

Health Ministers Pledge Support

Yohei Sasakawa visits two African nations moving toward elimination.



On a visit to Africa in April, Yohei Sasakawa met with the health ministers of Mozambique and Tanzania, who pledged their determination to see their countries achieve the elimination target. Mozambique currently has a PR of 2.5, while Tanzania's stands at 1.3.

Dr. Ivo Garrido, Mozambique's minister of health, said that the country's new government was fully committed to achieving the goal.

"For us in Mozambique, the fight against leprosy is not an issue of numbers. Fighting against leprosy is fighting for human dignity. That is why it is one of the top priorities of this government. We want to be able to tell the world that we, too, have won the fight."

He added that Mozambique intended to give leprosy the same priority as malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS.



PROBLEM OF STIGMA

In Tanzania, Health Minister Anna Abdullah said that the biggest problem in combating leprosy was stigma. Stigma means delays in seeking treatment, which results in disability.

"Up to 10% of new cases in Tanzania are diagnosed with grade II disability, which is a sign that people are hiding cases," she said. "We have to treat the minds of Tanzanians that leprosy is a disease like any other."

The country is now in the process of promoting community awareness and integrating leprosy treatment into the primary healthcare system.

"We hope to achieve the target, if not this year, then next," Health Minister Abdullah said, adding, "There should be no leprosy in the country. We shouldn't be content with a PR of less than 1 per 10,000." ■

(Top) Dr. Ivo Garrido,
(above) Mrs. Anna
Abdullah

FROM THE EDITORS

PEOPLE, NOT NUMBERS

In countries that have yet to achieve elimination, leprosy pales in comparison to the challenge posed by malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS. This reflects the enormous strides that have been made in the past two decades to bring leprosy under control, but also indicates the scale of the public health problem in these other areas.

But whether the leprosy caseload is large or small, every case represents a human life, an individual affected physically, emotionally and psychologically by the disease and with a knock-on effect on their families as well. As Mozambique's new health minister is quoted on this page as saying, "it's not an issue of numbers."

Dr. Rosa Castalia reminds us of this too when she comments on page 3 that the issue of elimination must be handled very sensitively. Many Brazilians affected by leprosy who will hear the government announce this year or next that the country has achieved elimination will think, "What about me?! I still have the disease."

The elimination target is a milestone along the

way to achieving a world without leprosy. Now that we are nearing the target in every country, it is more important than ever to see the individuals behind the statistics, and hear their voices. Just because the numbers are getting smaller, doesn't mean the problem is any less for the persons concerned.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "*Everyone* [italics added] has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

As we consider not only leprosy but other diseases — and also poverty and malnutrition — that are causing misery, claiming lives and imposing strains on the healthcare systems of countries concerned, we still have a long way to go.

FOR THE ELIMINATION OF LEPROSY

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