African Medical Adventure

By ACSH Staff — February 26, 2002

In the industrialized, modern world we've come to take a certain minimum level of public health so much for granted that it's easy to forget how much the history of the world has been shaped by disease. Two recently published books are reminders this precept: Jared Diamond's aptly titled book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* describes how Europe's success in conquering other cultures often hinged on whether those other cultures were highly susceptible to the germs Europeans brought with them (as in the Americas) or whether the Europeans were highly susceptible to the other cultures' diseases (as was, for a long time, the case in Africa).

Pagan Kennedy's fascinating new book *Black Livingstone: A True Tale of Adventure in the Nineteenth-Century Congo* contains a brief reminder of this theme as well. The book tells the true story of American missionary William Henry Sheppard, who in the 1890s became the first black missionary from the Presbyterian Church to the infamous Belgian Congo. The slave-labor conditions created there by the Belgians horrified Sheppard and horrified Joseph Conrad, who was inspired to write the novella *Heart of Darkness*. In her book, Kennedy notes that Sheppard put more emphasis on helping the locals with food and medicine and less emphasis on preaching as time went on.

Sheppard's partner Sam Lapsley was eventually killed by malaria, as countless millions have been in Africa. Though the book does not touch on the twentieth-century history of that disease, we know that the most effective way to prevent malaria deaths was, and still is, the use of DDT to kill the mosquitoes that carry it. That chemical has thus been one of the greatest life-saving innovations in all of human history. But it fell victim to the good-or-evil, all-or-nothing tendency in human thought: Since DDT was, for a time, believed to cause dangerous eggshell-thinning in bird populations, it was banned, to the great detriment of Africans. Further research has shown that the earlier conclusions about eggshell-thinning were in error, but even if they were true, we might do well to remind ourselves that few things in this world are all good or all bad. A chemical can harm animals while doing so much good for human populations that it's worth the trade-off. Rather than demonizing the chemical, we'd do well to find ways to maximize its benefits while minimizing any harm it might do.

In a world still shaped (though perhaps in subtler ways than in centuries past) by devastating plagues and the search for remedies, perhaps cultures should take more pride in clearly-beneficial accomplishments such as modern medicine while admitting their terrible faults in other areas, such as military conquest and racism. *Should Western civilization influence the rest of the globe?* That's not something you can intelligently answer with a yes or a no. The smart answer, though it opens a host of new questions, is: *Only in good ways.*