

Compassion as medicine ^[1]

Submitted on 10 September 2006 - 12:51pm

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By Katty Krumhansl / Special for El Nuevo Día endi.com ^[2] He loves traffic jams. He likes being alone, without telephones or in an airplane between strangers. These are the moments when this physician, specialized in infectiology, comes up with projects, ideas or ways to face a new challenge. For his great satisfaction, life presents Javier Morales Ramirez with a good dose of challenges - and moments of calm, too. He is a renowned Puerto Rican physician, who has dedicated great part of his practice, started in the 1980's, to the study of HIV, acronym for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. For all his efforts, doctor Morales Ramirez has received numerous

merits and recognitions, the “Award Hope” being most recent, granted for the first time to a Puerto Rican by Latino Commission on AIDS. This non-profit organization, is dedicated to the improvement and expansion of investigations, treatments and services between the Latin community of the United States, which constitutes 20% of the cases of HIV reported in the nation. Son of an accountant and writer, and the youngest brother of the famous actor, writer and film director Jacobo Morales, this doctor and investigator is in addition an innate sportsman, fan of sports “that are not timed”, says emphatically, since he admits, he can’t work with that kind of pressure. “I am deeply auditory and visual and I have all the symptoms of ADD (abbreviation for Attention Deficit Disorder). I can only in one thing at a time. More than anything, I’m oppressed by schedules”. A passionate scientist, doctor Morales Ramirez began his studies aiming to define the condition and finding a treatment adapted for his patients. “Right now, the field of researching and searching treatments and a cure for HIV has become extremely interesting,” comments the physician whose first patient with symptoms of this condition arrived at his private practice in 1981. At that time, he explains, no one knew anything, only that it seemed to be something infectious, that discriminated against particular groups of the population and that it attacked the immunological system. HIV was a challenge he faced like everything in his life: fully. “I decided to subspecialize in infectiology within internal medicine, because it allowed me to work in many areas and with other specialists: surgery, pediatricians, and orthopedists, among others”. Nevertheless, Morales comments that when he began working with HIV, he was alone “because nobody wanted to be associated with those patients. He had a great private office, which failed. HIV patients began to be marginalized, other doctors requested me not to consult them on those cases, health insurance plans did not cover the treatments or medicines, and the hospitals locked the patients up them in isolated rooms that were almost always in repair”. From that, he says, “Best Option Healthcare” was born, the company that he still presides, that provides at-home medical services “covered by the main medical plans”, emphasizes doctor Morales. By means of this company, it began to offer treatments to patients who otherwise would have not received them. On the other hand, he associated with pharmacists interested in proving the medicines effectiveness diverse and to be part of the “pool” of the international scientific community. “Those affected by the virus did not have viable options until in 1996, the pharmacology evolved to the well-known “cocktail” to treat HIV. This treatment consisted of taking 25 or 26 tablets a day. Today, the dose is one tablet at night; from living two years, now the patients can live about 35 years with the condition,” also explains the member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Puerto Rico, their his alma mater. “Currently, research works with new alternatives like receptor blockers, very promising virus decoders and other treatments”. Despite all the prejudices, discriminations and scorns that doctor Morales has experimented in his career, he would not go one step back. “If I had to do it again, I would do exactly the same. Sure with more experience. I’m still motivated by new things, the challenges, sharing with the patients of whom I always learn so much. They are the ones who teach me how to see the life from another perspective and they give me humility and esteem lessons, they teach me how to value what’s inside, family and first of all, being compassionate” he adds. This evident sense of humanity is something that doctor Morales-Ramirez has since he was a boy and what indeed took to him to be interested in medicine. “We lived in Old San Juan, in a building in San Justo and Luna streets. In the second floor, was the office of doctor Timothet. Whenever I went to his office for something, I was always the last one to be seen, and while he came and went, I noticed how well he treated everybody. He knew of everything, Literature, music, it became a learning site. His culture and the sweetness with which he treated people called my attention. Later, when I was already a doctor, I met a rheumatologist, doctor Del Toro, who had the same ‘bed-side manners’ that actually makes the

difference in medicine.” An enthusiastic sailor, he explains that, paradoxically, for him, there is nothing more intense than the last two minutes before the exit of a regatta. “It is the moment of more stress, of more butterflies in the stomach. My heart accelerates so much, that there is no way to control it. The tension, the sails, the wind, the exit, that type of thing. There nothing more intense for me,” says, recalling the last times on board of his sailboat “Matojo”, named in honor to a book written by his father. Another sport that it challenges him and that he practices regularly is golf. “I thought that it was an easy game, to hit that small ball. Then no, conquering the sport has turned into an obsession. It’s something that possesses you. It has made me lie, sometimes saying that I was in a meeting when I was actually hitting the ball, sometimes well, many very bad. But, with practice, it is something that now I enjoy to fullness”, comments warmly. Between his profession, the sports, his photography hobby, vacations and work (he participates in innumerable symposiums and conferences related to the infectiology around the world) and his family, the life of doctor Javier Morales Ramirez is full of gratifications. “Where am I going? Wherever life takes me, to the end of the world. New things motivate me. I want to continue seeing patients, continue with the research that show so much promise for HIV patients and other contagious infections, to learn photography in black and white. Retirement,” he ends up saying, “is abominable!”

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