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THURSDAY 4TH APRIL 2013

INDIA: REAL AWARD FOR THE REAL HERO

Dr Ashish Satav is one of the honorees of the REAL Awards – an award that acknowledges health workers' contribution towards saving lives.

The REAL Awards, created by Save the Children in partnership with the Frontline Health Workers Coalition, is a first-of-its-kind global awards programme to recognise, respect and appreciate the work of health workers and the lifesaving care they provide.

How it all started

Dr Ashish says:

“I was influenced by my grandfather, Mr Vasant Rao Bombatkar (Sarvodaya leader), who devoted his life to the freedom movement.

“Under his guidance, I read literature written by Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and Vinoba Bhave.

“When I was 13, I was touched by Gandhian teaching, ‘youths should go to the villages to serve as real India is in villages’. After 7th standard, I decided to become a doctor and serve the rural part of India.

“During my medical studies, I started visiting various rural and tribal health projects. After visiting tribal areas, I realised that these areas need medical facilities too.”

No easy task

Instead of joining a lucrative big-city practice, Dr Ashish knew he could have more impact by working in the poorest and most deprived parts of India.

He ended up in beautiful, but poor, Melghat in 1997, where medical facilities were scarce.

There were no hospital facilities for 100km and infant malnutrition was rampant – ten times beyond the official government statistics.

In one of the tribal areas, the infant mortality rates were more than 100 deaths per 1,000 live births – almost twice the Indian average of 52 per 1,000.

Leading the way amid challenges galore

Over the past 15 years, through sheer determination and ingenuity, Dr Ashish and his wife, Dr Kavita, have managed to reduce the mortality rate to around 60 deaths per 1,000 live births. Severe malnutrition cases have dropped by more than 40%.

But the task wasn't easy. One of the formidable challenges was the lack of awareness among the people.

Dr Ashish explains:

“When I started, the majority of people were going to traditional healers, and the health practices were rooted in their local values and culture.

“A tribal woman of around 30 came to me carrying a very sick infant.

“The child was severely malnourished and needed to be hospitalised. However, the mother – recently widowed and with no one else to look after her other children at home – refused to admit the child.

“‘The child will die,’ I warned her.

“‘I don’t have money,’ she replied. ‘I have four other children to look after and feed.’

“I was shocked, but realised that she had no other option.”

The mother and child departed, and the child died.

But the incident moved Dr Ashish to work on child nutrition issues with a sense of urgency.

As a mark of his determination and commitment, the first and only maternal and child care hospital opened in Melghat at the beginning of 2012.

Empowering community, changing lives

Despite challenges, Dr Ashish continued his mission – to change the situation for the better.

He trained tribal women to serve as village health workers, educating and supporting the families with nutrition and hygiene education, primary medical care, and nursing support.

In the absence of medical facilities, he trained the local health workers in newborn home-based care.

Dr Ashish also encouraged the villagers to start kitchen gardens.

He channeled government and community aid to village soup kitchens, and got city experts to teach village women tasty recipes with local vegetables and cereals.

These initiatives have brought down malnutrition and mortality rates, and earned him recognition and awards.

The most moving experience

One of Dr Ashish's most moving experiences was when his wife, Dr Kavita, assisted a mother during a complicated delivery and saved the child. But then they found that the mother could not produce any breast-milk to feed the child.

A nursing mother herself, Dr Kavita sent half her own milk to feed the baby, who is now a healthy boy. As a result, the couple created a programme encouraging lactating mothers to donate part of their milk to help save other babies.

Truth prevails

From grassroots work with communities to advocating the government for change, Dr Ashish does it all.

In 2004, his own research across several villages revealed a massive mismatch between his data and that of the government, which was an absolute under estimation of the reality.

This in turn led the local political leaders against him and his life was threatened.

Even this did not deter the doctor and, in 2005, malnutrition among tribal communities emerged high on the political agenda at the state level.

Dr Ashish says: “Gandhi always said ‘truth prevails’ and it did.”

The real heroes

It is heartening and inspiring to see people like Dr Ashish and Dr Kavita chipping away with great commitment to address and solve these problems.

The least we can do is to celebrate the valuable contribution they are making.

Find out more <http://www.therealawards.com/celebrate/46>

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