

Pictures bring home the hard truth about TB

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Photographer Damien Schumann caught shoppers at Tyger Valley Centre off guard with his hard hitting images of TB patients at his exhibition which opened on Tuesday March 3.

A world-renowned photographer, Mr Schumann, 27, matriculated at Rondebosch High School in 1999. He has travelled the Middle East and Asia where he developed his self-taught photography over three years. Then he won a scholarship to study professional photography at the Ruth Prowse School of Art in Woodstock.

Mr Schumann's work focuses on social issues and he has hosted a number of exhibitions in Khayelitsha and Nyanga which have been used for education and awareness purposes.

He has been involved in TB awareness since late 2005, but "I started this project in November last year," he said.

As a photographer he has faced a lot of red tape to gain access to hospitals.

"As a humanitarian I'd say trying to get people to make the small changes to lifestyle is necessary to improve infection control and hence prevent the spread of TB – a challenge it looks like we are slowly winning," he said.

Mr Schuman's goal is to use his work in the most pro-active ways possible to resolve the challenges which are confronting the given subject.

"I work on what I call my 'AREA' of work – Advocacy, Research, Education and Awareness.



■ One of the photographs shot by Damien Schumann to highlight the plight of those suffering from MDR TB. This image depicts a family in Katlehong, Gauteng. They are watching a video on TB supplied by the Red Cross.

"Being able to see my work assist in change rather than just being a document of an event or condition, not only places far more purpose on the work but it drives me to innovate and see how I can best encapsulate an audience to think about what really surrounds their daily lives," he told Tygertalk.

For Mr Schuman, it's the same in most projects. He often builds intimate relationships with the people he works with and it becomes hard to draw the line as to where

work ends and human instinct takes over.

"Especially when working with the sick or people in desperate situations it is easy to crack and emotionally break down. But if this happens it is pointless for you to be there in the first place, so one has to learn to balance being compassionate to those you work with while being strong enough to leave the intimate and often sad space in your original composure," he said.

TB is an air-borne disease and

the basic preventive measures are very simple to follow. "Be a hero – open a window," he said, because TB bacteria die very quickly on contact with fresh air.

He stressed that everyone must play their part because they are not only saving their own lives but the lives of those around them.

Explaining the subject matter of his latest exhibition, he said MDR-TB is TB that has mutated and is now immune to some treatment so it takes much longer to cure – two

years compared to six months for normal TB.

"There are a number of issues that can cause TB to mutate, but in one's personal power you can prevent MDR from developing but ensuring that if you start TB treatment you complete it," he said.

Mr Schumann's previous work around documenting diseases like TB and Aids has resulted in him being invited to world conferences hosted by the World Health Organisation and UNAids, where he made some presentations on the diseases.

To him the role of art is to be an interface into the personal and emotional lives of people surrounded by the disease.

One of his pictures included in the exhibition at Tyger Valley Centre, reflects a visit to a family in Katlehong, Gauteng last year.

In the picture, the family are watching a video on TB, supplied by the Red Cross.

"There is a long history of TB in the household and yet still none of them knows what causes TB, hence the Red Cross is showing the video. One member has now been diagnosed with MDR after having normal TB before.

"The room is very congested with no windows, making it very hot, moist and stuffy – perfect conditions for TB to spread.

"On this visit, the MDR patient was given her treatment and the other members in the household were persuaded to be tested for MDR-TB," Mr Schumann said.

The photographs at the Tyger Valley exhibition, were commissioned by the Lilly MDR-TB Partnership.