comfort of their home. People can help raising awareness and funds, and we’ll be glad to assist with advice and materials. For example, one can dedicate one’s birthday to one of our projects. Even relatively simple fundraisers can make a big difference. People can also look for grant opportunities; for example, many companies have charitable foundations to support good causes.

Some people have travelled overseas, especially to India; most of them helped at our schools, teaching English or to engage the children in creative activities, including art projects.

**Are there other ways people can help?**

We recently completed a 20-minute documentary, ‘Sahaya – Going Beyond’, about our work in India. Narration was provided pro bono by Academy Award winner Jeremy Irons; the theme song was provided by Enya. More information and the trailer can be viewed at www.sahayagoingbeyond.org.

**Where do you hope it might lead?**

Sahaya’s work is inspiring people to realise that within each of us is the power to make a difference if we just dare to go beyond our boundaries, and take one step at a time. Some of our volunteers have started their own projects, either locally or overseas. We hope this ripple effect continues. As Sahaya’s slogan states: ‘An act of kindness inspires, be a drop that creates a ripple’.
Ten-minute chat

Koen Van Rompay

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