

FOR THE ELIMINATION OF LEPROSY

A MESSAGE FROM THE SPECIAL AMBASSADOR

Reaching the Unreachable

We are continuing our special focus on India for this issue. In India, there were 473,658 new cases of leprosy in 2002, amounting to 76 percent of cases worldwide. The numbers prompt experts to say, "If India fails at elimination, we will all have failed."

The task of finding patients from all strata of society in all regions of the country and providing a cure — in a country with more than a billion people and over 100 languages — isn't an easy one.

Beyond the medical issues, social stigma is also a serious problem in India. The deeply rooted stigma attached to leprosy has made many of the leprosy-affected in the country nearly unreachable.

To overcome these barriers, efforts have focused increasingly on broadening the base of trained people who can look throughout the country for new cases. One example is the integration of leprosy services into General Health Services, with village health workers now going from home to home. Another example is the promotion of communication through school education. As explained in this issue's Report From India, schoolchildren are taking home simple drawings of the human body, on which they record any skin blemishes of family members and then bring the reports back to school.

These steady efforts are having a strong cumulative effect. More people are being reached than ever before. Still, new groups of people with no awareness of the cure are continually being discovered. Due to issues of language, geography and social structure, these groups are proving hardest to reach with the message that leprosy is curable. But until India has reached all of these people, we cannot say that we have succeeded. And without an awareness of the curability of the disease, there will remain many affected people who are reluctant to come forward to be examined. We must encourage people to visit nearby health centers when they find patches on their skin. For that, the messages, "Leprosy is Curable," "Free Treatment is Available," and "Social Discrimination has no Place" must be delivered to all strata of society. The challenge we must not fail to meet is how to reach the unreachable both with these messages and with the cure.



Yohei Sasakawa
WHO Special Ambassador
President, The Nippon Foundation

Leprosy is Curable.

Free Treatment is Available.

Social Discrimination has no Place.

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