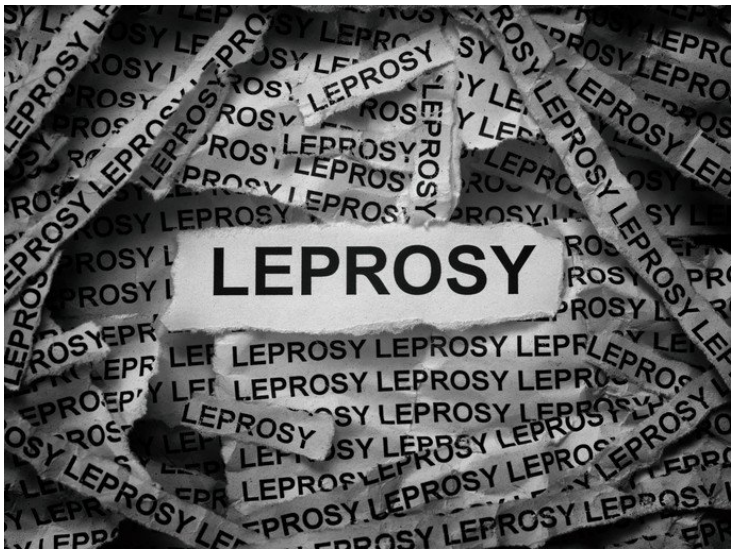
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Sasakawa leprosy initiative to boost support for Indonesia

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Indonesia has the third highest number of cases of leprosy in the world



WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa has announced that the Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative (SLI) will increase its support to Indonesia to combat the stigma and discrimination associated with leprosy and to promote early diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae* that mainly affects the skin and peripheral nerves. For much of its long history, the cause was unknown, giving rise to many myths and misconceptions.

Since the introduction of WHO-recommended multidrug therapy (MDT) in 1981, some 18 million people worldwide have been cured of leprosy. However, around 200,000 new cases are reported each year, and many people affected by leprosy and their families continue to face rejection based on outdated stereotypes and superstitions.

After India and Brazil, Indonesia has the third highest number of cases of leprosy in the world. In 2023, it recorded 14,376 new cases, including 1,179 children. In addition, 826 people, including 21 children, had visible disabilities at the time of diagnosis, indicating that they were diagnosed late.

"Indonesia is one of the most important countries in the fight against leprosy," said Sasakawa. "Overcoming stigma and discrimination and promoting early diagnosis and treatment there will be key to accelerating the world's progress toward zero leprosy."

He said that from this year, SLI will intensify its support for Indonesia, working with government agencies, civil society organizations, research institutes, the media and others to raise awareness of leprosy and encourage people to seek treatment if they suspect they have the disease.

SLI already supports the Indonesian Ministry of Health's national leprosy program through the WHO, as well as providing assistance to NGOs and PerMaTa, an organisation of persons affected by leprosy.

As part of its support for Indonesia's efforts against the disease, SLI plans to identify several districts and work with local government agencies, healthcare providers and others to develop "zero leprosy" projects that can serve as models for the whole country.