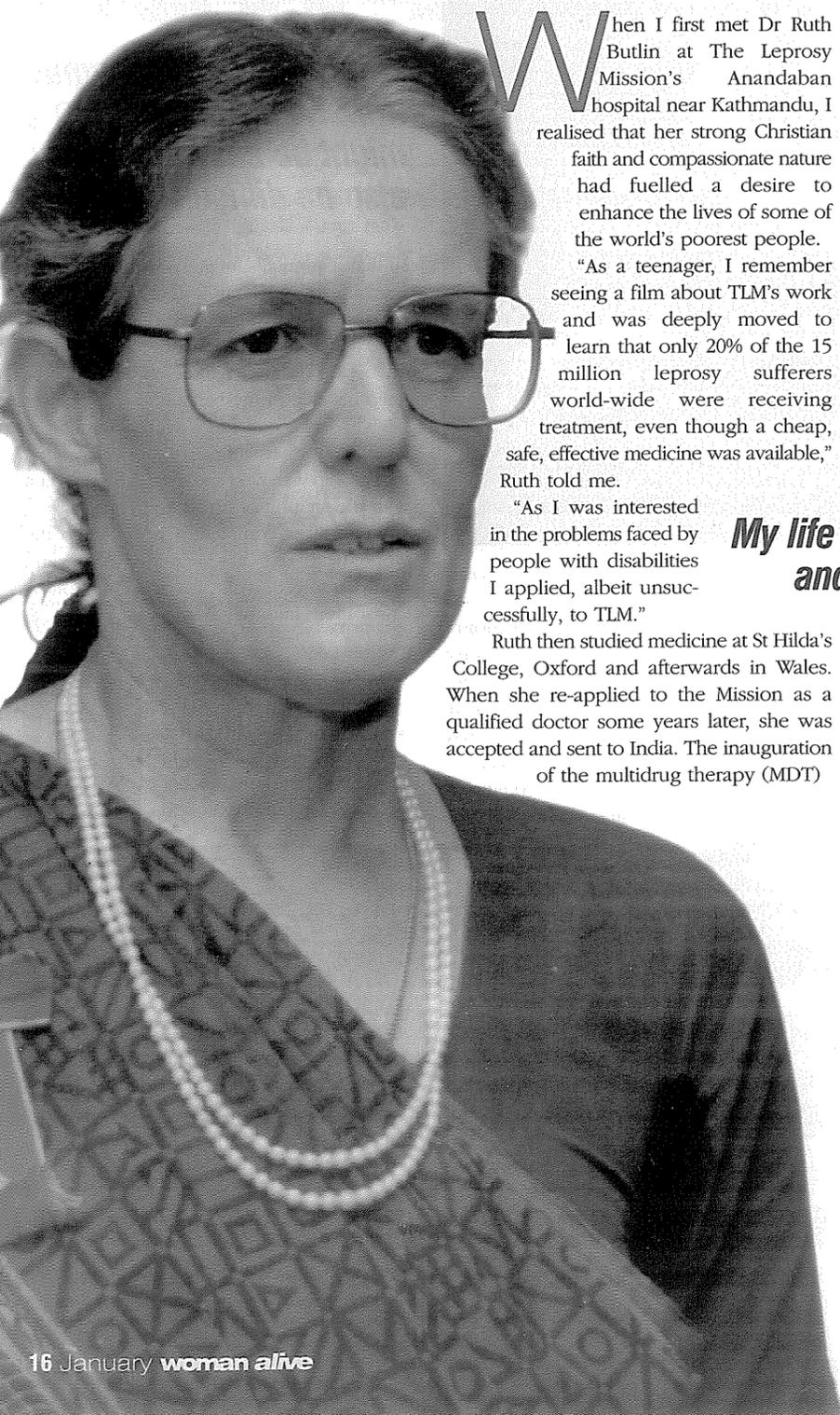


20 years of service



To mark World Leprosy Day this month, Simon Watkinson talks to Dr C Ruth Butlin, CBE, about her dedicated work with *The Leprosy Mission*

When I first met Dr Ruth Butlin at The Leprosy Mission's Anandaban hospital near Kathmandu, I realised that her strong Christian faith and compassionate nature had fuelled a desire to enhance the lives of some of the world's poorest people.

"As a teenager, I remember seeing a film about TLM's work and was deeply moved to learn that only 20% of the 15 million leprosy sufferers world-wide were receiving treatment, even though a cheap, safe, effective medicine was available," Ruth told me.

"As I was interested in the problems faced by people with disabilities I applied, albeit unsuccessfully, to TLM."

Ruth then studied medicine at St Hilda's College, Oxford and afterwards in Wales. When she re-applied to the Mission as a qualified doctor some years later, she was accepted and sent to India. The inauguration of the multidrug therapy (MDT)

programme at Richardson Hospital in Miraj, shortly after her arrival there in 1982, was a truly memorable occasion.

"People came to the hospital; the staff gathered to pray and the superintendent spoke about the new medicines. Then dozens of patients – many of whom were in the advanced stages of the disease and had severe disabilities – ceremonially took their first dose of MDT."

At that time there was much optimism that, once MDT was widely available, there would be no more physical suffering and rejection due to leprosy.

"Unnecessary disability can now be prevented by early detection and treatment, but there are still as many new cases found per year as there were 20 years ago."

My life has been so full of interest and opportunities to be useful

Indeed, in 2001 over 760,000 new leprosy cases were detected. Yet in this same year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared that the disease was no longer a public health problem as a prevalence rate of less than 1 per 10,000 had been attained, based on the global population. But as this calculation included countries without any leprosy, it hardly reflected the true situation. What's more, prevalence rates recorded in several parts of north-east India where TLM has hospitals were more than 20 times higher!

WHO's conclusion that a rate of less than 1 per 10,000 would halt the spread of the disease was based on the false assumption that MDT could stop the transmission. Pockets of high endemicity were consistently encountered in countries like Bangladesh and Sudan where the disease is officially under control.

"Even if leprosy were 'eliminated as a public health problem' (the World Health Organisation's goal)," Ruth said, "it would be years before the disease's adverse effects on individuals no longer existed."

I wondered how the work had changed over the past two decades.

"Health workers, including doctors, have become more knowledgeable about leprosy. The skill and inclination to treat leprosy are no longer confined to a few professionals working in specialised hospitals."

The two biggest daily challenges of Ruth's role are to convey to patients that leprosy is nothing to be ashamed of and to teach those with nerve damage how to care for themselves so as to prevent further disability.

What were the highs and lows of the job?

"Seeing a patient completely healed, with restored confidence, and helping those suffering from infected foot ulcerations to prevent a recurrence. The worst part, though, is often trying to convince staff of the need to persevere, even when we seem to fail."

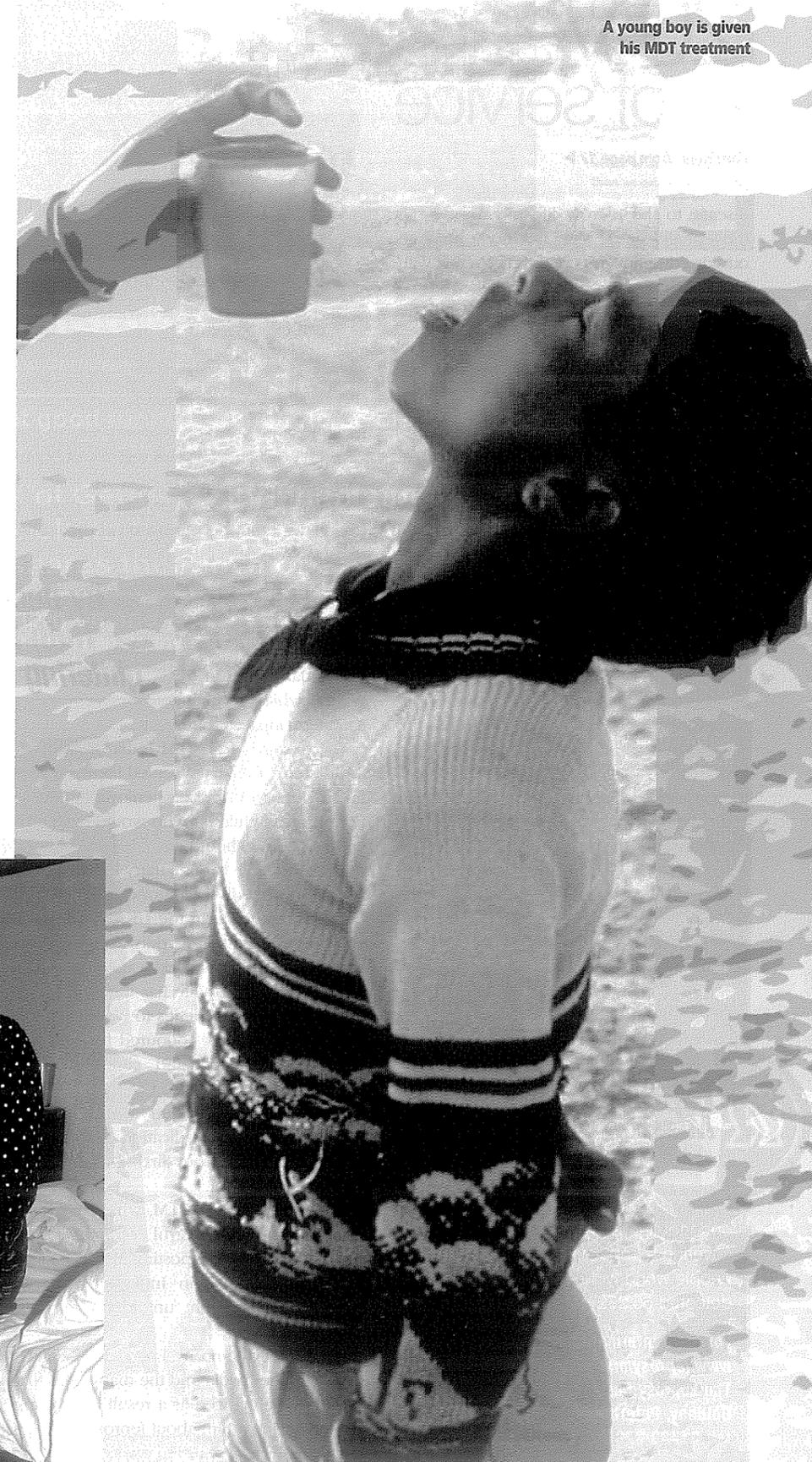
The highlights of her time with TLM?

"Witnessing the transformation of shy school leavers who were ignorant of leprosy into confident health workers who can treat patients. Also the opening of our beautiful new wards at Anandaban by Princess Shruti in the presence of many dignitaries in December 1999."

Another significant event was the closure of the school at Purulia Leprosy Centre, in West Bengal, India, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2002.

"When the school opened in 1927, it catered for youngsters confined by their

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A young boy is given his MDT treatment

