EDITORIAL

STRATEGIC APPROACH TO OVERCOME THE BURDEN OF LEPROSY IN INDIA

Leprosy is the oldest disease known to mankind. It is a chronic infectious disease caused by mycobacterium leprae. Leprosy trends in prevalence and case- detection have varied widely among countries and within the country. India has almost half of the worldwide leprosy cases, distributed unevenly concentrated mainly in Southern states. There has been significant reduction in disease burden of leprosy in every country of the world including India. This achievement was made possible by implementation of multi drug therapy and intensified political commitment.

The Leprosy control programme in India was renamed in 1982 as the National Leprosy Eradication Programme [1]. The National Health Policy 2002 set the goal for elimination of leprosy. India is trying to achieve the elimination of leprosy as a health problem by reducing the prevalence to below l/l0,000 population[2]. It is possible to eliminate the leprosy but will take much longer time to eradicate the it where completely.

The most relevant epidemiological measure of the burden of leprosy is the incidence of disease. It is not feasible to measure the incidence of leprosy directly. Therefore, the "case-detection rate" is used as a proxy for the incidence. This may reflect under-reporting and thus the number of cases detected will be generally lower than the actual number. The other method could be related to the registered prevalence of leprosy eases which is useful indicator of leprosy elimination, but it is not adequate to reflect changes in epidemiological trend of leprosy. Special stigma related nature of the disease causing impairments and disabilities is another burden[3].

There is a clear consensus now that the world and countries are in a very favourable situation with regard to disease burden as measured by prevalence, transmission of disease as measured by case-detection and extent of disability due to leprosy as measured through the WHO grading system[4].

The WHO has recommended **global strategy** for further reducing the leprosy burden and sustaining leprosy control activities[5].

- Sustain leprosy control activities in all endemic countries.
- Use case detection as the main indicator to monitor progress.
- Ensure high-quality diagnosis, case management, recording and reporting in all endemic countries.
- Strengthen routine and referral services
- Discontinue the campaign approach
- Develop tools and procedures that are home/community-based, integrated and loeally appropriate for the prevention of disabilities/impairments and for the provision of rehabilitation services.
- Promote operational research in order to improve implementation of a sustainable strategy.
- Encourage supportive working arrangement with patients at all levels.

Based on these guidelines, India has taken initiative to accelerate leprosy elimination activities and to sustain quality leprosy services. The new paradigms in National Leprosy Eradication Programme focus on measuring disease burden, improving quality of services, integrated with primary Health Care system, prevention and management of impairments and disabilities, improving community awareness and involvement, support from National Rural Health Mission, programme monitoring and evaluation[6]. Implementation of these activities will result in reducing the leprosy case burden as well as minimize disease related stigma.

The progress achieved by Indian leprosy programme is commendable. The fall in case detection has been remarkable. Case detection rate came down from 3 1.1/10,000 during 2003 to 12.7/10,000 at the end of March, 2007. Prevalence rate of 2.4/10,000 at the beginning of 2004 plummeted to 0.72/10,000 population by March 2007[6]. India has made substantial progress in reducing the leprosy burden and has already achieved elimination of leprosy as a public health problem at national level. This is not the end to achieve the goal of leprosy elimination, another issue should be kept in mind that new cases keep coming even after elimination has been achieved. It appears that India, despite many hurdles, would not be the last country to reach the goal of leprosy elimination.

RECOMMENDED READING

1. ***Agarwal S.P.*** *Final push for elimination of leprosy in India. Indian JLepr 2005, 77;1l.V7*
2. ***Editorial.*** *The debate over leprosy elimination versus sustainability of leprosy services. Indian J. Lepr 2005, 77:299.*
3. ***Joshi P.L., Bharkakaty B.N, Throat D.M****. Recent developments in elimination of leprosy in India. Indian J. Lepr 2007, 79:107.*
4. ***Rao C.K.*** *Leprosy Elimination in India- so near. Indian J. Lepr 2005,73; 207*
5. ***WHO global*** *strategy for further reducing the leprosy burden and sustaining leprosy control activities. Indian J. Lepr 2006, 78:7.*
6. ***Thorat D.M and Joshi P.L.*** *Present status of NLEF in Indian and the paradigm changes. Indian J Lepr 2008, 80:69.*

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