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Pictures on shack walls tell grim tale of disease

By David Curry

In the middle of Parliament House, one of the grandest of Australian public buildings, is a shack that could have come straight from a Cape Town slum, on display until Wednesday to promote an understanding of the scourge of tuberculosis in many countries.

The shack was the idea of 26 year old South African freelance photographer, Damien Schumann, who wanted to draw attention to a disease that kills two million people a year. Schumann built the shack from materials and furniture found in the slums, based on his own experience as a photographer there.

“The only difference [with this shack] is it’s a bit bigger for the traffic we get here,” he said.

He said that since many shacks had no windows and as many as 10 people might sleep in a single room, tuberculosis was easily spread.

The shack is filled with Schumann’s pictures of Africans suffering with HIV and TB and their stories, in an exhibition called *Dialogues – Understanding Tuberculosis*. He hoped that rather than being depressed by the pictures, people were motivated to help.

“This is about getting people, to feel the problem and empathise – but not to make them feel sad, to make them do something. TB is curable. It’s preventable.’

National Manager of advocacy organization RESULTS Australia Maree Nutt said the spread of HIV in developing countries was contributing to a surge in tuberculosis.

“One in three people carry TB dormant in their system. When you have HIV, and your immune system is depressed, the TB becomes active. So when you’ve got an HIV pandemic, you’ll also have a TB pandemic,’ she said. Ms Nutt said she hoped people left the exhibition inspired to advocate for continued financial support from the Australian Government in the fight against HIV and tuberculosis. She praised the Government for its continued contributions to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, but said it could do more.

Earlier in the week, Labor MP Bob McMullan said Australian contributions to the fund had helped save the lives of more than two million people. Since its establishment six years ago, the fund have provided 1.4 million people with anti-retroviral treatments for HIV and treated 3.3 million people for tuberculosis, Mr McMullan aid multidrug resistant strains of tuberculosis were emerging in Papua New Guinea, while East Timor, Cambodia and Kiribati had some of the highest infection rates in the world.