

## In memoriam 1977

The envelope arrived in the mail, addressed in perfect penmanship, with broad, open European handwriting. Inside was a typewritten white page, with a thick black border. My head began to swim. A lawyer's letter, from Holland:

*You have recently written to Koos and Marjanne Eekhout. We are acting on behalf of their estate. I read, not comprehending the words. I had sent Christmas greetings to the couple I'd met while working in a mission hospital in Africa five years earlier.*

*You probably have not received notification, continued the letter. I hadn't heard from them recently, but that was not unusual. The page shook in my hands.*

*They were on the plane that crashed near Tenerife, in the Canary Islands last spring, on March 27, 1977. With their two young children, age three and two.*

Oh my God. I didn't even know they'd had a second baby. She had tried so hard to get pregnant in Dzodze, Ghana and only conceived when she returned to Holland. Oh my God — they were all dead.

I couldn't believe it. Last spring? Where had I been all those months? It didn't seem possible. My face was wet.

I could barely read on: *Let us remember these wonderful people. They are gone. Only we are left. And their families.*

Koos and Marjanne were gone. Gone, after all the fire and energy they'd put into their missionary work in West Africa. He, the general practitioner, had been willing to operate by candlelight with a textbook open at the foot of the bed, performing emergency surgery he had never done before, trying to save the life of one mortal in Dzodze. She, a physiotherapist, had driven across the border into Togo to smuggle back x-ray film, so they could print what they only fleetingly saw on the fluoroscope. She had to *dash* (bribe), the border guards with Aspirins, which were a rarity there, in

order to get back into Ghana with her illegal stash of film.

They bought screening for the windows of the children's ward to keep out flies and mosquitoes that transmitted bacterial diarrhea from one dehydrated baby to another, which occurred commonly in other mission hospitals.

I recalled in the middle of one night, Koos was jarred awake by the nurse's plea of "Please, doktah, come quick." He raced up to the operating room and delicately examined the man on the table, whose umbilicus was cut out and his guts wrapped in a sandy, grey cloth. The fetish healing ritual had failed. It was Koss' job to repair the tranced-out man, and return him to life. Even Koos couldn't do it. But he certainly tried — all night long.

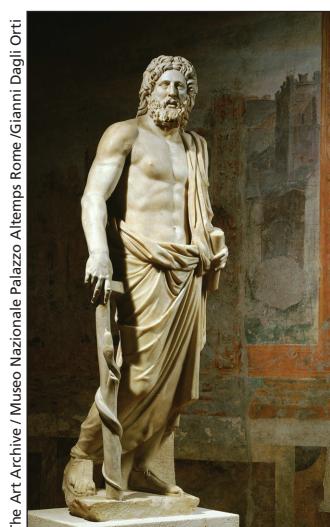
I remembered how Koos, a staunch Catholic who spoke perfect English, loved to tease and joke, and when something went wrong, he was the first to say *godverdomme* and *potverdorie* (God damn this and God damn that). I

left Dzodze one month later with full command of swear words in Dutch.

And one evening, Koos and Marjanne instructed the housekeeper, Milliecent Mercy, to prepare the local specialty of *akpleh*, and sent her to market to buy the finest goat's meat available. When she presented her creation, I got nauseous looking at it. Koos and Marjanne laughed, and he quickly whipped up something else to fill my belly.

In Dzodze, I got to experience this couple's essence and their love of the local people. And now they were gone. In a plane crash on a holiday they so deserved, with children they had dreamt about during their first two years in Africa, and continued to dream about for another two years after that, when Koos refused to leave until a suitable doctor was found to replace him. No one could replace them.

**Sharon Mae Baltman MD**  
General practitioner, psychotherapist  
Toronto, Ont.



The Art Archive / Museo Nazionale Palazzo Altieri Rome/Gianni Dagli Orti

**More humanities at [www.cmaj.ca](http://www.cmaj.ca)**

**Life in a wheelchair:** A review of *7 Wheelchairs: A Life Beyond Polio* (University of Iowa Press; 2008) makes particular note of author Gary Presley's remarkable candour as he describes his reaction to his polio diagnosis at the age of 17 and his subsequent life in a wheelchair for the next 50 years. — Shane Neilson MD, Guelph, Ont.

**Aesculapius:** This Classics-inspired poem explores the origins — and dramatic life — of the god of medicine and healing in ancient Greek religion. — Jack Coulehan MD, Setauket, NY

**HPV controversy:** *The HPV Vaccine Controversy: Sex, Cancer, God, and Politics* (Praeger Publishers; 2008) provides a balanced approach to the hot debate. — Joseph E. Balog MD, Brockport, NY

**cmaj.ca**