The Lifeline Express is ready to depart

Dentist Neil Sikka embarked on a mercy mission on board the Lifeline Express in India. Here is an account of his travels.

India is a vast and varied country, with a population of a billion, of which 70 million are disabled – more than the population of the U.K. I was looking forward to returning to my homeland and to work alongside those on the Lifeline Express. While the word Delhi may conjure up images of crowding, poverty and sickness, Delhi domestic terminal was like an age of crowding, and to work alone.

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the pristine ultrasonic scaler, which enabled me to provide some first-time scaling. All those I treated were incredibly grateful and remained stoic despite the considerable pain they had been in (probably for some years).

Some of those I examined had difficulty in opening their mouths and, on further investigation, I noticed clinical chang-
es on the buccal mucosa consistent with chewing tobacco and betel nut. Dr Ghate later confirmed that they see many cases of Submucous Fibrosis at the dental clinic. I remained for the next two days when it was time to hand over to Dr Ghate and his team who would be continuing the service for three weeks.

Staggering
By the end of my two days, we had seen and treated 92 patients for dental pro-
blems, a number which rose to an impressive 354 at the end of the three-week clinic. The medical teams on the Lifeline Express also treated 405 patients with eye problems, more than 100 for cleft lips, 85 patients with ear problems, and 211 sufferers of polio; in total a staggering 1,154 patients were treated.

Impact India’s ultimate aim is to raise awareness in communities to the benefits available to them by encouraging them to demand treatment at local and regional health centres. Most poor Indians are illiterate and unaware of their right to treatment. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh, those below the poverty line are entitled to £500 of treatment a year, paid for by the state. While funds are available to treat those below the poverty, less than 10 per cent of allocated finance reaches those in need.

On my final day I asked Zelma what ultimate dream for the Lifeline Express would be. “Neil, I hope that one day the train becomes defunct. If we can educate and inform people of their rights, treatment will be fully provided locally and our train will be surplus to requirements”.

Here’s hoping!