Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Rx for survival represents an heroic effort to raise awareness among the general public, particularly in the USA, about the toll infectious diseases and other major health problems are taking in the less developed world. The six-part series also strives to balance issues that are “journalistically tough” to cover—for example, the scourge of AIDS and river blindness in Africa—with “optimism” about potential solutions, producer Larry Klein told TLID. “We tried desperately to be journalistically sound and not overly negative, and to look at some of the projects that have great track records of working.”

In this viewer’s opinion, Klein and his colleagues succeeded admirably in their efforts to balance realism and optimism. As importantly, the series does a terrific job of educating. “We started working on these kinds of programmes 25 years ago, in an era when it looked like we were on top of our game as treatments for infectious diseases were concerned. There was a tremendous feeling of euphoria, that there was nothing we couldn’t do”, says Klein. But with the advent of AIDS, of serious antimicrobial resistance, and of complacency about the need for a real global infrastructure, “we hit a wall. We had to accept that although we had had some real successes in the developed world, these diseases were doing quite well in less developed countries.” Therefore, the concept for Rx for survival started with the question, “what happened in the past 25 years, and what can we do to bring those successes back?”

The series unfolds like a mystery, beginning with a look at “disease warriors” such as Louis Pasteur, who showed that illnesses were caused by germs. “Rise of the superbugs” chronicles the discovery of penicillin and the subsequent development of “wonder drugs”—and the pathogens that evolved to resist them. Viewers familiar with infectious diseases may appreciate the engaging way these stories are told, but are likely to find little new in the way of information in the first two parts of the series.

By contrast, “Delivering the goods” is eye-opening, highlighting novel programmes that help overcome the obstacles to providing care to populations in need. Riders for Health (figure), founded by Andrea and Barry Coleman in the UK, has helped local health departments from Ghana to Zimbabwe acquire and maintain hundreds of motorcycles to make health-care workers more mobile. Mechai Viravaidya, chairman of Thailand’s Population and Community Development Association, promoted condom use in the 1980s by persuading Buddhist monks to bless them and taxi drivers to hand them out; now, he is battling the AIDS epidemic with programmes that educate drug dealers and sex workers. Dora Akunyili, head of Nigeria’s National Agency for Food and Drug Administration, is waging war against counterfeit and adulterated medications. Under her watch, millions of dollars worth of “useless” drugs were seized and destroyed in the past few years.

“Deadly messengers” examines historical and current efforts to control the spread of vector-borne diseases, including malaria, yellow fever, and West Nile virus. “Back to basics” looks at the connection between illness and proper nutrition (including obesity, the result of an “overabun-
dance” of nutrition); and “How safe are we?” covers ebolavirus, severe acute respiratory syndrome, and avian influenza, warning of the risk of a pandemic while making the case for stronger public-health systems globally to help counteract the threat.

Although some of this makes for painful viewing, “our hidden agenda was to show that the situation is not hopeless, and that there are things we can do as individuals and nations that will make a difference”, emphasises Klein.

Therefore, the DVD is only a piece of a global health campaign that is almost daunting in scope (see panel). “We thought that by putting all our media partners together, we’d increase that awareness hit so that everything starts to take root. Public health is still a ‘hard sell’. We hope we’ve made some inroads.”

Marilynn Larkin
MLEditor@aol.com

Television
Ending AIDS: a search for a vaccine

Every December 1, on World AIDS Day, we are reminded by numerous articles and television programmes of how long scientists have been searching for a vaccine for AIDS. The latest entry, Ending AIDS: a search for a vaccine, does a credible job of chronicling the search, highlighting the main issues and controversies: early identification of AIDS as a “gay” disease, making funds hard to secure; protests by activists, which “changed the pharmaceutical industry”; the National Institute of Health’s refusal, in 1994, to fund the gp120 vaccine; Harvard’s Ron Desrosiers controversial “success” in vaccinating monkeys against simian immunodeficiency virus; Kenyan prostitutes with apparent natural immunity to HIV; launch of the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative; and the current status of some “80 trials of 30 entities” to combat the virus.

The documentary is at its best when it pulls together old news clips that really bring the history of the search to life. Less engaging are the “talking head” comments by science journalist Jon Cohen, upon whose book Shots in the dark: the wayward search for an AIDS vaccine the documentary is based.

Producer Michael Schwarz told TLID that the most difficult part of shooting the film, beyond “distilling a long and complex book into 56 minutes for a general audience”, is that the search for a vaccine remains a story without an ending. “The story you want to tell is how we searched and searched, then discovered a vaccine.” As it is, “we can look at the search as a story of repeated failures, or focus on the fact that we’ve learned a tremendous amount about the virus that we didn’t know before. That progress is the source of continuing hope for people who despite all setbacks remain convinced that a vaccine is still achievable.”

Of course, there’s the rub. Many scientists no longer believe a vaccine is possible. But those who do remain passionate. Searching for a vaccine, notes Margaret Johnston of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is like making a piece of a cathedral. It may not be achieved in one’s lifetime, but satisfaction comes from knowing that you are contributing to something “magnificent” that is going to have an impact on the world and stand as a success of mankind’s efforts. “That,” she says, “is what I feel like.”

Marilynn Larkin
MLEditor@aol.com