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TAC remembers Winstone Zulu (1964-2011)

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He was a brave AIDS activist who rebelled against Thabo Mbeki's AIDS denialism

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Winstone Zulu, the first Zambian to live openly with HIV and an outspoken proponent for the rights of people with HIV and TB, died on 12 October 2011. The Treatment Action Group (not to be confused with us, the Treatment Action Campaign) has written a moving tribute to Winstone: http://www.treatmentactiongroup.org/winstone-zulu [1]

We express our condolences to Winstone's family and friends.

Winstone was a leading figure in the Network of Zambian People Living with HIV/AIDS (NZP+) and one of the founders of the Pan African Treatment Access Movement.

We wish to pay tribute to Winstone by recalling his struggle with and against AIDS denialism. Winstone was open about his HIV status from the early 90s. In 1997 he started taking antiretroviral treatment. In 2000, Winstone, influenced by Thabo Mbeki as well as his own desire to not be ill, became an AIDS denialist. He stopped taking his medicines.

He was also invited to join the notorious Mbeki AIDS Advisory panel, which he did. He publicly questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and the use of antiretrovirals. [1] But Winstone became extremely ill --at one point he was confined to a wheelchair-- and realised that AIDS denialism was wrong and dangerous.

In 2002, Winstone attended the TAC/COSATU National HIV/AIDS Congress titled Treat the People. There he delivered a poignant repudiation of AIDS denialism. He explained how he had been encouraged by the views of President Mbeki, one of his heroes, to wish HIV away. He stopped taking his antiretrovirals for two years, during which time his CD4 count dropped from 500 to 36. In February 2002, he was very ill and began taking antiretrovirals again. Winstone gradually recovered and it is probable that ARVs gave him nearly a decade more of life. [2] His speech was widely reported in the media and was a blow to Mbeki's deadly agenda. [3]

Winstone's denouncement of AIDS denialism is best told in his own words:

" I?m a person living with HIV, I?ve been living with HIV for the last 12 years, since 1997 I was on antiretrovirals. Until one of the greatest people that I respect very much, one of my heroes Thabo Mbeki made me start doubting, well he didn?t make me start doubting. I?ve always wanted to be HIV negative and he sort of encouraged me to think in those lines. I decided to drop my drugs in the year 2000 and just wished HIV away. And it was kind of very stupid for someone to do but I think you will understand if you are living with HIV and you really want to live, say up to the age of Madiba and someone comes and say HIV has nothing to do with AIDS. It?s very attractive and I got very attracted and decided to start denying that HIV caused AIDS. And that denial has been very costly to me and I?m very lucky to be alive now at least on a wheelchair because some of the people, I was with in the panel, I?m a member of President Mbeki&rsq uo;s Presidential Panel, some of them are dead now. I think about three people, we were together, are dead. And my CD4 count plummeted from 500 when I stopped taking the medications to 36 in February this year, until I restarted and I?m able to stand now and speak to you." [4]

In an interview with Lynn Altenroxel, he said, ""What I went through was some kind of denial ... It was such a waste of time. The last two years were such a waste of time. I know some of the people I was with, they just died in denial." [3]

He also said, "What mattered to me as person living with HIV was to be told that HIV did not cause AIDS. That was nice. Of course, it was like printing money when the economy is not doing well. Or pissing in your pants when the weather is too cold. Comforting for a while but disastrous in the long run."

Winstone's story exemplifies the internal struggle many of us have to overcome when faced with the diagnosis of having a fatal or potentially fatal illness. The wish to deny it is immensely powerful. Tragically, that wish to deny is preyed upon by vultures selling quack remedies and anti-scientists like Mbeki and Peter Duesberg.Thankfully, Winstone overcame this impulse and repudiated Mbeki.

Winstone had a big role in destroying the edifice of deadly nonsense that Thabo Mbeki stood for. When we look back upon the struggle for treatment in South Africa which culminated in the rollout of ARVs in 2004, Winstone's speech at the TAC/COSATU Congress was a seminal moment.

He survived Mbeki's influence and took a decision to go back onto treatment that would give him, his family, his friends and the world of AIDS and TB a powerful and humane activist for almost another decade.

Hamba Kahle Winstone!

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