

More than kindness: Docs without borders

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Dr. James Orbinski (above) examines a patient suffering from a gunshot wound in Baidoa Hospital, Somalia while on tour during the filming of *Triage*, a documentary about his humanitarian work. Left: Dr Leslie Shanks, MSF medical coordinator, and Orbinski visit people internally displaced within the Democratic Republic of Congo at a camp in Goma. Orbinski is speaking in Abbotsford on Tuesday, Feb. 10 at Abbey Arts Centre.

Dr. James Orbinski has spent a career treating those marginalized by the world's most difficult humanitarian emergencies.

His work with Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) put him at the epicentres of war, genocide and disease in Somalia, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa and Kosovo.

While striving for human dignity in complex tragedies, surrendering to anguish is not viable, he says, and compassion should be accompanied by action.

"I'm anything but despairing. I'm extremely hopeful about the world," says Orbinski.

"All those situations I've worked in are certainly moments of crisis, but those moments are surrounded by a wealth of capacity and goodness.

"Seeing what we can do to ameliorate difficult circumstances as human beings, and seeing what we actually do, is actually quite inspiring."

The key, says the former president of MSF who accepted a Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the organization in 1999, is to not resort to the illusion that the world will improve without people's participation.

"A crisis is a moment of opportunity, a moment for change for the better – but it depends on what you do."

Orbinski will ascend the stage at the Abbey Arts Centre Tuesday night to share his views on humanitarianism and Canada's potential role in the world. His presentation is part of the Canadian Voices speaker series hosted by the Abbotsford Collegiate International Baccalaureate (IB) Program.

Orbinski, a founding member of MSF in Canada, plans to explore what it is to be humanitarian and a citizen in the context of critical issues such as the AIDS epidemic, genocide and climate change.

Canada and its citizens have a responsibility to themselves and the world at large to participate more actively in global problems or international institutions.

“I think Canada is a very special place. We have one of the most diverse populations in the world, and for all our problems, our political system actually works in a way that resolves differences and conflict, generally speaking, without violence. We have a society, in principle, that is fair and tolerant,” he says.

The country can offer a perspective that reflects values that Canadians hold dear; values rooted in very basic conceptions of dignity, respect, and fairness.

People should not assume individuals in his line of work are abnormally virtuous, says Orbinski.

“Humanitarians aren’t soldiers or saints. They are human beings. They make mistakes and sometimes do things in the right way.”

An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action for the 21st Century talks about his experiences as a physician working for MSF in Rwanda during the genocide.

Following the egregious failure of the world’s nations to intervene in the Rwandan genocide in 1994, it was “regular” people who brought about change that Orbinski credits as inspiring.

“[The failure] to stop the genocide led to outrage across the world by normal, average citizens who demanded something better. That outrage led to the creation of the International Criminal Court, which is one of the most important international institutions in the history of the world.”

It would also be a simple question posed by a young South African patient that would spark a revolutionary international medical campaign.

The 19-year-old, dying of AIDS, was carried over a great distance by his mother and grandmother into the clinic for treatment.

“Why do you come here only with only kindness when what I need is medicine for this AIDS?” the young man asked Orbinski.

That question led Orbinski and his colleagues to take on the lack of access to medicine for people suffering from treatable or preventable diseases in the developing world.

As a result of the Access to Essential Medicines Campaign, millions in the developing world now have access to AIDS treatment unavailable before 1999.

It led Orbinski to further action.

He helped found the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) launched in 2003.

The non-profit drug initiative, which develops medicines for diseases largely ignored by profit-driven companies, has 20 drugs under development and recently released two new anti-malarial drugs.

It was an occasion Orbinski found more rewarding than accepting the Nobel Prize.

“[The prize] was an important moment, no question, but . . . [the new anti-malarials] will change the lives of millions of people in the developing world. That’s gratifying.”