

Family Support System for Fulfilling of Psychosocial Need Among Leprosy Patients

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Leprosy patients, in addition to experiencing physical problems, also experience psychosocial problems. Efforts to reduce the burden of leprosy require a comprehensive approach that involves increasing awareness, increasing access to treatment, and reducing social stigma associated with meeting psychosocial needs. Therefore, a community-based approach is needed that combines health, social, and economic interventions to effectively address the challenges faced by individuals with leprosy in meeting psychosocial needs. The family can play a role in providing a support system for leprosy patients. Social and cultural stigma affects relationships within the family and how the family provides support for the psychological recovery of leprosy patients. In addition, factors that influence family dynamics in dealing with leprosy need to be identified comprehensively in efforts to strengthen the psychosocial needs of leprosy clients. Therefore, a family support system is very effective in meeting psychosocial needs and increasing the role of the family in supporting the psychosocial recovery of leprosy patients in the future.

Keywords: Leprosy, Family, Support System, Psychosocial

Introduction

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is a chronic infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae*. The disease primarily affects the skin, peripheral nerves, mucosa, and eyes, and can cause significant morbidity if left untreated. Leprosy is known for its long incubation period, which can last from several months to several years, making epidemiological tracking of the disease difficult. In Southeast Asia, leprosy remains a significant public health problem, with the region historically accounting for the majority of leprosy cases worldwide. In 2015, Southeast Asia reported

the highest number of leprosy cases worldwide, with an estimated 156,118 documented cases. The psychological impact of leprosy on patients is profound and diverse, encompassing a range of mental health issues arising from the physical manifestations of the disease, the social stigma, and social exclusion that accompany it (Susanto et al 2022). Leprosy, known to cause visible deformities and physical disabilities, often results in significant psychological distress for affected individuals. (Haverkort & Noordende 2022). Research shows that individuals affected by leprosy are at higher risk for various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety,

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and suicidal ideation. A systematic review highlighted that individuals affected by leprosy often face psychosocial challenges such as anxiety, fear, social stigma, social isolation and depression ((Somar et al 2020, Ali et al 2021)). The stigma attached to leprosy exacerbates these mental health issues, as individuals often face discrimination and social exclusion, which can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of mental distress (Govindasamy et al 2021, Sharma et al 2022).

The economic implications of leprosy also contribute to the psychological distress experienced by patients. Many individuals affected by leprosy are unable to work due to the resulting physical disabilities, leading to financial instability and increased stress (Fouad et al 2023). In addition, the role of family support in the psychosocial recovery of leprosy patients is crucial (Saputra et al 2024). Emotional and practical support from the family can help reduce the psychological stress experienced by patients and facilitate a better recovery process. Nugraheni (2023) emphasized that effective care from the family can improve the quality of life of affected individuals, because family members provide much-needed emotional and psychological comfort during the recovery process. On the other hand, lack of family support can worsen the patient's psychological condition, emphasizing the importance of harmonious family relationships in the leprosy recovery process (Putri et al 2022). Cultural factors also play an important role in the family's perception of leprosy, often exacerbating the stigma and social exclusion of individuals affected by the disease. Cultural perceptions that associate leprosy with uncleanness or moral weakness can cause affected individuals to be shunned by family members and the community. Efforts to reduce the burden of leprosy in Southeast Asia require a comprehensive approach that

involves raising awareness, increasing access to treatment, and reducing the social stigma associated with the disease. As suggested by Fouad et al (2023), a community-based approach that combines health, social, and economic interventions is needed to effectively address the challenges faced by individuals affected by leprosy. Therefore, the focus of this paper will give perspective for viewpoint family support system to maintain psychosocial need of leprosy patients.

Social stigma as a major challenge

Social stigma against leprosy is a highly complex issue and is rooted in socio-cultural contexts. It affects almost all aspects of patients' lives, including their interactions with their families, communities, and health services. As observed in various studies, leprosy patients often feel isolated and alienated due to the obvious physical signs of the disease, which is still seen as frightening and incurable by many communities in Southeast Asia (Sharma et al 2022, Somar et al 2020). The literature shows that stigma against chronic deforming diseases, such as leprosy, is often rooted in a deep-seated lack of understanding and fear of the disease (Govindasamy et al 2021). This stigma not only affects patients' mental health but also often leads to delays in seeking treatment, ultimately worsening their physical and psychological conditions (Sharma et al 2022). Interventions to reduce stigma should include comprehensive public education programs, aimed at debunking myths and misconceptions about leprosy.

Family dynamics and support in the recovery process

The role of the family in the psychosocial recovery of leprosy patients is one of the important findings of this study. Family support has been shown to be a significant determinant of mental health and patient recovery, as reported by many

participants who felt that their families provided the emotional and practical support needed to overcome the challenges of this disease. This is in line with research (Nugraheni 2023) which highlights that family support can significantly improve the quality of life of leprosy patients. However, not all patients receive adequate family support. Some reported that their families withdrew or even isolated them because of the stigma attached to leprosy. In this context, the role of the family is not always positive, and often worsens the patient's condition (Putri et al 2022). Based on the results of such studies, an intervention approach is needed that not only focuses on the patient, but also involves the family in the education and support process. Family-based rehabilitation programs, which provide an understanding of the disease and psychosocial support to all family members, can help reduce internal stigma within the family and strengthen relationships among family members (Mahendra & Hendrati 2024). Cultural factors play a significant role in how families and communities respond to leprosy patients. In many parts of Southeast Asia, cultural perceptions of leprosy are heavily influenced by myths and misconceptions, such as the belief that the disease is a curse or a form of retribution for immoral acts (Adhikari et al 2014).

Social support, community programs, and psychosocial coping strategies of leprosy patients

Community-based programs that focus on empowering communities to support leprosy patients, such as community education and support groups, have been shown to be effective in reducing stigma and improving patients' quality of life (Somar et al 2020). This study supports the importance of expanding the reach of such programs, especially in areas with high leprosy prevalence, such as rural Southeast Asia

where access to appropriate health services is still lacking.

Leprosy patients develop a variety of coping strategies to deal with the psychological and social distress they experience due to the disease. Leprosy afflicted persons who suffer from stigma avoid dealing with society, may delay their treatment and have poorer quality of life (Ajsal & Rahmawati 2023). In contrast, patients who receive support from family and community are more likely to develop positive coping strategies, such as talking openly about their condition and actively participating in rehabilitation programs. Positive coping strategies, such as involvement in support groups or psychological therapy, have been shown to be effective in improving mental well-being and accelerating recovery in leprosy patients (Somar et al 2020).

Conclusion

The psychosocial experiences of leprosy patients in Southeast Asian countries are heavily influenced by social stigma, family dynamics, and cultural factors. Stigma against leprosy remains strong, causing patients to feel isolated both within the community and family. However, full family support plays a crucial role in the psychosocial recovery of patients, while lack of support worsens their mental condition. Cultural and educational factors also influence perceptions of leprosy, with more educated areas showing lower levels of stigma. Social support and community-based programs are also important in supporting patient recovery.

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