
EDITORIAL

With the lowest reported global weekly death of COVID-19 this month since March 2020, the end of the pandemic is now finally in sight, as stated by the WHO's Director General himself. We have now reached a point where we need to live alongside the virus itself, while still implementing measures to minimize its damage. The virus might not go away completely, but it doesn't need to take further lives. *"Not there yet, but we have never been in a better position to end the pandemic"* – WHO's Director General, Tedros A. Ghebreyesus.

This pandemic had a significant impact on the global healthcare systems. A huge burden had been imposed on our healthcare system. The actual number of COVID-19 related death might be high, but the total of excess death caused by the pandemic is even higher. The additional burden on our already strained healthcare system has created a significant rise on morbidities of other diseases. The pandemic had taken our focus away from them. The neglected diseases, and among them, comes Leprosy. As one the neglected tropical diseases controlled by Indonesian Ministry of Health, Leprosy remains a challenging disease to eliminate. The pre-existing ill-stigma of leprosy patients combined with the limited access to healthcare system during the pandemic has not been an easy issue to overcome. Ongoing and relentless efforts have been done by our colleagues all over the country on the fight against Leprosy. Among them, is our own dearest colleague from the world of Ophthalmology: DR. dr. Yunia Irawati, SpM(K). I would like to acknowledge her wonderful work throughout the years. And here are the words from herself.

Prof. DR. dr. Widya Artini, SpM(K)
Editor-in-Chief
Ophthalmologica Indonesiana

DR. dr. Yunia Irawati, SpM(K)

Indonesia is still ranked as the highest number of new cases of leprosy in Southeast Asia and the third largest in the world after India and Brazil. As many as 11,173 new cases were reported in 2021. This number tends to be static every year. Six provinces in Indonesia have not been declared free of leprosy. According to the WHO, the target for leprosy elimination as a public health problem by the year 2000 was a prevalence rate of less than 1 case per 10,000 population. The target definition was then changed in 2015 to the reduction rate of new cases of grade 2 disability by at least 35% by the end on 2015. In 2016, WHO issued the "Global leprosy strategy 2016-2020" accelerating a leprosy-free world which is used as a momentum for global and local leprosy programs, however this target is considered rather challenging for Indonesia. In the Presidential Regulation of The Republic of Indonesia No. 18 of 2020, leprosy elimination was targeted to be eliminated by the end of 2024. Nevertheless, could Indonesia work together to achieve a concrete target?

World Leprosy Day (WLD) is celebrated each year on the last Sunday of January. In 2022, this day fell on January 30, 2022 with the theme "United for Dignity" which means calling for unity in respecting dignity of people who have experienced leprosy. This International Day

honours those who have been affected by leprosy, raises awareness about the disease, and calls for an end to stigma and discrimination associated with the condition. WLD is celebrated by conducting national webinars and also branching out talk shows on the national health radio broadcast, press conferences, and booth to hold listeners and reach out to advocate the media. These events were held until April 20, 2022.

One of the indicators used to show the success rate in detecting new cases of leprosy is the second grade of disability. In 2020, grade 2 disability rate is 2.32 per 1,000,000 population. Disabilities affect their hands, feet, and eyes. Eye disability could involve both intraocular or extraocular, causing severe visual impairment that might lead to blindness. The damage on the eyes can be progressive even after the completion of leprosy treatment. Blindness will take a toll in the patients' quality of life since these patients rely heavily on vision to prevent their numbed hands and feet from being injured, so their impairments do not deteriorate to "double handicap" condition. The risk of death in leprosy patients who experienced blindness is 4.8 times greater than normal population at the same age. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the distribution of ophthalmologists, especially who have in depth specialty in immunology infections, corneal and refractive surgery, glaucoma, and reconstructive oculoplastic and oncologists, who can treat the eye problems on leprosy in Indonesia and whose appropriate management skills are required to prevent blindness. Hence, treating blindness while it is still reversible. Disability causes limitation of activity and social participation. Leprosy patients are prone to losing their jobs, experience more stress, try to consider suicide, and are stigmatized by their peers because of fear for transmitting the disease.

Another issue that occurs is the proportion of leprosy in Indonesian children has not changed significantly in the last ten years. New cases in 2021 reached 11% while the Ministry of Health's target was below 5%. A high proportion of child cases in Indonesia reveals that transmission of long close contact (e.g. family) who have not been treated is still ongoing. Leprosy in children need additional concerns because of the social implication, especially at schools, which might eventually affect the intelligence of the whole nation.

Leprosy is not only a clinical problem but also a psychosocial and economic problem that has a significant impact on patients and their families. Discrimination and structural stigma significantly obstruct efforts to control leprosy. Stigma causes a person that has been affected by leprosy to be hesitant to seek treatment, apart from fear of their condition being known by the community but also from receiving unpleasant treatment from health workers. Therefore, the leprosy control program cannot be handled by the health sector alone, but, it needs to involve multidisciplinary sectors. Hand in hand, we can end leprosy-related stigma and discrimination against the disease, hence, leprosy patients can receive proper treatments and we can fundamentally prevent disabilities as soon as possible.

DR. dr. Yunia Irawati, SpM(K)