

Surge in Indian COVID-19 cases threatens to derail vital medical intervention for vulnerable communities, despite vaccinations

COLCHESTER - UK

Lepra, the international leprosy charity with 600 staff in India, is increasingly concerned about the situation, as COVID-19 infections continue to grow exponentially.

With over 340,000 cases of COVID-19 reported in India in the past 24 hours, there are growing concerns that both the Government and private health care system is teetering under the weight of demand. Oxygen is running short and most hospitals are beyond capacity.

Of greatest concern is the situation for those affected by leprosy.

Geoff Prescott, Lepra's CEO, says, *"People with leprosy are already at the bottom of the global health system. They are subjected to social isolation, discrimination and rejection at every turn. COVID-19 has exacerbated this in all countries, not just India."*

Abdul Nasar, a 50-year-old leprosy patient, has been living with leprosy for 10 years and is disabled. He travelled to his nearest government hospital and stayed overnight waiting for 3 days.

He was then turned away.

Abdul says, *"They want us to register on the government portal, but I cannot understand it. I am afraid. I am worried I will not receive my vaccination."*

This weekend Lepra began implementing a COVID-19 vaccination project in India targeting the most vulnerable people in the community, of which people affected by leprosy make up 80%.

Prasant Naik, CEO of Lepra in India says, "People affected by leprosy are struggling to get vaccinated, so we will begin ensuring that they do. The most vulnerable should not be left behind again. We have to move fast to turn back the tide of this epidemic."

It costs Lepra £11,000 to have 800 of the most vulnerable vaccinated with both doses.

Lepra is recording **35 - 40% PCR positive results** from 140 COVID tests a day. Lepra began PCR testing for COVID-19 at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, utilising its 97 years of infectious disease experience at its Blue Peter Public Health and Research Centre in Hyderabad.

Of great concern is that Lepra's COVID testing facility, like many others in India, is finding that PCR cartridges and reagents are now in short supply.

Vilvanathan, a frontline worker at Lepra's BPHRC facility in Hyderabad, who is assisting with the sample collection, says, *"We are trying to support patients as best we can with sample collection so that patients will not suffer and will not spread the infection to others."*

One of our colleagues got sick even after vaccination so we are quite concerned at the frontline. The spreading of the disease is increasing. Testing is the best way to stop the infection from spreading."

On any given day, 4% of Lepra's vital staff are sick with COVID-19 despite having full PPE and both doses of vaccine.

Dr Srikantam, Head of Research for Lepra in India, explains, *"Our working hours are very long, but we cannot stop. We test every person who comes to us, we turn no one away. It's a snowball effect; the more positive cases we have, the more contacts we must test and the higher the numbers rise."*

With testing, hospitals and health staff all over-stretched in India, the only solution is to accelerate vaccination to prevent infection or reduce the severity of symptoms that people may feel. Therefore, Lepra's staff are this weekend beginning to ensure that the most vulnerable of all, those who are subject to discrimination and neglect begin to also receive vaccinations.

Geoff Prescott, Lepra CEO, says, "The only solution to COVID-19 is global vaccination. The more the cases, the more the mutations. It is a global problem not a national problem. We all need to pull together to vaccinate the world."

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Notes for Editors

About Lepra

Our Vision: A world free from prejudice and disability due to leprosy

We are a secular leprosy charity. Lepra is open to all religions, races, classes, gender and nationalities. We support the most marginalised or ignored people in the world, those with leprosy and lymphatic filariasis (LF).

Since our foundation in 1924, we have been evidence-led. This culminated in the pioneering use of Dapsone, bringing to the world the first cure for leprosy.

Lepra works to beat leprosy in India, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe by finding, diagnosing. Treating and supporting people affected by leprosy and LF.

Last year, Lepra reached 260,893 people through diagnosis, treatment and care. We reached a further 995,659 people through health education around leprosy and other neglected diseases.

Our Patron is Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Find out more about Lepra on our 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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