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Bringing TB care to the communities of Timor-Leste
'Zero Death to Zero Infection in South East Asia'

The World TB Day march began at daybreak, high above the clouds in the mountainous village of Laclubar. Together, TB patients, community members and representatives from the Ministry of Health marched throughout the surrounding villages, gathering more participants and momentum along the way.

Laclubar was chosen for the commemoration of World TB Day in Manatuto because it has the highest prevalence of TB cases in the district. According to District TB Coordinator, Napolaoin Sarmentu, there were 24 TB cases in this remote village last year. "With the geography of Laclubar, it's not easy. There are many people living behind these mountains and we cannot access them", informed Mr. Sarmentu. With the World TB Day event, the district coordinator hopes to reach as many community members as possible with important information on how to prevent and treat TB.

The march wound up in the local secondary school in Laclubar and participants were seated for the formal commemoration of World TB Day. This year's theme is 'Stop TB in South East Asia. Zero Death to Zero Infection.' Medical presentations were given by nurses about Tuberculosis, films were screened, and there was even a quiz about TB with serious prize money on offer! But most importantly, speeches and personal experiences were shared by health workers and former TB patients with the community.

Tomas Ximenes Nasciementu, 42, is a recovered TB patient from Suco Batara. 'I didn't know anything about TB before I got sick. I had TB for 6 months before I got treatment in 2009.' Tomas is a farmer who works very hard looking after his pigs and goats. He also grows crops, including corn, cassava, arrowroot and potatoes. He doesn't smoke or drink but he developed a bad cough that wouldn't go away and he experienced fever in the night time. Eventually Tomas decided to go to the health facility to access treatment. He took his medication regularly until he was cured and so Tomas was one of the lucky ones. Both his uncle and his father died from TB. His father didn't take medicine and he was very sick before he died. Now there are others in the village with TB.



Tomas Ximenes Nasciementu

Tomas explains the challenges a TB patient faces when sick. 'I had difficulties because I didn't have time to farm; it was difficult to find food. It was no problem to take the drugs and get treatment; the problem was just to find food. When I got this sickness, I couldn't work at all. All my jobs were done by my wife. Before I had a strong body and I worked hard. I was really worried for my wife and my children; I wondered who would support my family? I was worried for my crops that animals would destroy them. But I wasn't afraid of dying. TB can be cured if you get treatment. I feel happy and healthy now. I have gotten information about TB and I am happy for myself, for my family and for the community from events like today.'

Many people are unaware of how TB is transmitted. TB is spread through the air, when we cough, sneeze or talk the droplets carry the TB bacilli from one person to the other. If a person with TB doesn't access treatment it can spread to ten other community members within the space of one year. So Tomas' message to the community is an important one 'if you have any symptoms, go to the health facility and get treatment. You can't just stay quiet. You must get treatment.'

Napoloain Sarmentu explained that while Laclubar did not reach their targets for reducing TB cases in 2012, the district health services are working hard to reach their targets this year. They hope to involve the community volunteers further to reach community members in the remote areas and inform them about TB prevention and treatment. Mr. Sarmentu also explained that the community themselves have an important role to play in preventing TB by avoiding risk factors such as smoking and drinking. Often there is not adequate ventilation in people's homes which increases the transmission of micro bacteria. Simple steps like opening windows while cooking on a wood fire can help prevent the transmission of TB. Mr. Sarmentu said he was very pleased with the commemoration of World TB Day in Laclubar. 'I feel happy because everyone was represented at the ceremony here today. There from representatives from government, WHO, district people, NGO and community members, women with babies travelled very far, coming from the mountains to be here for this important occasion.'

Every year the government commemorates World TB Day in each district to draw attention to this important public health issue. Manatuto and Ermera were the first districts to commemorate World TB Day this year with further districts planning events on the 8th of May. These are important events for the National TB Program to advocate on Tuberculosis and build community partnerships to ensure that Timor-Leste joins other countries in South East Asia to strive for 'Zero Death to Zero Infection'.



Dr. Lungten Wangchuk, WHO, Padre Domingos Gusmao, Laclubar, Sr Constantino Lopes, National TB Control Program Manager, Sr. Artur N.T.S. da Silva, Deputy of District Health Service Manatuto, Sr. Fernando Valentin, C.D.O. of Laclubar sub-district



Joananito, a recovered TB patient from Laclubar, shares his story with the audience, and takes part in the Tuberculosis quiz