

# Life is a battle for most kids

Children between 0–5 years of age are in a crisis situation. The now famous Oscar Award winning movie, 'Slumdog Millionaire' showcased the plight of people in the Dharavi slum. The child stars of the film are the lucky ones. Life is not so pleasant for others. Those who swear by the excellence of the film and the award winning musical score in their cocktail circuits may not know that between 1998 and 2006 the number of children suffering from malnutrition went up from 15% to 19% in India, while the number of kids under five with anemia rose from 74 to 79%. The proportion of the population that was unable to get the required 2,400 calories a day climbed from 75% to a record high of 87%. The film has captured the attention of people worldwide. Has it captured the attention of Rotarians in India?

Prevention of child mortality is the theme of RI President D K Lee. In addition this year the Rotary Awards for Service to Humanity (India) Trust, chaired by PRID O P Vaish has selected the theme 'child mortality' for accepting nominations from individuals and organisations who have been working in the area of reducing infant mortality.

There are slums in every city in India where life is much more horrible than what it is in Dharavi. Children are dying in these slums. India has an infant mortality rate of 55 per 1,000 live births which accounts for 72% of the country's 'under five' mortality rate. What can Rotary clubs do to prevent, if not reduce child mortality? Every Rotary club conducts health camps in the urban and rural areas. The medical practitioners in the club should create awareness about breast feeding during these camps. Breast feeding is the most important intervention to prevent newborn infections, diarrhoea and pneumonia which cause child deaths in the months after birth. Working women, especially the ones engaged in hard labour in construction sites and other areas need support at their work place in the form of intervals to engage in breast feeding.

Rotary clubs may not be able to convert the slums into housing complexes. But they can prevent hunger and disease



in these areas. The medical camps should also cater to the nutritional needs of pregnant women. In India's financial capital and the home to Bollywood, Mumbai, big dreams are woven by people who have had their fourth meal of the day, probably. Few kilometres away children are suffering from malnutrition and consequently have low immunity to disease and death.

It is estimated that nearly 67 million children in India live without the basic health care facilities. Girls die at much higher rates than boys. For every five boys who die, eight girls die. Children from the slums are often brought to healthcare facilities in more advanced states of illness and taken to less qualified doctors many times. India alone accounts for about one-third of all children aged below five in the world who don't have basic health care. Rotary can address this problem.

Infant and child mortality puts India in the 126<sup>th</sup> position in the United Nations Human Development Index. Rotary clubs can take up issues such as child abuse, trafficking, gender discrimination and special needs of challenged children. The alarming lack of progress in reducing child mortality and improving other indicators of child well-being underline the fact that neither the government or other NGOs including Rotary, has taken up the issues seriously. If after 61 years of Independence, the majority of children in the country are still undernourished and

continue to face severe deprivation and exploitation, there is an urgent need for concerted effort to tackle what can be described as a 'humanitarian emergency.' India has the distinction of being rated as the second among the worst places in sanitation. A recent survey shows that 1.5 million children die every year due to diarrhoea and 73 million work-days are lost due to water-borne diseases. Slums do not get sanitary facilities as they are seen as illegal settlements by the local governments. Setting up eco-friendly toilets in these areas can help the children and other people living in slums. Rotary clubs have a role to play here.

Laws and social activism can push children's issues centre stage. But the healing care of Rotarians, which comes with a real commitment to recognising the rights of children, is needed if these kids should not be buried in the debris of their slum. The next Oscar winning film should be on how slums have been transformed by Rotary into gardens and people around the world should see the smile on the face of every child Rotary has saved from death. This will be the greatest award to every Rotarian.



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