



## Film

# Storytelling and debate at the 2023 Global Health Film Festival

In 2015, Gerri McHugh founded Global Health Film, driven by a desire to bring science-informed storytelling to wider audiences. Now in its ninth edition, the non-profit's flagship annual event, the Global Health Film Festival (GHFF), continues to be, McHugh explains, "a convening space bringing together hundreds of global health professionals, thought-leaders, policy makers, students, and film-makers from all around the world to experience really great storytelling together, to discuss and debate the issues and the solutions, and to forge collaborations at the intersection of art and health... we are often talking to film-makers about their projects up to 5 years ahead of them hitting the big screen".

The 2023 GHFF features 20 films, accessible via video-on-demand and livestream, with a selection screened at an in-person event in London, UK. With remarkable diversity and breadth, the films include explorations of planetary health, food systems, the climate crisis, refugee and migrant health, global mental health, and access to health care. For McHugh a "common denominator" is "storytelling around issues of power, agency, equity, justice—in all settings, all around the world". This year, McHugh says she is "particularly excited to have the world premiere of *The Quietest Year*, which focuses on noise pollution, *Common Ground* on regenerative farming, *The Swedish-Speaking Migrants of Paris*, and *The Mind Game*, on refugee and migrant health", as well as a series of short films about dementia and disability that are moving for their remarkable intimacy and candour.

McHugh's sentiment that "most issues can be explored and illuminated through a global health lens" is amply attested to by other striking offerings at this year's GHFF. *Phantom Parrot*, directed by Kate Stonehill, provides chilling insights into the insidious development of Schedule 7 of the UK

Terrorism Act, which gives legal powers to stop, search, and hold people across the UK's border surveillance. The film is a

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damning account of technology, human rights, and structural racism and tells the story of British human rights activist Muhammad Rabbani who was detained, questioned, and arrested at London's Heathrow airport on his way home from a research trip in Doha, Qatar. Denied the right to silence, to legal representation, and to the requirement to consent to the collection of DNA, among other Miranda rights, the narrative follows Rabbani's conviction as a terrorist and his fight to assert his innocence. What emerges are disturbing revelations, including from investigative reporter in security and civil liberties Ryan Gallagher, who describes the "massive surveillance programmes that the general public had no idea were even operating". The film shows how these powers have not only been used for suspected terrorists, but have also targeted human rights activists and reporters. Since 2022, these powers were extended and are now applied to refugees and migrants coming to the UK by small boats.

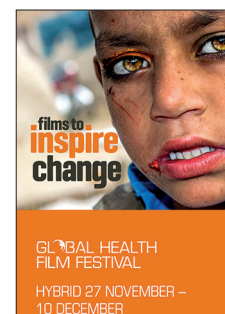
Equally engaging is *Pay or Die*. Directed by Scott Alexander Ruderman and Rachel Dyer, the film focuses on the high price of insulin made by three pharmaceutical companies in the USA, the lethal consequences for people with diabetes who cannot afford it, and the quest of a group of grieving parents to create legislation for an insulin-aid programme to force the price of medication to be capped. *Pay or Die* highlights the unaffordability of insulin in the USA compared with other countries in 2018–22, and the pressures this puts on individuals such as Emma

and her mother Sandra Cook, who both have diabetes. Aged just 11 years, Emma tried to find a job when they both became homeless. As she says in the film: "if you are paying for insulin, it's hard to pay for rent".

In 2023 three US pharmaceutical companies announced price reductions in insulin for 2024, but the affordability of, and access to, medicines in the USA remains a significant problem. *Pay or Die* scrutinises inequities in the US health-care system and drug industry. The film's protagonists, Nicole Smith-Holt and James Holt Jr, whose son Alec died, aged 26 years, because "he struggled to afford the one medicine created to save his life", describe insulin as the sixth most expensive liquid in the world. In fifth place was Chanel No 5. A Canadian pharmacist, accustomed to Americans crossing the border for affordable medications, remarks how rewarding it is "to help Americans in the predicament they find themselves in". In Nicole Smith-Holt's advocacy to prevent further unnecessary suffering, her words perhaps resonate with other stories this film festival shines a light on. "How shameful it is", she says, "that we've had to go to this extent to bring attention to an issue that shouldn't even exist."

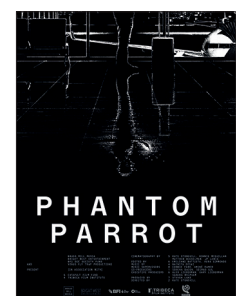
The storytelling at this year's GHFF takes viewers on a journey—sometimes tragic, at other times uplifting. Hope and the power of community feature in Chloe White and Kethiwe Ngcobo's intimate *1001 Days*. The film follows newborn home visits by the Ububele programme and its dedicated local women who support mothers and babies in Alexandra, South Africa, a community affected by unemployment, poverty, and a high burden of HIV. What all of the films certainly do, as McHugh notes, is present a truly global "springboard for really rich and profound discussion and exploration."

Aarathi Prasad

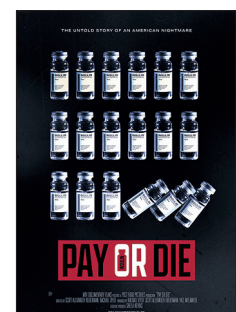


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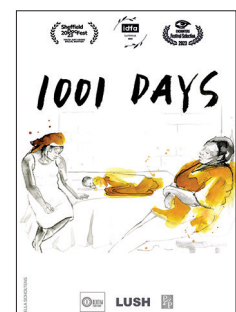
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Rubix Films 2023



MTV Documentary Films



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