

SHORT ARTICLE

SPARSH CAMPAIGN AND LEPROSY CASE DETECTION: AN EVALUATION OF AWARENESS - DRIVEN OUTCOMES IN TIRUVALLUR DISTRICT, TAMIL NADU 2018-2024

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION : Leprosy, a chronic infectious disease known for thousands of years, has long been associated with significant stigma. The disability resulting from delayed detection impacts not only the affected individual but also their family. To address this stigma and enhance awareness, the Sparsh Leprosy Awareness Campaign (SLAC) was launched under the National Leprosy Eradication Programme (NLEP) on 30th January 2017, coinciding with Anti-Leprosy Day. The campaign, celebrated as a fortnight event until 13th February, aims to increase awareness and reduce stigma. This study evaluates the impact of the Sparsh campaign on leprosy case detection in Tiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu, India, from 2018 to 2024.

METHODS : A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted to analyse the number of new leprosy patients detected during and one month after the Sparsh campaign. Data for February and March from 2018 to 2024 were extracted from monthly progress reports.

RESULTS : Between 2018 and 2024, 1,172 new leprosy patients were reported in Tiruvallur district, of which 223 were detected during the Sparsh campaign. Out of the 223 patients, 125 of them self-reported and 98 paucibacillary leprosy patients were detected during the campaign.

CONCLUSION : Awareness campaigns have demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating early detection of leprosy, emphasizing the importance of Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities. We recommend targeted awareness initiatives focusing on vulnerable population and high-endemic areas to promote self-reporting and reduce delays in diagnosis.

KEYWORDS : SPARSH, leprosy case detection, campaign

INTRODUCTION

Leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae*. It primarily affects the skin and peripheral nerves, the initial manifestations being hypopigmented patches with a definite loss of sensation. Early detection and prompt treatment prevents disabilities. If left treated it slowly causes nerve damage in the face, hands and legs causing permanent disabilities. It is a highly stigmatised disease leading to the exclusion of leprosy affected persons from society.

Hence, in order to address the issue of high level of stigma attached to leprosy and to increase awareness about various aspects of leprosy, a nationwide campaign called "Sparsh leprosy awareness campaign" (SLAC) was introduced under National Leprosy Eradication Programme (NLEP) on 30th January 2017 being the death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, celebrated as National Anti-Leprosy day every year, to honour his services offered towards persons affected with leprosy.

In order to provide necessary impetus, prototypes of message of District Magistrate, appeal of Grama

Sabha Pramukh and pledge of Grama Sabha members were prepared on theme of early case detection and stop discrimination. In addition, the guidelines of SLAC and a 'Sparsh package' encompassing IEC materials, including video spots, audio spots and posters were prepared. All the prototypes, guidelines and 'Sparsh package' were shared with all states with instructions to distribute to all Grama Sabhas before 30th January. Further, for better organisation and management special committees at various levels i.e., State, District and Block level were formed.

The major activities undertaken in Grama Sabha were: Message from District Magistrate on Leprosy, appeal in Grama Sabha by the concerned Panchayat leader to all members to stop discrimination against persons affected with leprosy and undertaking of pledge by all Gram Sabha



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members to not to discriminate persons affected with leprosy. In addition to the execution of Grama Sabha meetings as per suggested activities mentioned above, States celebrated the SLAC fortnight using innovative IEC activities to spread awareness regarding the disease in the community. The campaign was an output of cooperation and coordination of Health Department with allied sectors like Panchayat Raj Institutions, Rural Development, Urban Development, Human Resource Development, Women and Child Development and Social Justice and Empowerment and Agriculture. This drive is being carried out successfully every year since 2017.

In 2018, dissemination of IEC message through NLEP mascot 'Sapna' was implemented (Figure 1). 'Sapna' is a concept designed and developed keeping in mind a common girl living in community, who will help to spread awareness in the community, through key IEC messages, 'Sapna' will be a local school going girl who is from the same locality preferably. This turned out to be of tremendous success in spreading awareness. In our study we have analysed the number of new cases detected during the campaign and compared it across with other months of the year to show the impact of awareness driven case detection and reduction of stigma.



Figure 1: 'Sapna' the mascot

METHODS

Study setting: Tiruvallur district is located in the Northeastern part of Tamil Nadu along the state border. It has a population of 24,95,152 (projected population of 2024 based on 2011 Census data) spread across 14 sub-districts. It has 34.9 percent of rural and 65.1 percent of urban population (Census 2011). Its geographic location, being situated along the state border and in close proximity to the Chennai metropolitan area, makes it prone to significant migration and a transient population, further complicating its public health landscape and leprosy control efforts.

Study design, data collection and analysis: We did secondary data analysis for the reference period from 2018 to 2024. We extracted the data from the treatment registers

and monthly progress reports from the district. We analysed the number of leprosy patients detected during the months of February and March which falls during and post Sparsh campaign for the reference period 2018-2024. We compared it with the number of patients reported during the rest of the months in the year. We also analysed in the aspect of clinical form of leprosy and mode of detection of the leprosy patients reported during Sparsh Campaign.

RESULTS

Overall, 1172 new leprosy patients were reported in Tiruvallur district during 2018-2024, out of which 223 were detected during the SLAC. Among the 223, 125 leprosy patients self-reported during this period. 98 Paucibacillary leprosy and 125 Multibacillary leprosy patients were detected. 71 were detected during ACLF campaign in high endemic areas in 2018, 145 during LCDC in 2018-19, and 32 during Active case detection and surveillance campaign in 2021-2022. Out of the total 1172 new leprosy patients detected, 471 were detected during the campaign months (Table 1).

Table 1 Average number of new leprosy patients detected during campaign months compared to non-campaign months, 2018-2024, Tiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu, India

Year	Average number of new cases detected during campaign months		Average number of new cases detected during non-campaign months
	SPARSH Campaign	Other case detection campaigns	
2018	19	36	12
2019	19	25	10
2020	26	-	8
2021	20	17	7
2022	17	15	11
2023	13	16	11
2024	13	-	9

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the pivotal role of awareness campaigns, such as the Sparsh campaign, in facilitating the early detection of leprosy. Over the period from 2018 to 2024, a total of 1,172 new leprosy patients were reported in Tiruvallur district, with 223 detected during the targeted campaign months of February and March. Notably, 125 patients self-reported their condition, indicating the campaign's success in raising awareness and empowering individuals to seek timely medical attention. Additionally, 98 paucibacillary leprosy cases were identified through active case-finding efforts, further underscoring the importance of structured outreach programs in detecting otherwise unnoticed cases. The number of new cases detected was also high in the months of July and August in 2018 during which

the active case finding in high endemic areas campaign was done. In 2019 also the number of new leprosy patients was high during the Leprosy Case Detection Campaign (LCDC).

The Sparsh campaign's approach, which integrated Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) strategies, appears instrumental in addressing the stigma associated with leprosy and encouraging community participation. By actively engaging with vulnerable populations, the campaign not only improved case detection rates but also likely contributed to the prevention of secondary complications through early diagnosis and treatment. This aligns with previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of IEC strategies in promoting early health-seeking behaviour in endemic areas.^{1,2}

Despite these successes, gaps remain. While 125 individuals self-reported, it is imperative to explore barriers that might prevent others from doing so, such as fear of social exclusion or lack of awareness about early symptoms. Furthermore, the detection of 98 paucibacillary cases during active case-finding suggests the need for continuous surveillance and expanded reach beyond campaign periods. Future efforts should prioritize targeted, community-based interventions, especially in high-risk areas. Strengthening

IEC activities, fostering partnerships with local stakeholders, and incorporating technological innovations could enhance outreach and improve early detection.³ Addressing these challenges comprehensively could significantly reduce the disease burden and contribute to the global goal of eliminating leprosy as a public health concern.⁴

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None

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