

Grace Under Pressure

Have a double Scotch and an herbal chaser with Zimbabwean Lynde Francis

July 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

If Zimbabwe—where every fourth person has HIV—is one of the bloody fronts in the AIDS epidemic, then 52-year-old Lynde Francis is leading the charge. Founder of The Centre, a counseling, support and training project for PWAs in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, Francis bases her treatment on the holistic model practiced for centuries by her nation's traditional healers. Her anti-HIV arsenal includes vitamins, herbal extracts, fruits, vegetables and meditation—tools that are, for most of her fellow PWAs, matters of necessity rather than “alternatives.”

With 3,000 medical doctors and 33,000 traditional healers in a country of 11 million, Zimbabwe's health care system is utterly overwhelmed—as is Francis at times. But 13 years after testing positive, Francis, last interviewed in the December/January 1997 POZ, maintains the same routine she advocates for her clients—even though, as a familiar face on the international AIDS conference circuit, she has access to the best hospitals in the West. Recently, over a crackling phone line, Francis shared with POZ some tricks of her trade.

As a registered patient at a London hospital, you have access to the latest antiretroviral drugs. Why don't you take them?

I don't like the idea of toxic substances in my body. I've had bad reactions to many different drugs, including antibiotics; I even hallucinate from certain painkillers! I've been fortunate in that I haven't had any serious opportunistic infections beyond thrush, diarrhea and the occasional flu. If that changes, maybe I'll change my mind.

What treatments do you rely on?

Vitamins, garlic, coenzyme Q-10. I treat diarrhea with acidophilus and a yeast called *saccharomyces boulardii*. When I get a cold, I take megadoses of vitamin C. I eat only unprocessed foods—the staples of my diet are vegetables and grains. I don't eat any meat at all, no sugar, no coffee. I do have the occasional double Scotch when I'm feeling good, and every once in a while I pig out on chocolate—then immediately get thrush and feel stupid.

Do you see a traditional healer?

I see an herbalist. There are many kinds of healers in this part of Africa, and herbalists are very intuitive and spiritual in their approach. They spend time with you and get to know your psychological state as well as your symptoms. Then they go off and have a dream and envision

the right kind of herb for you. I've found their medicine to be very effective. I see Western doctors as well—I get my viral load and CD4 tests done at St. Thomas Hospital in London because tests are impossible to get here. My CD4 count fluctuates between 170 and 300. It was 240 at last count, and my viral load was 35,000.

How do you manage your job psychologically?

It's a struggle. Conditions here are appalling, especially the lack of medications. If you have herpes, you can't find acyclovir. If you get CMV, you go blind. If you get meningitis, you die. It's a very intense, stressful job. I went through a bad patch last year when I was extremely burnt out. I was so driven to take care of everybody around me that I neglected myself. I became completely overwhelmed and started having panic attacks. So I decided to focus exclusively on the micro level.

Today I have a wonderful, supportive family, and colleagues who let me know when I'm overdoing it. I also take comfort in the fact that out of the 900 patients at The Centre, most are doing quite well. We've only lost 89 since 1991, and that's remarkable.

What are your hopes for your work?

I want people to realize that we all share one world and we can't just take a whole sector of the world's people and forget about them.

Do you take a spiritual approach to your own treatment?

I meditate and try to listen to the guidance of the spirits within me. My energy is fueled largely by rage, and I think that's one reason I haven't given up. When I read information from the United States saying the AIDS crisis is over, I feel very bitter because for us it's just beginning. Somebody has to be out here telling the truth and fighting, and I feel it's destined to be me.