

Cultivating the Press

Media Partner Workshops are designed to show the Indian media that there is another way to portray leprosy — not as a dreaded disease but as a source of inspiring stories.

In India, the need to sensitize the press on the subject of leprosy has been felt for some time. Participants at several workshops on “Advocacy Strategies and the Role of Media for the Elimination of Leprosy,” held in the high endemic states in 2004 and 2005, all urged that this be done.

As a result, a number of Media Partnership Workshops have been held across India in the latter part of 2005, organized by communications consultancy ICONS Media in association with the International Leprosy Union (ILU) and IDEA India, and with support from the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation (SMHF) and The Nippon Foundation (TNF).

OBJECTIVES

The workshops have several objectives, among the most important being to familiarize the media with leprosy, raise awareness of the movement to attain the dignity and socio-economic integration of cured persons, discuss ways of fighting social stigma and discrimination, and discourage sensationalist coverage and the use of derogatory terms such as “leper.”

They are also an opportunity for leprosy activists to network with journalists covering health, development and social issues; to create a support base within the mainstream media; and to put leprosy into the national “mind-space” via newspaper and television coverage.

A short-term goal is to build up a groundswell of media interest in leprosy in the run-up to the first ever national forum of leprosy-affected persons scheduled for Delhi on December 19, where cured persons and colony representatives will discuss the possibility of forming a national network.

FORMAT

The media partnership workshops are typically divided into three parts. First, a documentary film is shown that gives a general introduction to the disease. This is followed by an inaugural session featuring the WHO goodwill ambassador, the state governor and the state health minister, accompanied by leading leprosy activists who address participants about the disease, stigma and the role that the media can play. Finally, doctors, cured persons and social activists address the audience on specific issues related to the medical and social aspects of the disease.

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Media workshops generate good coverage.

UNDERLYING MESSAGES

Underpinning the workshops are the three messages championed by the WHO goodwill ambassador — that leprosy is curable, treatment is free and readily available, and that there is no place for discrimination.

The workshops also take aim at myths and prejudices surrounding the disease, emphasizing that leprosy is very hard to transmit — it can't be caught by touching or shaking hands — and is not the result of a person's transgressions in a past life.

The medical discussions include information about what leprosy is; signs and symptoms; treatment; the importance of early detection; self-care; prevention of disabilities; and reconstructive surgery.

The discussions on the social aspects of the disease focus on both social and economic rehabilitation and ways of empowering persons affected by leprosy. Examples are drawn from the work of NGOs and experts in the field.

In particular, the workshops stress the role the media can play in combating the stigma surrounding leprosy by creating positive, humanistic portraits of people affected by the disease.

Backing this up are the personal testimonies of