

CARING FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

A Social Outreach Programme of Sacred Heart College

Mawlai, Shillong – 793 008

Introduction

Caring for Disabled Children is a social outreach programme of Sacred Heart College, Mawlai, with the objective of caring for children, who are disadvantaged in various ways, irrespective of caste or creed. The programme is funded entirely by Sacred Heart College through its many friends, well-wishers and benefactors.

A Brief History

Caring was started in 1989 by Fr. Jose Chunkapura and a group of students of Sacred Heart College in order to care for children afflicted with rickets in Phudmuri village of Mawlai where the college is located. Medical camps were organized with the help of voluntary doctors in order to treat such children. They were then followed up in their homes by a team of volunteers. Gradually the project included children from the nearby villages of Mawlai, and from other parts of Meghalaya. To date there are over 10,000 children registered under this programme. The caring team consists of 4 paid staff, 7 doctors, 3 nurses, 2 physiotherapists, and several volunteers.

During the absence of Fr. Jose Chunkapura in Rome for his doctoral studies, the project was looked after by late Fr. George Kottuppallil. From 1998 Fr. Shaji Joseph has been looking after this programme except for a period of three years (2001 – 2004) when he was away in Rome for his Ph.D. During this period Fr. Matthew George ably led the project with new initiatives.

A Survey of Activities

1. Caring for Children with Rickets

Rickets is an illness affecting children due to deficiency in Vitamin D and Calcium. Several children, especially the poorest of the poor in Meghalaya are afflicted with rickets. Medical Camps are held on every first Sunday of the month at our Caring Centre in Mawlai. Parents bring their children affected with rickets to these camps. After the usual formalities of registration, the doctors examine the children and prescribe the necessary treatment. The treatment is given free of charge to the children at the centre since the majority of them are from very poor families. An average of 100 new cases is registered at the centre every month. Hundreds of them are also brought for follow-up treatment during the medical camp. We have a committed team of doctors, nurses and volunteers for carrying out this task.

Medical Camps in Mawlai 2009

<i>Month</i>	<i>New cases</i>	<i>Follow-up cases</i>
February 2009	96	331
March 2009	45	127
April 2009	107	334
May 2009	105	318
June 2009	134	442
August 2009	193	462
September 2009	125	438
October 2009	105	451
November 2009	84	409
Total	994	3312

2. Rickets Eradication Programme in Meghalaya

Several children who come to the centre in Mawlai for medical check up are from far away villages of Meghalaya. Therefore Caring has embarked on a Rickets Eradication Programme in Meghalaya. Medical Camps have been organized in various out-stations such as Smit, Umroi, Mawkyrwat, Nongstoin, Mairang, Marbisu etc. The dispensaries run by the Catholic Church in those places give us the logistic support for these camps and they also do the follow-up treatment.

Outstation Camps in villages

<i>Village</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of children</i>
Nongstoin	24.02.2008	83
Mawkyrwat	13.04.2008	170
Mawkyrwat	21.09.2008	154
Smit	26.10.2008	97
Mairang	23.11.2008	97
Marbisu	20.12.2008	112
Mawkyrwat	22.03.2009	101
Mairang	24.05.2009	59
Mawkyrwat	30.08.2009	170

3. Village Health Workers' Training Programme

We believe that prevention is better than cure. Our dream therefore is to eradicate rickets totally from Meghalaya. Keeping this aim in mind we have started conducting Health Awareness Programmes in villages in order to instruct mothers and families on health, nutrition and care for children. A group of health workers are being trained in five villages now (Mawkyrnrew, Nongstoin, Mawkyrwat, Mairang and Umroi) in order to bring health at the grassroot level for children in these villages. These village health workers will go from house to house in various villages in order to instruct the people regarding health and nutrition with the aim of preventing Rickets. They will also identify those already suffering from rickets and arrange for their treatment.

4. Caring Literacy Programme

Education is the answer to several health problems. The poorest of the poor in villages get no opportunity to go to school since they cannot afford school fees. The parents themselves are illiterate and they do not have the conveniences at home for study. Therefore, we conduct an afternoon school called “Caring Literacy Programme” for the really poor children of the area in four classes (Nursery I and II, Pre-school and Class I adding up to a total of about 150 children). At the end of the classes the children are also given a light meal of bread and milk. Those who pass Class I are helped to continue their schooling in other formally recognized schools of the area.

5. Educational Scholarships for poor children

Those children who are integrated into mainstream schools need financial support so that they can continue schooling. We give them a scholarship so that they can pay their school fees, buy books and uniforms and meet the various expenses of schooling.

6. Caring Study/Nutrition Centre

Poor school-going children who have no light or other facilities at home for studying are helped in the evening in our Study Centre. One teacher is employed in order to assist the children in their homework and study. They are also given a light meal of milk and bread.

Conclusion

“Caring” is our name, motto and watch-word. Children are our future and if we care for our children, then we care for our future. We thank our friends, well-wishers and benefactors who through their interest and donations have also become valuable partners in this noble project.

Fr. Shaji Joseph SDB and the Caring Team.
26th November 2009