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Media release

On the occasion of the 55th World Leprosy Day on 27 January 2008

What is the true number of people affected by leprosy?

Three to seven times more people affected by leprosy than indicated in the official statistics – this is the result of a study conducted by Leprosy Relief Emmaus Switzerland in two areas in India. Are these individual cases, or is this a systematic failing?

Leprosy is officially regarded as having been eliminated in India. That is to say, according to the WHO, fewer than one in 10,000 persons suffers from leprosy. The rapid reduction in the number of registered persons affected by leprosy in the last four years has been regarded with suspicion for some time. A study by Leprosy Relief in one urban and one rural area in Mumbai has confirmed these doubts: many more people were discovered to be suffering from leprosy than were recorded on the official register.

It is not the first time that the linear decline in the number of leprosy cases in the Indian statistics has given rise to discussion. This study, together with reports from witnesses in the field, indicate that the statistics have been massaged. The extent of these manipulations is unknown. Erroneous figures may have fatal consequences however. If they are too low, insufficient medicines may be delivered. People are unable to receive prompt treatment; they remain infectious for longer and are more likely to develop disabilities. This glossing over of the true situation is a by-product of the arbitrarily set elimination threshold of 1:10,000. Achieving this became an aim in itself.

It remains to hope that the many unregistered persons affected were still able to obtain treatment. It is however high time and a moral obligation on the persons responsible to determine the true number of people affected by leprosy. This is the only way in which those involved can ensure the availability and quality of leprosy treatment instead of chasing after a number.

At the same time, the successes achieved in the fight against leprosy must not be forgotten: effective medicines have been available since the 1980s. Millions of people have been cured. New infections are running at a fraction of their former levels. Education and early diagnosis have massively reduced the stigmatisation of sufferers. This was made possible through a major effort on the part of the WHO, governments, sponsors, leprosy charities and patients' organisations.

Nevertheless, past achievements must not be allowed to conceal the challenges that remain ahead. Many new cases are still occurring. There are still millions of people with enduring disabilities. In many countries, the incidence of leprosy has ceased to decline. Leprosy Relief sees no reason to celebrate the achievement of an arbitrarily established elimination threshold. It will only celebrate when leprosy is eliminated in the true sense of the word: that is to say exterminated.

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