

Field Workers Forum

'KEEP THOSE HANDS MOBILE'

JOHS. G. ANDERSEN, CHIEF SURGEON, AND WIM BRANDSMA, CHIEF PHYSIOTHERPIST

All Africa Leprosy & Rehabilitation Training Centre, P.O. Box 165, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Every hand with ulnar or combined ulnar and median paralysis is in danger of developing joint stiffness or other secondary changes in addition to the clawing of the fingers and the loss of opposition of the thumb.

These secondary changes increase the primary deformity. They make the hand less suitable for work. The hand becomes more liable to ulcerations and infections. The hand becomes more unsightly. And it becomes nearly impossible for the reconstructive surgeon to obtain a good result, both functionally and cosmetically. At the moment not every leprosy patient has access to qualified physiotherapy and reconstructive surgery. Nevertheless it is possible to maintain these paralysed hands in good condition, to maintain them free of ulceration and infection, to keep them mobile and smooth. They will then remain better looking, and more suitable for work. When the time comes when reconstructive surgery becomes possible for these patients, they will have a far better chance of getting a good result.

There are many possible exercises for the hands. We have selected the few essential exercises for the paralysed hands. In our experience these exercises will keep the hand smooth and mobile. They are also simple enough for every patient to understand and continue using, even at home without supervision.

Preparation for hand exercises:

Wash the hands in soap and water and rinse well.

Then rub vegetable oil or vaseline into the wet skin.

All exercises can be done on a tabletop with a good padding. Better still, the patient can place the hand on his own thigh and do it this way.

The aim of the exercises:

- (1) To prevent stiffness from occurring in the mobile, paralysed hand.
- (2) To overcome stiffness or prevent more stiffness in the already contracted hand.

When and how often should the exercises be done?

- (1) For a mobile hand the exercises should be done for five minutes twice a day.
- (2) For the stiff hand the exercises should be done three times a day, for 15 minutes each time.

It is a good idea to make these exercises a normal part of the toilet.

Exercises for the mobile hand:

For ulnar nerve damage (clawing of the fingers):



Keep the hand firmly pressed against the thigh with the knuckles pressed down with the other hand. Then bend and straighten the fingers fully. Or:



Keep the hand firmly pressed against the thigh with the knuckle-joints bent. Then bend and straighten the fingers fully.

For combined ulnar and median nerve damage:

First do the exercises for ulnar nerve damage, then:



put your hand over the thumb and wrist joint. Then bend and straighten the joint of the thumb, next to the nail.

Exercises for the hand with stiffness:



Place the hand with the back against the thigh. Keep the knuckle-joints firmly against the thigh the whole time. Then rub the fingers straight with the other hand.



Grasp the thumb between the thumb and index finger of the other hand.
Then rub and pull the joints of the thumb straight.
Each exercise session is finished with the exercises for the mobile hand.