

## Human Myxoma Virus - The Pox

It had been the most natural thing in the world. Instinctive. Unthinking. Any father would have done the same.

Kwame sat at the opening to his hut. In the shadow of a young baobab tree, a famished dog gnawed on the remains of what looked like a bush squirrel. The mangey creature looked up and their eyes met. Kwame clapped his hands to startle the mutt but it just stared back impassively, before taking the squirrel carcass in its mouth and slinking away into the scrub, leaving the man alone with his torturous thoughts.

He had washed his hands, hadn't he? He certainly had when he arrived at the food bank but his arms had been full when he left. He might have cleansed them when he returned to the village but he couldn't be sure. Water was so precious, he was still not in the habit of wasting it on hand washing.

Kwame had heard her crying as he came up the dirt track. He had been gone all day and she was scared. It had been the most natural thing in the world. Kwame had kneeled, lifted her onto his lap and wiped her cheek with a stroke of his thumb.

"Hush baby," he had said. "Papa's here."

Her name was Woelinam - Lina for short. It had been his wife's choice.

Seven years. Seven long years, but when he pictured his wife's face, the pain was as acute as if it were yesterday. At least she had lived long enough to hold her child. Woelinam, meaning *In God I trust*.

No one had questioned the shut-down at first, but it hadn't taken long for unrest to grow; for some to say the whole thing was a hoax, invented by the government to gather more control, power and riches to the president.

Kwame did not know what he thought. It was 18 months since the pox - a mutation from rabbits if that could be believed - had come to Mutapaia. A flesh eating plague that hid on the hands and in the bodies of adults, sparing them while mutilating their children.

The virus had yet to reach the village. The elders said they were safe; that this plague had been sent to visit God's wrath upon the decadent West. But Kwame had heard that in Western countries, they were treating their children for the new virus every day to protect them. The pox was no longer a disease they had to fear.

Whereas in Mutapaia, they still cowered in their homes while the government scraped together the few medicines and supplies that were left to them, with prayer their best hope for deliverance.

18 months isolated from the world had damaged Lina. No school. No socialising. She was so fragile now.

Kwame wished once more for his wife. He knew he was blessed to have Lina but would it have been too much to keep them both with him in this mortal life, poor and often hungry but together?

Lina was all he had, save this hut and the few dollars he had sewn into his mattress.  
Woelinam. *In God I trust.*

There had been rumours today. Whispers he had overheard of the pox coming to Kellan. But that was a long way from the food bank.

He was worrying for nothing. He had been careful after all, standing apart from everyone, taking the position he always took beside the faded poster of the child with the bleeding eyes. Most avoided that poster so he knew he would be given space.

He remembered being called to the counter. The poorly packed bag. He remembered, as he lifted it, the quince rolling, then falling. She had passed it to him and he had taken it with thanks. Had their fingers touched?

Still sat at the opening to his hut, Kwame observed the crimson sky, then glanced at the scratched face of his wristwatch. The days were getting shorter, the nights colder. Lina would be hungry. He hoped they could eat tonight. Kwame rose and went inside to unpack their rations.

6pm. 15 minutes since infection.

Kwame woke to screaming. Lina's screaming. It was 4am, although it was too dark for Kwame to read that from his watch.

He crawled across the floor, bumping into the huddled form of his daughter, her knees drawn up to her chest as she manically rubbed her face.

"No, no!" said Kwame. "Stop! Lina!" He pulled her wet hands away from her face.

"It burns!" she screamed. "My eye!" She fought against him.

"Lina, baby, stop!"

He dragged her, kicking and screaming, to where moonlight fell on a face streaming with tears and Lina's left eye, bloodshot, the lids swollen.

"Stay here," said Kwame, summoning a note of calm that he did not feel. "Papa's here."

Inside he laid his hand on the last of yesterday's water. Less than a litre, judging by the weight. He brought it to his daughter.

"Don't rub it," he said. "Lay your head back."

She looked up to the heavens.

"Open your eyes," said Kwame. "That's it. Open. Keep them open."

Slowly, he began to pour the water across her face, limiting the flow, trying to make the most of every drop as the water flowed around the bridge of Lina's nose, across her eyes and fell to form a puddle in the dust.

Then the water was gone.

Lina blinked repeatedly. She reached for her face but Kwame stopped her.

“Don’t,” he said. “Is that better?”

Lina nodded. “A bit.”

What should he do? He had few options at this hour.

“Time to sleep now,” and he led her to his mattress where they curled up together.

Was this the pox? Probably just a bit of dirt got in there. It would be better come the dawn.

He rested his hand on her bottom and rocked her gently as he had done every night when she was an infant. After a few minutes, her breathing deepened and Kwame realised that she had fallen back to sleep.

Treated within 12 hours of infection, symptoms do not develop beyond conjunctivitis.

Both slept uneasily. Lina thrashed in her sleep and called out, although that was not unusual.

As Kwame became aware of light creeping through the doorway and the gaps in the patched straw roof, he saw with relief that she still slept. She was fine.

Then Lina began to moan. She cried out and then woke with a yowl of pain.

In the light of day, Kwame saw that both eyes were red, although the left was worse than the right.

He reached for the water container again, remembered it was empty and ran to wake Nana Osei.

Nana Osei was the closest thing that Lina had to a mother in the village. Many didn’t like her. She drank enough ògògóró to fell a rhino and chewed betel quid constantly, meaning she rarely took more than three limping steps before hocking red spittle onto the ground. But she was kind and the wisest of all the elders - at least in Kwame’s opinion. Old as time yet sharp as a hyena’s tooth, she would know what to do.

“Nana’s here,” she announced and Lina immediately calmed. “Let me see you, child.” She examined the girl. “Yes,” she said. “It must be. The rabbit pox. Hush my child,” as Lina began to cry once more. “You must be strong. You understand?”

Lina nodded her tear-streaked face.

“She needs medicine,” said Nana Osei. “There are pharmacies in Bertunoa.”

“That’s 12 kilometres from here.”

“Be thankful it’s not 13,” she replied. “Leave the child with me. Now go.”

Treated within 24 hours, the patient has a 90% chance of full recovery without corneal scarring. Treated within 30 hours, chance of full recovery drops to 60%. Treated with 36 hours, the globe of the eye will remain intact, although the patient’s sight will be severely and permanently damaged.

Untreated after 36 hours, the damage caused by the infection is catastrophic.

2 pm. 20 hours since infection.

The pharmacist turned the lock and the door flew inwards at him.

Kwame barged into the shop and began to frantically search the shelves.

“Hey,” said the pharmacist.

“Sorry,” said Kwame.

This was the third pharmacy he had visited; the last in the town. It had been closed for lunch and so Kwame had been forced to wait.

He scanned the aisles, running his hands across the many boxes and bottles.

“Hey!” repeated the pharmacist. “Stop touching everything. What are you looking for?”

Maybe this was it. A bottle with a large eye on the label. He snatched it up, examining the letters. He wished he could read. Lina could, or at least she had been learning to before they closed the schools. He had been so proud.

“What do you need?” asked the pharmacist over his shoulder.

“My daughter,” said Kwame. “She’s got the pox.”

“Are you sure?” asked the pharmacist. “Lots of panic at the-“

“I’m sure,” said Kwame. “Is this what I need?”

The pharmacist looked at him thoughtfully and then shook his head.

“But it-“

“This doesn’t work,” said the pharmacist. “Cheap stuff the government gets from Shiam.

See the label.” He pointed. “Sodium Cromoglicate. They say it’ll work for the pox but it won’t.”

“What do I need?” said Kwame. He didn’t have time for this.

“B-Cyclovir,” said the pharmacist.

“B...”

“Cyclovir.”

“Do you have any?”

The pharmacist shook his head again. “We never get much,” he said. “There’ve been cases in Kellan. We sold out this morning.”

“But you’ll get more,” said Kwame.

“I’m sorry,” said the pharmacist. “Not before you need it.”

“What do I do?”

“Get your daughter to a hospital.”

“Hospital.”

“District General,” said the pharmacist. “That’s in Yaondegu.”

“Yaondegu!” How far was that from his village? 20 kilometres? Maybe more.

“It’s your best hope,” said the pharmacist. “Here.” He scribbled on a scrap of paper and carefully passed it to Kwame.

*B-Cyclovir 16%.*

“That’s the medicine you need.”

“I don’t read.”

“Show it to someone at the hospital,” said the pharmacist. “Protect her eyes from the sunlight. That speeds up the ulceration.”

“Ulcer?”

“Protect her eyes from light and get her to the hospital.”

Kwame came flying into the hut and began to rip at the clumsily sewn seam of his mattress.

Lina was asleep. Nana Osei stroked her hair.

Almost 4pm. Kwame had begged a seat on a bus going to Abdalla which had brought him most of the way back to the village. It had saved him a little time and every minute was precious.

He laid his hands on the papers and pulled them from the mattress. 38 Western dollars. All he had in the world along with Lina... *Woelinam. In God I trust.*

“We’re going,” he said.

Lina roused.

“Where?” asked Nana Osei.

“Yaondegu,” he said. “Hospital.”

He pulled his daughter to her feet and dragged her out into the day. She cried, recoiling from the light.

Remembering the pharmacist’s advice, he removed his shirt - the only one he owned - and tied it around Lina’s head, covering her eyes.

He would carry her.

He headed for the highway. There was not time to travel so far on foot, even if Kwame was capable of making it - which he doubted.

He cradled her in his arms as every muscle screamed with fatigue.

Cars passed. He tried to hail them. Many slowed but when they saw the child in his arms, eyes covered, they sped on again. It was well past dark before a man stopped to let them crawl into the bed of his pickup and it was gone midnight before Kwame reached the hospital to find the entrance hall strewn with parents holding the helpless forms of their infected young.

He approached the desk.

“Can someone help me?”

No one met his eye.

“Please.”

A nurse passed across the hall.

“Excuse me, Miss!” but she continued on her way.

“Please,” and he grabbed the arm of a man in hospital uniform. A porter?

“I’m sorry,” said Kwame. “Can you help me?”

“No, I-“ began the man.

“I need medicine,” said Kwame. “The pox. My daughter.” He produced the scrap of paper from the pharmacist that read *B-Cyclovir 16%*. “I have money.” He fixed the porter with his gaze. “Please!”

“You have dollars?” asked the porter.

“Can you get it?”

“Maybe.”

“How much do you want?”

“20 dollars?”

“Here,” and Kwame counted out the notes.

As the porter watched the remaining money return to Kwame’s pocket, he was clearly considering asking for more.

“Give me an hour,” he said.

“Can you be quicker?”

“I’ll try.” And with that, he took the scrap of paper and disappeared down the packed corridor.

*B-Cyclovir. 16%.*

Kwame glanced at his watch. 1am.

The porter appeared, pushing a trolley of clean linen.

“Here,” he said under his breath. He produced a white plastic bottle from beneath the top blanket. “And take these.” He held handfuls of bandages. “Soak these in the medicine.”

“Thank you.” Kwame snatched the bottle. He had it!

31 hours since infection.

She was moaning constantly now.

In a quiet corner beside the toilets, Kwame poured some liquid onto a bandage and wrapped it around her face.

“How does it feel?”

“It hurts.”

“It will take time. Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay.”

But after 30 minutes, Lina’s pain was no better. Kwame got her to tip her head back as he applied more medicine. After an hour, no relief, so Kwame changed the bandage. After two hours, Lina’s pain was worse. Kwame continued his efforts regardless.

He could no longer remember the medicine he had needed and he certainly wouldn’t have recognised it if he had seen it written down.

If he had been able to, he would have read the following on the bottle he received from the porter.

*Sodium Cromoglicate. 2%. Made in Shiam.*

8am. 38 hours since infection.

Kwame was propped against the wall of the hospital corridor, Lina's bandaged head across his lap. They would be seen soon, he had been told. Ward rounds started in an hour. There would be a doctor. It might not be too late.

Lina sat bolt upright and began to fumble at the gauze that covered her eyes. She whimpered.

"Stop, baby, stop!" said Kwame. "What is it?"

Then she let out a guttural scream that echoed across the wards.

Kwame watched as the gauze over her left eye began to stain and a rust coloured liquid flooded onto the cloth.

It was then he knew the worst had happened. He began to weep.

Lina no longer screamed.

"It's okay, Papa," she said. "It's going to be okay."

His daughter comforted him and Kwame was reminded of how brave she was. And how kind. She was his wife in miniature.

Lina was blinded that day.

Woelinam. *In God I trust.*