STILL A THING - Leprosy Mission Australia – Melbourne 14-15 August 2026

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It was a great privilege to attend STILL A THING 2026, the biannual National Conference of the Leprosy Mission Australia (LMA) at Ridley College Parkville.
I met members of the LMA Board and their administrative team, representatives of their international teams as well as supporters and donors. This was a time of learning, about the disease, its identification and treatments and about geography as I kept GoogleMaps open as speakers talked of locations in remote provinces and newly independent countries.

My main takeaway points from the conference are common to most LMA projects.

- Leprosy Mission Australia is part of a worldwide, prayerful Christian organisation taking up Christ's command to "… cleanse those who have leprosy. Freely you have received; freely give." Matt10:8. The conference led by CEO Dr Greg Clarke began and ended with prayer.

- Partnerships are critical – projects will only be productive if supported by the local authorities, the community and health workers.

- Hansen's Disease can be treated if found, problems arise from physical access in remote communities, and from social access in urban communities

- Principal aim of LMA and partners is for incoming personnel to train and promote local on-ground staff to take up the work.

- Importance of following up cases to ensure that treatment continues and patients are being accepted in their local community. Patients can have adverse reaction to treatment, self-care groups will assist in ongoing success.

Prof Dr Warwick Britton opened with a challenging talk – Leprosy was declared "eliminated" by 2015 as there were few new cases, so governments "eliminated" funding and support.
It can take 25 years for a person infected with Leprosy to show symptoms, so a better guide to its prevalence and increasing new cases are the number of young children infected.

Several speakers dealt with more general topics of Christian engagement in global health. There were reminders that as supporters and donors we join in the mission to allow those implementing these projects on the ground, they are going where we cannot go and doing what we cannot do.

It is vital to understand the faith background of countries where LMA help is needed as part of respecting others' cultural traditions. Poverty robs people of choices, Hope for the future is with the children.

There were papers outlining active projects in several countries.

- Timor Leste and Solomon Islands
  Dr Ezequiel Gomes told us about the project in Oe Cusse a remote mountainous province of Timor Leste granted independence in 2022. Oe Cusse is physically surrounded by Indonesian Timor, and there are 37 local languages in this Catholic country. Border co-ordination is critical as the remote villages are close to regulatory boundaries.
  Identification of the disease cannot wait for people to come for diagnosis, health teams need to go out and find it.
  The long term sustainability of programs must be through local response, that any Australian input is valuable for setup and training and should ensure ongoing programs are locally run.

- Papua New Guinea
  Natalie Smith has been working in PNG for 11 years, for the past two years part time as a FIFO worker so the local people have to take charge of the work. Their greatest support is from the

New Zealand government in a similar arrangement to the Australian system. A new holistic approach Preventative Health and Community Empowerment (PHACE) has been developed in Bouganvile and now will operate in PNG, Timor Leste and Kiribati.
Gillian Whitely from LMA NZ talked further about the importance of using Aus/NZ funding to ensure sustainable local solutions.

- Nepal
  Santosh Nepali from the International Nepali Fellowship (INF) in Australia. In Nepal all disabilities and particularly neglected tropical diseases NTDs are addressed using a twin track approach through both the community and the health systems. INF in partnership with local authorities and leaders aims to reach the poor and marginalised, but emphasises the importance of listening to local people and having an exit strategy.
  INF is currently joining in local support and assistance to the rescue teams working in the devastated areas destroyed in the floods in Nepal.

- India
  Dr Nathan Grills reminded us that faith is "still a thing" in global health programs. A discussion on accountability raised the notion that "decolonisation is the colonists problem, not India's problem" as they have moved on.
  ENABLED has a team of doctors, community health workers, disability therapists and development professionals. In India's rural villages, a lack of resources or infrastructure is compounded where traditional taboos can prevent members of a higher caste from associating with a Dalit (an untouchable), a widow or someone with a disability such as Leprosy. They work closely with local Christian churches.

- Nigeria
  Helen Fernandes previously worked with The Leprosy Mission Niger.
  Public programs have been supported with training in health and education, noting that permission from the Imams is as important as government support, particularly in the Hindu northern parts of the country.

- Indonesia
  Andrew Newmarch from LMA recently addressed the OLJ National Chapter in Perth. An updated report is attached with these notes, outlining progress.
  Over 20,000 people have now been screened and extensive training programs are underway with partner Yayasan NLR.
  The Indonesian government gives very little support so partners and NGOs are working to lobby for increased funding and recognition of Leprosy issues.

Not all of us can walk to remote villages to deliver health care, some of us must use the bounty of our wealth in Australia to help those trained to work in our neighbouring countries where leprosy is "Still a Thing."

Further information and website links

- Japan based research and education project Sasakawa Leprosy Initiative website has many resources including a Leprosy Atlas that illustrates and identifies Hansen's Disease lesions compared with other skin conditions. Leprosy is the only skin disease that exhibits loss of feeling. https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/latest-updates/initiative-news/7053/

- World Health Organisation website has extensive information and annual statistical reports, with the databases likely to be updated in September 2026 https://www.who.int/health-topics/leprosy#tab=tab_1

- Leprosy Mission Australia website https://www.leprosymission.org.au/

- ENABLED website, outlining work primarily in India https://www.enabledhc.com