

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



Koen Van Rompay with two of the many children supported by Sahaya International

I WAS born in 1965, and grew up in the suburbs of Antwerp (Belgium) in a middle-class family of four children. My passion for animals started early. I remember in kindergarten being fascinated by an aquarium that one of the teachers had installed in the classroom. I was lucky that my parents allowed me to explore this passion. Over the years, our house and garden became a small zoo, where I spent most of my free time studying and breeding a variety of birds and fish.

In high school I majored in mathematics and, as this was my strongest subject (rather than biology), I toyed with the idea of becoming a mathematician. In the end, I decided to listen to my heart and pursue my childhood dream, and I started veterinary college. After completing the first three years at the University of Antwerp, I continued for the final three years at the University of Ghent.

By the fifth year of my veterinary studies, I was fully aware that entering veterinary practice wouldn't be ideal for me. I was too much of an introvert, and had a speech disability. At the same time, research appealed to me. Not having travelled much, I also felt the urge to explore the world beyond Belgium,

to learn what was out there, to learn more about myself and find my niche in the world. However, I had no idea how to go about it, where I should go, and if I should even try it, considering my lack of experience and funds. At a Michael Jackson concert in Belgium in August 1988, during the song 'Man in the Mirror', I knew that the USA was the place where, with hard work, one could make dreams come true. I successfully applied for a one-year fellowship of the Belgian American Educational Foundation and was also accepted for graduate studies at the University of California, Davis. In September 1989, I left Belgium with two suitcases and took my first flight towards a large unknown, the USA.

Starting out

My first interest was research on wildlife and zoo animals, and I was fortunate to get one of the world's leading veterinarians in that arena, Murray Fowler, as my major professor. However, it dawned on me that due to the relative lack of funds in this field, my one-year fellowship would soon end. On the advice of my graduate adviser, I joined Niels Pedersen, the veterinarian who had discovered feline

immunodeficiency virus. I became involved with HIV/AIDS research at the California National Primate Research Center. After obtaining my PhD there in 1994, I decided to stay to continue my research.

In those days, simian immunodeficiency virus infection of macaques was still in the early stages of becoming the prime animal model of HIV infection of people. Doing research on animals was a steep learning curve for me, and was initially associated with ethical concerns that I had to resolve. Besides learning a lot of laboratory assays, I realised the importance of careful biomedical research, not only to improve human health, but also to improve animal health. I also witnessed the excellent veterinary care and husbandry that is provided to the animals at our facility.

In 1990, I was given my own research project. I was asked to be in charge of a relatively small experiment to try to determine the efficacy of AZT (which at that time was the only drug approved for HIV-infected people), in infant macaques. The main goal was to validate the macaque model in the pipeline of anti-HIV drug development, as attempts by other investigators to demonstrate the efficacy of AZT in macaques had so far failed. We demonstrated that if AZT was given to infant macaques shortly before exposure to the virus, it could block infection. At that time, this was the first demonstration that an

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, 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 Sanskrit, 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 2009, 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.'