

Save lives - by talking about sex



**Misha
Glenny**

The Wisdom Of Whores

By Elizabeth Pisani

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Three years ago, I visited Hammanskraal, a township near Pretoria. Every 500 yards there was a funeral parlour. 'The only thriving business here is death,' observed my brother-in-law, who grew up in the township.

Everybody knows what has created this morbid society. Everyone, it would seem, except South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki, along with his ludicrous Minister of Health, who have been content to watch the grim reaper swing his scythe coated in the HIV virus through South Africa's black community.

The incidence of HIV/AIDS is higher in parts of eastern and southern Africa than anywhere else in the world. Why is that? Why is it that other, equally promiscuous parts of the world (including our own) largely avoided the epidemic that has so ravaged Kenya, Botswana and Swaziland?

The answers to these and many other questions about HIV are found in this intriguing book that has been written

with an admirable lightness of touch. Despite the subject matter, the style never appears inappropriate and by the end, the author has delivered some very profound messages about the nature of this disease. More worryingly, she details the appalling mismanagement of the global effort to overcome this shattering phenomenon.

Elisabeth Pisani was a Reuters journalist when she decided, out of the blue, to study for a master's degree in medical demography, a subject about as far away from her previous experience as imaginable. In the mid-Nineties, she was sent to Jakarta as part of a team of (non) experts whose job was basically to stop HIV spreading through Indonesia.

Pisani details her fascinating work among the prostitutes of Indonesia, both female and transgender. Through her conversations with the latter, Pisani begins to identify the epidemiological patterns of HIV which involve the complex calibration of social groups at risk, depending on their behaviour.

She explains convincingly why the type of multi-partner sexual activity prevalent among Africans, known as network sex, encourages the spread of HIV. There is frequently as much infidelity and adultery in other parts of the world, but this behaviour follows the 'string' pattern (read the book to find out what that is) which mitigates against HIV's easy spread.

What is blindingly obvious is that condoms are by far the greatest weapon in the battle against HIV (aside from the prevention of needle-sharing among intravenous drug-users). And in reality all politicians have to do around the

