

Letter from Himalaya

Himalayan Institute Hospital and Medical City

A new model of health care and education

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The Himalayan Institute is one of the first accredited medical schools in India, integrating both modern and traditional medicine. Adjacent to the school is a 700-bed hospital, serving approximately 10 million people from the neighbouring towns and villages. A range of inpatient and outpatient services, including a “combined therapy program” (CTP) forms a vital part of the institute. Services include biofeedback, yoga, nutrition, counseling, breathing, relaxation, meditation, and self-awareness techniques.

With its integration of different medical systems, especially with respect to such illnesses as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, and age-related disorders, the CTP has become the focus of current research at the institute. Specific programs are also being developed to study the various pharmacologic agents used in traditional medical systems, such as ayurveda (Indian science of medicine), to treat women’s illnesses, arthritis, and neurologic and chronic respiratory conditions. With the focus on physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of health, this institute continues to attract international attention for its unique therapeutic and educational health care initiatives.



Modern and traditional medicine under one roof: *The Himalayan Institute is one of the first accredited medical schools in India.*

Establishing the Rural Development Institute

The most impressive aspect of the institute’s work is its rural outreach program that serves about 100 000 people living in the Garhwal region of northern India. People in these rural and remote mountainous areas have little or no access to medical care. Travel is difficult, and those in need of medical attention die before reaching a hospital. With initial funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, the Rural Development Institute (RDI) project

was started in 1991 and today, through its 16 remote centres, serves approximately 300 villages with basic health care services, education, and income-generation programs, all installed at the village level.

The health care component of the RDI is provided by mobile medical clinics run by general practitioners, specialists, and paramedics. Basic health care services and information about areas such as appropriate shelter, externally ventilated stoves, clean water, effective sanitation, child care, immunization, and prenatal care are emphasized. Ongoing projects on women and child health, health fairs, school health, and water and environmental sanitation are described below.

A little knowledge goes a long way

Because women who know more about health promotion are more likely to make better decisions on matters affecting their own and their family’s health, the RDI has made women and children’s health care an important focus. The women and children health care project, funded by Indian national and state governmental agencies, currently runs 12 clinics

Letter from Himalaya

that disseminate information, education, and counseling, all implemented at the village level. The “bottom-up approach” is encouraged, where village health committees choose local people to be trained as health service providers. These village health workers enable the community to assume responsibility and ownership for sustaining health care services in the future.

Health fairs are set up to manage common illnesses, to refer complicated cases to the base hospital, and to increase awareness of health facilities and their use in the underserved population. Through partnership with the Government of India’s Department of Health and Family Welfare, the RDI provides six health fairs throughout the state of Uttar Pradesh.

In 1996, the RDI started a school health project that provides health screening and services to primary schoolchildren. Innovative audiovisual aids, such as puppetry, debates, and quiz games, are used to teach health and hygiene to children.

The water and environmental sanitation project forms an essential part of health promotion (surveys show that three out of five people in developing countries do not have access to safe drinking water). With partial funding from the World Bank, this project is currently being carried out in 50 villages in the hill districts of northern India. Water purification and storage practices are taught to avoid the spread of waterborne diseases, such as dysentery, cholera, and hepatitis. Self-reliance and community involvement in planning, constructing, and maintaining proper sanitation is encouraged.



Access to medical care: *Using a small-scale model, a project worker explains how mobile medical clinics operate in mountainous regions where people have little or no access to medical care.*



Rural outreach programs offer health care education: *Since its establishment about 10 years ago, the Rural Development Institute serves approximately 300 villages with basic health care services, education, and other activities, all at the local level.*

Letter from Himalaya

Approximately 10% of the costs of the project are carried by the community.

Ongoing education health workers

The education component of the RDI includes ongoing health education for nurses, certification programs for village health workers, and traditional birth attendant training in safe deliveries. A reduction in maternal and infant deaths has been observed over the last few years as a result of these programs. Other positive outcomes include awareness of better nutrition, family planning, protection against sexually transmitted diseases,

and respect for female children. Recent reports show an increase in immunization rates by 35% over the last 5 years.

As women's education and incomes are important factors in the use of health care services, RDI's income-generation programs were introduced to provide women members of rural families with opportunities for self-employment. Technical guidance and training for women in literacy and skills for generating income include a 6- to 12-month course on stitching, embroidery, and tailoring; a 6-month typing course; courses in beekeeping; and training in incense stick and chalk making.

Future challenges of the RDI include expanding funding and finding ways to improve health care access and delivery for the population. For further information about the RDI, contact Director, c/o Rural Development Institute, Himalayan Institute Hospital, Jolly Grant, Dehradun 248140, U.P. India. ❖

Dr Murty practises family medicine in Ottawa, Ont. She was recently invited to speak on the role of traditional medicine in modern medical practice at the Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences, located in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

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