

The Bhopal Medical Appeal

Charity registered in England & Wales, No 1117526

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Dear friend,

In the spring of this year in which the world changed forever, dread and confusion surged through the communities we care for in Bhopal.

People whose scarred lungs have laboured for thirty six years know how it feels to struggle for breath. But early research on the virus showed that the damage wreaked by Union Carbide's gases put Bhopal survivors uniquely at risk in other ways, also. Higher numbers of them suffer illnesses such as diabetes, kidney and heart disease, hypertension, cancers. As the virus blew towards Bhopal our doctors feared that these 'comorbidities' left the survivors at least five times more vulnerable to Covid-19.

We're sorry to have to tell you that these fears have been borne out. Though they make up only 17 percent of the population, of the city's officially recorded deaths from Covid-19, gas survivors currently account for almost 56 percent. They have succumbed at six and a half times the rate of locals who are not gas exposed.

It may have been much worse, were it not for you. Before the first coronavirus case had been identified in Bhopal, staff of Sambhavna and Chingari—who owe their work to your support—arranged emergency meetings with local networks to agree a demanding and dangerous plan of action to suppress the coming contagion.

Alongside local volunteers, our health teams first worked to stem the rising tide of anxiety and misinformation. They went door-to-door, in every lane and alley, handing out pamphlets, plastering posters, creating lines of communication, advising and reassuring. They collected details of those most vulnerable and set in place support. They delivered food and medicines, screened symptoms, arranged quarantines and testing. If services were unavailable, they advocated on behalf of those in need. The enclosed booklet describes details of this enormous effort. **In the 15 areas where it is still at work, in over nine months there have been only thirty three cases, and two deaths.**



Socially distanced in-patient area at the Sambhavna Clinic, April 2020 ©Biju Nair/Sambhavna

The booklet features interviews with volunteers who devoted themselves to this ‘community shield’. Trained by Sambhavna staff over many years to be able to undertake health education, data collection, medical testing and medical interventions, at the beginning of the pandemic they stood one hundred strong. In striving to keep their neighbours safe they have since inspired another one hundred volunteers to join them.

We’re not trying to make grand claims, we have no reliable way to measure these results against other possible outcomes. But since the pandemic began across Bhopal the rate of infection is officially one in a hundred. Among the 42,000 highly vulnerable people actively protected by our program, **over the course of nine months the infection rate is less than one in one thousand, two hundred and fifty.**

When we say ‘our’ program, we also mean ‘your’. If the community shield *has* saved lives it’s because behind it, as it holds fast, your arms link tightly with ours.

At the outset our teams worked in 21 of the most severely gas-affected communities. Within a few weeks—and in order to ensure the plan could be followed to the letter—they decided to refocus on 15 areas in which volunteers were more numerous and experienced. On seeing the meticulous and effective way the plan was being organised, local health authorities agreed, in May, to take up every aspect of it, and to roll the plan out across all severely gas-affected communities. We are again unable to account for the impact but it has since become even more clear just how vitally the work was needed.

Diabetes, hypertension and coronary heart disease are known to amplify the risk of severe illness from Covid-19. All are associated with obesity. As this letter was being written Sambhavna's Dr Sanjay Shrivastava described the results of a recent study. 'Our analysis of data on Body Mass Index and diagnosis of thyroid malfunction of 27,155 people receiving care at the clinic (over 15 years) shows that **those exposed to Union Carbide's gases were 2.75 times more likely of being overweight or obese and 1.92 times more likely to suffer from thyroid disease**'.

'Suffering thyroid diseases at almost double the usual rate' adds Sambhavna's Managing Trustee, Satinath Sarangi, 'indicates that in addition to several other systems, the Endocrine System has also been damaged.'

By taking great care, Sambhavna has been able to continue consultations, treatments and referrals at its Clinic. But to protect our most vulnerable children until it is safe for them to gather inside once more, this March **Chingari took the painful decision to temporarily close the doors of the Children's Rehabilitation Centre.**

As India moved towards full lockdown, all therapies for our children had to cease. And there were other urgent worries. Chingari provides 48 children with medicines for neurological disorders. If unable to receive these on time there was a danger the condition of some could rapidly deteriorate, and they might even fall into fits, or seizures.

The day Chingari closed, and as Bhopal was shutting down, three drivers stepped up to deliver the urgently needed medicines, using the Centre's vans to reach childrens' homes. All three agreed to this perilous work without hesitation.



Zoya Khan, a Chingari student, is comforted by her grandmother. Zoya's father was exposed to gas in 1984 ©Robit Jain

On the same day Chingari Managing Trustees Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla hared across the city from one government office to another, seeking approval for staff to travel for work. Without it they ran the risk of arrest, or worse. By the end of an exhausting day, they had the permission. Due to India's ultra-strict lockdown the families of around forty kids registered with the Centre faced potential starvation. Urgent appeals for funds dashed off by staff worked wonders. Three more drivers were hired to help deliver food to these families. Inspired to get further involved, Chingari staff provided cooked meals to hundreds of others in need, for several days also feeding migrant workers. Over the lockdown they organised 873 food and ration packets for 200 families. To cover all costs, our staff dedicated to this work 10 percent of their own salaries.

Unable to meet families at the Centre, our Therapists and Special Educators went online each day to teach parents simple activities and exercises to do at home. **Since lockdown ended, they have carried out more than 2,000 home visits to 320 of our damaged children.**



Alfez, 8, is helped by his sister ©Robit Jain

Before the pandemic eight year old Alfez learned for the first time how to jump, and how to play with others. He began holding a pencil well enough to draw a straight line. He had worked hard to learn a few spoken phrases to help his mother look after him. He could say things like 'Nabin ja riya', (I am not going) or 'kbana dedo' (give me food). He could tell his mother if he needed the toilet. But the enforced break from hands-on therapy has set Alfez back years. He can no longer hold a pencil, he doesn't know how to play with other kids and, no longer able to express his needs, Alfez regularly soils himself.

You may remember Suraj Singh, who after a long struggle learned to talk, and took his first unaided steps at

Chingari, aged 19. Last year Suraj could walk 40 paces without help. Now he cannot walk one. His muscles have knotted and curved, he can't now stand.

Our therapists and educators are now striving to reverse the ruin of this pandemic. They won't let our precious achievements be stolen away. The last year has challenged all of us to our core. Though we'd prefer not to ask for your support at this time, the truth is we really do need it. In case you feel you are able to help, gift forms are enclosed. We cannot thank you enough.



Suraj straightens with support ©Robit Jain