



A MESSAGE FROM SHIRLEY HEYWOOD

Prayer letter 63
May 2021

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c/o INF

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Dear Friends



When I last wrote to you, I was so encouraged to see the fistula centre full of patients and the outreach team working hard to spread awareness of obstetric fistula. We had appointed a doctor eager to learn fistula surgery and it seemed the road to a successful and sustainable fistula centre was open ahead. Since then, you will be aware that the coronavirus infection has spread from India throughout Nepal and health services here are overwhelmed and lacking the beds and oxygen and ventilators needed to look after those seriously affected.

The first wave of coronavirus infection in Nepal resulted in less than 2000 deaths throughout the country. The economic impact of the earlier lockdown was far more devastating and maybe this led to a reluctance to close the border with India and impose restrictions. Since the end of April there has been a national lockdown and there is no public transport or internal flights except for planes taking food and medicine supplies.

The Provincial Hospital in Surkhet has moved this month into the new hospital building which has 300 beds. The 100 beds in the old building and one ward block in the new building are filled with coronavirus patients. The new hospital has an oxygen plant which provided adequate oxygen until this weekend but now the plant cannot meet the demand and the hospital has had to close its doors to new Covid patients. Over 50% of people tested are proving positive and, unlike in the first wave, many people even younger people are symptomatic and there are many deaths. Churches were meeting right up to the beginning of lockdown and sadly pastors and church members have become sick and several have died.



At the beginning of April Dr Shuvechchha joined us. The spreading infection and the lock down have meant that we have had few fistula patients arriving but Shuvechchha has been learning and has performed her first fistula repair. Her patient, Kumari, aged about 74 had suffered from her fistula for fifty years and has now returned home happy and well. You can read her story at the end of the letter. I was able to receive a second vaccination in April along with other health workers in Surkhet. There is no more vaccine here and only a very small proportion of the population has been vaccinated.

**Shirley and Shuvechchha, socially distanced,
outside the fistula centre**

We were able to protect our patients in the Fistula centre through PCR screening, masks and hand washing. The last few patients to arrive all proved Covid positive and were kept in isolation until testing negative. Those ready to discharge are taken home by ambulance. This week we expect the last patients to go home and then we will wait and help the hospital in any way that we can.

Thank you for your prayers. I pray with you that the pandemic may be brought under control and that there will be sharing of vaccine and other resources.

May God bless you and all those who you love.

Shirley

Story of Kumari Pun

Kumari is about 70 years old and lives in Rolpa District. Married at seventeen she has born nine children. She is a frail looking, tiny woman and it is easy to understand why she should have experienced difficult labours to deliver each of those babies – all born at home with only family support. At that time there was no hospital in the district should a woman have difficulty in labour. Too often the baby died, and sometimes the mother as well. Three of Kumari's sons were born dead or died very soon after birth and a little daughter also died in infancy.

In her second delivery Kumari developed an obstetric fistula. After five days of pain Kumari's baby son was born. He did not cry at birth and her mother-in-law told her that he was dead. Two days later she found that her urine started to leak continuously and she could not control it. She developed ulcers from the urine burns and was in a lot of pain. Despite this she soon had to take on all the work in the house as well as gathering firewood and grass for the animals.

Her husband did not help her but spent his time playing cards and drinking alcohol with friends. At times Kumari was so ill and weak that she could not cook food for her children. Occasionally her mother would visit and take Kumari home with her, covering the bed with layers of cloth so that Kumari could sleep without ruining the bed. Those visits gave her a brief opportunity to rest, but otherwise life was very hard. She had to walk far to collect water, carrying her babies as well as the water pot, while urine soaked her clothing and ran down her legs.

As her children grew up and married, they didn't know how to help their mother and Kumari had no chance to seek treatment. There was no money. The little that she earned tending the land was just enough to feed the family. Kumari told us "I wished I could die but I still lived - for fifty long years."

Last year some of the local health post staff received training about obstetric fistula and learned that there was treatment for women like Kumari in Surkhet, in a special Fistula Treatment Centre at the Provincial Hospital. A nurse gave Kumari a phone number she could use to make contact and find out more. Kumari hardly dared to hope that there might be help for her. But then the coronavirus pandemic reached Nepal and the country was put into lockdown. Kumari was longing to go for treatment but she had a long wait.

At last, in February 2021, borrowing money from her neighbours to pay for the journey, she travelled with her husband and son to Surkhet.



In the fistula centre she was prepared for surgery. She had such a little hole in her bladder yet this had destroyed fifty years of her life. After the surgery there were two more weeks to wait until the catheter was removed and Kumari knew that she was cured. "I am really dry, no leaking at all! I never dreamed that I could be really well. It cost us nothing. Food, travel cost and surgery, all was provided free of cost. If I had had to pay, I could never have had this treatment. Only I know the pain and burden of these fifty years of incontinence and struggle. Now I can live a normal life and do all that I need to do and no one will hate me anymore. I don't want to die now; I want to live long and enjoy the new life which I have been given and I am so thankful for the Surkhet Fistula Centre".

Kumari and her husband, ready to go home

To find out more about INF and for all donations contact; www.inf.org.uk; **International Nepal Fellowship UK, 24 Weoley Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6QX; Tel: 0121 472 2425.**

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