

Multipurpose health workers respond to a quiz about leprosy elimination (right); children at an elimination rally



visits I had made in the past year.

Firstly, I reported on my meetings with the political leaders of several Indian states and the various activities initiated as a result of securing their commitment to elimination.

Secondly, I talked about my encounters with the media in the places I visited, which confirmed my impression that journalists still have a poor grasp of leprosy elimination. How to build a relationship with the media was one of the themes taken up by this conference at a workshop chaired by Dr. S.D. Gokhale, chairman of the International Leprosy Union. For my part, I suggested that we need to come up with a strategy that interests the media in what we are doing and results in active coverage of elimination activities.

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Thirdly, I talked about the need for a social movement to enhance leprosy elimination, which I called “broadening the scope of integration: reaching out beyond the leprosy community.” So long as responsibility for tackling leprosy remains in the hands of specialist government agencies, medical institutions and NGOs in a vertical setup, this won't be possible. We need to involve different bodies in the non-leprosy community if we want society to gain a proper awareness.

I also had the opportunity for discussions with Chhattisgarh's chief minister, Dr. Raman Singh, and the state health minister, Dr. Krishnamurthy Bandhi. Chhattisgarh has the third highest prevalence rate among India's states at 5.08 cases per 10,000 population. In common with other states, Chhattisgarh has a significant tribal population (over 34%), and faces a number of challenges in tackling leprosy, including large numbers of people living in remote areas, poor levels of hygiene and nutrition because of widespread poverty, and a high level of social discrimination. Consequently, much effort needs

to be put into case discovery and treatment, awareness-building and rehabilitation. But both Chief Minister Singh and Health Minister Bandhi fully understand the issues and showed me they are on top of the situation.

On January 29, I visited a primary health center in a village about 30 kilometers from Raipur, where I met about 20 multipurpose health workers who deal with a wide range of health issues, including maternity care, child care and tuberculosis prevention, not just leprosy.

I was told that these health workers are each responsible for about 5,000 people and do their rounds by motorcycle or bicycle. Many of the homes they visit are far apart, and some can only be reached on foot. When I heard this, I felt quite humble and grateful to them for their dedication.

On this occasion, they had gathered to prepare for a Modified Leprosy Elimination Campaign that was due to begin the next day. I was impressed by their knowledge of leprosy, their grasp of the leprosy situation in Chhattisgarh, and their determination to see the prevalence rate reduced to less than one case in 10,000 by the end of 2005.

A number of them related their experiences of elimination activities, and one account in particular stays with me. It concerned a member of the Brahmin caste, occupying a high position in the community, who discovered he had leprosy. His fingers began to twist out of shape, but he was cured thanks to MDT, and expressed his heartfelt gratitude to health workers. The moral of the story is that even in a hierarchical society such as India's, disease does not discriminate — and neither does the cure.

January 30 is Martyr's Day in India, marking the anniversary of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. That morning, several thousand children gathered in a square in Raipur to rally for leprosy elimination. I marched alongside the state health minister at the head of a long procession of political leaders, government workers and boys and girls as it passed through the center of the city, where the marchers handed out pamphlets promoting elimination. While I am confident that these children will grow up to know a world without leprosy, I am keenly aware that we must work even harder if that is to happen. ■

#### LEPROSY FACTS

- India's prevalence rate has gone down from 57.6 per 10,000 people in 1981 to 3.2 per 10,000 in March 2003