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n the heart of rural Punjab lies the village of Hansali, a tiny settlement known as the “bread-basket of India”. The land is mostly inhabited by farmers who work the land for an income of around 3,000 Rupees (£36) a month. The people who live in these remote areas are deeply religious, and Sikhsism is a significant part of their daily lives. The people here are not rich, but they do not fall in the category of poor from Indian standards; every village is connected by a road, and there are water pumps, electricity and irrigation facilities. None of them go without food and all the children have access to compulsory schooling. But the medical facilities in this area are very limited and dental care was non-existent until only a few years ago, when the Pain Relief Clinic was set up.

Major Shamsher Singh’s two sons Dr Hardev Coonar and Dr Pritam Singh Coonar set up the Pain Relief Clinic in 1999, instantly bringing pain relief to the people in the village in which it was nestled.

“My father always wished that our rural area had better medical care and so my brother, Dr Pritam Singh Coonar, became a doctor and set up a medical practice in the village which specialised in eye surgery. I became an oral surgeon after my basic degree in dentistry, but it wasn’t until I retired in 1999 from the Eastman Dental and Hammersmith Hospital that I came back home to serve my people,” explained Dr Coonar.

“During this period of time I was influenced by Dr Daman Lal-Sarin, who at the age of 60 had retired from general dental practice in Coventry and had started to volunteer in various parts of the world as a Rotarian dental surgeon. We talked about setting up a clinic and started to set one up here in Hansali.”

Setting up
The idea for setting up a clinic in the Hansali area was originally that of the late Major Shamsher Singh, who studied medicine at the Medical School of Agra before serving in the Indian Medical Corps. At the time Hansali was no different to any other village in the area and had little to no medical care. With much encouragement and support from Dr Daman Lal-Sarin, the Pain Relief Clinic was set up.

Dr Lal-Sarin then brought the idea for setting up a pain relief clinic, making sure that apart from Dr Daman Lal-Sarin, any money he receives is for the welfare of all people. Babaji receives many offerings, in small numbers through the Rotary in the past from Australia, England, Canada, USA and Argentina. In earlier days the Rotary used to pay for people to travel and we would provide them with accommodation and vegetarian food. But now the Rotary has very strict funding and volunteers have to fund the trips themselves, but we still provide them with accommodation.”

Funding
Most of the funding that the clinic receives is from Baba Ajit Singh Ji, a respected nobleman who has established a place for worship and people have faith in his presence. He is warmly known to the people as Babaji and is regarded by many as an enlightened man who cares for the welfare of all people. Babaji receives many offerings, and any money he receives is spent on good causes, such as education and health services. So far he has set up the local school, a college, a community centre and a temple at the very heart of the village and he even offered up his accommodation to Daman Lal-Sarin who at the age of 60 had retired from general dental practice in Coventry and had started to volunteer in various parts of the world as a Rotarian dental surgeon. We talked about setting up a clinic and started to set one up here in Hansali.”

Central figure
A month after the clinic had been set up a happily retired Dr Lal-Sarin started to actively take part in how the clinic was run. Spending months at a time over in the remote farmlands, Dr Lal-Sarin soon became a central figure at the clinic. As friends and family proudly exclaim, he made a significant impact on the staff at the clinic, making sure that apart from extractions they started gradually doing fillings, crowns dentures, and even root canal treatments all free of charge.

Dr Lal-Sarin then brought in the help of the Rotary Club, who directly helped by sending volunteer UK dentists to the village. Even his wife, Mrs Chad Lal-Sarin, began volunteering at the clinic. The clinic started reaching out beyond the village boundaries, and as one can imagine, in an area where medical care is scarce, the clinic generated interest in the surrounding areas outside of Hansali. For the staff, the demand became intense, but even though their wages were low, their determination and enthusiasm never once faltered. In 15 years more than 100,000 patients have used this free service and the clinic continues to provide free dental treatment and lectures on oral hygiene to the girls school and the boys schools.

Volunteers
“So far the clinic is going very well, and has had many visits from many volunteers,” Dr Coonar explained. “The first year when we established the clinic I invited the principal director of a dental college, Dr S Sidhu to work here. More recently a group from the international college of dentists from New Delhi taught the staff for three days.

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All treatments supplied to patients is free
for the location of the Pain Relief Clinic.

The clinic has four surgeries, two of which are well equipped, whilst the other two are older and in need of some modernisation. The clinic has its own power generator for when the power fails, and it even has digital radiograph equipment, which, as Dr Coonar explained, is a great improvement for the clinic.

Future plans
The plan now is to keep the clinic as a permanent feature and keep it as a centre for providing pain relief treatment to the surrounding community.

“I can verify completely that every penny we get is spent on the clinic; not a penny is wasted”

As both Dr Lal-Sarin and Dr Coonar highlighted, this is not a profit-making association; they buy local equipment and try to keep costs down as much as possible.

“There are so many charities that collect so much money but in quite a few cases people don’t know what happens to the money, but I can verify completely that every penny we get is spent on the clinic; not a penny is wasted,” Dr Daman Lal-Sarin said.

For more information on the Pain Relief Clinic and if you wish to donate equipment, please visit http://bit.ly/Odfhsc.

* Images supplied courtesy of Ms Karsta Straub

Acknowledgements
Special thanks to the contributions of Karsta Straub and Leonard Cohen. Dr Coonar wishes to thank them for their continued interest in Pain Relief Clinic Hans appro. Special thanks also to the role of RC Sirhind through Professor Harshinder Singh Past President and the current Lead Dental Surgeon in Dr Jagpreet Kaur, who, as both Dr Daman Lal-Sarin and Mrs Chand Lal-Sarin explained, is a “caring dedicated person under whose care the patients presenting for treatment get excellent care.”