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Too much bioethics, nowadays, is devoted to the sophisticated questions that arise in the highly technological context of medicine and nursing in the rich and developed countries of the world. We do not give enough attention to the problems of the world's medically deprived majority.

Perhaps this explains why the nursing school closest to our heart is the Delta School of Nursing, at the Delta Centre, Kadalure, Tamil-Nadu, India. It is a nursing school set up for Dalit ('untouchable') women from the villages who – in spite of terrible poverty, caste discrimination and outright persecution – have succeeded in obtaining a high-school education and are now learning to be nurses in a curriculum that follows the standards of the Indian Nursing Council.

They are extremely poor and, although they are moving forward with great enthusiasm, both on the part of the students and on the part of the Principal and nursing tutors, they are doing so with great difficulty.

Their big hurdle is to find a hospital with 150 beds for clinical experience as required by the Indian Nursing Council. The two nearby government hospitals (at Madurantakam, run by the Tamil-Nadu State Government, and at Kalpakkam, run by the Central Government's Atomic Energy Department) have not issued formal orders permitting clinical training for these Dalit women. Perhaps caste prejudices have something to do with this bureaucratic hurdle! However to fulfil the requirement, they are obtaining clinical experience by visiting private hospitals at Chengalpattu (at a longer distance). Both the Dalit Liberation Education Trust (the nursing school's parent organization) and the students are determined to succeed in achieving professional nursing training.

Not unnaturally, some of the students hope to work in big-city hospitals. However, there is also widespread commitment to community work in the villages. The Delta School of Nursing has helped us tremendously in our Mother and Child Health Education Project, which we have been running since January 2000. Phase I came with the millennium in January 2000, and Phase II was in October 2000.

Our international team, led and co-ordinated by Ben Gurion University's Centre for Asian and International Bioethics, teaches village Dalit women 'Healthy pregnancy'; 'Healthy childbirth'; 'Infant development, nutrition and infectious disease'; 'Environmental health', with an emphasis on the healthy use of water and the safe disposal of human waste; 'Family planning and sexually transmitted

Address for correspondence: Frank J Leavitt, Centre for Asian and International Bioethics, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, PO Box 653, 84105 Beer Sheva, Israel. E-mail: yeruham@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

diseases'; and 'bioethics'. The bioethics teaching unit consists of open, non-preaching discussions of subjects like community responsibility (What do you do when a dangerously sick person has no money for transportation to the hospital, which is 35 km away?); autonomy (What do you do when a baby is sick and the mother does not want to take the steps necessary for cure?); belief and culture (Can the evil eye really cause disease?); violence against women (What can be done about wife beating and alcoholism?) etc. Many health problems may look like medical problems, but they are really economic, sociocultural, and bioethical.

Women who complete our course receive certificates as health ambassadors. They have the task of spreading the message of healthy behaviour in their villages. After a 10-day course with us, they have a basic knowledge of safe obstetric delivery practices (among other things) and can assist the traditional birth attendants in the villages.

The principal, the tutors and the pupils of the Delta School of Nursing have been helping us in every way with this project. They serve as Tamil-English translators in the classroom. They accompany us to the villages. They help us in our continual updating of our teaching units. Being village people themselves, but with a modern nursing education, they bridge the cross-cultural gap for us. Most important of all, they are continuing to run the programme in our absence. International experts can start a project in a developing country. It can be considered a success only if it becomes self-sustaining and independent of the foreign experts' continued presence. The goal of the international experts must be to become unnecessary and be replaced by local talent. We were therefore delighted to see, during our follow-up visit in August 2001, that our health ambassadors are continuing their work under the guidance of the nursing school.

Members of our team participate in the nursing school teaching when we are in the Delta. Professor Michael Alkan has taught microbiology and Frank Leavitt has taught bioethics. Eszter Kismödi taught human rights and patients' rights. June Leavitt gave the students a very popular extracurricular course in yoga in October 2000. The students have been meeting every morning at 06.00 hours for yoga ever since.

It is a major goal for us to raise the money to build a hospital – with an ambulance – to serve the poor people of this medically deprived area. This hospital would also serve as the teaching hospital for the Delta School of Nursing. We hope that this facility will later become the site of an international school for developing country and disaster health care.

Further information about the Dalit Liberation Movement can be obtained from Henry Thiagaraj, Managing Trustee of the Dalit Liberation Education Trust (which is the mother organization of the Delta School of Nursing), e-mail: hremi@vsnl.com or from Frank Leavitt, e-mail: yeruham@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

Eszter Kismödi, Raya Gal and Eilon Shany, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel.

Mrinalinee Pendse, Ecological Society – Pune, Pune, India.

Michael L Alkan, Ronald Orie Browne and Michael Karplus, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel.

Henry Thiagaraj, Dalit Liberation Education Trust, Chennai, Tamil-Nadu, India.

Frank J Leavitt, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel.



Delta School of Nursing students with village women whom the students are helping to train as health ambassadors. (Photograph: June Leavitt)