



Dr Saw Wah Htoo, joking with his students

Busy in Burma

Simon Watkinson witnesses the many leprosy projects emanating from Mawlamyine Christian Leprosy Hospital

I wouldn't recommend the twelve hour, 240 mile drive, from Burma's Rangoon airport to the Christian Leprosy and Reconstructive Surgery Hospital (MCLH) in Mawlamyine, to anyone with a fragile stomach. The 'road', mostly a mass of potholes, passed through mud hut villages and crossed over the mystical 1,000 mile long Salween river, which springs in China and meanders through Burma and Thailand. The latter part of this wonderfully scenic route dissects paddy fields, coconut, banana and mango plantations and passes through a breathtakingly rugged, mountainous landscape dotted with gold embossed pagodas.

Burma was indeed a land of surprises. Never before had I seen diesel poured straight from a tin jug through a muslin funnel into the fuel tank. I was also astonished to learn that the cost of a motor car, US \$20,000, was equivalent to an average worker's lifetime's earnings.

The quality of leprosy care and treatment available at MCLH, which has been overseen by Medical

Superintendent Dr Saw Wah Htoo since 1978, was impressive. Numerous leprosy control activities also run from there, the only Christian mission hospital in Myanmar not to be nationalized by the military regime.

Training

Every three months, the hospital is visited by groups of twenty-five students between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six. They come from three states close to the Thai border, which are within a 250-mile radius of the hospital. During their three month stay these volunteers, who are financed by either their churches or parents, learn about leprosy, primary health care, dermatology, tropical diseases and community based rehabilitation. After this time, they return home with a qualification to monitor leprosy and diagnose cases of the disease in their villages, administer MDT and refer severely advanced cases to the nearest clinic. They earn consultation fees from their services and are an invaluable asset to their remote villages.

Visionary

The morning after my arrival, I caught up with Dr Saw to find out more about his involvement with TLM.

'As medical superintendent at Mawlamyine,' he began, 'I have to wear many hats! First, I have to be a spiritual leader and take the devotions in Chapel before we start work at 8 a.m. Once at work, I will treat people in the Outpatients Department, perform either septic or reconstructive surgery and then finish with administration.'

Before joining TLM in 1977, he had worked for six years as a GP in Pangling, a small town nearby. He was trained in leprosy and reconstructive surgery at Salur and Naini in India and appointed medical officer at MLCH in 1978.

'I wanted to become a missionary doctor and leprosy is a very challenging disease. I joined TLM because it is a Christian organisation,' Dr Saw told me.

Serving her community,
Khin Nyo



see leprosy patients with recurring ulcers who don't follow your advice!

'I don't think leprosy will be eliminated before

2005,' he went on. 'The biggest challenge for TLM's work in Burma is the establishment of economic rehabilitation schemes for leprosy patients.'

Self-enhancement

The community based rehabilitation (CBR) schemes set up in ten villages near to the hospital by Dr Zaw Moe Aung in June 2001 are now flourishing and transforming the lives of over 150 people and their dependants.

Khin Nyo (pictured above with her daughter Hnin Wutyee) is twenty-six and married with

three children.

She used to work in the hospital selling dried fish. Her father is a former leprosy patient. She received a 10,000 Kyat loan from the CBR scheme to set up a shop, which sells sweets, cigarettes, soap powder, vegetables, spices and tomatoes. [1300 Kyat = £1, Ed].

After visiting these villages, I started to dread the imminent joint-stiffening journey back to Rangoon. But then the look of sheer joy and relief on the faces of those who had been helped by TLM seemed to make it all worthwhile. ■



'Ready for action!,' Dr Zaw Moe Aung (right) and Kyaw Tun Aye, a local Pastor, who oversees the running of the projects

'I really enjoy performing reconstructive surgery for leprosy patients. It's the best job as you soon see results,' he added. 'But it's really frustrating when you

In November 2002, over 200 cataract operations were performed at Mawlamyine Christian Leprosy Hospital.

