

SPECIAL REPORT

Asian Leprosy Congress

The Asian Leprosy Congress was held in the Jaypee Palace Hotel at Agra, India during 9–13 November 2000. This congress was supported by Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation and the Government of India and co-sponsored by WHO and ILEP. Although this meeting was intended to focus on leprosy problems of Asian countries, it was more or less an international gathering, attended by 1377 delegates from 39 countries, from all over the world.

This Congress was special in the sense that for the first time in the region of South East Asia a large number of workers, from paramedical workers to district and state level officers actively involved in the programme, participated in a forum to share their experiences in the form of scientific papers and in other ways. The congress extended sponsorship to 270 delegates, including 158 participants deputed by the central and provincial governments of several countries.

The prestigious meeting was inaugurated by Mr Sarad Yadav, Honourable Minister of Civil Aviation, Government of India. Mr Yadav made a clarion call to double efforts for elimination of leprosy before the extended deadline of 2005. He recalled the concern Mahatma Gandhi had shown for leprosy patients, especially his personal care to Mr Pasteur Sastri, one of his co-workers, whom he sheltered with him and whose foot ulcer he dressed himself. This exemplary gesture from the Mahatma did much to eliminate the age-old stigma attached to the disease. Dr Yo Yuasa, President, International Leprosy Association, under the auspices of which this Congress was organized, stated that the fight against leprosy, which started in the mid-1940s with promin, continued with dapsone and culminated in the 1980s with the more effective MDT, has been fairly successful. Due to MDT, the millenia-long struggle is approaching an important milestone of achieving elimination by the year 2005. Ahead of that would be the goal of reaching a world without the residual problems, both medical and social.

Dr D. Daumerie, from WHO, expressed the view that MDT implementation close to the community would solve almost all leprosy problems. In his opinion, the real challenge was to spend the next 3 years working more closely with the community, implementing the programme properly and investigating further the strategy in states where the PR is high.

Mr Yohie Sasakawa, President of The Nippon Foundation, Japan emphasized that the technical expertise and total support of WHO, ILEP, NGOs and the administrative heads of leprosy endemic countries had resulted in the treatment of all newly detected patients. The task, he said, was not yet complete, particularly in the South Asian Region, and the Congress in India was appropriate and timely.

Dr S. K. Noordeen, the Chairman of the Congress, stated that this conference was the first in the field of leprosy to focus attention in the region and was being held at an important juncture in the fight against leprosy. Hence, efforts had been made to bring to this forum as many field workers as possible, as they generally received little reward for their efforts. He

asserted that WHO is playing a critical role by providing effective technical support and leadership in mobilizing national political commitment for leprosy elimination.

Dr C. S. Walter, Organizing Secretary of the Congress, while proposing a vote of thanks, expressed the hope that the problems posed by leprosy would soon disappear due to the renewed efforts of all delegates after their enthusiasm had been boosted at the Congress.

The scientific programmes consisted of three Panel discussions, eight State of the Art lectures and oral and poster presentations. The first panel discussion was on Elimination of Leprosy and was chaired by Dr S. K. Noordeen. The second and third issues were Immunodiagnostic Tools and Plantar Ulcer and were chaired by Drs P. Brennan and D. D. Palande, respectively. Experts in the respective fields made brief presentations on problematic areas of these subjects, which were then followed by interesting discussions.

The subjects identified for the state of the art lectures were issues of particular interest in terms of control/elimination of leprosy. The titles, speakers and chairpersons of the plenary lectures are given below:

Lecture no.	Subject	Speaker	Chairperson
1	Leprosy elimination	Dr M. Neira	Dr Yo Yuasa
2	Vaccine against leprosy	Dr M.D. Gupte	Dr W. M. Meyers
3	Newer drugs	Dr J. H. Grosset	Dr B. K. Girdhar
4	Nerve damage	Dr C. K. Job	Dr B. Naafs
5	Ocular leprosy	Dr M. Hogewag	Dr P. S. S. Rao
6	Immunopathology	Dr U. Sengupta	Dr K. V. Desikan
7	Social and rehabilitation aspects	Dr S. D. Gokhale	Mr. T. Vasey
8	International classification of disability	Dr W. H. van Brakel	Mr. T. Vasey

Abstracts for as many as 420 scientific papers were received in the Congress. Of these, 288 were accommodated as oral presentations and the remaining 132 as posters. Most papers were on issues related to control and elimination (20%), disability (15%) and chemotherapy and clinical aspects (12%). These papers generally presented success stories of LEC and FDT, including ROM therapy, which has been extended to cases with three lesions for study purposes. Papers related to basic sciences made up only 8% of the total abstracts, but they highlighted important developments in immunology, molecular biology, pathology and microbiology. In addition, the congress generously accommodated views from social scientists and representatives of organizations such as IDEA.

Countrywise, as many as 268 papers were from the host country, followed by China 51, Nepal 32, Brazil 11 and Bangladesh 10. The presentations from China reported mainly post-elimination data, and were of great interest.

Despite the minor chaos of the first day in handling such a large number of delegates, the arrangements generally went well. The overall good rating given by the delegates on the organization of the Congress indicates that as usual they were generous enough to forget the shortcomings and inconveniences. I hope that all the delegates have returned with a sweet souvenir of their stay in the city of Taj Mahal.

D. Poricha
Member, Organizing Committee