

Mr Sam Gidwani joins annual hand surgery visit to Nepal



At the end of November, Mr Sam Gidwani, Consultant Orthopaedic and Hand Surgeon at London Bridge Hospital, joined surgical colleagues Donald Sammut and Nola Lloyd, and anaesthetist James Rogers, on "Working Hands" charity's annual two week trip to Nepal.

Hand Surgeon, Mr Donald Sammut, who set up the charity, has been visiting India and more recently Nepal on a regular basis since 1990, providing much needed specialist surgical skills to patients with hand problems, mostly related to leprosy. Mr Gidwani has now visited Nepal with "Working Hands" twice, in 2013 and 2014.

The base for the visit is Lalgadh Leprosy Hospital, near Janakpur, in the South Eastern part of the country. The team start their visits by seeing all the patients that have arrived from the surrounding area. Patients of all ages attend, with hand problems predominantly related to the paralysis caused by infections with the leprosy bacteria. The rest of the visit is occupied by all-day operating lists, during which time approximately 50 patients undergo surgery.

Leprosy characteristically causes a "claw deformity" of the hands, and significantly impairs hand function. The critical ability of the thumb to oppose against the fingers can also be lost. Many of the patients treated at Lalgadh are of working age, with manual or farming jobs, so the loss of hand function makes it difficult for them to work, and to earn a living to support their families.

These problems can be addressed by tendon transfer surgery – using muscles that are still working to replace the function of muscles that are paralysed. It is delicate and painstaking work, and the outcome depends on careful postoperative hand therapy, which a local physiotherapist has been trained to provide.

On most occasions there are other conditions that need treatment, and during this recent trip almost a third of the patients, many of them children, presented with significant burn contractures – thickened scars on the hands and arms that had formed as a result of deep burns, which had not received appropriate early treatment. It was possible to excise these scars and resurface the areas with skin grafts, allowing improved hand and arm function in the long term.

Another important aim of each visit is to train local surgeons and physiotherapists to treat some of these problems themselves, and indeed a number of staff from Lalgadh and Kathmandu have been sponsored by Working Hands to visit the UK for additional training.

None of this valuable work would be possible without the generous support of a number of benefactors.

For more details see www.workinghandscharity.org.

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