

Jaipur foot restores lives

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Humanitarian aid to third world countries, no matter how well meaning, is often the wrong kind. A good example are the artificial legs sent to help the legless people of India walk again. For years western doctors were fitting handicapped people in India with western style artificial legs.

Designed by western experts, it was primarily suited for the western mode of life. It consisted of a foot piece which was not an exact replica of the human foot. It was meant for use inside a shoe.

Primarily for use in cold wet climates - it was necessary to protect the foot piece by wearing a shoe. Seen in the Indian context the necessity of a shoe made it impractical. Not only did it make the foot piece uncomfortable to wear in the hot weather but also added to the ultimate cost.

Moreover the western model had only enough mobility to enable the amputee to sit at chair level. The design did not permit sitting in any other position. As most casual laborers in India, such as farmers and craftsmen, work in the crouching position and when sitting, sit cross legged on the floor, the western style limb had to be removed. Thus it became common practice among the rural poor to discard the appliance after some time and go back to using crutches.

The development of the Jaipur foot started essentially in 1958 with the establishment of a separate orthopedics department of the Sawai Madho Singh hospital in Jaipur. Till then, the only place in the country supplying appliances like artificial limbs was the armed forces centre at Pune. The need for a centre supplying such aids directly to the patient was only too real. Along with this a need was felt for a rehabilitation centre.

It was then that Dr. R.K. Sethi took up the job with tireless enthusiasm. Simply a general surgeon by training, it proved to be a blessing in disguise as he was more receptive to non formal ideas. The Jaipur centre soon started making the pincer hand and later artificial limbs. Dr. Sethi realized that designing a limb is not just a simple biomechanical problem. It must also permit the people to preserve their life style, one which has evolved over centuries.

Unable to break new ground with the professionally trained limb-makers, help came for Dr. Sethi in the form of Ram Chander Sharma or Masterjie as he is now called. He had been working as a craftsman teaching crafts to handicapped people.



Indo Canadian

By Joan Mayo

He used the sand casting method to produce a dye which was used as a mould for the foot piece. A tire-treading mechanics services were utilized and vulcanized rubber was used to make



the foot piece.

Since this turned out to be too heavy, the western solid-ankle - cushioned-heel model was incorporated and coated with rubber. But it was only after the complete discarding of the western model that the problems of mobility were solved and the Jaipur foot was invented.

Masterjie even today sits in the same shack on the mud floor working on making even better versions of the Jaipur foot.

The Jaipur foot has had a tremendous impact on the lives of rural dwellers. In the past, rural amputees were forced to migrate to urban areas when fitted with western designs, frequenting the corridors of the Social Welfare ministry, pleading for a sit-down job in an alien setting.

They now live with family and friends in their natural environs and carry out their former vocations.

This is true rehabilitation.

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