

The Red Angels

This past January, Myanmar achieved elimination of leprosy. Its success has highlighted the effective techniques that it used to get there. This is especially so since, 40 years ago, Myanmar had one of the highest prevalence rates in the world.

One problem that developing countries have in dealing with such issues is the lack of monetary resources. Those few resources that exist must be allocated with the maximum possible efficacy if they are to have any effect at all.

Thus in 1978, rather than devote all of its money to central hospitals, Myanmar embarked on a People's Health Plan under which it included leprosy control as a part of its Basic Health Services (BHS). At that time, Myanmar had the highest number of patients in its recorded history — 270,000.

Before this 1978 change, leprosy control activities largely took the form of house calls made by vertical staff — leprosy experts. In those days, Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT) coverage and patient compliance were relatively low. However, by integrating leprosy services into BHS, the government gave leprosy-affected people access to the country's wide network of Red Angels — official midwives who are responsible for the general health of people who live in villages. When this happened, the nation's patients became increasingly accessible to its service providers. MDT coverage and treatment compliance

improved. Additionally, stigmatization among the people was reduced. While the vertical staff remain today, they have taken on the role of technical supervisors to the general health services.

The Red Angels, on the other hand, travel from village to village in their red skirts, riding red bicycles. They go from home to home, finding new cases and delivering the medicines needed to cure the disease. The use of these much-loved women is a much more proactive and humane way of reaching patients than requiring them to visit hospitals.

These grass-roots workers are perhaps the largest reason, after the free distribution of MDT, for Myanmar's recent success. As always, it is people working closely with people that has proven to be the best way to deal with human problems.



*A Red Angel
with her bicycle*

Correction — On Page 5 of the April 2003 issue, the name of the Nepalese Health Minister, Professor Upendra Devkota, FRCS, was incorrectly spelled. We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

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