

Isolate in unison, wear your mask in unity

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In keeping with the cover theme of masks, it seems that the dreaded Corona virus (SARS-CoV-2) has made many people weary and even rebellious towards wearing protective facemasks. This brought back memories of a patient who had been treated at one of the government hospitals many years before airborne epidemics made mask-wearing in public an observable occurrence. His story will be related in the hopes that its childlike innocence will be a reminder to us all that if we unselfishly unite in our struggles against this, and any of life's adversities, we WILL all win in the end.

Fransie* was a painfully shy and frail 7-year-old boy who was born with HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) virus. He had been abandoned by his mother and lived with his granny in the village. Unfortunately due to his poor immunity and general state of health, he contracted a cancrum oris infection. It ravaged his small body "eating away" parts of his face, including his upper lip and nose. He was taken to hospital for treatment and spent the rest of his life as a "hospital orphan". Following the initial consultation, the treating dentist thought of a way that may help with the upcoming procedures as well as assist in finding Fransie a friend. He was taken back to the children's ward and told that he could have the honour of "picking his new nose". He was tasked to spend the next few days looking at the noses of his "co-inmates" and to then choose the shape of one that he would like for himself. If the chosen child agreed, then a replica of their nose would be used to fabricate his prosthesis.

The following appointment saw Fransie standing timidly at the entrance to the surgery, wearing the surgical mask that he had taken to use as a way of covering his missing nose and lip. He was clutching the hand of his new playmate, Jackson*, a young boy who had been admitted to hospital with severe burns to his limbs as a result of a shack fire. Jackson was going to be the model for Fransie's new nose. The boys were giggling nervously and whispering secrets to each other while they waited their turn. Although both boys were no older than 7 years, their long stay in hospital had made them very independent. They arrived for their appointment unaccompanied, and each carrying their own big, brown envelopes which contained all their hospital records, radiographs, and documentation.

These may well have been the only personal possessions the boys owned. They looked like little ragamuffins in their oversized, stripy green-and-white, hospital-issue pyjamas. The picture of these two little waifs, battling to hook their bulging envelopes under one arm, while trying to hold hands, and hoist up loose pyjama pants with their other arm was made even more heart-wrenching because Jackson, the new best friend, was now also wearing a surgical mask, in unity with his buddy!

The assisting dental technician Frans* was a "big man" with an even bigger heart, who was also the generous donor of sweets and chips at previous visits. The boys stood against the wall giggling, and Fransie was pointing toward his namesake as Frans entered the cubicle. They were no doubt hoping for similar treats that day. Frans had anticipated this session and true to his nature, been shopping. He was carrying two large boxes, one for each boy. It was difficult to tell who was more excited with the gifts, Frans or the boys as he handed them over. Both kiddies dropped envelopes (and PJ pants), tore open the boxes, and discovered two brand new, remote-controlled, motorcars. Even under their surgical masks, one could see the size of their grins as their eyes sparkled with delight. That appointment must have felt like an eternity to these two small boys who were clearly anxious to go play and with their new cars.

Late that afternoon, as the staff headed for their own cars, if one looked hard into the fast-fading light of the early evening you would have caught a glimpse of two little dark figures in stripy green pyjamas scrambling across the adjoining veld, and disappearing into the laundry entrance at the back of the hospital. If you looked even closer into the dry sand of the parking area where they had been playing you would have seen stretches of miniature tyre tracks, worn into the earth from the hours and hours they had spent driving their cars. The hardships of life had thrown these two little boys together, and now thanks to the generosity of one kind heart, they had formed a unique friendship. A friendship that had allowed them to drop their guard and reveal themselves to each other, imperfections and all, without fear of ridicule or rejection. How do I know this? Because, there alongside the tyre tracks lay their two crumpled up surgical face masks, no longer needed for either of them to hide behind.

If we could all empathise with one another the way these boys and their clinicians did, isolate and wear our masks in unison and unity with one another, then we most surely will all be able to face a mask-free future together. United we can and will all WIN.

*Pseudonyms

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