

WHO calls for stepped-up fight against leprosy

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The World Health Organization called Monday for greater efforts to fight leprosy, warning the disfiguring disease was defying efforts to wipe it out across many countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

"We opened the champagne too early," said Shin Young-soo, chairman of the WHO's Western-Pacific region that covers 37 countries at the start of a three-day conference looking at how to combat leprosy and treat its victims.

There are 5,000 new cases being reported each year in the Western Pacific, according to Shin.

He said the problem was most severe in Micronesia, the [Marshall Islands](#) and Kiribati, which had failed to meet the WHO's technical definition of "elimination" of fewer than one case per 10,000 people.

Even in the [Philippines](#), where the disease was officially "eliminated" in 1998, 2,000 new cases are still recorded every year, according to Shin.

Outside of the Western Pacific, the problem is worse.

India leads the world with more than 130,000 new leprosy cases every year since 2006, while Brazil is second with about 40,000 new cases annually, according to WHO documents.

Shin called for a renewed commitment to fight leprosy, stressing that it had to be long-term because the disease could incubate for as long as 20 years.

"We have the drugs, we have the knowledge. It does not take a lot of money. We must make a final push," he said.

Leprosy is an infectious [bacterial disease](#) that has been recorded for thousands of years. If left

untreated it can damage the nerves, leading to [paralysis](#) in the extremities of the body and horrible disfigurements.

However it is curable with early detection and modern drugs.

The WHO has been providing free drug therapy to patients anywhere in the world since 1995.

Shin said that, with the medical hurdles overcome, the major challenge in countries with enduring leprosy was to ensure long-term commitment from governments.

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