

Coping five months after the earthquake in Pakistan

Tuberculosis (TB) is a curable disease but death rates in Pakistan are among the highest in the world and efforts to control the disease are a serious challenge. The earthquake in October that killed 73 000 people has also made the challenge of treating TB even more difficult.



Winter weather and snow are making an already difficult situation worse for people who survived the earthquake. Many are looking forward to the Spring when they can truly begin rebuilding their homes and their lives.



In the meantime, the World Health Organization (WHO) is working with the Ministry of Health to help the affected population. Dr Bushra Shams, TB Program Officer for WHO in Pakistan-administered Kashmir transmits TB data by phone to the WHO office in Islamabad from the only remaining hospital in Muzaffarabad, the Abbas Institute of Medical Sciences,.



The Shams family home was destroyed by the earthquake. "My family simply can't afford to rent one of the remaining houses. We have started to rebuild but it will take quite some time and money to complete," explains Dr Shams, "The winter is very rough up here in Kashmir. When a strong wind blows it feels like the tent is about to fly away. When it rains or snows, water seeps in. Before the earthquake we loved the snow, but not anymore".



Dr Shams' ten-year-old daughter, Maryam, finds it hard living in a tent. "It is so cold and the blankets we have are not good enough for the harsh winter nights. It's like sleeping directly under the sky," she says.



Many of the tents used by earthquake survivors are not designed for the harsh winter conditions in the Kashmir mountains and they collapse under the weight of snow or in heavy wind and rain.



Schools have reopened in Muzaffarabad, but are now operating in tents. Despite the many remaining hardships, most of the children are happy to return to class.



Dr Shams' eleven-year old daughter, Mirra, attends class in one of the tented schools. "It was so boring not to go to school, I'm working hard to get good grades; my dream is to be a gynecologist," says Mirra. "I have a lot of faith in the future. After some time Muzaffarabad will be the same as it was before"



A TB patient consults Dr Shams. In the earthquake-affected areas, there were more than 7800 new TB cases registered during the first half of 2005. There are an estimated total of 18 000 cases, half of which are considered highly contagious.



Dr Shams does an inventory of the medicine supply while a patient waits for a prescription. As the TB centre was destroyed, medicines continue to be stored and dispensed from a cabinet outside. "Most of our patients' records were destroyed in the earthquake. Furthermore, many of our patients who have been left homeless have had to move to various camps. This makes follow up treatment difficult," explains Dr. Shams.



Dr Shams analyzes smears under a microscope to assess whether a person has tested positive or negative for TB. 30 of the existing 36 TB centres in the earthquake-affected area were either completely destroyed or severely damaged by the earthquake. Only one out of eleven TB centres in Muzaffarabad survived the earthquake and Dr Shams now works out of a tent. TB control is cost-effective and can be adapted to suit many different and difficult environments. WHO will continue to support the Ministry of Health in the fight against the spread of TB by providing staff such as Dr Shams, by helping coordinate support such as the distribution of drugs and medical supplies and by providing appropriate tents to temporarily replace damaged and destroyed TB centres.
