

World Leprosy Day

Making Bangladesh a leprosy-free country

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The World Leprosy Day is observed on the last Sunday of January every year.

Leprosy Day was initiated in 1954 by French philanthropist and writer Raoul Follereau, as a means of raising global awareness of this ancient disease, and drawing public attention to the fact that it can be prevented, treated and cured.

Follereau believed that those affected by leprosy should receive the same respect, dignity and quality of care like any other patients. Additionally, he wanted greater awareness of the disease in order to change attitudes, superstitions and also remove the social stigma often associated with it.

People in poverty-stricken regions are affected most by leprosy due to poverty, social stigma and lack of proper medical facilities.

The date for World Leprosy Day was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination on January 30, 1948. Gandhi said, "Eliminating leprosy is the only work I have not been able to complete in my lifetime." For that reason, through World Leprosy Day, we hope that we can move closer to make his dream come true.

Leprosy is a chronic disease affecting the nerves and the skin. If not treated, sufferers can become blind, lose sensations in their hands and feet, and become prone to disability. Leprosy is one of the oldest diseases known to humankind.

It is also known as Hansen's disease, named after Norwegian physician Gerhard Henrik Armauer Hansen. He nullified the prevailing notion of the time that leprosy was a hereditary disease. He showed instead that the disease had a bacterial cause.

But the government declared Bangladesh leprosy-free in 2008. But there are approximately 30,000 people suffering from leprosy in the country. Annually, on an average, 4000 to 5000 cases are detected in the country. There are about 34,000 to 35,000 people in the country with deformity caused by leprosy.

There are no government health staffs in district- and upazila-level hospitals to treat leprosy. The relevant government health staffs are also not able to create public awareness at field levels. The general health professionals are unskilled and cannot detect leprosy.

Bangladesh has only three leprosy hospitals - a 30-bed leprosy hospital and institute at Mohakhali, Dhaka, 20-bed leprosy hospital in Nilphamari, and 80-bed leprosy hospital in Sylhet. But the facilities in these hospitals are reportedly inadequate.

The government, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, health workers and the media should team up in effective collaboration to make Bangladesh free from leprosy.

For leprosy-free Bangladesh, collective efforts must be taken to promote awareness for reducing the stigma and discrimination against people affected by leprosy. There should be a sustained interest of policy makers to encourage the involvement of general health services and other stakeholders in leprosy control.

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