

Not meant to die

It is quite normal as you drive along the long dusty road from Tete to Mutarara to be accosted by people wanting a lift. It's also quite normal, if you are to keep your vehicle within its load limit, to turn down almost every one. But on this occasion, there was something subtly more urgent in the behaviour of the young man who was sprinting towards the road to wave me down. Perhaps this once, I should not just drive straight on. I knew this village - I had arranged a poultry vaccination program there a couple of weeks earlier - so I knew that the house from which the man was running was that of the village headman. Yes, this time I might stop. After all, it was late afternoon and mine was likely to be the last vehicle to be passing that day.

"We have a man with cholera." I was told. "You can take him to the hospital in Mutarara." The "you can" rather than "can you" merely reflected their anxiety; mine was the only means of transport for miles.

"Cholera?" I thought. How could there be cholera near Mutarara? The 'normal' seasonal outbreak was under way down in the capital Maputo and even as far out as Chimoio, but not here in Mutarara. Mutarara is miles from anywhere. Cholera likes lots of people to wreak its havoc, the big smoke, not sparsely populated rural bush like this. The guy is probably just suffering from an acute case of the runs and everyone jumps on the band wagon because the radio has been blaring its normal panic campaigns!

So with a less than sympathetic heart and a retinue of helpers, I back-tracked the kilometre or so to the house of the afflicted man. It was only when he was brought out to the car, too weak to walk, severely dehydrated, suffering severe abdominal pain, that I realised that whatever the cause, this man needed help, and soon. Grimacing, he was bundled into the back of my Land Rover utility and back we went to the village headman's house to make last minute arrangements.

Now it is 300 long kilometres from Tete to Mutarara and most of it is dirt - five hours is a good trip. I really think I can be forgiven for being not fully on my guard when I had already done over four of those hours. I just wanted to go. I was sitting at the wheel, surrounded by a buzz of activity - people hurrying to and from the village headman's house, people attending to the suffering man, people supervising the melee. One youth was standing near my window holding an aluminium canister which gave him away as the Médecins Sans Frontières contact person for the village. I knew what the canister contained - a strong bleach used for sterilising water buckets as a precaution against cholera. Every village in the district had one, plus a person trained to use it properly - MSF do a great job. So when a second youth hurried over from the village headman's house bearing a large plastic mug of water to which the first added a good dollop of bleach, and hurried on with the mug to the rear of the vehicle, it took me a good few seconds to make anything of it. But thankfully, even tired dulled drivers can eventually put two and two together.

"STOP!" I screamed, in English rather than the requisite Portuguese, but everyone within earshot knew exactly what I meant. I thought I was already too late but the mug bearer appeared at my window. He knew the cause of my alarm: "It's okay." he said, "We haven't given him any. Look!" showing me the mug, still full of dilute bleach, and then to leave no doubt about his resolve, emptying the contents onto the ground.

I showed him not the slightest mercy. "MSF HAVE TOLD YOU THAT THAT BLEACH IS NOT A MEDICINE. IT IS FOR USE ON BUCKETS, NOT PEOPLE!" I roared, even though I was not sure exactly what MSF's instructions had been. "Yes, yes, I know" he said, but I wasn't sure what he really did know.

So with the centre of attention still alive, plus a companion to look after him, we set off for Mutarara. The road could be reasonable soon after it had been graded but this was not one of those times and I was in a hurry. When the potholes became the next threat to our patient's survival, the minder had to ask me to slow down. It was late by the time we arrived at Mutarara township where I could wearily deliver my charge to the nurses at the MSF supported hospital. It was time to hose out the back of the Land Rover (yes, cholera waits for no man) and find somewhere to unwind.

Dr Jacob, a delightful Chadian, was MSF's doctor in charge of the hospital. As usual, he worked till well after dark before getting back to the MSF house where he could, like me, partake of a relaxing beer. "Yes, that was cholera all right" he said, "but he'll be fine now that he is on a drip."

"He sure was in a bad way." I said. "I doubt that he would have lasted another day."

"Pat!" Jacob looked aghast at my ignorance. "One hour. Maybe two. No more!"

Our man had survived it all: an attack of cholera, the bleach wielding do-gooders, the chances of just not getting a lift to hospital within the hour, and the murderous potholes when he did. He definitely wasn't meant to die that day.

Copyright © Pat Boland 2008.