

Media Release

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Leprosy Still a Problem in NZ and the Pacific

Social attitudes, rather than a lack of medicine, are the major reason leprosy continues to be a problem in the Pacific Islands and to a lesser extent in New Zealand according to Jill Tomlinson, General Manager of the Pacific Leprosy Foundation in Christchurch.

World Leprosy Day is being held on 31 January 2010 to raise awareness of the disease. Past policies of segregation and isolation designed to prevent the spread of the disease made leprosy a disease out-of-sight and out-of-mind. As a consequence many people believe leprosy no longer exists. Unfortunately it certainly does— every week new cases are diagnosed in New Zealand and the Pacific.

People with leprosy tend to keep a low profile because of the stigma associated with the disease. They are often reluctant to seek medical treatment and instead hide the first tell tale signs of leprosy--strange pale patches on their skin.

"Because of this stigma associated with leprosy, patients are reluctant to seek medical help. Even when they have the disease diagnosed they hide the fact. Reimbursing medical costs using cheques is difficult for the Foundation as some patients won't even bank our cheques because they have the word leprosy on them," says Jill.

Leprosy can be cured with Multiple Drug Therapy but treatment needs to start as soon as the symptoms appear. If treatment is delayed, leprosy can cause nerve damage and permanent disability and disfigurement.

"There is still a lot of public confusion and mystery about leprosy which is why sufferers are often in denial. Even if they realise they can be cured they don't want to admit they have the disease because they know they may be shunned by their families, friends and community. The stigma is so acute sufferers never speak the word leprosy aloud. Instead it is referred to as 'the sickness'."

With the help of public donations and bequests, the Pacific Leprosy Foundation works to eradicate leprosy and care for patients and their families. It also educates the community about leprosy so the stigma is diminished through understanding.

"With many health workers being removed from leprosy programmes to work with TB and other communicable diseases, there is a real danger

leprosy will increase in the same way that TB has. We work to support and train health workers and provide them with the necessary resources to diagnose and treat leprosy," says Jill.

Rehabilitation and welfare is also a strong focus.

"People suffering from and disabled by leprosy and their families are a low priority for governments with limited resources. We fund rehabilitation and welfare work throughout the Pacific and provide money for medical treatment and clothing to protect hands and feet which have no feeling due to nerve damage."

Patients are encouraged to provide for themselves and their families. Funds are provided for income generating projects such as livestock improvement, growing crops and making crafts to be sold in the markets. The Foundation also provides funds for housing, housing improvements and the education of the children of leprosy sufferers.

About World Leprosy Day

World Leprosy Day is held on the last Sunday of every January. It is organised by the World Health Organisation to promote awareness of leprosy. The theme for 2010 World Leprosy Day is the stigma associated with leprosy. For further information www.ilep.org.uk

There has been an effective cure for leprosy since the introduction of Multiple Drug Therapy (MDT) in the 1980s.

- As a consequence of nerve damage in the limbs, unfelt injuries especially to the hands and feet lead to severe physical disabilities aggravated by accidental injuries and repetitive actions in everyday life.
- *M. leprae* attack the nerves in cooler areas of the body which are, in the main, the peripheral nerves close to the surface of the skin. This gives rise to visible patches and rashes on the skin, flattening of facial features, visual problems and loss of facial hair.
- Fingers and toes are most easily damaged and the loss of these digits is a notorious sign of leprosy. The simple repetitious action of walking with anaesthetized nerves in the feet lead to the later chronic problem of plantar ulcers on the soles. These are extremely difficult to cure and frequently lead to complications that result in amputations.
- Disabilities can occur long after the disease has been arrested either naturally or by medical treatment, because the nerves cannot recover. For this reason early diagnosis of leprosy and treatment are imperative to prevent nerve damage which may lead to later severe physical disabilities.

This media release was prepared and distributed by Robin Major Marketing on behalf of the Pacific Leprosy Foundation. Contact Robin Major on 03 960 6595, 021 621 656 or robin@robinmajor.co.nz