

JUST SIMPLE GREETINGS TO THE PERSON AFFECTED BY LEPROSY DISEASE CAN REDUCE STIGMA



Stigma and prejudice affecting leprosy patients still persist. Those with the disease are often shunned and cast out from their communities. The case of Achai Nyuol at Nyamlell is a sad reminder of how leprosy is still looked upon with horror in this part of Southern Sudan.

“It started 13 years ago”, Achai recalls, “one day I started feeling pain and itching in my hands and feet while I was doing my daily chores at home. Few weeks later, I noticed that if I touched fire when cooking, or any other hot object like a pot on the fire, my flesh would come out. However, I felt no pain. I never heard of this disease called leprosy before but I believed it came on its own, not as a punishment from an evil spirit like many people here believe.”

“My husband never showed any compassion; rather, he looked at me in disgust. My wounds and burns would get infected, which caused flies to cluster around my open sores. One day he told me he would marry another woman. I could not say anything, because it is in Dinka tradition for women to be submissive to their husband. When his second wife came she told him: “I don’t want that woman around because of her wounds and the flies that come with it.”

I told my husband that I should go and see a doctor: “We have neither money nor goats so we can’t afford transport”, he told me.

So I was chased away. I went and stayed with my relatives. I suffered a lot as my husband refused to leave our child with me. It was thanks to Asunta, a neighbour of mine, that my conditions improved. “I knew the woman was suffering from leprosy,” Asunta Akur, a local nurse says “and I referred her to the hospital. She started with drugs and two months later she was already able to fetch water again. She felt so bad because people rejected her. She was discriminated.”

“Yes I was” Achai nods, “and whenever I went to the well to fetch water, people would point fingers at me and throw away my jerricans. Even now some of them look down at my disease. They think that if they greet me they can catch it from me”.

“That is why whenever Achai comes to the hospital,” Asunta adds, I make sure I shake hands with her so that people realize that they cannot get leprosy by greeting her.”

Despite the fact that leprosy has cost Achai Nyuol her fingers and several toes, she feels happy now: “I don’t do much, she says, I just sit at home and fetch water, but I feel good and what is best I can get free drugs and food from the hospital thanks to AAA. The greatest thing for me is when people greet me and shake hands with me. And if I ever saw another woman with the same disease I would tell her to go to the hospital straight away. People should be made aware of leprosy. They need to be told that it can be cured; they need to be told that you can’t catch it by touching someone who has the disease. And what is most important, they need to be told that persons affected by leprosy are just like other human being.”

By ARKANGELO ALI ASSOCIATION - AAA