

a documentary by

VINCENT DETOURS & DOMINIQUE HENRY

DEMAIN J'IRAI MIEUX

Axelle, Hugo, Kareem and Victor have a cancer. They stand up to the ordeals of the treatment with the help of their loving parents and of the medical team that is as warm-hearted as it is professional. Their struggle takes us into the world of advanced medicine, rough and sophisticated at the same time, which perform miracles but cannot accomplish everything. During a period of over 18 months, **I'll get better tomorrow** follows the course of the treatment, from the diagnosis to how the treatments affect the various aspects of human experience: the functioning of the body, death, revolt, tenderness and the exuberant spontaneity of children...

In this compact and highly informative documentary, Vincent Detours and Dominique Henry avoid the pitfalls of cheap sentiment, allowing the situations to speak for themselves

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TOMORROW THEY'LL FEEL BETTER

I'll get better tomorrow goes straight to the heart of the viewer. But even though the viewer is deeply affected, the film's bits of humour also raise a sense of hope, like little stars twinkling in the darkest of nights.



It was a hazardous exercise...

Following young cancer patients and their next of kin closely for nearly two years without becoming pathetic or sentimental is quite a challenge. And yet, **Vincent Detours** and **Dominique Henry**, who have been making audio and film documentaries together for years, have succeeded in avoiding all obstacles. It takes a lot of sensitivity to plunge television viewers into a reality as cruel as this without upsetting them, and especially, without intruding on the filmed persons' intimacy.

I'll get better tomorrow, which was mainly shot at the Brussels Queen Fabiola Child Hospital's cancer ward, opens with a close up of two eyes wide open. Blue eyes. As blue as the shawl little Axelle has wrapped around her bald head. The girl is going through a chemotherapy. She is given injections and moans in silence. Then we see a tear rolling down her cheek. Pain? No, fear. And nausea.

Then we are introduced to Victor, who has a tumour in the little brain. No one knows whether he will ever get better. Here, it is his mother who is shedding tears.

Kareem, the baby, also sobs when they perform a blood extraction. But once the ordeal is over, he claps his hands and joins the nurses' applause. He has a suspicious lump in the brain.

So has Hugo. His mother breaks down: "For a woman it is tough, but for a mother, it is even tougher. You have to be strong, you cannot let your shoulders droop, you will not get a moment's peace. Ever since I became a mother, I have not had a moment's peace."

This documentary's subject matter is tough, very tough indeed. But the protagonists' sense of humour makes it uplifting. Upon being advised to take her child to Paris for a special treatment, Hugo's young mother yells: «From now on, I shall hate all the most beautiful cities in the world! And what's next? New York?»

Hope

One may be tempted to describe this documentary as some sort of anti-*Grey's Anatomy*, or even as an anti-*Urgences*: with its unpolished, sometimes even downright rough tone, this film has nothing of the glamour of the "medical drama". On the other hand, however, it would be wrong to claim that there is no resemblance, even though it would feel inappropriate to talk about "casting", or of "situations" or of "dialogue", and yet...

Nevertheless, the "characters" are extraordinary. Both the parents and the children are incredibly courageous, and doctor Eric Sariban – who is straightforward and tender at the same time – has the charisma of a fictional hero. The dialogue is often delightful and funny (The mother, for instance, when she is talking about her relationship with her little boy: «Nowadays we are very close to each other» - and the child: «Yes, especially me!»), and the camera keeps close to the characters and shows them in all details, yet remains discrete. They could easily have recorded the exchange of distress signals between the parents and the children in close ups, and have these scenes commented by a shaky off-screen voice, to make it all look even sadder, but the filmmakers preferred to let things speak for themselves and to keep a low profile during the shooting.

Some situations and scenes are incredibly sad. Others express hope, even joy. Like the last scene, for instance, in which Axelle, who is now wearing a bandage, explains that in spite of everything, she still does gym, cycling and dancing... and in which doctor Sariban, as if he wanted to compete with her, declares: "And now I'll finish my consultations! I want to complete my sandcastle!" Very touching indeed.



ERIC SARIBAN, A MAN IN ONE PIECE

The head of department of the cancer ward of the Queen Fabiola University Child Hospital looks like a character from a novel. A rebellious doctor, humane and with a strong sense of humour. He is the thread of **I'll get better tomorrow**.

Straight in front of his office – a small office (“this is, after all, a public hospital”) – hangs a children’s drawing. A house, a tree, a sun, birds, and a boy, the cap pulled deep over his head. The caption: *Wearing a cap makes them clap!* Professor Eric Sariban, co-director of the hospital’s paediatric oncology department, explains: «He is wearing a cap because he is bald as a result of the chemotherapy.» The little painting is also an item in a book that was published on the doctor’s initiative by Robert Laffond in 2004, called *Demain J’irai Mieux (I’ll get better tomorrow)*. A collective work consisting of drawings and writings by young patients. “Spoken books” printed on paper at the hospital’s print-shop: «I think we had to do something with them. They really are one of the hospital’s finest treasures!». Documentary filmmakers **Vincent Detours** and **Dominique Henry** had previously made a film about photographer Gaël Turine, who had worked on this book. That is how they met cancer specialist Sariban.

The documentary film would be entitled **I’ll get better tomorrow**. A film that follows the day-to-day life at “Section 67 - Oncology” during more than 18 months, with doctor Sariban as a guide, an anchor man: it is he who announces the bad news, who spreads good news, who attends and escorts, reassures, screws up courage. «The doctors here did not like the intrusion of a camera into their professional practice. I myself had no problem with it at all. It was inevitable that the filmmakers would follow me. I have nothing to hide and I have always thought that everybody should have the right to take a look at what happens at a hospital that is, after all, financed with tax payer’s money.» The book, the film - «A young doctor would never do such things, for lack of experience. It is exactly the younger doctors who feel the least comfortable when there is a camera around... But then I realize that I would not have liked it either if someone had been filming the mistakes I made when I was learning the job, or that the stupidities I said to the parents would have been recorded. Today, however, I am at a stage in which, I think, it is normal that you want to share your experience with others».

When the day is over...

I'll get better tomorrow depicts a doctor who has a twinkle in the eye, who is athletic, who is fond of a good laugh and who is resolutely positive, even though his task is heavy at times, for instance when he has to escort a child to the other side... «People often say: 'I would not want to do your job!' But I myself, I think: 'I would not want to do yours either...'» He is not haunted by the pain he often inflicts or the human dramas he often has to witness. Once he has closed the door behind him, the day is over. «It would haunt us if we knew we had not done everything we could or had to do, or if we had handled things clumsily... that would really be undermining. Dealing with cancer is not that difficult. But dealing with external circumstances imposed on us, that is difficult.» Facing the shortage of nurses, for instance, or having to announce the tragic diagnoses to parents somewhere in a corridor, because there are no appropriate rooms to do it in private, or the hospital cutting down the number of beds because the management is afraid not to be up to health care quality standards... «I am not afraid to stick my neck out in these matters.» Eric Sariban is a rebel. In 2001, he was suspended by the hospital's medical council after he had made some crass remarks about the hospital's financing, but he was rehabilitated after a decision of the Council of State. «It is simply intolerable that a country such as ours should spend so little money on a disease which is, along with traffic accidents, the main cause of child mortality.»

Off-screen accomplices

Straightforward – that is how Sariban also is with his patients. He calls a spade a spade, in plain language. «If people ask for information, I give them proper and correct information. That is often much of a shock to the families, but it is the only way to create a climate of mutual trust. They know we have said everything, that we are keeping nothing from them.»

With children, however, he is more lenient. «You have to be much more lenient with an adolescent than with a young child. Five year old children accept a lot of things and are, so to speak, 'easier to handle'. The bigger children, however, are much more anticipating. If not of death, they are at least aware how tough the treatment is going to be and that it will have an impact on their physical constitution... A six year-old boy goes to school bald headed. No problem. At worst, he puts on a shawl or a cap and that is fine with him!»

As he closes the door of his office behind him to go to the university (he teaches at the polytechnics faculty, the pharmacy and medicine faculties), Eric Sariban points at a poster on the wall of a stout female punk with tattoos all over her bottom: singer Beth Ditto. «You asked me how I manage this job, what I do to forget about my work? Well, by going to concerts with groups such as Gossip, for one thing!» And he starts talking about concerts he would like to attend in the company of the makers of **I'll get better tomorrow**, as off-screen accomplices. You see, you can be an oncologist and still be a rock-'n-roller...

A DIRECTOR'S TWOSOME

With *I'll get better tomorrow*, Vincent Detours and Dominique Henry fall in with the medical film genre. The intentions behind the story? Inform, break taboos and pay tribute to extraordinary people.

They made six documentary films and two radio documentaries together. They are convinced that one person can never produce the world's best ideas all by himself. And that we abandon poor ideas in the confrontation with the other. These two Belgians by adoption both received a solid scientific education. **Vincent Detours** is a doctor in biology and is currently professor and researcher bio-informatics and oncology at the Brussels University (ULB). **Dominique Henry** also studied biology and went on to learn how to handle a camera at the Brussels film school INSAS. After making scientific documentaries, the twosome gradually widened the scope, making films that no longer had anything to do with their scientific discipline, such as *Mains d'œuvre* (2007), a film about the precarious working conditions of labourers in India. With *I'll get better tomorrow* they fall in with medical filmmaking again.

How do you prevent a film about such a delicate subject as children's cancer from becoming a tearjerker? What do you have to do to avoid pathos?

Vincent Detours : Doctor Sariban himself avoids any pathos when he talks to his patients. I also think that the film is highly instructive: it shows various aspects of the treatment, from various perspectives and points of view – the parents', the children's and the medical team's. We are not interested in pathos. Some filmmakers are fascinated by pain and suffering and even make it three times worse, proving they suffer from a lack of confidence in the spectator. It means that you think a viewer will be unable to catch the meaning or intensity of a situation all by himself. But that is unnecessary. In our film, nothing has to be added to what is on screen: the situations speak for themselves.

How was the shooting at the hospital?

Dominique Henry : They took a very long time: from October 2006 until March 2008. Of course, without doctor Sariban opening the doors of his department, we would not

have been able to make this film. In the beginning, there was an amount of reticence from the part of the medical team, but that was gone a couple of weeks later. That reticence was, of course, completely justified: after all, we were filming them doing their daily work in difficult circumstances. But gradually, confidence grew as the shooting continued. The same thing happened with the parents. When they realized we did not just quickly drop in to make a couple of snap shots, they opened up. We had many conversations with them, and with the medical team and established good relations with both parties. We went to visit them nearly every day. But from the moment I turned on the camera, they agreed that I no longer existed.

What message do you want to convey with this film?

Vincent Detours : More than one, actually. But even more than the message, our primary concern was to inform the viewer. We want people to have an idea of what happens when a child is confronted with a serious disease. We want them to understand what it means for the child, for their family, the doctors and nurses. We also want to show how cancer is treated, showing various kinds of treatment: radiotherapy, chemotherapy... And afterwards, everyone can decide on his own lecture of the film.

I think it is a difficult film, but it is also uplifting and it gives new strength. The film confronts you with real problems, helping you to put your own problems into perspective...

Dominique Henry : Another thing is that there is a general fear of serious diseases among the general public. There are many taboos, and this film is to break some of these. Many parents notice that people turn away from them once they have told them their child has cancer, because they do not wish to be confronted with it, or because they do not know how to handle that situation.

Vincent Detours : And finally, we wish to pay tribute to the medical staff. We have really been deeply impressed by them. We have met people who are emotionally involved and yet manage to remain professional.

AXELLE, HUGO, KAREEM & VICTOR



10 year-old **Axelle** has been affected by a medulloblastoma (a brain tumour). She was operated at the Erasmus Hospital and is now going through 8 chemo treatments. The more the treatment progresses, the more she becomes impatient. She knows everything about her illness. She is fed up with the injections, the endless treatment, the chemo which does not allow her to move, the medical examinations, the painful meals, the vomiting, being awoken in the middle of the night to take her temperature. For two, three minutes, she cries in her parents' arms. Then she laughs again. Her large blue eyes light the entire room.

5 year-old **Hugo** also has a medulloblastoma. His treatment was completed in November 2006, but he relapsed in March 2007. He is in for a new, more powerful chemotherapy and will have to go to Paris, where he will have to stay in an isolated room for three months. This treatment is highly toxic and could be life-threatening. Hugo says: «I do not know anything about my illness» but as a five year-old child, he has fully understood that he has to take his medications punctually and without any protest. The faint smile in the corners of his mouth, his joy of living and his constant desire “to play” soften the harsh lines of his room.

15 months-old **Kareem** has a glioma on the optic nerve. The tumour on the crossing of his optic nerve has made him blind. He will be able to see again after completing a powerful three day chemotherapy. The nurses are all enthralled by his huge black eyelashes. Before giving him an injection they have little finger puppets sing «Viens ma belle, viens ma gazelle» to him. When it is all over, he gives them a thunderous applause.

10 year-old **Victor** has a medulloblastoma. His treatment began with a radiotherapy followed by a chemotherapy that was, like Axelle's, to last for 14 to 16 months. Victor likes to come to the hospital because he is well taken care of there. His illness has tightened the bonds between him and his brother Stanley and his parents. «I used to sit quietly by myself in the corner”, he says, “but now we are together much more often. I feel much closer.» Victor likes to watch when the nurses administer the chemo injection. He does not give a wink and gives the nurses a big smile. The nurses do not always come to his room to treat him. Sometimes they just drop in for a chat and to laugh at his inexhaustible supply of jokes.

FILMMAKERS' POINT OF VIEW

Cancer is a natural biological force. Children's spontaneity is another, and it is amazing how strong it manifests itself. Sick children are, before anything else, children. That is what makes *I'll get better tomorrow* for us such an uplifting film.

I'll get better tomorrow is the result of a time-consuming work process: 270 hours of footage shot over a period of more than 18 months at the Queen Fabiola Child Hospital in Brussels. In the flow of the day-to-day life of the oncology department, the camera has truthfully recorded the –sometimes trivial, sometimes decisive – moments that determine the rhythm of the cancer treatment.

The story of four children reveals a blind and, to be honest, also fascinating biological force: the tumour. Its impact on people's anatomy becomes clear when the doctors discuss the technical feasibility of open brain surgery. Its growth is clearly visible on the images of the sound scans. The film goes straight into the heart of the treatment: surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The medical team thoroughly debate the hopes the treatment will raise among the young patients and the risks it will bear for their future, and they discuss them with the parents in very revealing but emotionally highly charged sequences. We accompany Hugo and his mother on their way to Paris, where he, after having relapsed, will have to undergo a very severe chemotherapy in an isolated, sterile room. We understand why Axelle has grown fed up with the months-long treatment. Victor amazes us by the way he stands up to the ordeal without losing his nerve. And even though the technological tours de force and present day medicine's thorough knowledge of the human body are given exposure in the film, their limitations are unequivocally revealed in the case of little Kareem, for whom all practicable therapeutic options ultimately failed.

From the surgeon's detached precision to the devoted attentions of a nurse who does her utmost to administer the injections as painlessly as possible, the medical gesture sums up the paradoxical beauty of the profession: the greatest technical professional skills go hand in hand with intimate closeness, approaching the patient both as a biological organism and as a human being. Tell the families the whole truth without pushing them down the drain. Make a loving gesture at crucial moments and yet remain professional – to the Brussels cancer team, it is nothing more than the natural thing to do. But what doctor Sariban,

co-director of the department, does more than anything, is listen. How are the patients? What do they know? And then he comes straight to the point, not minimizing any problem. He also clearly marks out the limitations of his abilities as a doctor: «No, I am sorry, I cannot guarantee full recovery... Yes, indeed, he could relapse, we are not sure». Still, he puts his uncertainties into a pragmatic perspective: «We do not know whether or not there will be full recovery, but for you that is less important: the chances of recovery are very good. And you have done what could and had to be done». His thoughtful optimism, his reassuring looks and his slightly ironic sense of humour are like a little beams of light that shine on all those involved. Some of the little patients even feel sorry that the treatment is over!

The announcement of the diagnosis plunges the children and their parents into uncertainty. Could this be true? Is this really possible? It took Kareem's mother months before she was convinced that her little boy had a cancer. Rationally speaking, Victor's mother understands that there is a real risk of relapse, but a part of her needed the doctor to tell her one more time. And then there is the feeling of revolt. Upon hearing that Hugo has relapsed, his mother bursts out: «I hate it! ». What am I to do with this bad tidings? «What do I tell my son? And my daughters?». Next you have to stay the distance: await the results of the sound scans: is the disease under control? School and working rhythms are all turned upside down. Loss of hair and the effects of the tumour and treatment on the gestures and cognitive faculties will cause the child to attract attention. And the medical team's diplomacy will not always help make the endless stay at hospitals bearable. Once the ordeals of the treatment have been endured, another five years of intensive follow up will be required before there is a degree of certainty that the disease has been abated and the medications and radiation treatments have not disturbed the child's normal growth.

This journey has been an initiation in many ways. We now realize that what seemed evident – the life of a child – is, in fact, uncertain. That the inevitable ignorance of the future makes us live our days fully aware. We realize how limited our abilities are and thus learn to fully appreciate

the incredible power of a kiss or a simple attention. The ordeal puts the values of life back into perspective. The tumour is a natural biological force. So is cancer. And so is children's spontaneity, a force that manifests itself with astonishing strength. Sick children are, before anything else, children. That is why for us **I'll get better tomorrow** is a very uplifting film.

TECHNICAL DATA

Demain j'irai mieux - I'll get better tomorrow

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ARTISTIC AND TECHNICAL CREW

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Camera: **Dominique Henry**
Sound: **Vincent Detours & Dominique Henry**
Editing: **Luc Plantier (image) - Arnould Chapel (sound)**
Mixing: **Luc Thomas**

This film was produced by **Need Productions**

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ARTE G.E.I.E

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