Leprosy in Vietnam: Over the Years

By Mai-Khanh Tran, MD

As we approach more than a decade and a half of working with lepers in Vietnam, I want to remind you of why we are there and to inspire you with stories of changes that have brightened my heart.

Leprosy is unlike any other disease. The disease ravages your body with disfigurement beyond imagination. It gives you constant pain over many seemingly unending years. It robs you of every physical feature that makes you human. Yet it does not stop there. The disease also affects your family, generation after generation. It robs them of their livelihood and their future. Leprosy can be treated with available medicine but the physical and social ills of the disease are hard to eradicate.

We are in Vietnam to help the lepers because we know that leprosy has to be treated with medicine and love and commitment. We have been chipping away at the problem, slowly but surely, over the past 15 years. Small acts of assistance have brought on significant changes, two of which have made lasting impressions on me.

First, the sores once synonymous with leprosy are almost gone. On my trip to Vietnam two months ago, I was struck by the lack of stench and the absence of festering sores that used to overwhelm me when I see the lepers, whether they are in large camps or remote villages. The sores on the elderly patients in some of the camps are now minimal thanks to the caretakers we have hired, the once unbearable stench at their bedside now more manageable. The large sores at the bottom of the feet of young lepers in the central highlands are almost non-existent. The deformities are still there but there are no signs of acute infections. The wounds are clean and dry, not festering and fresh, enough for me to feel comfortable touching their limbs with ungloved hands. And this is true villages after villages. I attribute this amazing change to the years of wound-care teaching and the customized sandals we have provided lepers in the central highlands.

Secondly, the children of the lepers now see brighter future. Because we have been providing scholarships over the past 15 years, many of the children of lepers, about to drop out of schools when we first reached them, are now in college. We count a handful of doctors, engineers, professors as our success stories. I remember one shy little girl, standing in line to get help with her leper grandmother ten years ago, now a confident young college student. She said she never thought such dream would be possible for someone like her. Such a statement and the transformation I witnessed brought tears to my eyes. Other leper children, especially those receiving college scholarships, told me that they feel less ashamed, less ostracized, and more confident of their future. Seeing their bright and happy faces warmed my heart as they are the pictures of our achievement.

The defining features of leprosy—the sores and the shame—are slowly being chipped away by our work in Vietnam. But it is only a small dent toward eradication. Please continue to support us so that small acts of care and kindness can bring about more monumental changes in the years to come.