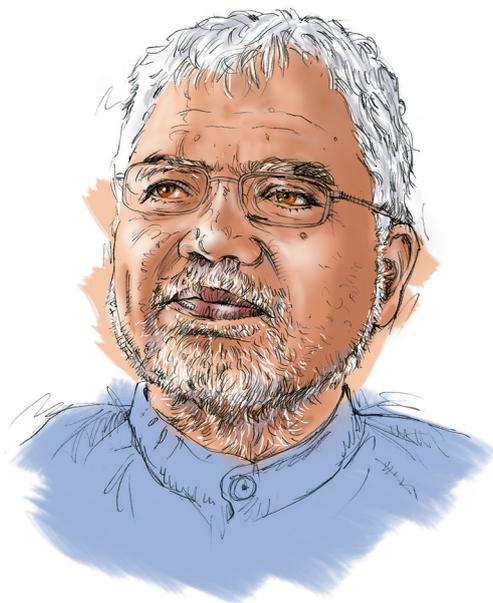




OBSERVATIONS

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Mukesh Kapila: The international humanitarian



[Image: Duncan Smith]

Biography

Mukesh Kapila, 64, is professor of global health and humanitarian affairs at the University of Manchester. He qualified in medicine and public health, working for the NHS in Oxford, Cambridge, and London before being drawn into international humanitarian affairs. As a British government official in the 1990s he dealt with the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Serving as the head of the United Nations in Sudan in 2003-04 he witnessed mass crimes against humanity in Darfur. His strong protests led to his expulsion and to writing *Against a Tide of Evil*, a book documenting what was then confirmed by the International Criminal Court as genocide. "We can argue the words, but that would be no consolation to those people who were affected," he says. He has served as a member or an adviser to many international bodies and was appointed a CBE in 2003.

What was your earliest ambition?

To be an actor. Hankering for that helped me navigate through a life that has witnessed, in equal measure, so much tragedy and absurdity.

What do you regret most in your career?

Not giving Slobodan Milosevic (Serbian president who died in the Hague during his trial for war crimes and genocide) a robust piece of my mind when I met him in Belgrade during the height of the war.

What is your pet hate?

Cowardice mixed with hypocrisy.

What is the worst job you have done?

Standing at the edge of the Kagera river and counting the number of dead bodies washing into Lake Victoria—around 100 an hour, hour after hour—and inputting the data into epidemiological modelling to estimate mortality from the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

Do doctors get paid enough?

Yes. Even somewhat too much at the higher grades.

What unheralded change has made the most difference in your field?

Cash, including electronic cash, instead of laborious and expensive in-kind relief provision of food etc, to people in humanitarian crises such as disasters and wars. I saw how the Turkish Red Crescent uses cash to bring hope and help to Syrian refugees and the dignity that this reignites when people are enabled to make their own choices.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

For a properly guilty pleasure the ratio of guilt to pleasure should be at least 2:1. My guilty pleasure is New York cheesecake. I'm a diabetic, which fosters the primary guilt, and then injecting an extra bolus of insulin reinforces the guilt. This happens twice a year only. For the rest of the year I just look at cheesecake and feel guilty.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To work for a world where no people with diabetes die just because they can't afford insulin. Currently, tens of thousands do so around the world.

Where are or when were you happiest?

Floating down the Zambezi river in a country boat with a bottle of cold beer, smug that the crocodiles whose eyes glistened in the darkness couldn't get me—but with just a slight frisson that they might jump up . . .

How is your work-life balance?

There is none. I felt mightily liberated when I gave up on this, knowing it to be a hopeless struggle. I then began to enjoy life and work, both in extremes. The secret to a good, unbalanced life is to be prepared for the consequences of your choices—and to grin and bear them.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

I'd probably replicate my last supper in Sudan, hosted by the French ambassador, on my expulsion in 2004 as the head of the United Nations there for having the temerity to speak up against the Darfur genocide—the most seminal experience of my life. Velouté d'épinards (with William Fevre Chablis 2002), eventail de volaille aux champignons (with Domaine les Salices Syrah 1998), and crème caramel (with Monbazillac 1996).

What television programmes do you like?

Historical dramas—preferably inaccurate ones. That way one can appreciate history as it should have been.

What was your best career move?

Giving up clinical medicine (I didn't like the sight of blood), to get into global public health and then international humanitarian work.

What new technology or development are you most looking forward to?

Oral insulin, for personal reasons. So far I've injected myself some 36 000 times (as well as at least 50 000 pricks for measuring glucose), and it's very tedious.

How do you keep fit and healthy?

I walk when I can—difficult, in the smog ridden cities I visit in my extensive travels. Also, fitful visits to the gym whenever I stay in a hotel, which is about 10 days a month. I manage perhaps 4000 steps a day on average, far short of the recommended 10 000.

What single change would you like to see made to the NHS?

Value clinical medical and health skills more, and put them back in charge of running the NHS.

What would you say to your former student self?

"Why do you work too hard?" It probably made little difference to how my life evolved. Imagine where I could be now if I'd practised more sloth.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

To the girls and women who endured the siege of Sarajevo during the 1992-95 Bosnian war. I'm sorry that it took us too long to recognise that women stranded up in high floor, sniper

plagued apartments were cutting up their precious clothes for menstrual hygiene purposes. Sanitary products should be an essential part of humanitarian relief provision.

What do you usually wear to work?

The first things I find in the morning: usually an ill assorted match of shirt, tie, jacket, and trousers. I'm well known for being the worst dressed person in town. But I also have a special category of clothes that I reluctantly wear when calling on government leaders or ambassadors, which I do a lot in my job.

Which living doctor do you most admire, and why?

Tom Catena, a US physician who has practised for the past decade in the remote Nuba Mountains of Sudan (see <https://www.bmj.com/content/346/bmj.f759>). He's the most stubborn man I know, and it was an honour to visit him and witness his extraordinary courage in the face of terrible genocidal violence. He was awarded the 2017 Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity.

What book should every doctor read?

Burmese Days (1934) by George Orwell. As a child in India I read about the British colonial administrator who lived somewhere up the Irrawaddy river. He received his bundled-up copies of the *Times* three months late by boat. Instead of reading the latest issue first, as a lesser mortal would have done, our indomitable bastion of the empire read his newspapers (after getting them ironed, of course) in strict order, starting with the oldest. Thus he was systematically informed—three months late, but at least consistently late. I resolved then and there that I must come to the UK to benefit from the unique education that produced such characters.

Summarise your personality in three words

Constantly tries, often fails. (Four words, sorry.)

Is the thought of retirement a dream or a nightmare?

Definitely a nightmare. I'd like to continue to challenge myself and those around me for as long as they can tolerate me, and preferably beyond.

If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?

I'd write another book (published posthumously) saying everything I couldn't in earlier books because of the Official Secrets Act, contractual obligations, personal sensitivities, etc.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like at your funeral?

"Man's inhumanity to man," in the 1784 Robert Burns poem *Man Was Made to Mourn: a Dirge*. I'd like people to mourn properly by being thoroughly depressed when I go.