

I am sure that there are some who do not understand what leprosy is. For much of history, it has been an incurable disease. It is an ailment that affects the skin and nerves of the people who suffer from it. If left untreated, it can lead to a certain amount of disfigurement, although deaths that occur directly from leprosy are rare in the extreme. As a result of this characteristic, through history, the leprosy-affected have suffered under a tremendous social stigma, often leading to banishment and disownment. This stigma has in turn made the disease one of the most feared in the history of humankind.

However, in 1981, the World Health Organization began to promote the use of a multidrug therapy, or MDT, as a complete cure. In 1985, there were 122 countries registered as being officially leprosy-endemic which, in medical terms, means that they had a prevalence of more than 1 case in 10,000. The effect of MDT has been simply stunning. Since 1985, the number of officially endemic countries has fallen dramatically, and the leprosy burden is now mostly concentrated in six nations. The number of patients has fallen from 5.3 million to fewer than 600,000.

These results were accomplished thanks to the dedicated efforts of WHO, governments and NGOs to truly use the discovery to bring about the greatest possible outcome. During the last 27 years The Nippon Foundation, of which I am the president, has provided the global elimination campaign with approximately \$200 million, working through WHO and the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation. As a part of this, we provided free MDT to any patient in the world from 1994 to 1999. Following that, Novartis took up the baton and is currently providing this service. I am convinced such continuous effort has brought about the drastic decrease in the number of leprosy patients around the world. Today, we stand at the point where this millennia-old disease can be eliminated; it is simply a matter of time.

However, it is said in Japan: "In a journey of 100 miles, the 99th mile is no better than half-way." The final mile is perhaps the most arduous.

WHO has given us a goal: elimination by the year 2005. For our final push toward this objective, in 1999 WHO organized the Global Alliance for the Elimination of Leprosy. This Global Alliance, which we often refer to as GAEL, is made up of the governments of endemic countries, The Nippon Foundation/Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation, Novartis/Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development, WHO, the World Bank, Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) and various NGOs. It is an alliance of diverse partners, working from diverse angles to achieve our clear numerical target: elimination in each and every country of the world by the year 2005.

At the first GAEL meeting, held in India in 2001, I was appointed to be the special ambassador. Since then, I have made elimination my highest priority and have worked in every endemic country in the world.

Through my work I have become convinced that we must focus on three important points if we are to achieve elimination. First, it is imperative that political leaders feel a strong commitment to the goal of elimination. Second, the support of the media is vital. And third, it is necessary to bring together a variety of different actors, such as WHO, the World Bank, national governments, international organizations and NGOs. The work of the Global Alliance is thus indispensable.

In my role as the special ambassador, I have attempted to achieve two fundamental aims. First, I have not only worked to obtain the firm commitment of the political leaders of endemic countries, but I have also urged them to grasp this window of opportunity and heighten the priority given to elimination within their governments. Second, I have been appealing to the media of the world to disseminate correct information on leprosy to the general public. It is particularly important for both of these groups to spread the following three messages: *Leprosy is curable; free treatment is available at all primary health centers; discrimination has no place in today's world.*

I have come to believe that it is necessary for us to reach people working for the public good, within and outside the field of leprosy. These people's support is very important, and they need to be in possession of all of the correct facts about the disease. If we can obtain the help of non-leprosy NGOs, we can then reach a much larger audience through them, turning our effort into a genuine social movement. We are at the point where we can motivate people in the community to take a vested interest in leprosy elimination. This newsletter is designed to achieve this kind of broad audience.

This publication is not the official newsletter of WHO or GAEL. Instead, it is something that I am producing in my capacity as special ambassador, with the support of The Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation. It will include reports of my work as special ambassador, articles on GAEL activities, features on the elimination activities of endemic countries, the stories that individuals have to tell and more. Contributions are welcome. I hope that this newsletter will serve as a medium for information exchange among those working for leprosy elimination as well as those involved in non-leprosy related activities.

It is my sincerest hope that this exchange of information will become a major force, turning the leprosy elimination campaign into a global social movement. □