Leprosy-Info

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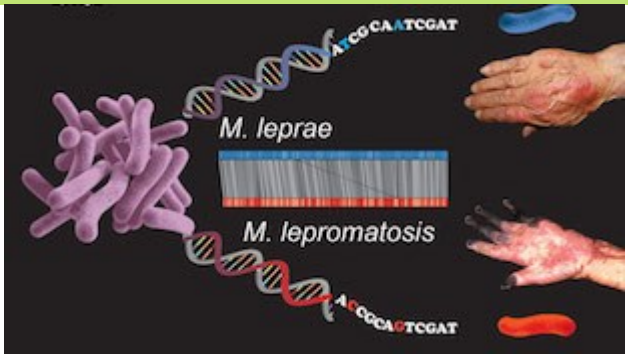
In his first message as pontiff delivered in May this year, Pope Leo XIV he defined his pontificate's message with the sentence: *we want to be a synodal church, walking and always seeking peace, charity, closeness, especially to those who are suffering*. This statement follows the synodal movement started by his predecessor Pope Francis I's in the last synod of bishops that specifically dealt with the synodality of the Church. A synodal Church is a Church where all members journey together in communion, participation, and mission, actively involved in the Church's life and decision-making processes. While decisions are made through a process of discernment through prayer, dialogue, and consensus-building, the synodal church envisages a situation where all members share in the responsibility for the Church's life and mission, recognizing that each person has a unique role to play. Pope Leo XIV's plea to seek closeness within the community, especially to those who are suffering, has particular significance the victims of Hansen's disease, but also to those who suffer for stigmatization as a result of race, colour, social status, religion, etc. – a stigmatization resulting from the prejudices of the so-called modern world. The message of the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers of the Church still applies today. The encouraged their listeners to put aside their prejudice when dealing with the victims of this destructive infection and adopt the message in Jesus's Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Leper. Let us assume the responsibility of providing support and care to these unfortunates. As members of an organization whose original *raison d'être* was the care of lepers, let us stand up to be counted.

Old World or New World Disease



It has always been believed that the *Mycobacterium leprae* was originally an Old-World disease which had ravaged Europe, Asia and Africa for thousands of years before being introduced to the Americas. However, archaeological evidence has now suggested that this original assumption was not true. In 2018, a related pathogen *M. lepromatosis* was identified in ancient DNA of an individual who lived in Western Canada 1,000 years before Europeans had arrived in the Americas. Further screening of ancient DNA databases revealed *M. lepromatosis* genetic signatures from skeletal material in two sites in Argentina also dated to about 1,000 years ago, and in two sites in Argentina also dated to about 4,000 years ago. The presence of *M. lepromatosis* in ancient material in areas separated by more than 10,000 km strongly suggests that the infection was widespread in the Americas long before the advent of European settlers. Mutation estimate studies suggest that *M. lepromatosis* emerged about 9000 years ago, somewhere in the Americas. It is as yet unclear whether the strain was brought over by Paleo-Indians migrating into North America across the Bering Land Bridge circa 16,500 years ago or if they acquired it from animals already living on the continent.

Reference: M. Price. Leprosy was an American scourge long before Europeans arrived. Science, 29 May 2025, doi: 10.1126/science.zkpqx9v

NEWS

The MALTESE ASSOCIATION OF DERMATOLOGY & VENEROLOGY: Hansen's Disease is no longer endemic in the Maltese Islands. The reason for this is the success story of the Malta Leprosy Elimination Project (MLEP) which started in 1972 and which targeted the systematic treatment of all known registered cases. The earlier abolition of forceful segregation and the introduction of a non-contributory pension ensured that it was in the patients' interest to be registered. The clinical work at the time was done by Dr George Depasquale who passed away on the 7th March 2024. In tribute to Dr Depasquale and his coworkers, the MADV has prepared a tribute page with background information, an interview of the late Dr George Depasquale and a video presentation of the musical prayer of thanksgiving – "*Talba Minn Malta – A Prayer from Malta*" created specifically to commemorate the project. The page may be accessed here: https://madv.org.mt/malta-leprosy-elimination-project-tribute/.

Zoonotic reservoirs: A spatial analysis of the role of armadillo hunting in human leprosy transmission carried out in Brazil has shown that armadillo hunting seems to play a more significant role in human leprosy transmission than previously recognised. Interventions to reduce the risk should focus on reducing unsafe and illegal hunting, improving communication around zoonotic risks, strengthening disease surveillance in high-risk areas, and conducting genetic studies to confirm wildlife-to-human transmission.

Reference: Aliaga-Samanez A, Deps PD, Fa JE, et al. Wildlife hunting and the increased risk of leprosy transmission in the tropical Americas: a pathogeographical study. Infectious Diseases of Poverty. Springer Science and Business Media LLC. 2025; 14 (1) : 1-14. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40249-025-01301-z

The **U.K. Leprosy Mission** has recently published an impact report describing how the financial donation from funds raised by the Grand Priory of England & Wales during the World Leprosy Day Appeal made in memory of Lord Lothian. The report clearly shows what a significant difference we have been able to make to the lives of those whom society has chosen to ignore because of the stigma of leprosy. The funds helped [1] increase leprosy awareness and supported Health Camps; [2] provided protective footwear; [3] helped train Leprosy Champions; [4] helped improve the quality of life and promoted immune systems; [5] provided 30 new homes and ensured ownership of land; [6] provided clean water; [7] helped build kitchen gardens and six community farms; and [8] importantly showed the victims of this infection that they are not forgotten. The report can be accessed HERE.

NOTICE OF INTERNATIONAL MEETING : A preliminary day meeting targeting historical aspects of leprosy and patron saints for lepers will be held on the 22nd October 2026 [next year] as a preliminary meeting to the 6th International Meeting of the Academy of the order of St Lazarus scheduled to be held in Malta. Those interesting in contributing or participating are asked to indicate their interest.

ABSTRACTS

Edin A, Towfik Z, Tesfaye D, et al. Quality of life among leprosy patients: An analysis of associated factors. PLOS Mental Health. Public Library of Science (PLoS). 2025; 2 (5): 1-19.

Download PDF

Abstract

Leprosy is accompanied by stigma and discrimination that significantly impact patients' quality of life. Previous studies in Ethiopia have focused primarily on demographic and disease-related aspects, neglecting mental health factors. Therefore, was aimed to assess quality of life and associated factors among leprosy patients in Eastern Ethiopia. An institutional-based cross-sectional study was conducted among 170 leprosy patients at Bisidimo General Hospital using the World Health Organization Quality of Life-BREF (WHOQOL-BREF) questionnaire. Data were analyzed using STATA version 17, with multiple linear regression identifying associations between variables. Mean domain scores were: physical 53.03 ± 16.44, psychological 51.37 ± 13.10, social 44.95 ± 18.34, and environmental 57.10 ± 15.28. Depression, anxiety, comorbidity, stigma, and illness duration showed significant negative associations with quality of life domains. Income demonstrated positive associations across all domains. Additionally, poor social support negatively impacted the physical domain, while lifetime khat use negatively affected the social domain. Leprosy patients exhibited lower scores in social and psychological domains but higher scores in the environmental domain. Most factors affecting quality of life are preventable, suggesting the importance of programs that increase awareness, facilitate early treatment, and implement routine screening for mental health alongside physical health to improve patients' quality of life.

Argentina F, Bernolian N, Sakina M, et al. Efficacy of Multidrug Therapy (MDT) and exclusion of transplacental transmission in a pregnant woman with multibacillary leprosy. Leprosy Review. Lepra. 2025; 96 (2): 1-5. ***Download PDF***

Abstract

Leprosy in pregnancy is a rare occurrence. The evidence of transplacental transmission of leprosy in animal models brings anxiety regarding the potential impact on the fetus. This case report shows the steps taken to detect possible transplacental transmission of leprosy and evaluate the efficacy of multidrug therapy (MDT) in a pregnant woman. We report a case of a 19-year-old Indonesian woman, in the third trimester of pregnancy, diagnosed with borderline tuberculoid multibacillary (MB) leprosy. She had been on MDT since the 38th week of pregnancy. We evaluated the transplacental transmission and assessed the efficacy of MDT by comparing IgM anti-phenolic glycolipid-1 (PGL-1) antibody levels over time. Serological testing showed no anti-PGL-1 IgM antibodies in the umbilical cord blood, and histopathological examination found no acid-fast bacilli (AFB) in placental and umbilical cord tissues. MDT was effective in reducing BI, MI, and IgM anti-PGL-1 levels in the patient. MDT is safe for use during pregnancy. No perinatal complications were reported.

Jain A, Chakrabartty A, Nayak PK, et al. Unmet needs of households and people living in leprosy colonies in India. Leprosy Review. Lepra. 2025; 96 (2): 1-12. ***Download PDF***

Abstract

Objective: To assess the unmet needs of households and individuals living in leprosy colonies in India. Methods: A mixed-methods study was conducted in 129 leprosy colonies across seven states in India. The study included a survey of 6907 family members from 2134 households and 14 focus group discussions (FGD)—6 FGDs with adolescents (aged 10–19 years), 4 FGDs with eligible women, and 4 FGDs with senior citizens. Results: Within the leprosy colonies, 36.1% of household members and 88.7% of household heads were affected by leprosy. Additionally, 0.8% of family members had disabilities due to causes other than leprosy. Around 1.6% of households had at least one child under 18 years of age with a disability. Among persons with disabilities, 77.7% expressed a need for any type of care, and of these, 48.9% reported unmet needs related to assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, or splints. Self-care needs were reported by 47.7%, with 13.4% requiring specialized care. Reconstructive surgery was needed by 1.7% of leprosy-affected individuals with disabilities. Gender disparities were evident in various needs, including reconstructive surgery (male: 72.2% vs. female: 27.8%) and self-care (male: 55.2% vs. female: 44.8%). Key documentation needs for accessing public services included the Ayushman Bharat card (16.8%), the Permanent Account Number (PAN) card (7.4%), and the Below Poverty Line (BPL) card (4.5%). Other community needs included children's education, women's income-generation schemes, elderly healthcare, and infrastructure support. Conclusion: The unmet needs identified in this study can inform stakeholders for better planning and resource allocation to improve the quality of life of persons residing in leprosy colonies in India.

Ramirez DA, Sitter TL, Översti S, et al. 4,000-year-old Mycobacterium lepromatosis genomes from Chile reveal long establishment of Hansen's disease in the Americas. Nature Ecology & Evolution, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-025-02771-y. ***Download PDF***

Abstract

Mycobacterium lepromatosis is a recently identified cause of Hansen's disease, and is associated with the more severe and potentially lethal presentations of diffuse lepromatous leprosy and Lucio's phenomenon. Detection of this infection has been limited to a small number of individuals, leaving much to be learned about its global distribution and transmissibility. Its discovery in wild rodent populations in the United Kingdom and Ireland also raises questions about its zoonotic potential. Here, we raise further awareness of this disease via analyses of two exceptionally well preserved M. lepromatosis genomes obtained from 4,000-year-old human remains of two adult males from the archaeological sites of El Cerrito and La Herradura in Northern Chile. This formed the basis of genomic comparisons between ancient and modern forms of the pathogen. We demonstrate an unexpected long history of M. lepromatosis in the Americas, which contrasts with the more recent Eurasian history of the closely related Mycobacterium leprae. We offer relevant perspectives on its evolution while providing an incentive for further disease monitoring in both humans and other potential reservoir species in the Americas and elsewhere.

Royal Lepers – King Robert I the Bruce

The most famous and well-known leper king is by no means King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem who constantly engaged in warfare against his Islamic foes led by Sultan Salah al-Din. In 1180, he obtained a two-year truce during the latter part of his reign, which truce was lost after he relinquished his kingdom to regents because of failing health. However, other members of the European royal families were also reported to have been afflicted by the disease. One important personality reputed to have suffered from leprosy was Robert I the Bruce [born 1274; died 1329], was crowned King of the Scots in 1306. The first mention of the possibility that Robert I might have suffered from leprosy appears in the *Chronicon de Lanercost*, a general history of England and Scotland from 1210 to 1346 which has been attributed to an unknown Franciscan friar at Carlisle. This states that Bruce deputed the command of the army during the Weardale campaign in 1327 because he had developed leprosy - "*Dominus autem Robertus de Brus, quia factus fuerat leprosus, ilia vice cum eis Angliam non intravit*". However, in spite of this contemporary assertion, there has always been some doubt as to whether Bruce, who died in 1329, did suffer from leprosy. It has suggested that his condition could have resulted from "sporadic syphilis", which in the Middle Ages was commonly confused with leprosy. In 1817, a skeleton exhumed from he nave of the ruined ancient Cathedral Church of Dunfermline was attributed to Robert I. The exhumed skeleton was studied by a number of medical specialists including Dr Alexander Monro *tertius*, Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh University. An accurate Plaster-of-Paris cast was made of the skull and mandible by W. Scoular.

Skeleton of King Robert Bruce at excavation after opening the lead cover.

The original copy of the cast is now located in the Anatomy Museum of the University of Edinburgh. Copies of this cast have been used to produce the portrait head of Robert I that was displayed in the Royal Scottish Academy in 1958; and more recently the reconstruction of the facial features by George Buchanan and computer-aided reconstruction prepared by Professor Vanesis of the Forensic Medicine Department of the University of Glasgow. The cast confirms that Robert I suffered the loss of his upper incisors and associated alveolar maxillary bone. These features have been interpreted by V. Moller-Christiansen and R.G. Inkster, authorities on the osteological appearance of leprosy, as typical of *facies leprosa*, and not those of *calvaria syphilitica* (syphylitic osteitis). According to the latter authors, the cast displays "antemortem loss of the central and right lateral incisors, and possibly the left lateral incisor". The authors continue: “There are no signs of loss of teeth caused by trauma in vivo. But the most important component of the *facies leprosa*, the inflammatory changes in the hard palate, cannot be verified in this case because the plaster cast does not show the hard palate, and so does not allow investigation. ….. The plaster cast of Robert the Bruce shows clear signs of *facies leprosa*, but to be one hundred percent sure of the diagnosis of leprosy, we would have to unearth his skeleton once more and make a proper examination.”