

COVID-19: India's most vulnerable battle two infectious diseases at once as total countrywide lockdown continues.

As countries around the world continue to shut borders and impose restrictive travel measures, UK-based international charity Lepra is calling on the government for funding and support for those affected by leprosy.

COVID-19 poses a serious and life-threatening risk to those currently undergoing treatment for leprosy related reactions. These reactions can be unbearably painful and leave people affected with severe, life-changing disabilities.

Dr Barbara De Barros, clinical research fellow and doctor of infectious disease at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, says that COVID-19 could have a potentially devastating impact on those suffering from leprosy reactions.

“The corticosteroids used to treat leprosy reactions significantly alter the immune system. These people are at high risk of developing severe COVID-19 because of this.”

At present, over 60% of all cases of leprosy in the world are found in India. It is a serious, chronic, infectious disease that can vastly change a person's life.

Dr. Aparna Srikantam, head of research at Lepra's Blue Peter Health and Research Center in India, has said the situation on the ground is not good for those affected by leprosy.

“As a global health emergency, the COVID-19 outbreak has the possibility to seriously damage the already fragile healthcare system in India. We need help.

For leprosy patients, it is having a massive impact, as all non-emergent health conditions are discouraged from visiting hospitals and clinics.

The 21-day countrywide lockdown will be detrimental to those with leprosy. It will mean no availability of public transport and minimal staff working to treat patients. There is a very real danger that leprosy funding will be cut.

Our leprosy research is also being negatively impacted by COVID-19. Staff and patient movements are restricted by a national curfew and military intervention, leaving clinic and community based activities postponed indefinitely.”

The current pandemic will have far reaching consequences for our ability to support our colleagues in India with their work.

Geoff Prescott, Chief Executive of Lepra in the UK says, “At times like this, we are expecting a huge growth in prejudice. When people turn inwards, they often become quite insular and prejudices are stoked. Therefore, people with leprosy will catch COVID-19, but also extra prejudice.

People with leprosy are already marginalised from health services. We expect this to worsen with a COVID-19 diagnosis.”

Lepra is urgently seeking support from the government, and the general public, to help us in the fight against leprosy during this current pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of

immunocompromised leprosy patients, already suffering from reactions, are now also at risk of contracting COVID-19.

The events surrounding the current pandemic continue to rock the charity sector, and Lepra is not immune to this. We are appealing for continued support, in what is a difficult time.

It has never been more important to assist those who have so little.

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Notes for Editors

About Lepra and leprosy

Lepra is a UK-based international specialist charity that has been working to beat leprosy since 1924. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II became Patron of Lepra in 1952, shortly after the death of her father King George VI, who had been Lepra's Patron since the charity was founded in 1924.

Leprosy affects over 7 million people around the world. While leprosy can affect anyone, it particularly affects people who are already vulnerable for reasons of poverty, education, culture or other risk factors. Left untreated, leprosy can cause life-changing disabilities and attracts terrible prejudice and discrimination. **But there is a cure.**

Lepra works to beat leprosy in India, Bangladesh, Mozambique and Zimbabwe by finding, diagnosing and treating people affected by the disease. By raising awareness, pushing for early detection and supporting people living with disabilities caused by leprosy, Lepra works towards a day when this disease no longer destroys lives.

Last year, the charity reached 301,000 people through diagnosis, treatment and care. It reached a further 1.7 million people through health education and events to raise awareness of leprosy and other neglected diseases.

Find out more about Lepra on its website and social media channels:

Website: www.lepra.org.uk

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LepraUK>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LEPRAUK/>

You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/LEPRAHinA>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/LepraUK/>

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