

# POISONED PASTS

Legacies of the South African  
**Chemical and Biological  
Warfare Programme**

Curated by Kathryn Smith, Chandré Gould and Brian Rappert



# MESSAGE FROM THE

# NELSON MANDELA FOUNDATION

The past is always present. It shapes both the energies and the possibilities of any society. It can do so constructively or destructively. For societies emerging from periods of conflict or oppression, the past can weigh heavily. The challenge, perhaps ironically, is always to find ways of ‘presencing’ a society’s pasts, consciously and creatively. Unengaged or neglected, these pasts can drag society down. ‘Presenced’ skillfully they can become a vital resource for both individuals and collectivities. These are amongst the primary learnings for the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) from its international Mandela Dialogues programme, a partnership with the German GIZ Global Leadership Academy. Inaugurated in 2013, the programme has seen the Foundation encountering people from around the world who are, in one way or another, engaged in memory work, and it has provided opportunities to visit countries as diverse as Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Brazil, Germany, Rwanda and Sri Lanka.



Sello Hatang



Verne Harris

*Sello Hatang is the Chief Executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Verne Harris is the Director: Archive and Dialogue*

The Mandela Dialogues have constituted the immediate institutional context within which over the last four years the Foundation has developed a particular interest in Project Coast, the apartheid security establishment’s chemical and biological warfare (CBW) programme. We have assisted former Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) investigator Chandré Gould with the arrangement and description of her archive of documents and materials about chemical and biological warfare, advised provincial government heritage structures on what to do with Project Coast’s former Roodeplaat Research Laboratories, hosted or participated in three dialogue forums focused on Project Coast, and have followed closely the Health Professions Council’s (HPCSA) investigation into former Coast head Dr Wouter Basson. And now we are partnering on the exhibition *Poisoned Pasts*.

Why this particular interest?

We believe that the histories of Project Coast – and the multiple narratives comprising them – need to be ‘presenced’ consciously

and creatively. Despite many investigations and public hearings – the TRC, the courts and the HPCSA – we still know too little about Coast in many respects. There are too many secrets that breed suspicion and fear. Processes of disclosure and accountability have been frustrated. And, crucially, victims remain unidentified or unnamed. There is unfinished business in relation to Coast. And, as we have learned over and over again in South Africa and in other countries, a price is paid for unfinished business. Coast is one example of what has been dragging us down as a nation.

A huge amount of memory work has been done in South Africa since 1994. Too much of it, in our view, has been triumphalist and reductionist. Despite some extraordinary endeavours by the TRC and related processes, dominant narratives (such as the ‘rainbow nation’) have tended to be reinforced, usually at the expense of both sub-narratives and counter-narratives. Only recently have we seen evidence of significant institutional commitment to doing the really difficult memory work – the work which troubles

the present, which disturbs prevailing relations of power, invites in complexity, engages with shame and betrayal. The NMF was given a mandate by Nelson Mandela to do difficult memory and dialogue work. And there is no doubt that engagement with CBW and Project Coast is difficult work.

What, specifically, do we hope to achieve with *Poisoned Pasts* and the dialogue we plan to foster around it? First and foremost, we want to contribute to the processes of honouring the victims of Coast – to honour by identifying, naming, and creating spaces for healing. (Here the many animals who died in Coast’s laboratories must be acknowledged.)

Project Coast and its head have been held accountable in ways that very few of apartheid’s structures and functionaries have been, and yet work remains to be done because juridical and related formal processes can only go so far in the realm of healing space. We also aim to contribute to:

- Building a more comprehensive and accessible archive
- Learning the lessons offered by Coast in relation to ethics for scientific research and medical practice
- Enabling South Africa to meet its international obligations to disclosure and control, and
- Creating opportunity for those who were involved in Coast to reckon with their pasts.

*Poisoned Pasts*, ultimately, is not about the past. It is about the futures we want to build. And for the NMF it is about realising the South Africa of Nelson Mandela’s dreams.



Marikana August 2012



#FeesMustFall, Union Buildings  
Police face off against protesting students 15/10/15

# PRESENT PASTS

Chandré Gould and Brian Rappert have collaborated on a number of projects over many years exploring the intersections between science, security and secrecy. Here they reflect on the context and considerations that gave rise to the exhibition, **Poisoned Pasts**.

What was Project Coast? Who was affected by it? How extensive was it? Many answers have been given to these questions.

By official accounts, South Africa's apartheid-era chemical and biological warfare programme remains characterised as an effort to develop protective equipment for South African Defense Force troops operating outside of the country and to devise relatively benign ways of policing crowds at home during the turbulent times of the 1980s and early 1990s. For others, it represents an instance of how individuals can use the cover of conflict to advance their professional ambitions and financial fortunes. Still elsewhere, the programme is presented as a disturbing example of how an oppressive state can attempt to harness science and medicine in order to retain its grip on power. At times the scientists involved have been depicted as evil Einsteins ruthlessly planning how to kill; at other times as buffoons indulging in crafting absurd James Bond-type gadgetry.

These impressions and interpretations of the chemical and biological warfare programme emerged from a series of investigations that began in 1992 with a secret internal military inquiry into the involvement of covert military units in fomenting violence. Later when the long-time Project Officer for Project Coast, Dr Wouter Basson, was found in possession of large quantities of Ecstasy (or MDMA) in 1997, the police narcotics unit started a separate investigation. Meanwhile the Office for Serious Economic Offences was examining claims of fraud too. Another investigation was undertaken by the Transvaal Attorney General into allegations of murder, torture, conspiracy and intimidation by Basson and other members of the security forces. Then, in 1997 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began its inquiry after having received amnesty applications from scientists who were part of the programme.

These investigations gave rise to a public hearing of the Truth Commission, a three year criminal trial (that resulted in Basson's acquittal, or findings of not-guilty, on all charges); a three year court battle by the South African History Archives that ended in the creation of an archive of military and other documents about the programme now available to the public; and a finding in 2013 by the Health Professions Council of South Africa that Basson was guilty of unethical and unprofessional conduct (though by mid-2016 he has yet to be sentenced).

More than twenty years after the end of apartheid we might well want to ask the question: Do these investigations represent an example of successful transitional justice?

There are many reasons this may not be the case. For one, each attempt to determine and remember has been structured and delimited by the very conditions that enabled it. So, for example, the Truth Commission hearing was constrained by the requirements of legal procedure which meant that many questions simply were not answered by witnesses; and only matters relating to alleged human rights violations could be dealt with, and then only those that fell within the stipulated time frame. Documentary traces and fragments compiled to date signals much still remains unknown and perhaps will never be widely appreciated. Those who held critical pieces are either dead or have opted to maintain their secrets. There is some irony in recognising that a good portion of the work done at one of the front companies of Project Coast sought to identify substances that could kill without leaving any trace. Finding traces of Project Coast and attempting to assemble these fragments into a coherent narrative has been the endeavour of multiple institutions and many individuals.

Still, for many reasons, no straightforward account can be given about who suffered as a result of Project Coast. Stories of victimhood are not out there to collect in a simple fashion. Much depends on who is asking, for what purpose, and according to what criteria. The many unanswered questions about South Africa chemical and biological warfare programme suggest much

remains unknown and unknowable. The absence of a victim narrative to personalise the harm done has arguably stripped the histories assembled of their social resonance. The stories told about the programme to date have been ones in which the main narrators have been almost exclusively the white individuals at the heart of its operations. Thus, they have been partial stories, stories of contested perpetration in which the victims have had little identity, even less voice, and as a result there has been little scope for reconciliation or forgiveness.

In short, Project Coast is situated between revelation and concealment, remembering and forgetting, and the past and the future. In this it shares much with other transgressions elsewhere.

Perhaps a greater source of caution about the resolution potential of the investigations into the Project Coast centres on the role of truth. Today the fraught experiences with transitional justice arguably indicates that pinning down more details about yesterday may not build a more just tomorrow, that 'truth telling' is not a neat, simple process – and even less so when mediated through highly legal strictures. These issues apply far beyond South Africa's borders. Around the world, people who are and have been engaged with memory work and transitional justice processes are grappling with a range of troubling issues, and a disturbing sense that no measures to reckon with the past can offer the satisfaction or the healing that is sought.

Why then *Poisoned Pasts*? Our hope for this exhibition is that it cultivates a skilful engagement with former times and stimulates further inquiry into the role of systems, processes and individuals in reckoning with what has passed. *Poisoned Pasts* is not simply or even primarily intended to set the record straight, or even provide a comprehensive account of the chemical and biological warfare programme or the investigative processes that resulted from its revelation. Rather is undertaken in the spirit of investigating the possibilities and challenges for understanding ourselves in relation to the past. For a danger with examining an activity like Project Coast is to get swept away by the mystique and spectacle that has defined it. Secrecy was not only central to how the programme was justified, undertaken and covered-up, it continues to be central to how it is milled, ignored, and mystified now.

Rather than being swept away, the hope for this exhibition is that it promotes receptiveness to the desires, aversions, commitments, fantasies and fascinations associated with attempts to make open what was hidden.

Through fostering a sensitivity to the pushes and pulls that can be experienced in trying to expose a hidden past, we also aim to set a basis for asking about how we might reckon with it in innovative ways. Despite the changes that have taken place in South Africa with the end of apartheid, there are a striking number of parallels between then and now regarding how violence is justified and power is concealed. Such parallels have prompted this questioning of the continuing relevance of Project Coast. *Poisoned Pasts* asks whether our tainted yesterdays are finding expression now in the silences created by the practices of diplomacy, politics, and science, and in other disturbing and unsettling ways.



#FMF  
Parliament  
(pink smoke)  
21 Oct 2015



Brian Rappert



Chandré Gould

*Brian Rappert is a professor in the Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology at Exeter University. Chandré Gould is a senior research fellow at the Institute for Security Studies.*

# Exhibition Notes

The exhibition is designed as a journey through three broad clusters, roughly demarcating conceptual foreground-middleground-background zones within the overall space of the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory. The exhibition is mainly contained within the dedicated temporary exhibition space, but like a parasite, it also intervenes and settles in other parts of the space, including in the permanent exhibition exploring the life of Mandela, and within the Centre's library.

Within the main exhibition, the clusters are constructed as groups of interconnected, double-sided panels on and within which contextual texts, archival documents and audio-visual material present (often contradictory) documentation regarding Project Coast, questioning our knowledge of and attitudes to scientific research, ethics and social responsibility; and reflecting on how chemical and biological weapons might be impacting on our contemporary lives.

The central hub of the exhibition is a structure comprising two screens that meet at an angle, forming an alcove. This framing space contains a contextual statement and video testimonies acknowledging those who were most likely affected by Coast's activities.

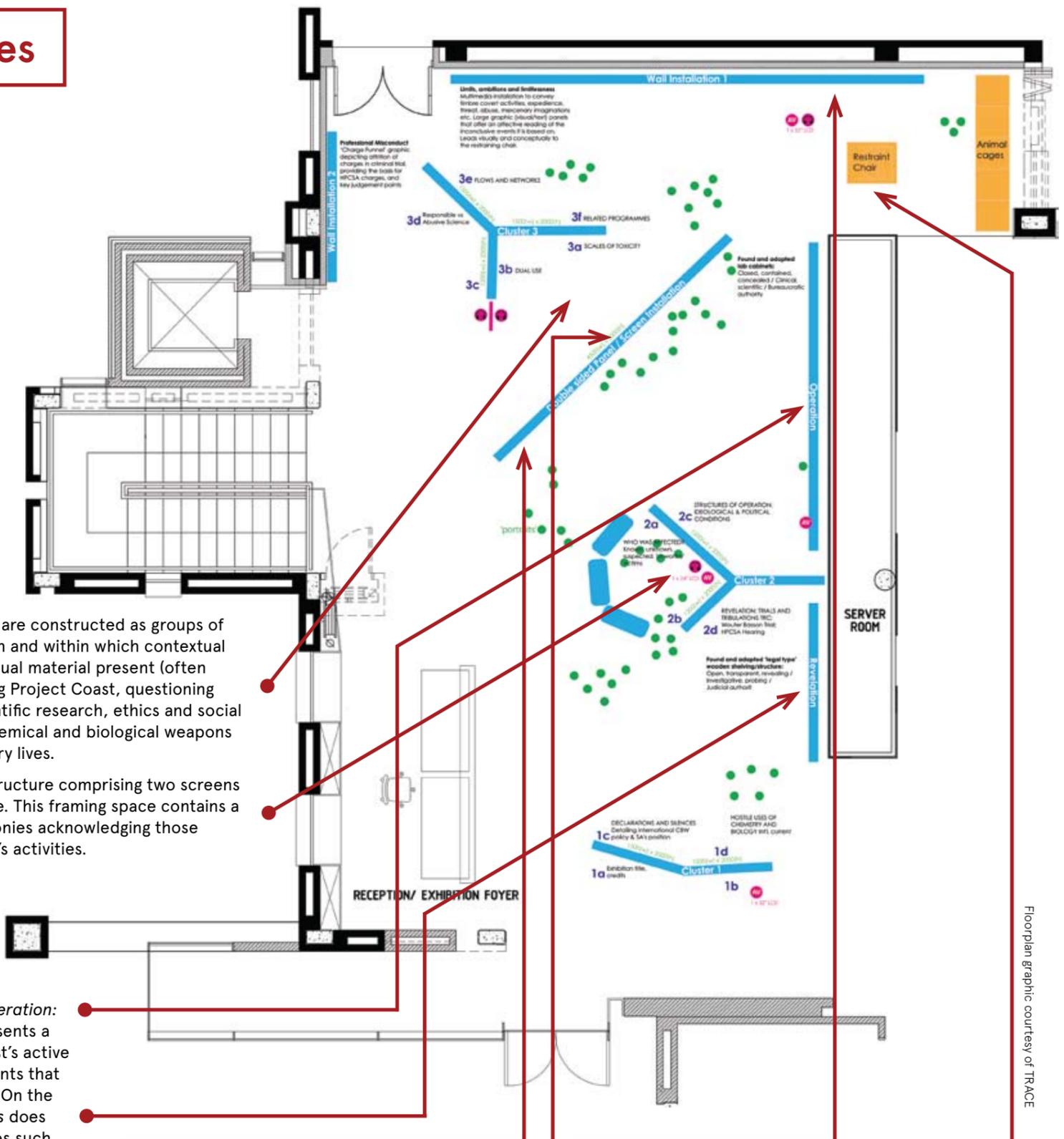
Behind the alcove, and connecting at the point where its two screens meet, a PVC strip-curtain of the kind you might find in cold storage units or slaughterhouses stretches back, splitting a multimedia installation into two parts. On the left, *Structures of Operation: Ideological and Political Conditions* presents a range of material from the time of Coast's active operations, including copies of documents that visitors can variously consult or handle. On the right, *Revelations: Trials and Tribulations* does the same, mirroring 'operational' themes such as 'Hidden in Plain Sight', 'Locking Away' and 'Silences', but now from the perspective of the various political, legal, professional and citizen-led processes that have attempted to shed light on Coast's activities. Again, space is provided for visitors to work with a selection of documents that these processes produced.

The semi-permeable membrane of the curtain allows braver visitors to pass between these spaces, or view the one from the position of the other, albeit indistinctly. Despite their similarities, the two parts of the installation have distinct material identities and associations that reflect the nature of their respective contents.

The *Operations* side is constructed from catalogue-issue steel office furniture that has been customised to function as display vitrines. *Revelations* makes use of warmer wood structures as well as stacks of archive boxes that reference the physical matter of archives and investigative evidence, the promises of revelation and the frustrations of concealment and inconclusive findings that working with archives can embody.

From the *Operations* zone, a panel set on the diagonal divides the space, effectively blocking one's line of sight to what lies behind it. Dominating the panoramic expanse is a grainy image of a coastline with the ghostly shadow of an aircraft cast down onto the littoral zone where ocean meets land. Here we locate the story of Operation Barnacle, ostensibly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of soldiers whose bodies were thrown into the sea.

Choosing to move left around the screen will bring you to a set of interlocking screens that focus on the dual uses of science, asking questions about



*Poisoned Past* questions our knowledge of and attitudes to scientific research, ethics and social responsibility; and reflects on how chemical and biological weapons might be impacting on our contemporary lives

professional conduct within scientific research; and pointing to the global context of CBW research and development, and Coast's implication within it.

Turning back to the diagonal screen now, our attention is focused on one document, the Verkope Lys (Sales List), arguably the most damning piece of evidence to emerge from investigations into Project Coast. Here the work of human agents within the fields of intelligence and counter-intelligence is mapped onto the capacity of toxins as causative agents of another sort, and how Coast researchers experimented with them.

Opposite this expanse of 'poison profiles', a wall installation arranged in layered relief, loosely references eight episodes selected for their particular qualities of representing the 'limits and limitlessness' of the real and potential horrors of the Coast narrative, including operations which were planned but aborted. Selected archival documents and public-domain images sourced from the infinite

archive of the internet are filtered, rescaled and inverted, and arranged as notional co-ordinates for a set of events and exchanges we cannot fully reconstruct, mapped out across imagined terrains.

Human experimentation in the Dukuduku forest; animal experimentation at Roodeplaat Research Laboratories; the twice-aborted attempted assassination of ANC leaders Ronnie Kasrils and Pallo Jordan in London with a poison-tipped umbrella; a threat in the form of a baboon foetus hung on a tree outside the home of Bishop Desmond Tutu by members of the Civil Co-Operation Bureau (the foetus may have originated from a Coast research laboratory); the intended distribution of poisoned beer at Eastern Cape taxi ranks; the arrest of Dr Wouter Basson for ecstasy possession; a proposed anthrax sale agreement drawn up between Coast scientist Dr Daan Goosen, an ex-South African intelligence agent middle-man and representatives of the United States government; and the 'weapons of mass destruction' accusations made by the US against Iraq in which South African intelligence was indirectly implicated.

In the corner of the exhibition is a 1:1 scale reproduction of a restraint chair, reconstructed after an original design by biomedical engineer Jan Lourens. This chair and its functions are on record, based on Lourens's TRC testimony and later interviews with Gould and the exhibition design team. The original chair (location unknown) was a sophisticated construction in thick Perspex, with straps to restrain an experimental animal (probably a baboon) and an enclosure that would allow scientists to test the effects of various gases. Here, it is a mercifully functionless rendering in cardboard.

# POISONED PASTS

# FINDING A FORM

In his book **Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities**, Paul Williams asks two critical questions: “In commemorating distressing events, what is the primary story to be told? Who should be authorized to tell it?”

Over the two and a half years since Chandré Gould first invited me to join her and Brian Rappert to think about the visual potential of her Project Coast archive, these questions have animated our thinking. They have framed our interactions with others who also recognise the implicit and explicit challenges of this kind of heritage practice, and who have so generously participated in discussions that have guided and shaped this project since.

The process of opening up, of revealing previously hidden or suppressed collective or personal stories, will be many things to many people over time: resisted, traumatic, celebratory, cathartic. Those affected by such events will experience historical endgames differently: some may choose to draw a line under the past and move on. For others, the past will continue to push into the present, often in discomfiting ways.

The search for an appropriate visual expression for the Project Coast archive has given rise to a constellation of questions that each represent little compounds of practical, ethical and creative expression. Here are a few:

- How best should exhibition curators approach source material that consists mainly of texts and documents, the content of which tells conflicting and contested stories that are difficult to verify?
- How can this material be made not only visually stimulating and accessible, but also productive? Can we avoid creating a book-on-a-wall while still communicating the facts (and fictions) of this historical narrative in a manner that is accessible and productive, perhaps even giving rise to brave new perspectives on a dark history?
- How can we sensitively and accurately represent those affected by South Africa’s chemical and biological weapons programme, when so much remains unknown and unproven?
- Why revisit this incomplete, fragmentary and traumatic history? Has sufficient time passed to invite reflection on the actions taken and the consequences of those decisions?
- And what might such a reflection stir in the contemporary moment? What do we hope this exhibition will do? Instruct, inform, educate? Or bear witness, honour, remember? Is it a cautionary tale? Might it be possible for it to do all these things, or is that asking too much?

As much as a recorded history exists, the story of Coast is one of subterfuge, doublespeak, espionage fantasies and real violence as much as it is about defensive research and protecting national interests (such as they were). There is much that remains unknown. Other than over 5 000 pages of documents and military memos – most in Afrikaans – some personal snapshots of scientists and associates travelling or at social events, there is little visual evidence of Coast’s work.

When difficult histories are insufficiently ‘mastered’, or there is no consensus about how we choose to remember them or the forms we craft to do this work of remembrance, they become spectral, subconsciously provoking our sense of tolerance and the imaginative limitlessness of horror. And concealment has its own

double logic: it may be necessary to ensure safety and security (prevent weapons proliferation, for example) or it may have far more sinister motivations.

*Poisoned Pasts* asks what happens to past events that struggle to attain (or retain?) a public consciousness, and how this impacts on the present?

What can be said to embody or exemplify Project Coast? The smug visage of Wouter Basson? This seems to be the decision that was made by the media, driven perhaps by his own obduracy and ego. But like the illusionist’s technique of misdirection, the figure of Basson is simultaneously also a distraction. He may have been Coast’s project manager, giving instructions to his staff of scientists and other associates, but he was also directed and funded, and had superiors to whom he reported. These superiors exist mainly as absent presences in the investigations undertaken to date. They have quietly contributed to the enduring sense of Coast as ‘horror without an object’, while judicial and professional bodies have struggled to contain Coast’s activities via the body of Basson (which has publicly presented itself either in a suit or African shirt, depending on the occasion).

In *Poisoned Pasts*, deciding which parts of the story are salient and why is a bit like trying to colour in a shape, the outlines of which keep shifting.

*Poisoned Pasts* is not an expansive exhibition but it has been designed with a deliberate density. It has an imagined, internal route plan, a logic of narrative unfolding. This journey cannot be linear or reconstructed as such and no particular route of encounter can be enforced. Deviations may throw up unexpected connections, and the form encourages connections to be made across thematic clusters without choreographing connections in clumsy or overstated juxtaposition.

We might say that *Poisoned Pasts* offers a blended model of what Williams (2007: 121) identifies as two popular approaches employed by those (usually institutions) with atrocity-commemoration mandates: to ‘offer lessons’ and to ‘stage an intervention’. Conventionally, this is done by establishing the facts and visibility of the event in question, whilst acknowledging that current conditions represent “a decisive break from the conditions of the [original] event.”

Williams points to a recent upswing in tolerance-based pedagogies that asks users of such spaces to consider how we could be turned into agents of intolerance, with the motivation being that vigilance can mitigate reoccurrence (Williams 2007: 138, 150).

Except what if we are still dealing with these effects in the present? And what if, despite clear evidence to the contrary, governments remain impassive in relation to such threats, or worse, are the agents of such violence themselves? Apartheid may be ‘finished’ as a legislative project, but its legacies are still keenly felt. Is Coast perhaps emblematic then, of Williams’s observation that “The meaning of an event remains unfinished inasmuch as considerations of its ‘lesson’ are gauged against the prevailing conditions of the society in which it resides”?

Is there a greater use-value (or set of values) to an exhibition such as this beyond the principle that a topic ‘deserves’ historical representation? I would suggest that our intentions with *Poisoned Pasts* are to question this very principle, and that adopting methods that foster active engagement with its materials will contribute to shaping and defining what those greater values might be, and articulate their relevance for the present.

Situated firmly in the contemporary moment, we would like *Poisoned Pasts* to enable us to look both ways, reaching back into recent history to draw events, people and spaces back into the present to hold them to new account, and to demand an improved consciousness in the actions we take in the interests of a better, safer society that can genuinely ensure freedom and equality for all.



Kathryn Smith

*Kathryn Smith is a visual artist, curator and forensic practitioner. Head of Fine Arts at Stellenbosch University from 2006–2012, she is currently a PhD researcher in LJMU’s Face Lab, and teaching on the MA Art in Science programme.*



Detail from Limits and Limitless; modified document courtesy Gould Collection

#### Note

Williams, P. 2007. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Oxford: Berg.

# ANIMATING THE ARCHIVE

Working with archives, whether physical or digital, offers a unique opportunity to reflect on why and how we collect and preserve historical information. All users, no matter their level of expertise, are actively involved in shaping historical data through our own experiences and interpretations. What is at stake in translating physical documents into digital ones? How might this contribute to making our histories alive, accessible and open to new perspectives? Visual artist and **Poisoned Pasts** research assistant Rian Blignaut offers his perspective on making the animation **Global Connections: Project Coast Abroad** that illustrates the international travel, and therefore the international connections, of those involved in Project Coast.



Rian Blignaut

Rian is a visual artist currently completing a Masters in Fine Art at the Wits School of Arts, with particular interest in digital art and forensic aesthetics.

*Global Connections* was researched, designed and built by translating historical data drawn from a number of physical and digital documents, the products of thousands of hours of research compiling and verifying relationships and transactions conducted by people associated with Project Coast and their international contacts or associates. The documents consulted specifically includes:

- the various testimonies delivered at Dr Wouter Basson's trial from 4 October 1999 to 11 April 2002 compiled by journalist Marlène Burger and edited by Chandré Gould
- the book *Secrets and Lies: Wouter Basson and South Africa's Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme* by Marlène Burger and Chandré Gould
- the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research report *Project Coast: apartheid's chemical and biological warfare programme*, by Chandré Gould and Peter Folb, and
- the transcripts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's public hearings on the chemical and biological warfare programme (8 June 1998 to 31 April 1998).

Using a suite of software applications, including word processing and data analysis platforms, and specialised image editing and animation programmes, these events were visualised as short episodes spanning the years 1977-2002, presented on a map of the world. Episodes highlight those involved, conflicting accounts of what took place and what was being exchanged.

Working with archival material is one of the quickest ways to learn how alienating language can be. Even though we tend to think of language as primarily spoken or written, it is also visual. Where texts use highly technical vocabulary or colloquial lingo, images follow a certain set of visual conventions, depending on their intended purpose. Whether official photographs, references or supplements to written records or personal snapshots, materials such as these reflect or signify their original functions with varying degrees of success when a researcher encounters them many years later. The immediacy of a trial report may for instance resonate somewhat differently in the present, where that which was once common knowledge is no longer so accessible.

The existence of an archive presupposes that someone – an individual, an organisation or institution – saw fit to preserve the information, to prevent it from being discarded or destroyed, and perhaps even working against prevailing conditions, at considerable risk, to do so. The types of documents we might encounter in a government or other official state archive, for instance, primarily reflect how the state and its various bodies function – or, at times, how they wish to be seen as functioning. Beyond the formality of the language these documents most often use, there is almost always the sense that it wasn't written for people, but about them.

As a result of the various official and personal sources from which such documents might derive, an archive can (and often does) delve into the most intimate details of people's lives while retaining a veil of authority. For French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), it is these traces of events and individuals in the archive that "is at the same time the memory, the archive, and the erasure, the repression, the forgetting of what it is supposed to keep safe".<sup>1</sup> Archives therefore maintain a complex relationship with what we might call collective memory. How or whether the archive modulates or feeds back into our daily lives both supports and complicates our ability to stand as witnesses to historical events. Reflecting the communicative imperatives of the time they were created in consequently renders documents relating to Project Coast either more or less accessible in the current moment.

Although documents are usually organized according to very specific rules and conventions, they do not necessarily present coherent narratives. Historians and researchers of various kinds are traditionally tasked with working through these records to construct certain kinds of accounts from the information available. The stories that emerge are informed by how these individuals interpret the documents, and should therefore not be confused with the 'truth' of any given event or individual. At best, they have varying degrees of truth-value, depending on how much trust we place in the individual that authored it and the institution or database that houses the documents.

Images, especially photographs, tend to accrue a lot of truth-value because of the way they are invested in as objective forms



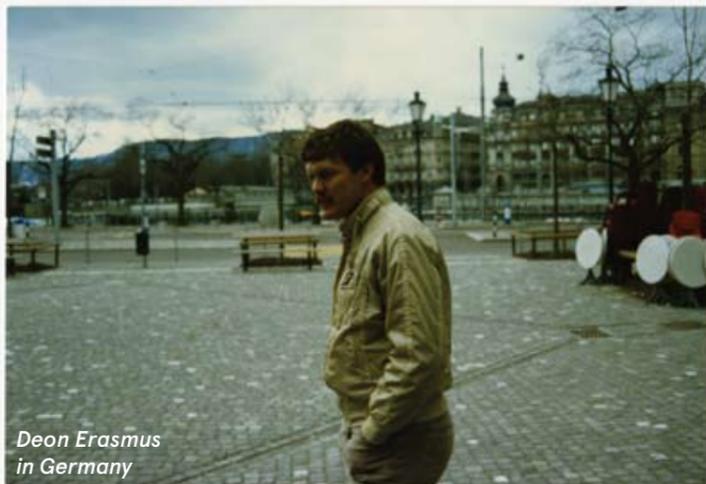
Engineer Jan Lourens and the King Air in Brazzaville, c.1989. On this trip, the King Air flew to Europe with a mysterious green drum on board, which was then left in either Zürich or Frankfurt



Wouter Basson and an unidentified person in Mozambique



Scientist Brian Davey in Germany



Deon Erasmus in Germany

All four visuals courtesy UCT Special Collections

of evidence. For artist and theorist Allan Sekula, they are “hybrid constructions, the outcome of an interplay of iconic, graphic and narrative conventions”.<sup>2</sup> As a visual and digital artist, my experience of archives as resources for research is visual. In other words, when I work with images and texts in the archive, I access them mainly by *looking* at them. This is especially true of digital archives where we read texts or look at images on a screen.

Analog and digital archives provide access to information, but the experience of working with them offers different potentials. When I go to an archive housed in a specific place, such as the South African History Archive, I can physically handle these documents. I can turn them around, feel the creases on the paper, perhaps even see the oily residue of a hand print of someone who had used them before me. Moreover, the place or site where I encounter these documents alerts me to how much value is placed on them.

Here, I am in the position of someone *doing* research; it becomes a physical, embodied action. When I look at these documents, there is a sense in which they draw out a certain response from me because of the way they look. I would even go so far as to say that their function in the archive, at least as far as my work is concerned, depends to a large degree exactly on this. Noticing something like that fingerprint on a photograph, possibly belonging to the person who processed the original image, or who clumsily stuck it to a supporting page, can transform an abstracted object into something very individual.

Documents handled in an archive or digitised versions of documents viewed on a screen remain fragments of an unknown whole, yet their authority is largely dependent on the place they came from. Is the source credible or not? This requires us to refer back to the archival collection as a totality. By extension, the words or accounts seemingly given by individual persons in these documents tend to evoke the possibility of *spaces* rather than specific meanings.<sup>3</sup>

So, if there is narrative to be had, I am actively making it, constructing something meaningful from the fragmentary data. In selecting specific images or certain bits of texts, I am both referencing and slightly altering the conventions that I find there. I might also introduce conventions or practices entirely foreign to a specific archive in order to highlight certain aspects of the information that would not otherwise stand out. Working with digitised documents such as PDFs means my relationship with the information may not be directly tactile, but I am able to cut, paste, alter and move data around as I wish. In this there is great creative freedom, but it is the same freedom that censors in oppressive regimes enjoy. If we agree that preserving and communicating basic facts is important and useful, this demands a particular ethical commitment.

Part of the wager of translating archival documents into an animated format, as we have done in *Global Connections: Project Coast Abroad*, is that the structure and experience of

information in this document could aid in facilitating the process of corroborating diverse sources of information.

For the most part, working in a digital format like animation follows the same logic of working with archives, yet it is geared much more directly to the act of someone else’s looking: I am trying to communicate something to a viewer that I only know through my engagement with historical records. The visual aspects I add or alter not only foreground certain aspects of the information that might not have been overtly obvious in the documents, but allows me to dynamically shape the experience of engaging with information. It changes the narrative, and creates a new one.

Within an archival collection, a user may be able to control the time they spend with the material, flipping quickly through pages or images. If the material is presented as a linear narrative, and they wish to experience the full story, they are bound by this predetermined duration. Seen in the context of an exhibition, where it plays on a constant loop, a visitor will not necessarily encounter *Global Connections* from the ‘beginning’, but at any point of its duration at which they happen to pass by. This interrupts chronological conventions, how we are trained to understand the logical and progressive flow of time. Played back on a personal device such as a computer or mobile phone – which could be literally anywhere with an internet connection – the document attains a new mobility, even as the user’s interaction with the document might be limited to forwarding, rewinding and pausing the animation.

Archives are crucial repositories of social memory. There is no doubt that digitising their contents has mobilised otherwise static collections for new audiences with (virtually) no geographical restrictions. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor and political journalist John Matisonn offer two powerful views on the dangers and potentials of open access to documents of social memory, particularly traumatic ones.

Taylor suggests that traumatic memory can come to resemble a kind of contagion, transmitted through time: “one ‘catches’ and embodies the burden, pain and responsibility of past behaviours/events.”<sup>4</sup> It becomes important then that we find ways of witnessing traumatic events in a way that is conducive “for ‘claiming’ experience and enabling, as opposed to ‘collapsing’, witnessing”.<sup>5</sup> Reflection on his work as public broadcasting facilitator, Matisonn notes: “I found a divide sometimes more important than racist or non-racist views: conformity or rebelliousness. The innate conformism of the authoritarian personality often made it a surprisingly seamless shift of loyalty from one master to another. For these, tell them to do something terrible and some will. Tell them to do something good, and that is also possible.”<sup>6</sup>

Both of these ideas have particular relevance for *Poisoned Past*, in which metaphors of toxicity and secrecy address the possible effects of Project Coast – and similar endeavours elsewhere in the world – on contemporary society. If archival documents gain something from being translated into digital, interactive formats I would venture that it lies in the way it allows us to question and encounter not only the information contained in the images and texts, but the act or duration of looking at them, our ability to *witness* as it were. Perhaps it allows us to conceive of historical documents as having new potential, that even records of oppression and extortion relating to the cruel choices made by individuals as representatives of an authoritarian state, can be – and should be – actively repurposed instead of being forgotten in boxes, wreaking subconscious havoc on our social fabric.

#### Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever,” in Hamilton, C., Harris, V., Pickover, M., Reid, G., Saleh, R., Taylor, J. (Eds.) 2002. *Refiguring the Archive*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 54.
- 2 Allan Sekula. 1981. “The Traffic in Photographs,” *Art Journal* 41, 16.
- 3 Sven Spieker. 2008. *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 49.
- 4 Diana Taylor. 2003. *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press. See 167-168.
- 5 Ibid, 210.
- 6 John Matisonn. 2015. *God, Spies and Lies: Finding South Africa’s Future through its Past*. Vlaeberg: Ideas for Africa. Kindle edition, loc. 5402.

## Who was affected

The question 'Who has been affected by Project Coast?' raises important issues about how suffering is both concealed and acknowledged, and how those affected should be represented.

There are a small number of people who were almost certainly poisoned by substances produced by Project Coast front companies. But units of the police and military, which made use of poisons and drugs, may have sourced substances elsewhere.

Here we honour all those individuals who are believed – or suspected – to have fallen victim to poisoning, those who were intended targets of failed operations, and those who were drugged during military or police actions, including those whose cause of death or injury remains a mystery. The names of many who died are still unknown. Their stories can be read here, and you can find their portrait markers hung throughout the exhibition.



**Donald Woods**

In 1977 Donald Woods, a South African journalist and anti-apartheid activist received a shirt laced with Ninhydrin for his five year-old daughter, Mary. The chemical was said to sting on contact and is used by police forces worldwide.

**±200 unknown SWAPO members**

Between 1979 and 1988 many members of SWAPO were killed by SADF soldier Johan Theron, mostly by the lethal injection of muscle relaxants. Some of these soldiers had allegedly been 'turned' and then outlived their usefulness to the SADF. Their bodies were disappeared either by being thrown from an aircraft into the sea, or from armoured vehicles into the veld. Some were dumped in the Brandenburg mountains. One victim is believed to have been a woman. The body-disposal operation was dubbed Operation Dual. The identities of these victims, and the number of victims disposed of in this way are unknown, but it is believed that nearly 200 people died this way.

**4 unknown men**  
One a Barnacle member

In 1980 four unnamed men were targeted for assassination by Barnacle member Trevor Floyd. One of these four men was also a member of Barnacle and had become a risk when it was discovered that he was making calls to Zimbabwe. Floyd gave all four of the men lethal injections.

**5 POWs, Fort Rev**

Soldier Johan Theron alleges that he and Dr Wouter Basson visited Fort Rev in South West Africa in 1980, where they gave five prisoners sleeping pills and then injected them with lethal quantities of muscle relaxants. Basson denies this allegation.



**Joe Slovo**

In 1981 ANC member Joe Slovo was a target of an assassination attempt in London. Police hit squad commander Dirk Coetzee ordered the attempt on his life, and gave a security police officer a poison with which to lace Slovo's drink. The assassination attempt failed.

**Gonisizwe Kondile**

In 1981 political detainee Gonisizwe Kondile was given 'knock-out drops' by police hit squad head, Dirk Coetzee, before he was murdered near Komatipoort. The security police burnt his body.

**Selby Mavuso and Peter Dlamini**

In 1981 police hit squad commander Dirk Coetzee poisoned, tortured and killed activist Selby Mavuso and askari Peter Dlamini.



**Sphiwo Mtimkhulu**

In 1981, Eastern Cape student Sphiwo Mtimkhulu was hospitalised shortly after his release from prison. He was suffering from thallium poisoning. Before he could sue the police he disappeared along with his friend Topsy Madaka. Mtimkhulu was murdered in 1982 but his remains were never found.

**3 Men**  
Dukuduku forest

In 1983 three men were taken to the Dukuduku forest in KwaZulu Natal. They were smeared with a substance and tied to a tree by a chain and left there overnight. The next day military doctor Kobus Bothma and soldier Johan Theron injected them with lethal quantities of muscle relaxants and threw their bodies into the sea. Their identities remain unknown.

**Roland Hunter**

In 1983, SADF conscript and ANC member Roland Hunter was the intended target of an assassination attempt. The plan was to inject Hunter with mamba toxin and leave a dead mamba next to his body so that it would appear he died from a snakebite. Hunter was arrested by the security police on charges of espionage before the plan could be carried out.

**Christopher**  
Barnacle member

In 1983, a Barnacle operative known only as Christopher was murdered by Civil Co-operation Bureau member Danie Phaal and Barnacle member Trevor Floyd. According to Phaal, they had offered Christopher a ride to Messina, and during the trip they gave him a beer containing sedatives. After he fell asleep they injected him with the anaesthetic drug Ketalar. The intention was to keep Christopher sedated until their flight from the Zeerust airfield. However while sedated Christopher stopped breathing.

**5 Renamo members**  
1 possibly Boaventura Bomba

In 1983 five members of Renamo who were believed to be responsible for the murder of Renamo leader, Orlando Christina, were captured by the police and taken to the Caprivi. One of the men was taken from 1 Military hospital. During the Basson trial it was alleged that the men were injected with drugs during their interrogation, after which they were killed and their bodies dumped in the sea. One of these men is believed to have been Boaventura Bomba.

**Unknown victim**  
possibly a SWAPO member

Sometime between 1983 and 1986, a prisoner believed to be a SWAPO member detained at Ondangwa, Namibia was given orange juice laced with poison by Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) member Danie Phaal. After drinking the juice he started bleeding from all orifices and died a short while later.



**Garth Bailey**

In 1984 SADF 5 Reconnaissance Commando member Garth Bailey died mysteriously at 1 Military Hospital. His clinical and post mortem records state cause of death as sudden onset of myasthenia gravis, however his death might equally be explained by poisoning with botulinum toxin. His widow Daphne Potter says: "Although it is not so uncommon these days for children to grow up without their biological fathers, it is hard to grow up without ever having had the opportunity to meet your father. To have that opportunity taken away [from Garth's child] and the 'what ifs' and the 'whys' never answered has been difficult. There are still so many unanswered questions that even the opportunity for proper grief has been taken away. How can you be angry when you don't know for sure what or why he died? You are left with a hole in your life that can never be filled because the questions go on."



**Peter Kalangula**

In 1985, Namibian religious leader Peter Kalangula was an intended target for assassination by Barnacle member Trevor Floyd. Floyd was given a toxic substance to smear on the door handle of Kalangula's car. The attempt failed.



**Victor Da Fonseca**

In 1986 Victor Da Fonseca, a Mozambican member of 5 Reconnaissance Commando, died. According to his official death certificate he had a brain tumour and died of pneumonia. Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) member Danie Phaal testified that on two separate occasions that he was given substances to put in Da Fonseca's drinks with the intention of killing him. Da Fonseca's body was exhumed in 1998 and examined for thallium, but the levels were found to be too low to have caused his death.

**Samuel Phina and Themba Ngesi**

The ANC submission to the TRC lists Samuel Phina and Themba Ngesi as having died after being poisoned in Mozambique in 1986.



**Ronnie Kasrils  
Pallo Jordan**

In 1985/1986 ANC leaders Ronnie Kasrils and Pallo Jordan were the intended targets of an assassination attempt in London, by way of a poison-tipped umbrella. Project Barnacle member Trevor Floyd stated that he was given the modified umbrella by bio-engineer Jan Lourens who showed him how to load the umbrella with the poison. The attempt failed.



In 1987/1988 a second attempt on the lives of Kasrils and Jordan in London was planned. This time, bio-engineer Jan Lourens supplied Barnacle operative Floyd with a modified screwdriver 'applicator' and a substance that may have been phenylsilitrane. There was no opportunity to administer the toxins and Floyd discarded them in the Thames.

**Mack Anderson**

In 1987 Corporal Mack Anderson of Reconnaissance Commando had allegedly become a security risk. He died after fellow soldier Johan Theron administered lethal injections of Scoline, Tubarine and Ketalar. His body was loaded into a helicopter and left in the Mozambique bush.

**Petrus Lubane**

In 1987 ANC courier Petrus Lubane was given a beer laced with sleeping tablets before he was murdered by members of the Northern Transvaal Security Branch, who detonated an explosive strapped to his body.

**Gibson Mondlane**

In 1987 ANC member Gibson Mondlane (aka Gibson Ncube) was seen drinking a South African beer at a party in Maputo. By the time the party ended, his feet were paralysed. The paralysis spread through his whole body and he died eight days later.



**Conny Braam**

In 1987, former head of the Dutch anti-apartheid movement Conny Braam believed that two attempts were made to poison her, in Lusaka and Harare respectively. She became ill after trying on a jacket she found in the cupboard of her hotel room.

**Jeremiah Ntuli  
Jeremiah Magagula  
Rooibaard Geldenhuys  
Morris Nkabinde  
Samuel Masilela  
Abram Makolane  
Stephen Makena  
Thomas Phiri  
Sipho Sibanyoni  
Elliot Sathekge**

In 1987, ten young men between the ages of 15 and 22 were recruited in Mamelodi by askari Joe Mamasela under false pretences. They were told they would be joining the ANC. They were given drinks laced with an unknown substance and their unconscious bodies were blown up in the minibus in which they had been travelling. They have become known as the Nietverdiend Ten.



**Klaas de Jonge**

In April 1988, Dutch anti-apartheid activist Klaas de Jonge left a small bag of clothes in a luggage locker at Nijmegen railway station. Returning a few hours later he found the entire door of the locker missing and the bag gone. He recovered the bag at the left luggage office, where he was told a man had handed it in. The contents were checked and everything seemed normal. The next day, after wearing clothes from the bag, De Jonge experienced severe pain and swelling of his right eye. Within a few weeks, he was completely blind in his right eye. Examination at several hospitals by a number of specialists failed to establish the cause of the infection. A second plot to murder De Jonge is suspected but was never carried out.



**Dullah Omar**

In 1989 ANC leader Dullah Omar was the intended target for assassination. Civil Co-operation Bureau member 'Slang' Van Zyl was given a powder to put in Omar's food that would induce a heart attack. The plan was never carried out.



**Reverend Frank  
Chikane**

In 1989 ANC and religious leader Reverend Frank Chikane was the target of an attempted assassination by the police security branch. He fell violently ill after wearing underwear that had been poisoned with organophosphates.

**Enoch Dlamini**

In 1989, ANC member Enoch Dlamini died in Swaziland. Military Intelligence member Jan Anton Nieuwoudt testified in the trial of Dr Wouter Basson that he had given poisoned beer to an agent in Swaziland to give to Dlamini. The official cause of death was recorded as acute haemorrhagic pancreatitis.

**Kwenza Mlaba**

In 1989, Durban civil rights lawyer Kwenza Mlaba was the target of an attempted poisoning. Members of the Civil Co-operation Bureau left a sealed bag of poisoned razor blades in his office in the hope that he would use them.

**ANC meeting  
Soweto 1989**

In 1989, Roodeplaats Research Laboratories microbiologist Dr Mike Odendaal was asked for salmonella, which he was told would be added to the sugar at an ANC meeting in Soweto. Odendaal was later told that the salmonella had 'worked so well' that all the delegates had fallen ill.

**Dr. Allan Wellington  
Madolwana  
(aka Francis Melli)**

In 1990 Dr Allan Wellington Madolwana (aka Francis Melli), a high-ranking ANC official believed to have been a spy for the South African security forces, was found dead in his room at the Protea Inn Hotel in East London. It is suspected he had discovered information that could compromise the Directorate of Military Intelligence. The cause of his death is unknown, but the ANC suspected he was poisoned.

**Jean Luc  
Curutchet**

In 1990, AECI scientist Jean Luc Curutchet was involved in a work-related accident. He attempted to sue for liability, and shortly thereafter began to experience symptoms, which he believed resulted from being given a poisoned neck-brace to wear.

**Peter Martin**

In 1992, former British intelligence (MI6) agent Peter Martin died of a heart attack. The London Sunday Times reported on 14 July 1998 that an investigation into Martin's death had been opened after the TRC's chemical and biological warfare hearings. Martin was believed to have met with Basson in London some time before. His fiancé, Rosemary Durrant, feared he may have been poisoned. No evidence to that effect has yet been made public.



**Samuel Khanyile  
(aka Solly Smith)**

In 1993, former ANC representative in London Samuel Khanyile (aka Solly Smith) was found dead in his bed under mysterious circumstances. In 1991 he had confessed to the ANC that he had been compromised by Military Intelligence, and had been feeding them information. The ANC suspected he was poisoned to prevent further exposure of its agents.

## How to account?

**This poem is a heartfelt account by a scientist who worked for Project Coast.**

**Since 1991 he has been a medical researcher at a South African university where his research has contributed to understanding disease mechanisms. In 1995 he tried to speak to someone about Project Coast but it was regarded as being too sensitive at the time. He has shared his stories with Chandré Gould. Over the years he has helped to shape and inform narratives about Project Coast, however he has remained unknown, hidden in plain sight.**

**Now he agonizes about how and whether to tell his story to his colleagues, fearing anger, rejection and negative attention for his institution. He wonders if there is any good to be gained from telling his colleague about his past. Like many white men who served in the SADF he has carried his secrets for a long time. Poisoned Past is has offered him a chance to tell his story, to 'come in from the cold'.**

### HOW DO I COME IN FROM THE COLD?

We lay on sunny days listening to Forces Favourites  
Of sweethearts writing to young boys "on the border"  
Messages ending with "SWANK" and "KISS"

Then it was my turn to partake in this "ballet of men doing nothing"  
We built equipment while playing chess  
And then I was sucked in to earn for my family

Reading yellowed pages of stiff journals of wars past  
Deciphering and guessing what lay beneath the inked out words of the "declassified"  
We muddled and worked out what was needed to protect troops from gas

Then when they asked me things I would not do  
I walked away, looking over my shoulder for a long time  
So I was told

Before I left I had showed a young man how the equipment worked  
And worried until I knew he was safe  
That was 8 years on after Mandela had rescued us in the palm of his forgiving hand

Stories surfaced of activists pulling hair from their scalps  
I asked to tell my tale  
No-one was interested, everything was too new I was told

The Doctor was caught  
Peddling tablets and our secrets  
And shrouding the story in a veil of mist and smoke

Once a General and the soft-spoken blue-eyed Colonel had stood on a river bank  
Their raincoat-wrapped soldiers waiting for gas  
To fill their lungs with blistering choking vomit

They stared at me in stunned disbelief  
Where was the equipment to protect us they asked  
"It was here" I told them

And now I am trusted to work out why people become so ill  
Working with individuals I so admire and who stood up to PW, Malan & Co  
Often to their great cost

I watched in silence when they tried to charge the Doctor  
What I could have told would have been denied - there is no proof you see -  
And would have left me and those I love so vulnerable

They tell us between 5 and 15 thousand died "on the border"  
But none of us have been really told of this forgotten little war between the Bear & Stars-and-Stripes  
I made things to try and protect those young men in brown

I am told these still help those who wear camouflage fatigues today  
Perhaps one of the few things not warped to save a dying ideology  
Is this good?

So how do I tell this tale to those I admire and who trust me?  
A tale of ideas and knowledge twisted to harm those  
Who fought so bravely for their place in the sun.

# PROJECT COAST AND

# THE CHALLENGE OF MORAL EQUIVALENCY

Y. Obenewa Amponsah participated in the consultative workshops that informed the exhibition. She writes here in her personal capacity, reflecting on how personal choice and agency comes to inform how victims are and should be viewed.

*Poisoned Pasts* undertakes the unenviable, but critical, task of recounting Project Coast, South Africa's apartheid-era chemical and biological warfare program; as well as the manner in which it has, and has not, been addressed through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, among other forums. At first glance, Project Coast seems to be James Bond-esque and perhaps somewhat implausible. With signet rings that could conceal substances, umbrellas used to deploy poison and screwdrivers laced with chemical agents, Project Coast, to the casual observer, could be the stuff of science fiction. The reality, however, is that the program brutalized untold numbers of people.

With its objective being to uphold the apartheid state, Project Coast's scientists undertook experiments to develop the potential to inflict wide scale devastation. In the process of creating methods to clandestinely poison water supplies and to covertly sterilize black women, Project Coast had an indefinite number of victims; some of whom are known, and an indeterminate number who will likely remain forever unknown.

Among the known, or highly probable, victims of Project Coast are activists such as Frank Chikane and Conny Braam, then head of the Dutch anti-apartheid movement, both poisoned via clothing. Other suspected victims include the 1989 attendees of an ANC meeting in Soweto (and any hapless children or visitors who may have come after them) who fell ill after the sugar bowl was contaminated by bacteria provided by Project Coast. The varied profiles of the victims depicts a harrowing picture of unsuspecting

people, whose main commonality was their resistance to the apartheid regime.

Yet *Poisoned Pasts* also tells the stories of other casualties of Project Coast: the collaborators, askaris and soldiers who made the deployment of Project Coast's creations possible. In some instances, for a myriad of reasons, these individuals themselves were poisoned or killed through means developed by the chemical and biological warfare programme.

This aspect of Project Coast raises the question of whether those who ultimately had to "take a dose of their own medicine" should be considered victims in the same manner that activists, freedom fighters and the general public are? Is there equivalency between those who sought to end apartheid, and were poisoned for their efforts, and those who actively worked to uphold the regime? Morally, should perpetrators also be considered victims?

The issue of moral equivalency is not a new one. South Africa saw similar debates with the creation of Freedom Park, and the question of whether to include members of the apartheid era South African Defense Force in the memorial honouring fallen heroes.

For many, this may seem like an academic question, one which unnecessarily underscores the divisions of the past and undermines the narrative of the rainbow nation. Yet, the question of equivalency is a critical one as it speaks to justice, personal responsibility and the creation of a culture of human rights.

Apartheid was declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations; Project Coast, facilitated to uphold the criminal state, was therefore also inimical to human rights. Its existence and perpetuation was only possible through the active engagement of, not only the security forces, scientists and researchers, but also the doctors – who despite swearing to uphold the Hippocratic oath – took part in unethical research.

Regardless of Project Coast's service on behalf of apartheid, as has been noted in assessments of the project, some of the scientists and researchers involved do not consider their engagement wrong; rather, they were involved as foot soldiers in the war that was apartheid. Others were there for the 'science'.

This is not to say that raising the alarm would have been easy; or that the rewards for scientists – such as the ability to conduct their own innovative research alongside Project Coast – would not have been tempting. But the notion that they were neutral participants in the program is problematic in that it strips them of personal agency, and their ability to bring about change. Similarly, the notion that soldiers and other collaborators were victims is problematic.

Why problematic? In short, because the choices of individuals matter. They determine the course of history. Neither apartheid nor Project Coast were natural disasters; they were man-made tragedies that could have been averted or brought to an end earlier. Had the individuals involved in Project Coast made different choices, perhaps this exhibition would be entitled *Proud Pasts*, and would recount the ways in which South Africa's scientific and medical communities worked to advance human rights, instead of chemical and biological warfare.

By classifying perpetrators as morally equivalent to victims, and scientists as neutral participants, individuals are distanced from their responsibility to make choices and to be accountable for the personal and societal impact.

Rather, by holding perpetrators accountable, society has an opportunity to communicate the responsibility of all towards creating a culture of human rights. To quote Steve Biko, "History works through people, and we have availed ourselves to history to work through us." In this light, Project Coast raises a critical question for contemporary society: today, what type of history is at work through individual and collective choices?

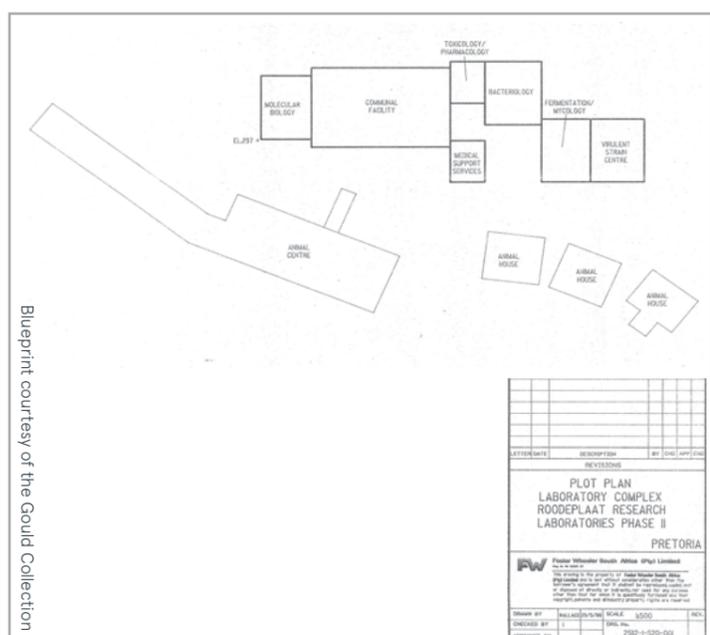


Y. Obenewa Amponsah

Y. Obenewa Amponsah is the CEO of the Steve Biko Foundation.



Joyce Mtimkhulu.



Blueprint courtesy of the Gould Collection

# RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE?

# HOLDING DR BASSON TO ACCOUNT

Professors Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven and Leslie London are medical practitioners who laid the complaint against Dr Wouter Basson with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Both have a long history of involvement in exposing and countering human rights violations in their profession. Both are teachers and have used



**Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven**

Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven is Professor of Family Medicine, Wits University, Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Clinical Medicine; and, Head of Department (Clinical), Family Medicine, Southern Gauteng Districts, Gauteng Department of Health

**Chandré Gould (CG):** Why did you make the complaint to the HPCSA?

**Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven (LB-R):** This was not the first submission we made to the HPCSA. In 1998, the Health and Human Rights Project compiled a list of individuals who were registered with the Council and had been named as being complicit in gross human rights violations during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) public hearings, and in private submissions.

The Interim National Medical and Dental Council (INMDC) never acknowledged receipt of that submission and our concerns. Although its mandate was to transition the regulatory body from an apartheid-era parastatal organisation to a free and democratic institution dedicated to "protecting the public and guiding the professions," it was obviously not in its interest to pursue retributive justice.

Dr Wouter Basson was on the original list of doctors we reported to the INMDC. He was one of many health practitioners who were alleged to have contravened professional codes of conduct in their treatment of patients, detainees and the public at large during apartheid.

We have written about these egregious examples of health care workers violating professional ethics in order to ensure that these practises do not continue.<sup>1</sup> We have also developed training materials so that future generations of health care professionals will know what types of behaviours are ethical, and which ones are not. A key component of professionalism is the concept of 'self-regulation.' That means that health professionals must hold one another accountable for bad behaviour, even if it is sometimes risky to speak out.

When the criminal case against Dr Basson started in 1999 it became unconscionable that he would continue to practice medicine, let alone teach medical students, as he had been doing at Stellenbosch University. We therefore lodged a very specific complaint regarding Dr Basson's involvement in Project Coast, pointing out that secretly developing chemical and biological weapons constituted professional misconduct. Even while serving in the country's armed forces, his involvement warranted a special investigation. There were historical precedents from other countries for such complaints. Progressive doctors, for example, challenged the medical association in Germany, years after the fact, for its role in the Nazification of the profession under the Third Reich. Other cases of dual loyalty had been recorded among health care providers in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Israel/Palestine and the former Soviet Union. Only later were their professional associations called to task for failing to support their members who stood up against injustice. Eventually, in these cases, such advocacy efforts resulted in the profession publicly acknowledging wrong-doing and taking concrete steps to make amends. These brave acts of holding medical professionals to account paved the way for us in South Africa to pursue our complaint with the HPCSA. We also felt compelled to uphold the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa,<sup>2</sup> international human rights instruments which South Africa had ratified<sup>3</sup> as well as global ethical codes for health professionals<sup>4</sup> through this case.

**CG:** Has the process been frustrating?

**LB-R:** While frustrating on a number of levels, the process teaches the need for patience, tenacity and vigilance when confronting issues like this. It's hard to seek redress for something that would not have been considered wrong, but was clearly unethical when benchmarked against universal human rights standards.

Not that long ago in South Africa, people like Dr Basson would have been venerated for the work they did to protect their country at any cost. Apartheid imposed severe restrictions on health care services, fostering racism and other forms of

discrimination in public facilities, and distorting science for political and nationalist purposes. Institutions are slow to change. Although the Council has undergone a process of transformation, testing the structures that fostered and then protected wrong-doing amongst health care professionals did not seem that easy.

In addition, legal processes are fraught with time delays and are expensive. Dr Basson's defence has been paid for by the state and he has spared no opportunity to challenge and even delay the process. Yet, this is very important for due process, to ensure that his disciplinary hearing was fair. So although it took nearly six years of hearings, postponements and interdicts for the HPCSA disciplinary inquiry to reach a guilty verdict and clearly refute all of the arguments presented in Basson's defence, it was worth it.

I was fortunate to attend the proceedings, which were open to the public. I also read and wrote about the process as it was unfolding so as to keep the issue alive in the public mind. Had we not done so, Dr Basson would have been correct when he said defiantly, "Who remembers? And, who cares?" We do!

It is disappointing that despite the criminal trial and professional inquiry processes, there are still so many unanswered questions about what exactly Project Coast and the South African Army's Seventh Military Battalion did and who was involved. In the end, the complaint against Dr Basson feels somewhat symbolic, since it hasn't resulted in any more "truths" about what really happened.

**CG:** So what are the lessons to be learned from this?

**LB-R:** Dr Basson is still to be sentenced for his unprofessional conduct. Due to a postponement of the process, granted in early 2014, he remains registered with the Medical Board of the HPCSA. It is critical that we continue to monitor the sentencing process and push for progress while galvanising a broad-based coalition of concerned health care workers, families of people who were harmed during apartheid, current users of the health care system and anyone who cares about justice, however delayed, in order to hold health care professionals accountable for unethical behaviour. If we don't do this, we become complicit in covering up mistakes and breeding further mistrust within the health care system, which seems an awful lot like continuing the secrecy that was the hallmark of Project Coast.

**CG:** What is your experience of how students think about these issues now?

**LB-R:** I teach in many different contexts about the human rights imperatives in health. South African students seem puzzled about the current strain in the health care system, and attribute this to more recent phenomena, such as the AIDS pandemic and ever-widening social inequality. What they don't realise is that these are merely symptoms of long-standing hierarchical and abusive practises in our public health system. To arrive at a culture of human rights and ethical behaviour in our health care system, we need to confront the legacies of the past, however painful and pervasive they may be.

Dr Basson's impunity to have used his medical skills to perpetuate harm is an example of how the entire health sector becomes tainted when we tolerate behaviour like this. As an educator, I believe it is important to challenge unethical standards in health care practise no matter how daunting or how long ago they occurred.

I find that most students are very open to this approach, as they are eager to learn and want to make meaningful contributions from the beginning of their life's work. Students also are beginning to understand how important advocacy is if we are to achieve equitable and universal health care coverage, one of the Sustainable Development Goals and a government priority. Yet, without adequate support, it can seem overwhelming and very discouraging—but the solidarity and coalitions that have formed recently around transformation issues in higher education give one hope. *A la luta continua!*

VERKOPPE

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DATE	CELEWER	STOF	VOLUME	PREIS
19.03.89	SK	Phenoklidien Thallium asetaat	1 x 500mg 50g	Teruggeskr.
23.03.89	SK	Phenoklidien	5 x 100mg	✓
04.04.89	✓	Aldicarb - Lomonsap	6 x 200mg	✓
04.04.89	✓	Asied - Whisky	3 x 1.5kg	✓
04.04.89	✓	Paraoxon	10x 2ml	✓
07.04.89	✓	Vit D	2gr	✓
15.05.89	✓	Vit D	2gr	✓ R300,00
15.05.89	✓	Katharidien	70mg	✓ R150,00
15.05.89	✓	10ml Spuite	50	✓
16.05.89	✓	Naalde 190x10mm	24	✓ R18,00
16.05.89	✓	Naalde 170x7,5mm	7	✓ R7,00
19.05.89	✓	Thallium asetaat	1g	✓
30.05.89	✓	Feofied tablette	30	✓
09.06.89	✓	Spore en Brief	1	✓
20.06.89	✓	Kapsules NaCN	50	✓
21.06.89	✓	Bierblik Bot	3	✓
21.06.89	✓	Bierblik Thallium	3	✓
21.06.89	✓	Bottel Bier Bot	1	✓
21.06.89	✓	Bottel Bier Thallium	2	✓
22.06.89	✓	Suiker en Salmonella	200gr	✓
27.06.89	✓	Winkey en Paragat	1x75ml	✓
20.07.89	✓	Hg-sianied	-4gr	✓
27.07.89	✓	Bobbejaan foetus	1	✓

Verkope Lys courtesy of the Gould Collection.



Entrance to Roodeplaat Research Laboratories



A poster advertising RRL's services



A view of the RRL facility

Images from video footage from Liza Key

Project Coast as a case study to raise difficult questions about medical ethics with their students. In this brief exchange with Chandré Gould they reflect on the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) disciplinary process and what we can learn from this experience.

**CG:** What made you lay a complaint against Dr Basson with the HPCSA?

**LL:** I had no idea in 1997 about the existence of Project Coast or the presence of a chemical and biological warfare programme in the SADF under apartheid, until it was uncovered by the TRC's investigations. It wasn't that I didn't think the apartheid government capable of such a project. Rather, it was that I was not aware it existed, nor that it was run by a fellow doctor.

However, having spent a lot of effort documenting the collusion of medical professionals in the apartheid project, it did not surprise me that there were doctors like Basson willing to put their professional ethics aside in the interest of furthering apartheid's objectives. For that reason, when it became clear that Basson had stepped over the boundary of professional norms, I felt it important to lodge the complaint with the then Interim National Medical and Dental Council.

Why did I do this? Firstly, because impunity can never be accepted. If we do not hold people accountable for violating human rights, then the consequence will be that this behaviour will be repeated in future, by other persons, under another government that has no respect for human life.

Secondly, as a health professional, I undertook a professional commitment that involves respecting human dignity and rights. That another doctor could push these obligations aside when politics suited him to do so is a smear on the profession for all doctors in South Africa. Unless we have a clear statement from the HPCSA that his behaviour was unacceptable, the whole profession is compromised.

Thirdly, Dr Basson had choices. He could have refused to what he was asked to do. He could have said 'enough' when asked to develop poisons or distribute toxic chemicals in communities. But he did not. When I was faced with difficult moral choices, I made the decisions I had to make but I owned up to those decisions. Basson has refused to 'own' his decisions at the time, claiming it was part of being a soldier. That he was following orders and had no choice. This is simply a fiction to disguise his lack of moral compass.

So, that is why I lodged the complaint – so that no-one who commits human rights violations, particularly a medical practitioner, can walk free and untouched without accounting for what they did. Also so that future generations of doctors will learn right from wrong, unlike Dr Basson, who has insisted on pretending he did nothing wrong. He has never owned up to his choices, has chosen to hide behind arguments that he, himself, surely does not believe, and flaunts his perceived impunity to the public.

**CG:** What has frustrated you about the process?

**LL:** No doubt, justice grinds slowly. The HPCSA and prior to that, the INMDC, took an exceptionally long time to pursue disciplinary proceedings against Basson, citing *sub judice* rules in ways that I thought, at times, to be an excuse for their lack of appetite to pursue the matter. Basson has exploited the very framework of constitutional rights – the right of an accused to a fair trial was not one that was enjoyed by most black South Africans under apartheid, nor by political opponents of the racist regime. That was precisely the security system that Basson sought to preserve as an apartheid soldier, yet under the democracy he fought against, he has been able to use the rights in the Constitution to delay his disciplinary hearing endlessly, through the use of expensive lawyers and repeated obfuscatory tactics.

He continues to practice. I encounter students who have been his patients. Their attitude is mostly embarrassment but nothing more substantive. Only when students at Stellenbosch University protested about Basson giving tutorials to medical students did his veneer seem to wane. He has continued to present himself as a high-minded clinician, suitable to be invited to give guest

lectures at Kelvin Grove. This reinventing of himself as just a clinician is historical revisionism of the most bilious kind.

**CG:** What have we learned from all this?

**LL:** Firstly that moral choices do matter. The fact that Basson said he was simply obeying orders is not very different from doctors simply obeying an order not to see a critically ill illegal refugee at a tertiary clinic because the superintendent said illegal immigrants cannot be seen at Groote Schuur Hospital! Or doctors who might pass on confidential information believing they have no alternative. The fact that a line was drawn by the HPCSA and Basson was found to have stepped over that line is a clear message to others – to practitioners and to students.

Secondly, the process of the hearing itself reflected a high degree of transparency and openness. It was open to the public and received considerable uncensored press coverage. For all the HPCSA shortcomings in the process, this was one element that it was committed to and which it followed through on. One of the main reasons why health professionals get involved in unethical practice is because it happens behind closed doors and is hidden from public scrutiny, often even hidden from peer review. So, transparency should be a sine qua non for ethical practice.

Thirdly, the decision to find Dr Basson guilty was finally taken by a courageous panel of peers. Making the decision was a task not easily or lightly performed. It is natural that professionals would feel uncomfortable in disciplining a colleague – I might be sitting there, were it not for the grace of a higher being. However, this sense of camaraderie often leads to a closing of ranks. It is brave to resist the professional pressure to protect your peers. But it is possible if you are committed to the ethical requirements of your profession and supported to do so by the institutions of the profession.

Fourthly, even though it took 13 years for a verdict decision to be reached, due process sends a clear message to the profession. Arguing that unprofessional actions don't matter any longer because people won't remember is recipe to have such actions recur in future. We owe it to our students and to future generations to do the right thing now, even if it is belated.

Lastly, deciding what is ethical should not depend on majority views. If morality was a popularity vote, we would indeed be in deep trouble. One need only think of medicine under the Nazi regime, deeply distorted and perverse in many aspects, where the medical profession had the highest density of Nazi party members out of all professions in wartime Germany, to realise the critical importance of having moral anchors that do not sway with public opinion.

**CG:** How do your students feel about Dr Basson and the verdict?

**LL:** Students I teach are generally disbelieving that such a clinician could exist. It is far too bizarre for most students to think it real. When they are presented with the evidence, they are generally shocked and find it difficult to process. This is particularly so for the minority who have seen him as a patient.

For students who have done a special study research module on Dr Basson, the realisation that medicine could be so perverted has been really important for them to understand how vital it is for the profession to have a moral compass, and to make human rights a central and undeniable element of professional practice.

#### Notes

- 1 Baldwin-Ragaven, L, de Gruchy J and London, L. (1999) *An Ambulance of the Wrong Colour: Health Professionals, Human Rights and Ethics in South Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press. Physicians for Human Rights and the University of Cape Town (2003) *Dual Loyalty and Human Rights in Health Professional Practice: Proposed Guidelines and Institutional Mechanisms* <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/reports/dual-loyalty-and-human-rights-2003.html?referrer=https://www.google.co.za/>
- 2 The Constitution is available at: <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng-02.pdf>
- 3 See <http://indicators.ohchr.org/>
- 4 <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/HB-E-2015-1.pdf>, <http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/30ethicsmanual/index.html> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act75/001/2009/en/>



Leslie London

Prof Leslie London is the head of Public Health Medicine at the University of Cape Town

# HOLDING THE MEDICAL PROFESSION TO ACCOUNT A TIMELINE

1991 – 1994

During the transition to democracy, many questions are posed about the future of health care services in the country, including:

- What will the new state prioritise?
- How best to integrate racially and spatially segregated health care training facilities and service delivery platforms?
- Will the same health professionals (doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, etc.) who were architects of and/or complicit with apartheid be able to commit themselves to their work after the transition?
- How will the new government acknowledge health activists, who were victimised, imprisoned or lost their lives defending principles of ethics, human rights, equity and justice in the health sector?

1995 – 1996



TRC poster courtesy of SAHHA

Calls are made for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to recognise the collusion of health professionals in apartheid abuses.

An international conference on torture and medical complicity is held in Cape Town in 1995 which highlights the role of medical professionals in human rights abuses under apartheid.

Agreement is reached that the health sector should be scrutinised by the TRC. There is an imperative to hold special public hearings so that a full picture of apartheid health and medicine might emerge.

A blanket apology by the Medical Association of South Africa (MASA) in 1995, aimed at "persons within and outside the medical profession, who might in the past have been hurt or offended by any acts of commission on its part in the past," is seen as inadequate by activists in the health sector who highlight the extent of the organisation's failures to promote medical neutrality and professional ethics.

April – May 1997

The Health and Human Rights Project (HHRP), a joint initiative of the Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture and the University of Cape Town's Department of Community Medicine hires researchers to coordinate the work of the HHRP Support Group and participate in planning TRC special hearings on the health sector.

The HHRP assembles and submits its comprehensive report and recommendations to the TRC.

June 1997



Siphwe Sibeko/elite-photoagency.com

Public hearings are held over two days in Cape Town to determine how health institutions were complicit in apartheid state violence through the provision, or withholding, of health care services.

The hearings reveal ideologies that fueled discriminatory practices, such as scientific racism and biological determinism.

Over 80 inputs are received by the TRC, with only a fraction of these put forward during the hearings.

Taken together with hearings on individual gross human rights violations, women, mandatory conscription and chemical and biological weapons, a collective picture of health sector institutional bias and systematic 'group think' emerges. There is the acknowledgement that those who resisted were routinely victimised.

1998

The HHRP compiles its findings and requests the Interim National Medical and Dental Council (INMDC) to investigate individual doctors who had been "named" through the TRC process as being complicit in human rights violations of patients, prisoners and ordinary citizens. Dr Wouter Basson is on this list, together with other medical doctors of concern.

The acting registrar never responds, although there is an initiative within the INMDC to develop guidelines for practitioners involved in chemical and biological warfare-related work. The guidelines gives credence to the distinction between work to develop measures to counter chemical and biological weapons, and weapons development. It is a fine line.

1999

The University of Cape Town Press publishes *An Ambulance of the Wrong Colour: Health Professionals, Human Rights and Ethics in South Africa*, based on the HHRP submission to the TRC. It contains a chapter on chemical and biological warfare that outlines what was known about Project Coast at the time. It draws attention to the legal and ethical requirements for doctors and scientists not to use their knowledge for harmful purposes.

The state's trial against Dr Basson begins later that year.

2000



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Given the gravity of the charges, forty doctors sign and submit a complaint to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) about Dr Basson's secret involvement in chemical and biological weapons development. They detail how Dr Basson "has brought the medical profession in South Africa into disrepute by acting unprofessionally and has compromised medical ethics through his leadership of Project Coast". It recommends an investigation into "how... [these] activities constitute improper or disgraceful conduct and grounds for disciplinary action on the part of the Council."

The Registrar of the HPCSA responds saying that since the criminal trial against Dr Basson is on-going, the complaint would be treated as *sub-judice* pending the outcome of the trial.

2001–2002

Dr Basson's trial lasts for 30 months. He is acquitted or found not guilty of all 67 charges.

2002–2006

Dr Basson practices cardiology, teaches medical students and becomes a motivational speaker.

2007–2013

Five years after the end of the criminal trial, the HPCSA initiates a disciplinary inquiry into Dr Basson's alleged unprofessional conduct.

After almost six years of hearings, including many delays, Dr Basson is found guilty on four counts of professional misconduct.

The disciplinary committee issues a very clear rebuttal of all the arguments advanced by Dr Basson in his defence, stating categorically that professional medical ethics in times of conflict are the same as in times of peace.

2014–present

Sentencing by the HPCSA is postponed after a petition to the High Court by Dr Basson's legal team challenging the fairness of the disciplinary procedures.

# PROJECT COAST BY A YOUNG SCIENTIST

Scientists function as agents for the world who convert questions into answers. They have the capacity to model innovative creations and heal and prevent disease. Their training is filled with excitement and the promise of making a difference in society.

It is however, important to recognize and acknowledge that in the name of science there have been many grave injustices. Science can create and it can also destroy. Instead of healing it can harm, and instead of preventing it can promote undesired outcomes. Science can raise more questions than answers, particularly when it is practiced with the wrong intentions. Science has the potential to be a powerful force for good in society and equally so, it can debilitate society. Every scientist should understand the power they possess and what impact they can have in society by using science.

## Intersectionality of science

Science can be subdivided into two branches; natural and social. Natural sciences include, amongst others, physics and biology, whereas the social sciences include economics and politics. Although these sciences do not seem to be linked, the natural sciences and social sciences coexist and are interwoven. Social sciences can infiltrate the natural sciences as in the case of Project Coast where a political agenda informed the kind of science that was performed.



aka RRL 2014 Courtesy Kathryn Smith CC-BY-NC-ND



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'Special Applicator' courtesy Freedom Park Archives. Photo: Alexis Fotiadis

Young scientists need to be conscious of this reality and not overlook their ethical responsibilities, as scientists, to promote other causes like political agendas. Project Coast serves as a lesson to all scientists to ensure that they practice good and responsible science and uphold their values, regardless.

A scientist's education and expertise is merely a tool that can be used to promote good or cause harm. It is the scientist's responsibility to ensure that their contributions are positive and that justice is promoted where possible. To achieve this, a scientist must question the outcomes of any project they are involved in, and the methods they will employ to execute their projects. They also have to be cautious not to bring their profession to disrepute through unethical practices, dual loyalty or a conflict of interest. They must be aware that they are answerable to their statutory councils and bodies.

Project Coast is a clear indicator of what can happen when science is used for unethical social reasons. It also shows how science misused can be deleterious and can poison generations.

## Primum noc nocere

*Primum noc nocere* is a Latin phrase meaning "first – do no harm". This is one of the most important ethical principles. It is an unequivocal ethical principle which all scientists should subscribe to. Oaths that are religiously sworn by scientists stem from this simple principle and all oath-takers are bound by it.

One of the main aims of scientists at the Project Coast front company Roodeplaat Research Laboratories was to find ways to kill people with chemical and biological agents while leaving no trace. Scientists also sought to find ways to sterilize black women without their knowledge. Intoxicated by patriotism and compelled by the dual loyalty between their duties to the government and to their profession, these scientists ignored the moral codes that they were bound by. They poisoned South Africa in ways more than just physical, instilling in the population distrust for science.

Project Coast, among other injustices from the apartheid era, has necessitated bioethics training for all science students. Bioethics is a branch of applied ethics that focuses on medicine and other natural sciences. It was only introduced to some South African medical schools in the late 1970s, and is still a relatively new school of thought, particularly in South Africa.

Interest in bioethics in South Africa was stimulated by the death of Steve Biko, who died at the hands of doctors who colluded with the police. The TRC revealed the misconduct of health professionals and scientists during apartheid and it was clear that great harm had been done in the past by scientists.

With such a history of violations it is of vital importance that South African scientists are educated about the past, the effects of the past events, and their professional duties to ensure that such violations never reoccur. Scientists need to know how to protect themselves from participating in improper science.

Project Coast has left a negative mark in the history of South African science. It is not spoken about as often as it should be, and there is an uncanny feeling that it haunts and poisons the present.

There needs to be continuous open discussion about Project Coast, to reveal what is known and make sense of the mysteries and wrongs, and to serve as a reminder of how perilous science can be. This is not so as to dwell on the past but to ensure that scientists do not participate in chemical and biological warfare in the future. Every scientist must know about Project Coast and other projects that were similar to it. We tend to focus on the grave injustices linked to science that the holocaust inflicted; yet we have our own South African past injustices and unless we engage with them fully, they will continue to poison us.



Lizeka Tandwa

Biomedical Sciences Honours (Wits), MSc (Med) Bioethics and Health Law candidate (Wits), Wits Students' Bioethics Society Past Chairperson

I was reading an interview with some of the scientists from Project Coast and it scared me. It reminded me how easy it would be to be attracted to the allure of an incredible lab. I can imagine a chemistry and biochemistry major (like me) who is hoping to eventually settle down (like me) and someone offers you what looks like a deal of a lifetime: resources to do some astounding research, by this I mean experimenting with essentially anything that tickles your fantasy, state of the art equipment, a good financial plan, low supervision, and all wrapped up in the by-line of serving the people of the country. Seems too good to be true. To a lot of people this looks like something great, so you take the job.

Third year BSc Chemistry student, Stellenbosch University, 2016

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