

Lesson Sharing 1: Providing Holistic Care – recognising the importance of mental health in rehabilitation

Anandaban Hospital, near Kathmandu, Nepal prides its self not just on catering for the medical needs of its clients, but also ensuring that their psychological and spiritual needs are met too. A diagnosis of leprosy can leave someone in despair, concerned about their future and their acceptance by family and society. Providing holistic leprosy care is more than just making sure people are treated for the disease. It is also about helping them to feel valued and loved; providing them with the opportunity to discuss issues that are troubling them and share their experience, so they have the inner resources to live life in all its fullness.

At Anandaban hospital every person who is newly diagnosed with leprosy and every new in-patient are provided with counselling. This is not meant to be a health awareness session about leprosy, its treatment and potential complications, although these are often discussed as part of the conversation. It is about helping the person to talk through their feelings and their fears, busting the myths associated with the disease and supporting people to realise that they are loved by God and are valued. It's about developing their self-esteem and enabling them to develop a positive outlook on life, having dreams for the future.



Group counselling Session at Anandaban Leprosy Hospital

Ruth, Anandaban's counsellor, has background of psychology studies and training in counselling, as well as many years practical experience of listening to and supporting people going through challenging times. Psychological support at Anandaban may be one-to-one with the counsellor; group counselling where a group of people each share their concerns or experiences and support each other; or peer counselling where

two clients of the same sex, of similar age groups and culture support each other. Ruth also undertakes bed-to-bed visits to the patients, follow-up counselling, pre and post operational counselling and pays home visit to patients, as well as providing spiritual nurturing. All these types of counselling are an opportunity to open up, share their fears and concerns, and work through solutions in a safe environment, with someone who cares about their wellbeing.

The hospital has just one trained counsellor. Providing psychological support for a whole hospital can't just rely on one person. Therefore the majority of nurses have also had basic counselling training, with annual refresher training. The training is very practical and covers active-listening, questioning skills and handling the emotional pressures of providing

counselling, so key staff in close contact with the clients can also provide this essential support. They are encouraged to keep verbatim records of their discussions that can then be shared with the counsellor, who can work with the client further if required. Since some of the staff who have been trained are affected by leprosy themselves they are able to build the trust of clients in a special way and share from their own experiences.

This priority for catering for the mental health of its clients was scaled up following the recent earthquake. Many people came to Anandaban Hospital who had suffered acute trauma. Parents had lost children, young people lost limbs and their hopes for the future, children were badly injured, lost their friends, had been buried under rubble and had their homes destroyed. Many had nightmares about the quakes or could not sleep. Some sat in silence, without eating, in a cloud of despair.



Trauma Counselling

The counsellor coordinated debriefing sessions for staff and patients who had been affected by the earthquakes with support from Elijah Counselling Training Centre. These group sessions were an opportunity to share their experience, work through their grief and support each other.

As the staff started to reach out into the earthquake-affected communities, to provide emergency relief camps, they realised the need for someone on the team to be equipped to provide psychological support. Therefore, four field staff received two days Basic Trauma Counselling Skills Training for emergency relief workers. Every medical screening camp conducted did not just provide medicines, dressings and referrals but also a chance to speak to someone about the trauma they had experienced.

This was a good first step, but one counselling session is not enough to support people who have been through such traumatic circumstances. Therefore plans are in place to provide community volunteers 5-days counselling training in the coming month so in the future they can provide ongoing support close to those in need.

This community-based model for providing ongoing psychological support may be something that could be modelled elsewhere, not just in situations of acute trauma, but also to provide ongoing support for people struggling with the low self-esteem and stigma that is often the result of a diagnosis of leprosy.