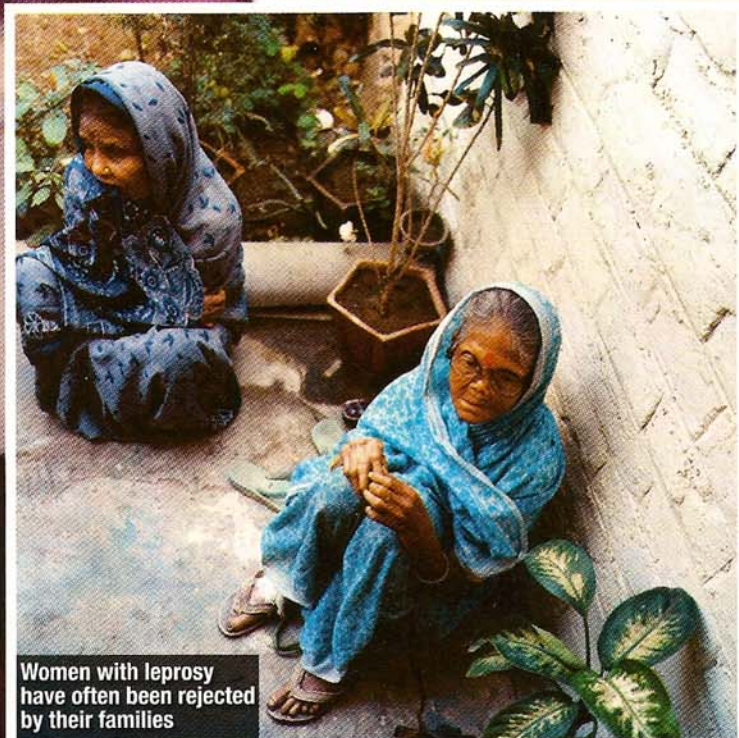


BEYOND THE CALL OF CHARITY

Even when Leah Pattison, right, was diagnosed with leprosy herself, she refused to leave the women who needed her most

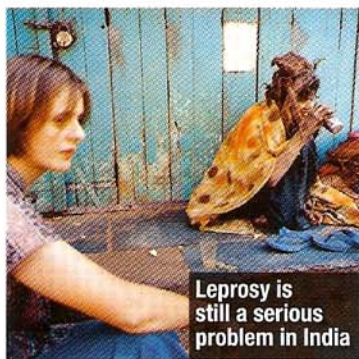


Women with leprosy have often been rejected by their families

‘When I was told I had leprosy I burst into tears. I was so scared’



PHOTOS: LIMPUS; GETTY IMAGES/REUTERS; SHUTTERSTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK



Leprosy is still a serious problem in India

It was only a tiny lesion on her wrist. But for Leah Pattison, who noticed the rash just days before her 25th birthday, it was to prove a pivotal moment in her life.

For the university graduate, who had been working tirelessly with victims of leprosy in the Indian city of Nagpur, realised she had finally caught the chronic disease that infects nearly 300,000 new victims each year. And having nursed sufferers for two years, she was only too aware of its debilitating consequences.

'It can cause nerve damage so you lose all sensation in your hands and feet as well as developing extreme deformities and awful ulcers,' she says. She initially dismissed the patch on her wrist as eczema, 'So when I was told I had leprosy I burst into tears. I was scared, but in a way it was a good thing. That was a turning point when I knew I had to keep helping others who had it.'



Leah says she's not a Mother Teresa type

When, Leah, now 34, told her parents they begged her to come back to Britain, but she was determined to continue her work.

Leah first went to India in 1995, on a year out after university, to teach English to young girls at a leprosy colony. She was just 23.

'As a foreigner, I thought I would be treated as an honoured guest,' she says. 'Instead I was shown to a rat-infested room with a broken basin and a bare mattress on the stone floor.'

The next few weeks were no easier. Only one person in the colony spoke English and Leah, from County Durham, hadn't learned Hindi or the local dialect, Marathi. Although Leah had prepared herself for the deformities that leprosy inflicts, one patient – who had lost her

Doctors told us to leave one woman to die but we managed to save her'

lower lip, so her tongue sprawled out of her mouth – made her recoil in horror.

'However much I wanted to help people, I just couldn't bring myself to stay,' she recalls. 'I'm a hypochondriac, am obsessed with cleaning and I care about how I look. I'm hardly your typical Mother Teresa type.'

But after visiting a hostel for girls and young women affected by leprosy, Leah felt she had to do something. 'When I heard the traumatic stories of their mothers being beaten and thrown out by their fathers, it was very humbling.'

Leah also learnt that, in India, leprosy is seen as a punishment for the sins of a past life and female sufferers are often shunned by their families.

Leah returned home after six months, but couldn't forget one of the girls she had met. Usha Patil was a shy 19-year-old who had been in the colony since the age of 10 with a case of leprosy so severe that, as a child, she couldn't eat, sleep, lie down or bear the touch of clothes on her body.

As a result, over the next three-and-a-half years Leah continued to return to the colony, selling her possessions to fund her trips.

Even her own diagnosis didn't

stop her. 'Leprosy is a completely curable disease,' says Leah. 'It's easy to treat and the medication is free. So when I got it I knew I was still in a much better situation than these girls.'

Leah was treated in the leper colony for nine months on a simple course of drugs and her symptoms did not progress beyond the patch on her wrist and numbness in her hand. They disappeared completely after just three months. It was the ease with which she recovered which inspired her to continue in her aid work.

In August 2000, three years after Leah was cured, she and Usha joined forces to set up the charity Start to help Nagpur's slum-dwelling lepers.

Leah explains: 'We now spend our days dressing the women's sores, providing them with food, clean clothes and housing. But not all of the patients welcome our help. After years of being shunned by all around them, many of the women are depressed and hostile.'

'When we found one woman, Mina, she was wrapped in filthy rags with a maggot-infested wound in her head. She was close to death.'

Although doctors told Leah and Usha to let Mina die, they refused to abandon her. 'We cleaned the wound every day, gave her medicine, fed and clothed her. She's made an amazing recovery.'

As a result Leah and Usha launched a new charity, Women in Need, to tackle a whole range of medical problems. But despite having lunch with the Queen in 2004 alongside 200 other women of achievement, Leah doesn't think what she is doing is above and beyond the call of duty.

'People are amazed that I've carried on doing this work despite contracting leprosy,' says Leah. 'But there's still so much that I need to do.'

Dan Roberts

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Contact Leah's mother, Sandra Pattison, on 01388 528497 or visit www.leahpattison.org Or you can send cheques or postal orders to Sandra Pattison, Frosterley Cottage, Intake Lane, Frosterley, Bishop Auckland, Co Durham DL13 2TH

BRITAIN'S MOST INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN

The children's saviour

During a holiday to The Gambia, Anita Smith, 50, a mother-of-three from Kettering, Northants, was shocked to discover the state of the country's hospitals. On her return to the UK she persuaded Kettering Hospital to send its redundant equipment to The Gambia. Anita has since helped to transform the children's ward at Bansang into the best facility in Africa.



Risking her life to help

Kids for Kids, the charity founded by Patricia Parker, a 58-year-old from Dorking, Surrey, transforms children's lives in Sudan.

Last year the charity supplied enough goats to give 11,000 children milk. Even though Patricia was taken by the Sudanese Liberation Army and held for 24 hours last February, she refuses to back down.



Britain's best foster mum

Four kids would be enough for most women – but not for Carole Hall, who while raising her own children has fostered 320 more over the last 18 years. Carole and her husband John, 52, have given over their Victorian house in Malden, Suffolk, to a constant stream of disadvantaged children.

Carole says: 'I'd like to see 700 through our doors before we stop.'

