

## Letters to the Editor

### ANALYSIS OF COMPETITIVE EXAMINATION IN LEPROSY FOR MEDICAL UNDERGRADUATES IN BOMBAY OVER 22 YEARS OLD

Sir,

Apathy to and dislike of leprosy is still prevalent in Indian society as well as the medical profession. The attitude of the medical fraternity toward leprosy at all levels—medical students, teachers, general practitioners and consultants—needs to change totally for leprosy control programmes to be meaningful. In the past, a few sporadic efforts have been made by voluntary organizations to overcome this situation. In 1978 and 1979, 2 workshops on the 'Training of undergraduate medical students in leprosy' were conducted by the Acworth Leprosy Hospital Research Society and the Gandhi Memorial Leprosy Foundation with the Indian Council of Medical Research. The recommendations of the Workshops were submitted to universities and the National Medical Education Board, but no concrete steps have been taken except for the individual efforts of a few medical teachers. Refresher courses in leprosy for general practitioners and consultants are held by some organizations periodically. Discussing the role of 'The medical student and leprosy', in an editorial, McDougall<sup>1</sup> remarked that, 'it would not cost much money to radically upgrade their involvement with leprosy at the undergraduate stage'. Concerted efforts to involve medical colleges are indeed lacking on the part of the leprosy agencies even in endemic countries.

In India the number of medical colleges imparting education in indigenous medicine is 3 times those teaching allopathic medicine. In these non-allopathy medical colleges teaching of leprosy is not always done in tune with the modern scientific knowledge now being rapidly acquired on leprosy. Most of the graduates from these medical colleges practise their profession at the grass roots level, where they would have been more useful for the detection of early cases of leprosy, if proper teaching had been imparted. Recently the Hind Kusht Nivaran Sangh—Maharashtra Branch (1992) undertook training of students of such non-allopathy colleges in Maharashtra on an experimental basis. This was only in a small unit but it can be considered as a good beginning.

In this context the Acworth Leprosy Hospital Research Society has been making efforts since its inception to communicate the leprosy message to different strata of the medical profession in Bombay, such as the holding of competitive examinations for medical students. These examinations, which were initiated in 1972 in 4 allopathy medical colleges in Bombay City, were restricted to undergraduates. In 1979 they were expanded to intern groups and in 1988 further expanded to the students of 5 non-allopathy medical colleges in the city. These 3 groups were dealt with separately for judging. The students who passed and secured the first 10 ranks underwent a practical examination of leprosy on the pattern of regular medical examination.

Over the last 22 years, 710 students appeared for the competitive examination and this represents 2% of the total admission to these medical colleges during this period. In 1987 and 1993 an attempt was made to obtain a feedback from these students to judge the utility of the examination, and 82 and 67 students respectively responded (Table 1). Most respondents in 1987 were relatively well settled in their profession, whereas the same cannot be said of the 1993 sample.

**Table 1.** Results of feedback

Questionnaire	1987		1993	
	Response (%)	No Response (%)	Response (%)	No Response (%)
1 Nature of examination	Complete and adequate 71	6	Complete and adequate 81	1
2 Does examination fulfil its objects?	Yes 82	5	Yes 83	2
3 Necessity of teaching session before examination	Yes 73	2	Yes 84	1
4 Appearing in examination was beneficial	Yes 95	—	Yes 93	—
5 Enough number of reference books in college library available	Yes 50	—	Yes 51	—
6 Teaching of leprosy in medical colleges	Adequate 18	—	Adequate 25	—
7 Knowledge acquired for preparation of examination was useful in future career	Yes 70	—	Yes 90	1
8 Wish to participate in leprosy control programme	—	—	Yes 85	15

The analysis of feedback from medical students suggests that the majority of the students are happy with the nature and conditions of the examination and 90% of them found that by taking part in these examinations, they got an opportunity to obtain adequate knowledge of leprosy, and it is of special significance that 70% of them felt that they used it in their medical practice. The study shows that 76% of them were unhappy with the inadequate teaching of leprosy prevailing in their medical colleges, and 49% of them complained about the lack of reference material and textbooks on leprosy in their libraries. The results are somewhat similar in both the feedbacks obtained in 1987 and 1993, though there is a gap of 5 years between these studies.

The analysis of the special remarks obtained by the respondents suggests that special training is required by the participants before examination and the questions asked should be more objective. They further pointed out the need for the gearing up of health education for the public, especially to the medical profession and the motivation of leprosy patients for regular treatment. They also seem to be impressed by the need for vaccine and new drugs fore-shortening the duration of therapy for leprosy.

#### IMPRESSIONS

This study gives the impression that though the percentage of students who took part in the competitive examinations is negligible, those that did benefited them as individuals. The leprosy programme may also have benefited in the areas of care detection and treatment. The static stage of the standard of medical education in leprosy for the last 22 years in Bombay City seems to have deprived the leprosy programme of the full potential of these undergraduate students. In view of the target to eliminate leprosy fixed as 2000 AD in our country, we feel that there is a necessity to work out the strategies to cover the entire population of medical students (allopathy and non-allopathy) adequately in respect of leprosy.

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#### References

- <sup>1</sup> McDougall AC. The medical student and leprosy. *Lepr Rev*, 1986; 57: 97-100.