EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCES ON LEPROSY: EXPERIENCES FROM A NON-GOVERNMENT HOSPITAL IN PARAGUAY

Editor

The Hospital Mennonita Km 81 is located in the oriental region of Paraguay and has been dedicated to the diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation of leprosy patients since 1951. It is a non-government hospital offering physical, social and spiritual help, whilst also educating leading members of society (college directors, teachers, trainers, nurses, pastors, professors and others) in order to reduce stigma and acquaint them with basic information about this disease.

Many educational conferences have been held between July 1997 and August 1999, with the participation of 1017 people. At the outset, participants were shown an 8-min film with general information on diagnosis, treatment, complications and rehabilitation. They then filled out a first questionnaire with the following main headings:

i. How does one acquire leprosy?
ii. What type of leprosy patient transmits the disease?
iii. Can you list some typical signs and symptoms?
iv. Is leprosy curable? If yes, how?
v. Where should one go (report) for leprosy treatment?
vi. Do you personally know anyone who has had the disease?

After a teaching session on the most important aspects of leprosy, including consideration of stigma and social aspects, the participants completed a second questionnaire, based on the following main headings:

i. What kind of people are mainly affected by leprosy?
ii. Would you drink tea with someone who suffers from leprosy?
iii. Would you shake the hand of an ex-leprosy patient? If yes, give reasons
iv. Would you buy or rent a house or roan from someone who has had leprosy?
v. Would you marry someone who has had a leprosy patient in the family?
vi. What would you do if a close relative developed leprosy?

Under each of these headings, for both the first and second questionnaire, we listed between 5 and 14 possible statements for consideration and answer.

We would be happy to supply detailed information from the large number of replies we recorded in these conferences, involving 1017 people, but the following are the most important conclusions:

1. 1.99% of all respondents knew that leprosy is curable with medical treatment.
2. The majority accepted that this disease has important social, spiritual and psychological elements (in addition to early diagnosis and chemotherapy).
3. However, even after teaching and instruction, accompanied by transparencies and other teaching aids, 19% still categorically refused to drink tea with a cured patient; 20% would not buy or rent a roan from a patient and 25% would not marry anyone with a leprosy patient in the family. Finally, 4.5% would avoid all forms of contact with a leprosy patient.

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Especially as many of the participants in these educational conferences had completed primary and secondary education (12 years in Paraguay), we have been both surprised and disappointed by the findings in (3) above. We conclude that there is a need for much more health education on leprosy, at least in this part of the country, to minimize stigma and improve the acceptance of leprosy patients in society.

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