Eldred Tellis and the Sankalp Trust

April 30, 2018 By Greg Jefferys

One of the great highlights of my visit to Mumbai was meeting with Mr Eldred Tellis who for the past 35 years has been working with the injecting drug users on the streets of Mumbai through the Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust, which is dedicated to stopping the spread of HIV and Hep C amongst IV drug users. Sankalp also works to empower drug users to take charge of their health and lives.

Part of his work is helping people access treatment for Hep C and HIV, which he does through a variety of ways, including advocating for cheaper medicines and fighting Big Pharma in the courts of India.

David vs Goliath
In 2012 Eldred achieved a major victory against the Swiss pharma giant Roche when he challenged their Indian patent on pegylated interferon, which at that time was the best treatment option for people with Hep C.
As with the Sofosbuvir based Hep C treatments of today pegylated interferon was outrageously priced at around US$50,000 per treatment. Obviously this price put treatment out of reach of most Indians with Hepatitis C.
Eldred argued in court that the drug was not sufficiently novel to deserve a patent and that the patent should be revoked so that generic versions could bring down the price and make the medication more available to people with Hep C in India.
Ultimately the courts agreed making this a victory for justice. A great victory when a single man fought the good fight against one of the global pharmaceutical giants and won.
However, Peg became obsolete shortly after this great victory as Sofosbuvir came onto the market as a much more effective treatment for Hep C.
Applying for a patent in India is a priority for most Big Pharma companies because they know how robust and competant the Indian pharmaceutical industry is, so it was one of the first non-Western countries Gilead lodged a patent application for Sofosbuvir in.
Knowing Mr Tellis's reputation for fighting unfair medical pricing in the courts Gilead sent a delegation of seven vice presidents to Mumbai to meet him and try and buy him off.
That delegation was staying at the Taj Hotel on the waterfront of the Mumbai harbour… one of the most luxurious and expensive hotels in Mumbai. Gilead invited Mr Tellis to also stay there for a few nights while they discussed things with him.

Click here to read the rest of this blog and view a photo of Greg and Eldred Tellis at the Sankalp Drop-in Centre on the streets of Mumbai.

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