WHO flags spinal care as critical medical gap, long-term health need of Nepal

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

♦ One in three of the estimated 14 000 injured people in the earthquake require follow-up rehabilitation treatment. Of them, around 12% have a damaged spinal cord.
♦ WHO has identified spinal care as a critical medical gap, and this is being flagged for funding.
♦ If people with spinal cord injuries are not properly cared for, it could lead to paralysis.

When Nepal’s devastating April 25 earthquake hit, Nanda Thami was safe. The forty-two-year-old resident of Phopa Chaku, a small village in Dolakha district east of Kathmandu, was in an open space, away from the mud-brick structures dotted throughout his village.

When Nepal’s devastating earthquake hit on 25 April, Nanda Thami was safe. The forty-two-year-old resident of Phopa Chaku, a small village in Dolakha district east of Kathmandu, was in an open space, away from the mud-brick structures dotted throughout his village.

Nanda rushed into the house to rescue his five-year-old son Gopal who was still inside the family house as the earthquake’s aftershocks continued with terrifying frequency. While the boy was saved with only minor injuries, Nanda bore the brunt of the family home structure as it collapsed.
According to Nanda’s nephew Kumar, members of the village banded together and carried Nanda to the district headquarters of Charikot, which is four hours away. From there he was able to hitch a ride in a local police vehicle to Kathmandu to seek medical care.

Nanda now lies in a bed in the foyer of Bir Trauma Centre, Kathmandu’s primary critical care provider, and cannot move from the shoulders down. His head remains in a fixed position. Though Nanda’s condition is stable, the spinal cord injuries he sustained provide challenges for medical service providers.

Among the estimated 14,000 injuries, approximately one in three (or around 4,700) will require follow-up rehabilitation treatment. Of this number, approximately 12% have damage to their spinal cord.

According to Dr Ganesh Gurung, who is coordinating operations at Bir Trauma Centre, Nepal has neither the human resources nor medical facilities to deal with the needs of those suffering spinal injuries, making delivery of such resources critical to the wider relief effort.

“The number one need now is spinal cord rehabilitation – human and medical resources related to that are the most important because we do not have those kinds of resources,” said Dr Gurung.

WHO, in coordination with Nepal’s Ministry of Health and Population, is deploying foreign medical teams to areas that lack access to services, or whose medical infrastructures were destroyed by the quake. The UN health agency is calling all donor agencies and emergency relief partners to make the long-term needs of affected populations a priority, and to ensure that spinal care and rehabilitation is taken into account.

“Treatment, proper handling and care of those injured are essential to prevent future disabilities,” said Damodar Adhikari, Programme Manager at WHO Nepal Earthquake Response, adding, “If people are not properly cared for, spinal cord injuries could lead to paralysis.”

According to Dr Roderico Ofrin, WHO’s Overall Health Response Manager in Nepal, spinal care has been identified as a critical medical gap, and is being flagged for funding, reflecting WHO’s long-term commitment to the health and welfare of the Nepalese people.

Sarah Blin, Nepal Country Director at Handicap International, says her organization is currently working within Nepal’s health system to ensure that spinal cord injuries are not overlooked.

“We are working in four major hospitals in the Kathmandu valley, supporting the medical teams once a patient has been discharged, and ensuring that the right care and equipment to address spinal cord injury is provided,” she said.

Handicap International is supporting spinal cord injuries in hospitals and indicated that additional human resources and equipment is being sought by Kathmandu’s Spinal Injury and Rehabilitation Centre to ensure adequate provision of long-term care.

For those such as Nanda Thami who were injured in the quake, the delivery of such care will ensure not only their own health, but also theirs and their family’s future economic security.