“Bone-Nibblers Please” ... a Hand-Reconstructive-Surgery Week

at Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital, Nepal

“Bone nibblers please” requests Dr Donald quietly, though never taking his magnifying-spectacled eyes off the tiny gleaming white bony prominence that is peeping through a complex tangle of tendons, arteries and nerves of IndraKala’s surgically-opened hand.

Malati, our scrub-nurse, quickly places the shining metal bone-nibblers, handles first, in Dr Donald’s gloved hand. Crunch crunch, nibble nibble... and the leprosy-distorted eroded bones of one of Indrakala’s stumpy fingers are tidied up, as Dr Donald, assisted by our Dr Lama, then begins the task of carefully dividing muscle tendons from still functioning fingers and transplanting them into the tiny unused wasted muscles on her bad fingers, carefully reconstructing her hand.

Fffzzzzzzzzzzzztt... goes the cauthery machine as Dr Donald seals off the last of the bleeders. And after two and a half hours of fine reconstructive surgery, he sews Indrakala’s hand with fine 6-O suture thread, so fine it’s hard to see, then he bandages it from fingers to elbow with plenty of gauze padding and crepe bandage, and finally applies a plaster cast to keep it secure for the next 2 weeks.

And so goes our hand-reconstructive-surgery week at Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital! – and it keeps us all busy-up-to-the eyeballs non-stop throughout this entire week!

Of course, it’s been planned for the preceding nine months, with actively preparing for the past month – sending messages out through our Community Programme network and radio broadcasts over south-eastern Nepal, encouraging folks with any sort of hand deformities – not just leprosy: to come here this week, no matter how poor or deformed, to get their hands fixed, operated on, repaired with excellent reconstructive specialist surgery. This sort of specialist surgery is way beyond what’s available in Nepal, and most people in Nepal are far too poor to even imagine seeking such surgery,... especially if you have leprosy.

And this is all possible because a warm-hearted well-known British hand-surgeon - Dr Donald Sammut - who normally runs a specialist hand reconstructive surgery and plastic surgery practice in London, Windsor, and Bath, has come to Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital. Dr Nola – his surgical registrar has come to assist too. He’s a great guy – he heard about Lalgadh Hospital a couple of years ago, and offered his free services, and came for the first time last year. It was an immense success with a flood of needy patients turning up. So much so that he is back again this year, bringing some specialised fine surgical instruments with him for Lalgadh Hospital – instruments way beyond our reach here. And in both operating himself, and training our doctors in these fine hand-surgery techniques, he operates intensively throughout the week on deformed hands, all day every day for the entire seven days period he is here.
Leprosy is a major horrible mangler-distorter-deformer-disabler of hands (and feet) here in Nepal... even in kids. So this week provides a terrific chance for many leprosy-affected patients – children, teenagers, adults and elderly – to have some really expert reconstructive surgery, beyond what our surgeons can normally do, to bring many deformed hands closer to normality.

But then it’s not just leprosy deformities. There are many other untreated hand deformities here in Nepal, largely because there is no-one here with the expertise to treat them, or they are too poor to afford what is available in any case. They include unimaginable deformities difficult to show you here.... congenital deformities, burns, crush injuries, nerve damage, and several other conditions.

Ragini aged 9 – congenital hand malformation

Sakila aged 14 (she thinks) – losing both her hands and her eyes due to leprosy. She’s never been to school. Life can be so awfully unfair.
Ever think life’s unfair sometimes? Then imagine little Sakila’s situation. Sakila thinks she is 14 but is not quite sure. She can’t read or write because she has never been to school.... her family is very poor, and she was excluded from school because they guessed she had leprosy. She is losing her hands and her eyes from leprosy ... hopefully we have caught her just in time to rescue both.

Amongst those coming for hand surgery this week, we have a large number of children affected by leprosy.... can you imagine! Kids with leprosy hand deformities.... some with eroding disappearing fingers, others with their the feeling and function disappearing and fingers curling over into a claw hand... all coming in the hope that reconstructive surgery might save their hands.

A couple of days post-operative, the kid were up and running around the ward. So yesterday we got out the remaining cards ... we still have about 17 cards left of those that Suzanna and Douglas brought from the Geneva Sunday-School kids. We sat our kids down here, spread out the cards, and got them to choose whichever one they liked best. They were sooooooooo excited as you can see in the pictures. What still amazes us is that all the kids in these pictures her - except for Ragini the happy little girl in yellow who had a severely congenitally deformed hand – are all leprosy-affected kids and all have deformed hands due to leprosy. Leprosy is still such a major problem here!

Happy post-operative children – the joy and thrill of getting hand-drawn coloured “Get-Well-Soon” cards, sent with care and love from children of the Sunday-School, Church of Scotland, Geneva

What still amazes us is that all the kids you see in these pictures here - except for Ragini – that’s the happy little girl in yellow who has had her severely congenitally deformed hand amazingly reconstructed – these are all leprosy-affected kids and all have deformed hands due to leprosy. Leprosy is still such a major problem here!

But then that’s why Lalghad Leprosy Hospital is the world’s busiest leprosy hospital.... nearly 1,000 new leprosy patients each year, more than 6,000 returning leprosy patients each year, and 55,000 outpatients of all sorts and rising – leprosy affected people plus malnutrition, malaria, meningitis, typhoid, tuberculosis, respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases, and many others... mostly poverty-
related diseases. This whole area of the southeast region of Nepal and across the border in Bihar and West Bengal in India seem to be the world’s hottest hotspot for leprosy.

One of those undergoing reconstructive hand surgery is 35-year old Indra Kala... some of you may well remember seeing her rescue-story just over a year ago. She caught leprosy when she was 22, and from that time had lived for 12 years hidden – banished, out of human contact – hidden in a dark windowless room at the back of her mother’s mud house, with a hole in the wall for her to quietly exit and re-enter at night, like a little mouse. Stigmatised, marginalised, rejected by her, village, her community, and even her own family except for her mother, who kept her fed in the little “cave” in the back of the house. Her hands, her feet and her eyes are all severely damaged by leprosy.

We had to amputate Indra Kala’s right foot a year ago as it was so deformed and ulcerated, and her left foot (which we thought might need amputation) is now ready for reconstructive surgery and still needs repair, but will probably be OK. Both her hands and wrists need surgical reconstructive repair too, so we brought her into Lalgarh Hospital this week. Dr Donald operated on her right hand yesterday. It was a complicated multi-procedure operation needing four different procedures on the one hand and wrist... it took three hours. Here’s her pictures... she is one brave lady. I’ll update you further on her long, courageous path to recovery in a few weeks, perhaps when we take her right-hand plaster off and see what sort of reconstructive miracle has been performed.

So doesn’t leprosy make you weep? Hits me sometimes (when no-one is watching of course)... especially when it’s kids affected, because one knows it has usually wrecked their lives at that stage. Nerve damage of leprosy is irreversible even after it is “cured” with a year’s medication. We do our best with reconstructive surgery if we catch the deformities of hands, eyes and feet early
enough, so they then can look normal and function better. Yet they have still permanently lost the feeling and sensation in hands or feet, and it means that for the rest of their lives they need to be extra extra extra vigilant about injuries and blisters and ulcers on hands and feet that they can’t feel. and daily eye care too if they have leprosy-damaged eyes.

Of course if you are poor and pull a rickshaw in the town, or live in a village and have to plant rice, do hard manual farm work, gather and break stones, collect firewood or fodder for the goats everyday... inevitably blisters and ulcers that you can’t even feel develop on hands and feet. And unless you are terribly careful, ulcers and infection gradually erode your toes and feet and fingers and hands and even eyes ... and your family and friends suspect you are “a leper”, and the downward spiral of misery and rejection grinds on, and no-one wants you around.... and repeated hospital stays and ultimately amputations are almost inevitable.

Hey folks! ...Christmas is coming in just a few weeks ... mostly unrecognised and uncelebrated here as people just get on with their busy lives some struggling to survive - rather like in Jesus’ day, when He arrived, largely unrecognised. At Lalgadh Hospital we’ll be celebrating, singing, sharing gifts with the patients and singing Nepalese carols out in the nearby villages like Sukumbasi, doing our best to spread the happiness and Good News and amazing significance of the miracle of Christmas and God’s love.

A wonderful Christmas present for our hand surgery patients will be the removal of their protective plaster and bandages, removal of the sutures, and seeing the reconstructed “mini-miracle” of their new hands for the first time.

Some of the younger happy post-operative hand-surgery patients (all leprosy-affected) waiting excitedly for their Christmas “mini-miracle”, when the plaster and bandages comes off and sutures removed, and movement is regained with physiotherapy.

Then it’s intense physiotherapy as they learn to use their hands again. They all stay here at the hospital for 8 weeks ... so I’ll tell you about this and joy and excitement of their Christmas here when all this happiness happens.

But this is again to say three huge “Thankyous” to (a) the Sunday School children.... I remember most of you from your beeeeeautiful hand-drawn cards though I know I’ve missed some of you (sorry)...... Estelle, Marcos, Ruben, Max, Charlotte, Emilie, Beatrix, Max, Shona, Oscar, Morven and several others too, and a big thankyou also to (b) Suzanna and Douglas for coming all the way to Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital and bringing the cards with them.... and then (c) a huge humble grateful Thankyou to all of you in the whole church family for your caring, your prayers, your support and your encouragement.... it would be impossible for us to continue here without these.

And if any of you, dear readers and Church family, feel moved in your hearts to want to help with a special something at Christmas for this front-line leprosy healing work here at Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital .... here are 3 suggestions ... well, just in case.... because any help towards these three things will be of enduring, long-lasting value ... and if I don’t tell you about it, you’ll never know (PS. Lalgadh Hospital’s Bank details are at:  http://www.lalgadh.org/Bank/Blank.html, or drop me an e-mail clugstong@gmail.com).

- This Hand-Reconstructive-Surgery week ... this surgery week is costing us a total of 9800 CHF largely because we treat all leprosy patients free, as well as very poor patients (which most are). Dr Donald’s services are free, so this cost covers eight weeks hospital stay for 27 patients, plus medications, anaesthetics, bandages, plaster of Paris, syringes, drips, wire implants etc etc (ie. It’s on average 363 CHF per patient.... pretty good for a complicated operation plus weeks stay in hospital with medications and physiotherapy! Try that in Geneva!). It amounts to a total of 9800 CHF that we need to find, with the Good Lord’s help.

- Training a Staff Nurse ... we have just sent one of our fine Christian junior nurses to fulfil the dream of her life.... to do the 3-Year BN Staff Nurse Training... she’ll come back and be a cornerstone of Lalgadh Hospital’s Nursing Staff for many years to come. Total cost for her complete 3-year training (tuition fees, books, living expenses) is 7230 CHF....and we suggested to her we would try to find ½ of her costs (4820 CHF).
• Baby resuscitation trolley & warmer ... for the new Maternity-Delivery unit when it opens early next year, because at the moment we often have difficulty resuscitating newborn babies – especially the malnourished, low-birthweight ones - if they are in difficulty at birth, needing oxygen, suction, assisted breathing, warmth, light, ... that’s what the resuscitation trolley can provide. It costs 3500 CHF.

Happy happy post-operative Aarati (10, and no longer in tears) and Sarita (12) with their “Get-Well-Soon” cards, – and waiting for their Christmas mini-miracle.

So we send you all our warmest wishes, along with our grateful thanks – from the children, patients, and the Lalgadh Team - for your continuing encouragement, prayers and support .... and we pray that God’s rich blessings be on you all and your families as the wonder of Christmas time approaches.

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