

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2003. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

### **Media Bites: An appeal for humanity**

Journalists, by nature and by training, are relentlessly curious. We become so used to asking questions in our professional lives that this often spills over into our personal and social relationships.

When Tekeste Gebreselassie, a handsome young doctor from Ethiopia, first visited our home about this time last year, my usual approach would have been to bombard him with questions, to elucidate his story.

For once, I held my tongue. It was clear that mention of anything relating to his past or family was intensely painful for Tekeste. His distress, when conversation inadvertently triggered memories of home, was heartbreaking to watch.

Anyway, you didn't need to ask many questions to realise that Tekeste was a gentle, sincere and intelligent person, who deserved much better treatment than he was getting.

Later, we learnt a little more of Tekeste's story from the following email.

"My parents are originally from Eritrea (a former colony of Italy, which was snatched later to become one of the provinces of Ethiopia and spent thirty years of struggle for its independence, achieved in 1993). But I am grown up and went to school (including my medical training) in Ethiopia.

"I enjoyed working as a general practitioner for the Ethiopian Government for three years. I liked to spend time in the operation rooms and I have performed a fair numbers of successful operations which make me feel good to remember them now. I had a plan to end up being a surgeon or a gynaecologist.

"In 1998 the two countries went into war again which claimed 100,000 of lives from both sides (because Eritrean independence left Ethiopia land

locked). I was drafted to the Ethiopian army as an army doctor and I had to leave the country.

“As consequence of this war, I have lost my career, my friends and contact with my family. I had a great respect to the human population as part of my medical training, but I have lost it drastically after the war. It is very hard for me to believe how the human population could be so cruel on their fellow human beings.”

When Tekeste sent that note, he had lost all hope. His case to be accepted by Australia as a refugee had failed - because he had such trouble telling his story, his solicitor said - and he was certain he would be killed if returned to Ethiopia.

For most of the last 15 months, Tekeste has lived in a Sydney refuge and survived on charity after being forced, by Government rules, to give up a hospital job when his appeal was lost.

His last hope, though slight, was for Minister Philip Ruddock to make a special dispensation to allow him to stay.

On February 7, the long-awaited letter arrived. Tekeste is now a permanent resident of Australia, and his dream is to resume his medical career here.

Many representations were made on his behalf. Special thanks to Professor Peter Baume, Professor Stephen Leeder, Associate Professor Merrilyn Walton, Dr Peter Macdonald, the Fred Hollows Foundation and NSW Health Minister Craig Knowles. Our local MP, Bruce Baird, and his wife Judy also put in a huge effort.

In such troubled times, it's a relief to have a good news story for a change. Shame about all the other poor sods with war-torn lives.