

LIFE

Bangkok Post TUESDAY, MAY 6, 2014

Common remedy for flattened skulls in babies doesn't work

HEALTH P.6

Meanwhile in India the stigma of leprosy rarely improves

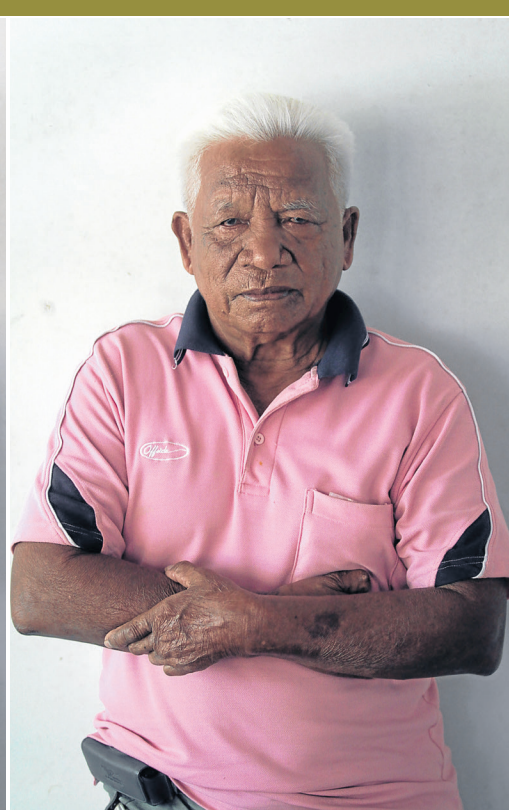
FEATURE P.12



Boontham Sukkasem.



La-ied Ditsaru.



Amart Toman.



Ubun Raksari.



Pard Saewong.



Arkom Prasongsilp.

THE LEPROSY MISSION

A new lease of life for the Phud Hong Colony

STORY: ARUSA PISUTHIPAN PHOTOS: JETJARAS NA RANONG



Anong Kerdhung.

In Thailand, there are more than 500 registered leprosy patients, not to mention the unregistered, according to figures in 2012 from the Department of Disease Control's Rajprachasamasai Institute working under the Ministry of Public Health to prevent and monitor the prevalence of leprosy in the country.

And because leprosy — an infectious disease caused by a bacterium called *Mycobacterium leprae* — has been believed to be a sin-cursed illness making lepers a target of social disdain due to physical deformities and the lack of limbs in most cases, most lepers choose to live in colonies — a sanctuary where patients, as well as relatives are allowed to live like a community.

There are 12 leper colonies in several regions of Thailand. Phud Hong Leper Colony is one of them. Located in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat, the colony was founded in 1947 with an objective to provide an asylum for people falling prey to the sickness where they can live without being looked down upon. Most of the lepers at the colony are above the age of 60. All of them have had medical treatment and are no longer contagious. There are almost 150 lepers living in the colony with their

relatives. Some members of the 155 families, especially those who work to earn their living outside the colony, are still forced to deal with social outcasts and discrimination.

Inside the leprosarium, lepers feel they are safe from social bias. But in fact they struggle to live in loneliness. Unlike orphanages or homes for the elderly, no one ever wants to visit leper communities for fear of being infected. The colony thus has hardly any visitors who would give them the much-needed support.

In the past, leprosy was thought to be easily transmittable from one person to another, making those suffering from leprosy a disgrace among themselves and their families. Yet today, people's attitudes towards patients have changed and turned somewhat positive. Despite that, patients at Phud Hong Leper Colony still have to live with a financial strain given the 100 baht daily allowance they receive from the government, which is not enough to put food on the table.

To shed light on physical, emotional and financial deadlock lepers are forced to encounter, *Life* talks to seven lepers at Phud Hong Leper Colony about what they have been through and how they wish the society's attitudes towards them to change.

BOONTHAM SUKKASEM, 61
Lottery vendor

Boontham Sukkasem was diagnosed with leprosy when he was 15 years old. Suddenly his classmates showed signs of hatred after they became aware of his disease.

"Back then I did not know if leprosy was curable. Neither did I know where to turn to for medical treatment. So I did not do anything, only kept the worry to myself," recalled Boontham.

Boontham admitted that today, fortunately, people's attitudes towards lepers have changed considerably. The Persons with Disabilities' Quality of Life Promotion Act, which was enacted in 2007, has helped the physically impaired enormously in terms of better social benefits. Yet Boontham still thinks that what the disabled need the most is the chance to be treated like the able-bodied, especially in terms of job opportunities.

"People with disabilities are the first group of people that society chooses to neglect," said Boontham. "But when it comes to social welfare, we are the last group that people think of. But the disabled also need compassion and care. And most importantly, we need to be given the same rights as normal people. After all, lepers or not, we are all humans. And we must help each other."

LA-IED DITSARU, 77
Unemployed

When La-ied Ditsaru was still in school she was pinched hard by a friend of hers, and she remembers feeling no pain. Not long after that she realised she suffered from leprosy and was consequently forced to leave school.

"I moved into Phud Hong Leper Colony in 1948 and have stayed here ever since," said La-ied. "Back then people felt lepers were disgusting. When we patients hailed public transportation on the road, we never got picked up."

The disease took away her life as a student so today La-ied sees the importance of education. She believes it is crucial that relatives of the patients receive an opportunity to go to school so that, after graduation, they can work for a better living standard for the family.

"Suffering the disease, I had no choice but to quit school. So I have no knowledge to earn myself some income. But I want people outside the colony to understand that lepers and their relatives are like everyone of us. Especially our children or grandchildren, they need to be educated so that they can stand strong for not just themselves but also their parents or grandparents who suffer leprosy."

Continued on page 12

INFO FOR DONATION

Payment Details:
Bank Transfer to Phud Hong Leper Foundation Savings Account 218-0-13367-6, Bangkok Bank, Sunthorn Kosa Branch

Please Fax clear bank transfer slip to fax number 02-671-3137, attention of Kusuma Bekenn

Cheque donation may be made payable to Phud Hong Leper Foundation, to be sent to Phud Hong Leper Foundation, Bangkok Post Building, 136 Na Ranong, Klong Toey, Bangkok 10110, attention of Kusuma Bekenn.

Receipts by Phud Hong Leper Foundation are for tax exemption.

For more information, please contact 081-900-4922.

► Related story on page 12

Meisterstück and Hugh Jackman

Crafted for New Heights

Ninety years ago, Montblanc created a writing instrument that became an icon far beyond writing culture: the Montblanc Meisterstück, a symbol for the everlasting quest of achievement. To celebrate 90 years of Meisterstück, the new Meisterstück 90 Years has red gold-plated fittings and a nib specially engraved with a commemorative "90". Visit and shop at Montblanc.com

MONTBLANC

Meisterstück 90 Years Collection