

The Fight Continues

Efforts to eliminate leprosy continue to make progress. The battle against social discrimination must do the same.

THE PHILIPPINES (DECEMBER 1-2, 2004)

In December 2004, I attended WHO's SEARO/WPRO bi-regional meeting in Manila on post-elimination strategies in South East Asia and the Western Pacific. The theme of the meeting was how to sustain elimination once the goal of achieving a prevalence rate of less than 1 per 10,000 population has been achieved. In particular, the strategy focuses on establishing a surveillance system, integrating treatment of leprosy into the general health services and ensuring early detection and treatment.

INDIA (DECEMBER 3-9)

Eliminating leprosy and rooting out stigma and social discrimination are two sides of the same coin. To win the battle against leprosy, it is necessary to address both. Visiting the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh only strengthened this conviction.

I have visited India repeatedly in recent years. Of all the countries that have yet to achieve elimination, India has the most cases (266,000 at the end of March 2004). This was my tenth visit since 2003, but my first to these states.

Both states are working toward the elimination goal. As of October 2004, Madhya Pradesh had a PR of 1.28/10,000, and Andhra Pradesh of 1.73/10,000. Elimination is close.

Furthermore, in Madhya Pradesh, there are camps to assist in the process of reintegrating cured persons into society. Known in Hindi as Kushta Kantha Nivaram Karykram (literally, "camps to remove the suffering of recovered persons from within"), they bring together those recovered from the disease as well as community members in a move to tackle stigma and social discrimination.

Meanwhile, in Andhra Pradesh, efforts are being made to integrate leprosy into the general



Malak Singh Shrivastav

health services, where it can be treated as just one more disease.

In Bhopal, I met with Dr. Balram Jakhad, the governor of Madhya Pradesh; Shri Babulal Gaur, the chief minister; Dr. Gaurishankar Shejwar, the health minister; and Dr. M.K. Joshi, the health department director and secretary for state leprosy eradication. In Hyderabad, I called on Shri Sushil Kumar Shinde, the governor of Andhra Pradesh and attended ILEP's India Day meeting and an Advocacy Meet organized by LEPRA where the speakers included Dr. T.V. Venkateswarulu, AP's state leprosy officer.

I also visited with patients, recovered persons and health workers to hear their stories. Of all the people I encountered, I shall not forget Mr. Malak Singh Shrivastav, whom I met in Bhopal. A 56-year-old farmer from the village of Maleh Pipariya, Narsinghpur District, he was diagnosed with leprosy three years ago. Based on the little he knew, he thought this would result in him being shunned by society.

For two days, he couldn't eat, and on the third day, he began to think about killing himself. He told a close friend, and as soon as his family and fellow villagers got to hear of this, they watched over him 24 hours a day for 15 days to make sure he didn't follow through on his suicide plan.

Meanwhile, his wife went to the regional leprosy officer for more information, and convinced her husband that the disease was easily treatable, medicine was available at the primary health center, and that nobody was going to exclude him from society. Thus encouraged, and at the same time moved by the compassion of his family and friends, he began receiving treatment

LEPROSY FACTS

- Each year, the last Sunday in January is set aside as World Leprosy Day, a day to demonstrate support for those with the disease. It was established by French journalist and philosopher Raoul Follereau in 1954. This year, it fell on January 30, the 57th anniversary of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.



Shri Babulal Gaur, chief minister, Madhya Pradesh



Shri Sushil Kumar Shinde, governor, Andhra Pradesh