

THE PAUL HARRISON AWARD

The Paul Harrison Award is the accolade of the Christian Medical College, Vellore to alumni who have rendered selfless, steadfast and significant service to the neglected and the disadvantaged in the area of health care. Drs. Loretta and Premal Das now join this august company.

Drs. Loretta and Premal of the batch of 1978 have spent nearly 3 decades in the service of patients with leprosy, a stigmatizing disease that disproportionately affects the poorest, most marginalized and those that have the least access to health care.

After completing their undergraduate medical studies in CMC Vellore, they served as medical officers from 1986 to 1989 at Leprosy Mission Hospitals in rural parts of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. This period confirmed their resolve to serve people affected by leprosy who were, and still are, ostracized from their communities and are, most often, the poorest of the poor. Dr. Premal drew his inspiration from his family- he is the third generation to have worked with The Leprosy Mission- and later from Dr. Ernest Fritschi, the renowned reconstructive surgeon. For Dr. Loretta, the turning point was her undergraduate training in CMC. They completed their post-graduate training in CMC Vellore from 1989 to 1992, Dr. Premal in General Surgery and Dr. Loretta in General Medicine, after which they returned to The Leprosy Mission to continue their life's work. Following stints at the TLM Hospitals in Salur and Chandkuri, they have been at the TLM Hospital, Naini, Uttar Pradesh since 1997.

In all these places, they have treated both the leprosy-affected and the general community, handling almost all problems, within and outside their specialization. Over the years, there has been a steady increase in the number of new leprosy patients coming to their hospital, belieing claims about the elimination of leprosy. The workload has been heavy- with patients drawn by the quality of care, compassion, sensitivity and measure of trust that seemed lacking anywhere else. The workload has been challenging, given the paucity of resources- physical, human and material. Yet, it has always been gratifying, for in ministering to others, their very souls have been satisfied.

Facilities for reconstructive surgery to correct deformities due to leprosy are very few, and Dr. Premal with his skill in Reconstructive Surgery, plays a vital role in restoring a measure of dignity to these patients. Dr. Premal has conducted numerous reconstructive surgery camps in different parts of India, and in Nepal and China as well. He has shared his expertise in reconstructive surgery in leprosy, training surgeons from India and abroad.

Team building has been another area of focus for Dr. Premal, who has been the Superintendent of the Hospital since 1997. TLM Naini is now a nationally and internationally recognised centre of leprosy expertise and excellence, with 150 beds for medical and surgical management of leprosy complications and disability management. The major departments are Surgery (Reconstructive and General), General Medicine, Dermatology, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Prosthetics and Footwear and Rehabilitation. It is recognized by the Government of India as a Tertiary Leprosy Referral Centre for specialized leprosy care, a critical aspect as leprosy gets little or no importance in the private and public health system. On a wider front, Dr. Premal has held the post of Deputy Director of TLM and has helped revive several TLM Hospitals

Dr. Loretta's medical work revolves around the 150 inpatients, many of whom are admitted for intractable Leprosy reactions, diabetics with a trophic ulcer or on steroids. It is common to get abandoned patients with septicemia from neglected wounds. She has developed protocols for TLM to improve the quality of medical and leprosy care and is always on call for doctors from other TLM hospitals when they need advice on medical and leprosy related problems. Training and capacity building of the government staff in leprosy remains a key priority, particularly after the integration of leprosy with general health services in 2003. The Training Unit of TLM Naini is now recognized by the National Leprosy Eradication Programme and the WHO for Leprosy Training. Dr. Loretta has developed courses that integrate leprosy into the general curriculum for doctors, nurses and physiotherapy trainees, and training programmes for public health inspectors, field workers etc.

TLM Naini has published many research papers and is part of many multicentric national and international research projects. This training and research has helped maintain a perspective on leprosy, at a time when India has the largest proportion of new cases in the world.

For focusing on people who society treats as invisible, and for responding to their needs in a lifetime of dedicated service, Christian Medical College, Vellore is proud to claim Drs. Loretta and Premal Das as its illustrious alumni and honour them with the Paul Harrison Award for 2015.