

## Can the mugariga plant actually cure disease?

Tanzanian pastor Ambilikile Mwasapila knows what it is like to be besieged by the desperately ill seeking help. The sick clamor for a cup of the magical potion he brews from the “mugariga” plant (*Carissa Spinarum*.) Mwasapila, known to his followers as “Babu (old man)”, claims that his potion cures all diseases, including AIDS, cancer, and diabetes. How does a pastor with no scientific education come to make such a claim?

It seems he got advice directly from God in a dream! That apparently is convincing enough for the desperate. They come in droves to the remote village of Samunge where Mwasapila administers his cure, which he says only works when given by him personally. Furthermore, if someone jumps the queue while waiting for the magical cup of herbal brew, it won't work. And there certainly is a queue! At one time in March of 2011 the lineup of vehicles carrying some 24,000 patients stretched for fifty-five kilometers. That many people waiting for treatment would be unusual even in Quebec. But driving over hundreds of kilometers of poor roads and waiting for days without access to clean water, toilets or shelter is apparently no deterrent when it comes to the allure of a cure-all. Unfortunately over a hundred people waiting for that cure never managed to make it to the front of the line. They died. Mostly they were seriously ill, taken out of hospitals by relatives who believed that they were more likely to be cured by the pastor than by doctors.

At one point Mwasapila appealed to the authorities to stop the traffic for a week so he could clear up the log jam. “This is a pathetic situation,” he complained, “and something should be done to stem the crisis.” He was right. It was a pathetic situation. But not because of the traffic jam. It was pathetic because sick people were being misled. And in some cases, it cost them their lives. Documented reports attest to AIDS patients refusing to take their anti-viral drugs after being told by Babu that they had been healed of the disease. So people die waiting for treatment, people die because they think they have been cured by the treatment, and people pay outrageous amounts for transportation to Samunge. Not a pretty picture.

But is it possible that it's all countered by this lowly humble pastor having actually stumbled on a remedy that works? Herbal extracts can certainly have physiological effects. However, the claim that diseases can be cured by one single administration of an oral remedy immediately puts it into the implausible category. Medications just don't work like that. And of course different diseases with different causes are unlikely to be cured by the same remedy. But desperate people will do desperate things.