

Death of Aids activist

Pitchaimani, founder and leader of one of India's foremost HIV/Aids activist groups and a partner organisation of VST, has died.

He took his own life last month, weighed down by depression, debt, and personal troubles 12 years after being diagnosed with Aids.

Those 12 years were remarkable ones. Refusing to bow to the then untreatable disease he vowed to put his considerable talent and energy to work in service of positive people. The organisation he led, Theni District Network of Positive People, grew from an informal group receiving support and counselling at Arogya Agam to a high profile lobbying body able to exert pressure on officials and ministers at district, state and national level.

After initial nurturing from Arogya Agam, TDNP+ became an independent organisation and a partner of Village Service Trust in its own right. The network is unique in being a real community based organisation, with trustees elected by the members. TDNP+ was one of the top two networks in Tamil Nadu for mobilising funding - it had the maximum government funding for a drop-in centre, where positive people received support and advice on their anti-retroviral treatment and where special help went to those infected with both HIV and tuberculosis.

Today it can claim credit for Theni having one of the best resourced Aids



treatment centres in Tamil Nadu and a reputation for high standards of HIV work.

Much of that was due to Pitchaimani's drive and ability – qualities that were recognised two years ago when he received a government award as the state's best Aids activist. Pitchaimani also held a prominent position in the state positive people's network.

The last year, however, saw the effects of such a high pressure role begin to take their toll. His health, sustained by anti-retrovirals, began to suffer as the drugs lost their potency. He had borrowed heavily to pay for private treatment. He leaves a wife, Vijaya, a teenage son and daughter, and a married daughter.

Overpage: Pitchaimani, interviewed three years ago, and an appreciation by John Dalton

VST awarded lottery grant

The Big Lottery Fund is giving VST £308,000 for its work with village women. The money will help us build independent community organisations - known as federations - that work to overcome poverty, discrimination and violence.

VST's partner NGOs in India will provide training and support to the federations. Working with village women's groups, the federations promote microenterprise to boost incomes and campaign to against domestic violence.

VST was among 20 applicants to win lottery support out of around 300 hopefuls. This is the fourth lottery grant awarded to VST.

Overleaf: the federations in action



New faces



Sir Nicholas Fenn, former British High Commissioner to India, has become a patron of VST. Since retiring from the diplomatic service Sir Nicholas has been active in charity work. He has been a supporter of VST for several years.



Dominic Munro-McCarthy is to be VST's new fundraising manager. Dominic, 34, has worked as a fundraiser for hospices and a youth organisation. This is his first job in the development field.

'I felt I had to do something to change attitudes to HIV'

Three years ago Pitchaimani spoke about contracting Aids and how he turned to campaigning for fair treatment of positive people

'In 1997 I was a successful cloth merchant living with my wife and three children. We had a good life. Then I began to get ill all the time. I spent a fortune on private doctors, but nothing helped. Eventually my money ran out, the doctors did the 'final' test and it revealed I was HIV positive. So was my wife. I had TB too, I weighed 36 kilos and couldn't work. My family turned their backs apart from my wife who found farm work, but it only paid 25 rupees a day. This wasn't enough to feed our children so we sent them to an orphanage. I was suicidal by this time. Luckily, almost when I had given up, I found out about Arogya Agam. They told me that I didn't need to die from Aids, that I could learn to manage the disease and start living again. They gave me medicine and educated me on nutrition, I began to do yoga and slowly my health improved. In 2001 Arogya Agam asked me to become a counsellor and role model for people with HIV. They paid me Rs1,000 a month, plus I started my business as a cloth merchant again on the side and we brought our children back home.

Within six months I had found 16 HIV positive people and uncovered much stigma. HIV+ people were made to stay in different rooms in the home, not allowed to play with children, they had to eat separately and all their belongings were burnt when they died. I felt I had to do something to change attitudes to HIV. With support from Arogya Agam and Network Theni, a group of us formed TDNP+ in 2002. Our aim was to educate about the disease, enable people with HIV to live openly and provide them with information and support. We started by doing advocacy work with the hospitals and government as they were ignoring the disease and refusing to provide treatment. Anti-retrovirals were not freely available. Slowly we found government officials and doctors who were sympathetic to our cause and who supported us.

Now we have 800 members across Theni District and another 2,000 who we work with, but are reluctant to openly become members. We have a 'drop in' centre and counselling facility, there are regular support group meetings and training sessions. Our 'positive speakers' attend public meetings and other events to speak out and our peer group educators work openly in the community supporting other HIV positive people and educating about prevention. We pay for staff to work in the local hospitals to counsel and reach out to HIV positive people. We provide educational support to children of HIV positive parents and give loans to help finance new enterprises to those out of work. Our network is associated with other networks and I am also the president of the Tamil Nadu Federation of Positive People. Now we have support nationwide, our new focus is at the grassroots level, ensuring that every village council supports the HIV+ people in their community.'



Pitchaimani addressing activists of TDNP+

He was the person I knew who did most for people with HIV

Pitchaimani's business selling cloth in north India often took him away from home. Later as an activist he was asked by the state health minister how he got Aids. He said: "Yes, I have made mistakes, but the important thing for us positive people is not to dwell on the past - but look to how we are going to manage our lives and to live in the future."

Pitchaimani came to Arogya Agam (one of VST's partner organisations) in the first batch of patients found to be HIV positive. He came to a support group for medical advice and counselling. Opportunistic infections could be treated but there were no antiretroviral drugs within the reach of even rich people. This group became TDNP+ with Pitchaimani taking the lead. A few activists became vocal - first speaking and advocating for facilities in Chennai, then in Theni and last, hardest of all, in their own villages.

Discriminatory practices in the government hospitals faded out as Pitchaimani and his group gatecrashed meetings of doctors and health officials and complained to higher officials. They were soon respected by the top district officials, and later by top state officials. Pitchaimani was often called to meetings at state and national level. Another lasting achievement was to help positive networks develop in another 20 districts of the state.

When antiretroviral drugs arrived Pitchaimani lobbied tirelessly for them to be available in Theni itself and when that succeeded to get the complicated blood testing equipment and supplies. Network members were taken

'The important thing for us positive people is not to dwell on the past'

on as counsellors at the antiretroviral treatment centre and in other testing centres. And today the facilities in Theni are second to none outside the state capital - because of Pitchaimani.

When an author asked officials in Delhi to name a good district for HIV care and prevention - they were told: Theni. When HIV officers came from every state in India to Tamil Nadu for an exposure visit they ranked Theni as number one district. This is a success of our project - committed NGOs and a committed network - TDNP+. Our advice now to those working in the HIV field is to nurture and help networks: they have tremendous potential. Time and again it was proved in Theni that it was the network who could mobilise all the top officials in one room, hall or meeting - NGOs could not do that. Antiretrovirals have indeed brought hope and life - but they are not a cure. After a while the drugs stop working and have to be changed. This was happening with Pitchaimani and he had been unwell for the past year. His physical as well as mental state had deteriorated, the latter perhaps because of HIV-related effects. He had personal and other problems towards the end, not least of these managing one of the biggest positive networks in India. Networks are not without their conflicts. All these things must have built up to make him take the extreme step of taking his own life.

It is sad for his family and also a very sad loss to us. But very importantly it is a sad day for the cause of HIV. He was the person I knew personally who did the most for people affected by HIV. We want him to be remembered for that.

John Dalton, VST programmes adviser

Federations act to curb violence against women

Ms. Rani bought a cow with a micro-enterprise loan through her self-help group. The cow wandered into a rich man's field to graze. For this the man attacked Rani, leaving her bruised and bleeding and she spent six days in hospital. When she made a complaint against the rich, and therefore influential, man the police took no action. The self-help group members sent a letter of complaint to higher ranking police and the local police were forced to act.



Ms. Suruliammal's husband died leaving her with a seven-year-old son. She had a plot of land which was registered in her name, but her parents were getting an income from the land and refused to give it up. The Vaigai Federation negotiated on her behalf with her parents and she now has possession of the land and income from it.



Ms. Perumayee is HIV positive. After her husband died of Aids she was forced to leave the house they had shared with other members of his family and abandon the plot of land she worked



and made a living from. She discussed the problem with the federation and federation members approached the police. The police advised her to return to her in-law's house. Her father accompanied her and both were beaten by her in-laws. Again the federation members discussed with the police who got a written statement from the in-laws agreeing to no further violence.

Madras Cafe volunteers visit Vasandham

Supporters of Madras Café, whose profits go to Action Village India, were guests at VST partner organisation Vasandham recently. Jo Moss describes their visit.

We travelled across the Western Ghats to Theni district, where Vanajaa, director of VST's programmes, and her colleagues told us about their work. High on their agenda were female infanticide and the plight of women suffering domestic violence. A major step towards addressing these issues was to empower women by setting up women's support groups and credit unions from which they also gain the confidence to take an active part in the village panchayat (council). Later we arrived at Vasandham. The director, Gunasekharan, talked about villagers' struggle to hold on to their land. He gave a chilling account of how his protest against illicit sand excavation had led to a severe beating by the company's agents. At a group discussion with a health worker I learnt that HIV was increasing but that the most prevalent disease was TB, which was curable. His father had died of the disease so his personal tragedy had strengthened his commitment to train as a medic and deepened his understanding of its impact on patient and family. After a long and busy day the cook served a delicious meal. We chatted about the people we had met, the work they were doing and how they inspired us to continue our own efforts of support.



Gunasekharan and colleague with Madras Cafe visitors

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