

Nepal Leprosy Trust – a review of 2016

2016 was a challenging year, beginning with continuation of the general strike on the Terai plains in the southern part of Nepal, and the Indian border blockade which greatly affected travel and supplies. Many of our patients were unable to travel to our centre at Lalgadh during this time and had to wait, in the hope that things would improve and they would be able to seek our help. The resulting fuel shortages greatly hampered the relief work for people affected by the earthquakes of 2015, many thousands of whom were still living in tents or under tarpaulins. We have been involved in this relief work, and our own teams from Lalgadh have distributed more than 300 tonnes of food, medicine and shelter supplies to 7000 extremely needy families in the high hill areas most affected. Fortunately the blockade and strike were lifted in late January 2016, so life gradually returned to normal and we were able to continue the relief work in small ways, including helping a high village in Sindhuli district to rebuild its school building which had been badly damaged by the earthquake.



The Lalgadh team distributing food

Our centre at Lalgadh continues to be extremely busy. It had more than 100,000 patient visits in 2016, around 12,000 of which were by people affected by leprosy, amongst whom we diagnosed and treated more than 1200 new cases of leprosy. Patient numbers have been growing steadily and, whereas a busy day usually sees around 600 visitors, we had a day in October when 904 people came for help! The centre also cared for nearly 800 inpatients, 600 of whom were affected by leprosy, and provided 200 surgical operations to deal with complicated ulcers, reconstruction of deformed hands and feet, and some general surgeries. It continues to be the only centre in southeast Nepal providing specialist services for people suffering from the acute complications of leprosy, and these leprosy services are given free of charge. 2016 closed with a surgical camp supported by the UK hand surgeon Dr Donald Sammut and his team, who spent over a week at Lalgadh with our medical staff, performing complex hand operations on people with severe deformities and congenital defects. These adults and children were all villagers from poor backgrounds, who could never have received such help otherwise, and we are enormously grateful to Donald for this support. Likewise, Dr Graeme Clugston and his wife Meena have continued to support the staff at Lalgadh, and NLT is grateful to them both, and their friends, for the wonderful fundraising work they have done for Lalgadh and the leprosy relief work.



Busy Out-patients

Along with all the work we do to help people who already have leprosy is our work with the communities around us. We realized years ago that simply repairing damaged people would not stop the flow of patients to Lalgadh, and that we needed to change the attitudes of communities to overcome the terrible stigma that leprosy still has in Nepal. This began with street drama, education and training, and radio broadcasts; but about 15 years ago we added the development of self-help groups, composed of people affected by leprosy who meet together in their communities. These groups work together not only to better themselves, but also to improve their communities, and this has



A Self Help Group Meeting

resulted in a remarkable reduction of the level of stigma in those communities. From the initial 10 groups that we began with, this programme has grown to 100 groups, which now include many people who are marginalized for reasons other than leprosy. Nearly all these groups are now independent and still active, and continue to work as 'change agents' throughout the 4 districts that we work in, affecting thousands of people.

This community work has been augmented in the last 8 years by our Village Alive Programme, where we work directly with several very poor communities to improve things that they identify as most important to them. These are usually health, education, water and sanitation, but might also include tidying the village, repairing roads, and starting women's groups, adolescents' groups, farmers' groups, etc. These projects are always focused around a successful self-help group, so that there is community experience and trust already in place, which are vital to get a community working together. These village projects involve years of commitment from our staff and have produced good results with some very significant improvements, especially in the areas of health and education, but also in the transformation of some very poor situations. We are hoping to begin working with a number of new villages over the next few years, but the programme already directly impacts on several thousand people.



A Village Alive women's group meeting

Along with these bigger works, we support individual people and families affected by leprosy, who have become vulnerable through poverty and disability. Often they have no land of their own, very defective accommodation, and an uncertain food supply. During 2016 we supported 3 elderly ladies who have no family support, by finding sponsors willing to provide a monthly allowance to help with basic food necessities. The amount is not large but makes a huge difference to their well-being, and takes the edge off that gnawing anxiety about where the next meal might come from. We have also helped several families to obtain land, build a decent small house, and begin an income generating project to help them towards independence.



Keshav's new house

One such family was Keshav Pariyar's, living in extreme poverty and with all family members affected by leprosy. They were discovered when Keshav, who is a boy of 11, joined our self care training centre to learn how to live with his disabilities caused by leprosy. Whilst learning about the signs and symptoms of leprosy, he realised that his sister and parents probably all had the disease too, so he went home and persuaded them to come to Lalgadh for checkups. They did in fact all have serious leprosy and are now having treatment. The Community Team meanwhile assessed the family's situation and managed to obtain some land and build a house for them, and is now helping them to establish a small business. This family, along with several others, have moved from a hopeless and vulnerable situation, to relative security, transforming their lives and bringing hope.

If you look at our website or receive our newsletter, you may be aware of Kalpana, a mother of four small children, abandoned by her husband and disowned by her family, who is affected by serious leprosy. She was under treatment at Lalgadh for some time and then came in 2016 to have her fourth child delivered, just after her husband had left her. She had leprosy, no husband, no home, no job, no family, and four children including a new baby, in a society that offers no support for such a crippling combination. With some donations from individuals and small organizations, we were able to



Kalpana and her children

buy some land, build a house, and help Kalpana to start working again. Her house is in Lalgadh and so her children are able to come to the school on our site, and staff can keep an eye on Kalpana and her family. Very sadly, her third child Tilak, who had cerebral palsy, recently died suddenly of pneumonia.

The last exciting development of 2016 to mention is the new outpatient department buildings, which should be opened in February or March 2017. These will provide more space for staff and the ever-growing numbers of patients, so that the outpatients work will be easier for everyone. Lalgadh was only intended for people affected by leprosy and a small primary health care service; it was not designed for the 100,000 visits a year that we now receive! These extra rooms will be a huge relief in the very hot season, where overcrowded spaces can be very trying.



New Out-patients



Re-modelled NLT headquarters

Our headquarters building in Kathmandu has also been undergoing a drastic re-modelling since the municipal authorities insisted that we demolish eight feet from its front, right across its 80 foot width, so they could widen the adjacent road. This has taken more than a year, but staff moved back into the renovated building this January and work will return to normal soon. The headquarters also houses the handicraft workshop, employing a variety of people who have been marginalised through poverty and illness, including leprosy. The workshop produces leather, felt and Nepali batik work which is

sold in outlets in Kathmandu, Europe and America. The Lydia Fund Child sponsorship scheme is also administered from the Kathmandu headquarters and enables about 80 children from very poor backgrounds to receive an education. This has enabled some to continue on to study nursing, accountancy and even medicine. Along with these works, The Kathmandu office provides many supporting services for the rest of NLT, especially in liaising with the government offices, and negotiating supplies for the Centre at Lalgadh.

I hope this gives a sense both of the scale of the work that NLT is engaged in, and of how the work is responding to needs at a very grassroots level. The majority of our work is with the poorest people, and that is why even the smallest support makes such a difference in these people's lives. All our work is done in the Spirit and love of the Lord Jesus Christ and we have had many people say how much their worldview has changed after time spent recovering at our Centre, and how much they have been affected by the compassion and care received, often after very negative experiences in their community. We are so grateful to all the wonderful staff at Kathmandu and Lalgadh who are salt and light amongst those they serve.

We greatly appreciate the support that many individuals, church groups and organizations have given us throughout the last year, whether financial or in prayer, and we hope that this brief review of our work through 2016 is an encouragement to you.

With our thanks, the NLT UK Team

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