Philanthropy moves mountains

Philanthropy – benevolence to one’s fellows – comes in all shapes and sizes. But for sheer size and scope the world has been astounded by the world’s richest man, Bill Gates of Microsoft fame, and his wife Melinda putting much of their wealth, and their present energies, into action to alleviate the suffering of the world’s poorest people. Warren Buffett, the world’s second richest man, who made his money through shrewd long-term investments, was so inspired by their efforts that he recently announced the biggest charitable gift ever. His chief beneficiary is the Bill and Belinda Gates Foundation. This foundation will focus much of its attention on combating three major health scourges, particularly of the developing world, namely HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis.

The life of a wealthy individual comprises two parts: the first is the accumulation of wealth and the second, should be, the subsequent distribution of this wealth for benevolent causes. This was the philosophy of Andrew Carnegie, a Scotsman who made a fortune in the USA in the late 19th century, largely through the steel industry. John D Rockefeller at about the same time made his fortune mainly out of oil. When they retired both devoted the rest of their lives and their fortunes to philanthropy. Carnegie money funded the investigation into medical education in the USA by Abraham Flexner that resulted in his famous report in 1910. Flexner’s remaining career was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. His influence on the quality of medical education in the USA, the UK and Europe was immense. Both foundations, *inter alia*, still influence medical and other education through generous grants (including bursaries to students in South Africa).

Influence other than wealth can also provide huge leverage and impact. Jimmy Carter, after his Presidency of the USA, established the Carter Center in 1982 together with his wife Rosalyn. Through donations from individuals, foundations, corporations and countries, their health initiatives have been bold and effective in more than 65 countries. Their focus has been on eliminating guinea worm (dracunculiasis), river blindness (onchocerciasis) and lymphatic filariasis, and controlling trachoma (chlamydia trachomatis) and schistosomiasis. In these initiatives major pharmaceutical companies have generously provided products to combat these diseases. For example, since 1982 Merck has provided ivermectin, which is used to prevent and treat river blindness; by 2008 Pfizer will have provided 145 million doses of zithromax, used in the treatment of trachoma; and GlaxoSmithKline provides albendazole for the treatment of lymphatic filariasis.

Bill Clinton is another former President of the USA who has thrown his energies and influence into the arena of health care, especially in the field of HIV/AIDS. As a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford he was the beneficiary of another philanthropist, this time from South Africa, namely Cecil John Rhodes, who made his fortune out of diamonds and gold. Clinton has been particularly helpful in getting major pharmaceutical companies to reduce the price of their drugs used in the treatment of HIV/AIDS. On their recent visit to southern Africa, Bill and Belinda Gates and Bill Clinton demonstrated the power of combining their skills. Clinton is the great persuader and communicator while Gates provides the scientific analysis and insight.

The colossal size of some private philanthropic enterprises is small compared with governmental funding. The total of the Gates Foundation (combined with Buffett’s contributions) is about $60 billion compared with the annual budget of the Centers for Disease Control of the USA of $28 billion! Nevertheless private foundations are often more effective as they are more nimble, readily cross borders and work with other governments, foundations, NGOs and agencies such as the WHO and UNICEF. Another point emphasised by Gates and Buffett is that they are prepared to take calculated bets and willing to lose or to be proven wrong from time to time.

This edition of the *SAMJ* provides further evidence of the power of vision, perseverance and philanthropy in overcoming obstacles and achieving great things. The Red Cross Children’s Hospital celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Its funding came not from a single person with great wealth but in the form of thousands of donations from a supportive society, some modest and others large. Such philanthropy enabled the hospital to be established, and more recently probably rescued it from oblivion. Concerns that government may withdraw from its responsibilities when resources are successfully raised for a particular cause have proved unfounded, and fundraising is more likely to provide a lever for support.

The poet John Donne reminds us ‘No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a … part of the main’, and ‘any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee’. Despite many philanthropic individuals, foundations and companies, South Africa does not have the philanthropic tradition of the Americans. Such generosity should become part of our culture.

*J P de V van Niekerk*  
*Deputy Editor*