

Media release

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Filmmaker Wins International Health Award

28 October 2011 (Lille, France) – Epidemiologist and Filmmaker, Jonathan P. Smith has received an international award for his creative and moving documentary and website highlighting the plight of miners in South Africa affected by HIV and tuberculosis (TB).

Mr. Smith was awarded the Tuberculosis Survival Prize today at an awards ceremony in Lille, France. The annual award is given by the Tuberculosis Survival Project, with support from the Lilly MDR-TB Partnership.

Mr. Smith, an epidemiologist and lecturer at Yale University, began working on the video documentary – called *They Go to Die* - while conducting epidemiological research on multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) in the mining industry. With no film experience, but plenty of heart and determination, he worked two jobs to fund his trip to South Africa, where he spent several months living with four miners coinfecting with TB and HIV.

“It was only when I arrived at Mr Mkoko’s house – the first miner I stayed with – that I realized what our research had been missing. These diseases [TB and HIV] don’t just cause an increase in morbidity and mortality statistics; more importantly, they remove a life: an organic, immeasurable component of a greater interconnectedness of relationships, love and family,” said Mr. Smith.

The TB Survival Project received entries from organizations around the world. These were reviewed by a jury working in the humanitarian field, and headed by Nobel peace laureate, Betty Williams.

Ms. Williams said Mr. Smith was awarded the prize because of the inspirational effort he made to tell the miners’ story to a wider audience.

“Mr. Smith was courageous and humble to look beyond his scientific background of quantifying disease, to find the faces behind the illness. He has made a moving and inspirational account of the experiences of his friends, working in the mines, to remind us of the people behind the numbers. He reminds us that we need to continue to look at the humanity of disease to find effective solutions,” said Ms. Williams.

Paul Thorn, Project Director of the TB Survival Prize, explained that the prize was created to recognize the work of NGOs and individuals like Jonathan Smith.

“Many advocates and activists, and the role they play in the fight against TB and other diseases, often goes unrecognized. The Tuberculosis Survival Prize rewards the innovative work of these unsung heroes and heroines and makes a contribution towards those efforts,” explained Mr. Thorn.

For Jonathan Smith, the award is a welcome recognition of his efforts to get the miners’ story to the world.

“My goal is to stop the cycle on new infections and deaths from a disease that is both preventable and curable. When it comes to TB research, there’s a lot of information around. Yet the world knows very little about what it’s like to live with this disease. These men were my friends. I made this film to tell their story to the world.

"*They Go to Die* raises concerns of TB, HIV and human rights violations in South Africa's mining industry through the prism of life, love and family. Unlike traditional health films, it focuses on relationships and bonding, not simply disease. It's a film that transcends culture and paints a portrait of common humanity," explained Mr. Smith.

TB is an airborne infectious disease, which is preventable and curable. The disease can be spread when people who are ill with TB bacteria in their lungs cough and expel the bacteria into the air. If TB is detected early and fully treated, people with the disease quickly become non-infectious and eventually cured. Multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) arises from interrupted or incomplete treatment of TB, and has become a major global health threat. MDR-TB is also curable, although treatment is longer and more complex than for TB.

The Tuberculosis Survival Project was launched in 2006 to raise awareness and provide information about TB/MDR-TB. It offers a peer support service and a web-based facility for people to share their own experience of having TB/MDR-TB. The TB Survival Project also produces self-help publications for those on the TB treatment journey. For more information, visit www.tbsurvivalproject.org.

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