

The programme on leprosy elimination in the Federated States of Micronesia

S.T. HAN *

For centuries, leprosy was a disease with no hope, and leprosy control an exercise in frustration. Few other diseases in history have caused so much stigmatization and fear. The reason is that leprosy deforms and disables, but seldom kills. Those who are crippled by the disease live on, steadily getting worse for all to see. Moreover, the attitude of society towards the lepers has given rise to much ridicule, and even condemnation.

Now, leprosy patients can be treated effectively at home. The introduction of multidrug therapy (MDT) by WHO in 1982 brought about a major change. The effect of the new regimen on the global prevalence of the disease was immediate. In 1982, the number of leprosy patients reported worldwide was about 6 million; ten years later, it decreased to 3 million. Based upon this success, a World Health Assembly resolution in May 1991 – reinforced by a Western Pacific regional resolution in September 1995 – urged Member States to intensify efforts to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem by the year 2000 which means less than 1 case per 10000 population. To support this goal, at our regional workshop on leprosy elimination in 1992, we resolved to work to achieve the elimination of leprosy, not just as an average across the Region, but in each country and area in the Region.

Today, what nobody would have dared to imagine 50 years ago, is about to happen. Leprosy prevalence in the Region has reached 0.25 per 10000 as a regional average, and 19 countries and areas have reached the elimination target. However, despite such tremendous progress, leprosy is still a public health problem in a few countries and areas in the Region. The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is one of these. Your

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country has the greatest number of leprosy cases for the size of its population in the Region. If the FSM wants to solve this public health problem in a very short period of time, something special needs to be done.

Data suggest that there are about 300 new leprosy patients every year in the FSM. This is because many people have already been infected, although the disease itself has not yet developed. To stop such development the government of the FSM, WHO, Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation and well known experts from the world discussed and agreed on a new strategy.

The strategy is composed of two approaches: first approach is to detect all cases and provide complete treatment; the second approach is to provide, only once a year, a safe and effective medicine to everyone to prevent the development of leprosy. Such an approach can prevent the disease in 80% of those infected. Therefore, instead of 300 new cases a year, a maximum of only 60 should occur in 1997 after one dose of preventive therapy, and less than 20 in 1998 after the second dose. This is a decrease of more than 90% of what would happen if nothing is done.

This large undertaking has been made possible because of the generous support from Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation and Nippon Foundation which have been the key supporters for leprosy elimination in the Region for many years.

The success of this undertaking is in your hands. With the active participation of each of you and every member of the community, I am sure that we can put an end to this scourge of history in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Editorial Note: A paper on leprosy in Pohnpei had to be withdrawn from this issue. □

* Regional Director, World Health Organization, Western Pacific Region. Keynote Address at the Launching Ceremony, Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia, March 15, 1996.