

# Leprosy

India, which is home to 60% of world's leprosy patients, celebrated the World Leprosy Day 2019 on 30th January. Also, last week's article in the Lancet "A New Face of Leprosy" rekindled memories of this dreadful disease from my younger days. Leprosy is a neglected tropical disease and one of the most stigmatising of diseases. Images of severely disabled patients with leprosy have helped to raise awareness, attract attention, and drive donations. But these pictures are not representative of the disease. Leprosy patients deserve a better image—leprosy needs a new face. For the New Face of Leprosy, the project is developing a more positive image of leprosy as a treatable infection, with patients enjoying life and functioning in society.[\[1\]](#) (*see pictures in the article*)

Born and brought up in India, seeing a person affected by leprosy was not a strange sight. There were always people sitting by the roadside begging for help, often displaying disfigured parts of body to attract sympathy. Bus or train stations and public places were common places where they could receive some help for living. It was rumoured that there were agents who brought some of the most disabled people and left them at strategic places, only to be fetched back at the end of the day, and the agents pocketing the the day's earnings! There are known colonies in most big towns where only lepers live. There were leprosy homes run by Christian missionaries where any possible treatment and rehabilitation was provided.

Things have improved in India and leprosy has declined markedly since 2000. Patients are entitled to free treatment at government run health centres and subsidies to help them survive. They are allowed to travel free in the Indian Railways, but in crowded conditions and public attitude towards leprosy patients, it is doubtful how many can avail this service.

Because of ancient references going back to at least 1350 BCE in Egypt, leprosy is sometimes referred to as the "oldest recorded disease" or the "oldest known disease." In one form or another, leprosy appears to have stalked human beings for millennia, always causing those who suffer from it to be ostracized from their communities and encouraging the belief that sufferers are being punished by the gods. The Old Testament is full of references to the disease and is the key to understanding leprosy as a form of physical and spiritual pollution which requires one to be excluded from the community.[\[2\]](#) Other major religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, also promote ostracism towards people affected by the disease.[\[3\]](#) Leprosy strikes fear in the minds of people as a disfiguring, contagious and incurable disease – the result of divine punishment for sins and the society continues to stigmatise and discriminate against people affected by the disease. With the noticeable exception of Christian hospitals, even the medical doctors in India, refuse to touch the leprosy patient, which is essential to diagnose the disease. Leprosy patients have to go to special clinics and hospitals designated for them. Cured patient continue to be ostracised because of the disfigured hands and face. Contact between lepers and public is unheard of. Even today, when leprosy is curable, stigma is a reality in the lives of the people affected by leprosy, and this hampers their physical, psychological, social and economical well-being.

Many people with leprosy will not develop severe disease if they access treatment early. Leprosy infection is curable with 6 or 12 month courses of two or three antibiotics depending on the type of leprosy that they develop, provided free to national leprosy programmes by WHO. 211, 973 new leprosy cases were reported from 108 countries worldwide, in

2015. India has 60% of the global leprosy case load, followed by Brazil and Indonesia. Of them, 11,389 were children (8.94%) and 48,808 were women (38.33%).

For those who do not know about the disease, Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, an acid-fast, rod-shaped bacillus. The disease mainly affects the skin, the peripheral nerves, mucosa of the upper respiratory tract, and the eyes. It is completely curable using multi-drug therapy available free in public hospitals and treatment in early stages prevents disability. Because of its mild and unremarkable start, the disease is often neglected and its advance, although slow, leads to loss of sensation in hands and feet and disfigurement of the face, which are permanent. Furthermore, stigma attached to the disease forces the patient to hide it as long as possible, losing precious time for taking medication and curing the disease permanently with little damage.

Some notable organisations have worked ceaselessly for a long time to making a dent in the disease. The Leprosy Mission, an International non-profit charitable organisation, was founded in 1874 and works in 50 countries around the world, serving the needs of people affected by leprosy. The Leprosy Mission Trust of India, in association with the Leprosy Mission, has been working in India for nearly 140 years. It has strived to prevent disability, reduce stigma and discrimination, and restore dignity of the people affected by leprosy.

Schieffelin Leprosy Research Centre, Karigiri, Vellore (Christian Medical College and Hospital) has pioneered leprosy research and rehabilitation for a long time. Dr Robert Cochrane's work on Dapsone, the first drug to be tried in the treatment of leprosy in 1945, and Dr Paul Brand's work 1946 on wards on tendon transplant on leprosy patients are some of the pioneer works carried out in Christian Medical Collage, Vellore in South India. The centre has history of outstanding contribution on treatment and rehabilitation of leprosy patients.

Public needs to understand the disease and accept those who have suffered from it and help disseminate information that it is a curable disease if diagnosed early and treated.

Some Facts about the disease<sup>[4]</sup>:

1. **India leads the world in the number of leprosy cases:** India shares fifty eight percent of the global leprosy load. The number of women afflicted by the disease is a lot more than the number of men and over thirteen thousand children have been found to be afflicted with this disease.
2. **Leprosy is one of the oldest diseases in the world:** It is also known as Hansen's Disease named after the scientist who discovered it in 1873.
3. **Is caused by a bacteria:** The disease is caused by a rod-shaped bacterium known as *Mycobacterium leprae*. The most common symptom is the occurrence of pale patches on skin without sensitivity.
4. **It is not easily transmitted:** It is believed to be transmitted via droplets from the nose and mouth. But unlike other infectious diseases it spreads only with repeated and close contact with the infected person, and only untreated patients pose a risk.
5. **95% humans are immune to the leprosy bacterium:** In India ninety to ninety five per cent people are naturally immune to the disease, hence leprosy is not highly infectious.

6. **The symptoms are unique for every type of leprosy:** The symptoms of the condition include – patches on the skin that are insensitive to touch or any sensation.
7. **Diagnosis of leprosy is simple:** When a person visits his/her doctor a physical examination is usually more than enough to diagnose the person.
8. **It is curable and treatment is free:** Leprosy is curable through [Multi-Drug Therapy \(MDT\)](#) and in India it is available free of cost at any government health centre.
9. **Untreated leprosy can cause severe deformities** of fingers, toes and eyes.
10. **Early diagnosis is the key to avoiding disabilities:** Early diagnosis and treatment with Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT) prevents permanent disabilities by curing the disease before it causes deformities.

### **References:**

[1] [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)30158-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)30158-8/fulltext)

[2] Cline, Austin. "What Does the Bible Say About Leprosy and Lepers?" Thought Co, Aug. 19, 2018, [thoughtco.com/what-is-leprosy](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-leprosy).

[3] <https://www.leprosymission.in/leprosy-modern-challenges-of-an-ancient-disease/leprosy-social-aspects/>

[4] <https://www.thehealthsite.com/diseases-conditions/leprosy-10-facts-to-know-p114/>