

Malaria, the Secret Storm

A troubled region, sub-Saharan Africa, has fuelled the interest of many people over the years. One person in particular comes to mind, however. Jean Vercoutère of France, film director, has been investigating the silent killer: paludism, also known as malaria.

With more than 15 years of experience under his belt, Jean Vercoutère has directed 17 documentaries on a wide range of topics on the popularisation of science, like dyslexia and the lives of the physically challenged. However, one film that particularly illustrates the importance of science popularisation, is his 1999 documentary *Paludisme, l'hécatombe silencieuse* (Malaria, the Secret Storm).

Half a billion people are affected by malaria each year, resulting in two million deaths from this disease. The hardest hit area is Africa, accounting for 90% of the total deaths. What is even more devastating, is that paludism remains the principle cause of death for children under 5 years of age, living in sub-Saharan Africa.

Wanting to show the world the savage effects of paludism, Jean Vercoutère, along with Bernard Germain, took his quest to Kenya, Tanzania, Benin and Burkina Faso. The result was a fascinating and gripping documentary about this endemic disease and how African people are fighting it on a daily basis. *Paludisme, l'hécatombe silencieuse* is a visual rendering of the scientific and human conditions of this killer.

The documentary, a production by RTBF-La Cinquième, shows the harrowing situation for the people in Africa. The film chronicles the way in which the people try to fight paludism, but unfortunately, the means available are neither strong nor sufficient enough. Essentially, it is tremendously difficult to fight back at something that successfully kills a person every 15 seconds.

The film notes the significance of the fact that Africans must face this disease on their own. International assistance will never fulfil their duties to their children. Furthermore, money is not a guarantee of success in this fight. Houses must be cleaned assiduously, standing water must never be left near the villages and the use of impregnated mosquito nets, which are soaked in a pyrethroid insecticide, are only some of the methods and tools they can use to protect themselves.

Paludisme, l'hécatombe silencieuse also touches on the lives of the killer mosquitoes, the culprit behind this disease. Viewers get a glimpse into the mosquitoes' life cycle, blood food habits and injection, and the development of this debilitating disease. Jean Vercoutère provides descriptions, explanations and analyses, which elucidate the very essence of paludism. It is a scientific fact that these mosquitoes are impervious to insecticides, and the biggest worry is that they are resistant to chloroquine, an anti-malarial drug used to treat this disease.

In 2000, the 14th Scientific Film Festival in Oullins awarded Jean Vercoutère and Bernard Germain 'Le Deuxième Prix du Jury Professionnel' (Second Prize of the Professional Jury) for *Paludisme, l'hécatombe silencieuse* in the category of Best Scientific Film.

PANEL INFO

**Paludisme, l'hécatombe silencieuse
(Malaria, the Secret Storm)**

CATEGORY

Popularising science through audio-visual and electronic media (e.g. scientific television or radio documentaries, websites, editorial policies)

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