

Another Asra woman named Baisantin worked with her husband in the headman's house but, when she contracted the disease and her fingers began to twist, she was told that there was no place for her in the village. She took her baby and went home to her parents, who had her admitted to a leprosy hospital. At the hospital though, she was told to stop breastfeeding her child. This broke her spirit and she threw herself in front of a train.

Asra has many such stories to tell. And the introduction of MDT in the late 1980s had distressingly little effect. Patients continued to hide the disease and the community ignored the efforts of district leprosy workers. As a result, in Asra, the largest village in its district, only two leprosy-affected people had been registered.

The rest hid their symptoms and grew progressively worse.

One major reason for this problem was that the headman, Vyas Narain, who had been trained in Ayurvedic medicine, believed that leprosy patients would infect those around them and that they must be cast out of the community.

However, in 1991, regional leprosy workers organized a six-day treatment camp in the village. The workers' preparatory efforts focused on the headman and his wife — without their support, the patients in the village would not likely have had the courage to come for treatment. The headman was initially afraid that the leprosy patients from the countryside would cause a village-wide epidemic, but the workers explained that if people became aware of the cure, the root of the disease would be eliminated.



The headman eventually gave in, reluctantly. On the first day, he watched from a distance. The second day he found him sitting near people with leprosy. By the third day, he was touching patients and helping to clean their wounds. On that day, he also began allowing patients to bathe in the large communal pond. He later said, "The camp changed my perception. I realized that my interpretation of the Ayurvedic books was not correct regarding leprosy."

Since the workers had focused on his wife as well, by the last day, many women were attending, and the village itself wore a festive look, complete with rangoli and kalash decorations.

The final day was a celebration. Women sang songs,

put on a play, and there was a common lunch, attended by the headman.

Perhaps the most symbolic gesture of the day came from the wealthy village grocer, who

announced that he had the disease and there received his first MDT treatment.

The celebrations not only exorcised the collective guilt of the village; they were an indication of a general welcome for the cure and promised social acceptance of those affected by leprosy.

Thanks to the efforts of the health workers and the resulting revelation of the headman, the people of the village are no longer fearful of leprosy and leprosy-related suicides are a thing of the past. □

Extracts from "Combating Leprosy"
— by DANLEP-Madhya Pradesh

WHO Special Ambassador's Newsletter

No. 3, August 1, 2003

Publisher

Yohei Sasakawa

Editor in Chief

Tatsuya Tanami

Proofing Editor

James Huffman

Contributing Staff

Ron Faxon, Akiko Nozawa

Photographer

Natsuko Tominaga

Editorial Office

WHO Special Ambassador's Newsletter

5th Floor, Nippon Foundation Building

1-2-2 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107-8404, Japan

Telephone: +81-3-6229-5601 Fax: +81-3-6229-5602

Email: smhf_an@tnfb.jp

With support from:

The Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation,

The Nippon Foundation

www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/eng/

Contributions or comments should be addressed to the Editorial Office as listed above

© 2003 The Nippon Foundation. All rights are reserved by the foundation. This document may, however, be freely reviewed, abstracted, reproduced or translated, in part or in whole, but not for sale or for use in conjunction with commercial purposes. The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the editors and contributors, and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of the Special Ambassador's Office.