

Brazil Gets 40,000 Leprosy Cases a Year

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An agreement among Brazil's Ministry of Health, the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), and the University of the State of São Paulo (USP) will permit the implantation of the Telemedicine Project, a new tool for early diagnosis of Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy.

The project was one of the main topics discussed yesterday on the final day of the Quarterly Center-South Macro-Regional Meeting to Evaluate the National Program for the Elimination of Hansen's Disease, in Rio de Janeiro.

The project, which is expected to be introduced throughout the country by the end of 2006, with US\$ 33 thousand (86 thousand reais) from the Ministry of Health, will diminish the incidence of the disease, cases of impairments, and aftereffects.

This information was provided by the coordinator of the program, Rosa Castalia, who added that the project consists of the use of virtual technology to create devices to train health professionals in techniques for combatting the disease.

There are currently 1.7 cases of Hansen's disease in every group of 10 thousand in the Brazilian population, and the goal is to reduce this proportion to a single case by the end of the year.

Since 2000, an average of 40 thousand cases have arisen each year. In 3 thousand of these cases, the patients already presented physical deformities.

Another sign of late diagnosis is the fact that 3.8% of the victims are under 15 years old and probably caught the disease from adults.

30,693 cases of Hansen's disease were being treated in the country as of January 15. Most of them are within the limits of the administratively defined Amazon region. Maranhão, Pará, and Mato Grosso are the three states with the largest number of victims.

According to the coordinator of the program, the chief difficulties in controlling the disease are centralization, prejudice, and lack of information.

US\$ 5.1 million (13.2 million reais) will be spent this year alone on the program to combat Hansen's disease. Community agents and agents from the Family Health Program were trained last year in diagnosis and treatment.

The number of trained teams grew 118%, from 2,880 in December, 2003, to 6,274 in August, 2004. Over the same period the number of health units that care for Hansen's disease patients increased only 23%, from 9,315 to 11,207.

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