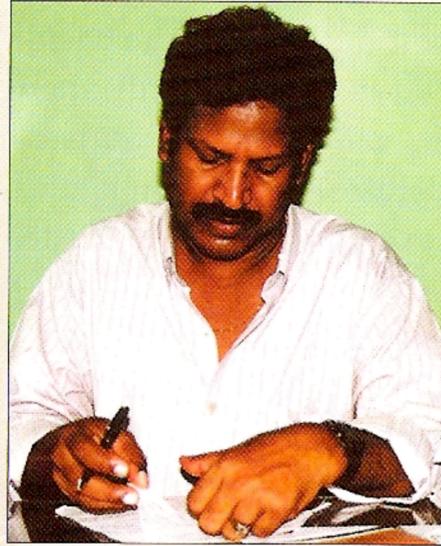




# An unforgettable morning

*Simon Watkinson spends a Saturday morning in the company of Dr Vijayakumar, reconstructive surgeon and superintendent of TLM Hospital, Shahdara*

**T**he clawing of fingers and thumbs is perhaps one of the most debilitating and distressingly visible effects of leprosy. This is due to *mycobacterium leprae* attacking the ulnar nerve at the elbow and median nerve at the wrist, which only need to encounter minimal swelling for the blood supply to be cut off, causing the nerves to stop working and ultimately die. However, by transferring tendons from the wrist to the fingers and thumbs, reconstructive surgery can correct such clawing and thereby give a whole new lease of life to the patient.



**Dr Vijayakumar at his desk, in Shahdara Hospital**

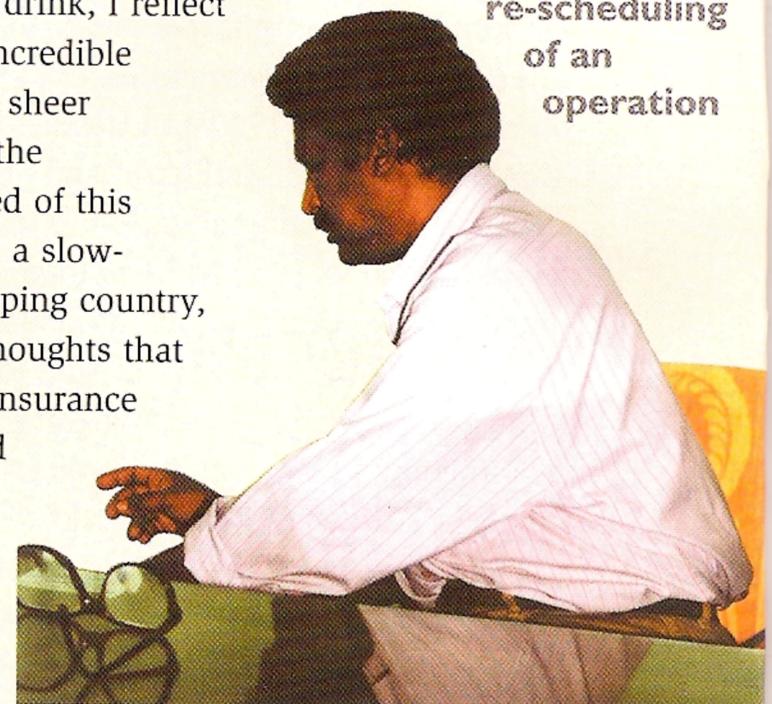
Hospital, I witness some incredible, if not suicidal, feats of driving and start to pray. On arrival at our destination forty-five minutes later I am thankful that a head-on collision with a lorry overtaking on a hill has been skilfully averted. I am escorted to Dr Vijay's high ceilinged office where a huge propeller fan battles with the close, dry heat to effect a welcome whisper of cooling air. As Dr Vijay enters and sits down, he offers me a revitalising glass of cold cola.

Having heard of the global renown of his reconstructive surgery skills over dinner the previous evening, my camera is primed with a 36-exposure film and so I ask whether he is operating that day. He must have noticed my school-boyish look of disappointment as he explains that no operations were planned for that morning. 'Then you've never seen a thumb-correction operation before?' he asks with a look of astonishment on his face. 'Would you like to see one?' he further enquires in the next breath.

I am smiling again as he picks the phone up to ask whether a patient booked in for the following Monday would agree to be operated on in half an hour's time.

As I sip my drink, I reflect on Dr Vijay's incredible dynamism. My sheer amazement at the whirlwind speed of this rescheduling in a slow-moving, developing country, coupled with thoughts that private health insurance in the UK could never deliver this level of service, is further heightened

**Dr Vijay, arranging a nifty re-scheduling of an operation**



*I praise you because  
I am fearfully and  
wonderfully made;  
your works are  
wonderful, I know  
that full well.*

*Psalm 139.14*

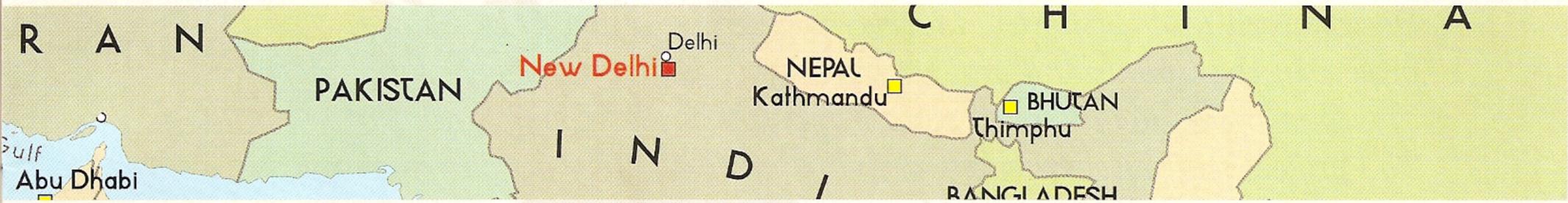
TLM Hospital Shahdara where there is a huge demand for his reconstructive surgery skills.

In a gruelling annual schedule, he will perform 350 to 400 reconstructive surgeries and hold nine clinics outside of Delhi – for example, in 1998 and 1999 he worked in Bangladesh, Bhutan and China.

The next day, as I am being driven across New Delhi in the blistering morning heat to Shahdara



## Bringing hope of a future to lives devastated by leprosy



when I am ushered into the operating theatre twenty-five minutes later to witness the proceedings.

I am even more impressed when, before the operation begins, Dr Vijay asks the theatre auxiliary to say a prayer committing both the operation and the patient into God's hands. Twenty minutes and thirty

'close-up' shots later, the operation is complete

and, after exercise, this leprosy patient will soon be able to straighten and use the digits of his previously dysfunctional hand.

'It was my mother's wish that

I should join TLM, as we used to see beggars disabled by leprosy and it made us feel really sad,' Dr Vijay tells me over coffee later that day in my hotel. 'She forced me in fact, but from the very first day I really enjoyed it,' he smiles, explaining how honoured he felt to show the Princess of Wales around TLM Premananda Hospital, Calcutta in February 1992, where he was superintendent and surgeon.

'I love doing reconstructive surgery and will stay with TLM

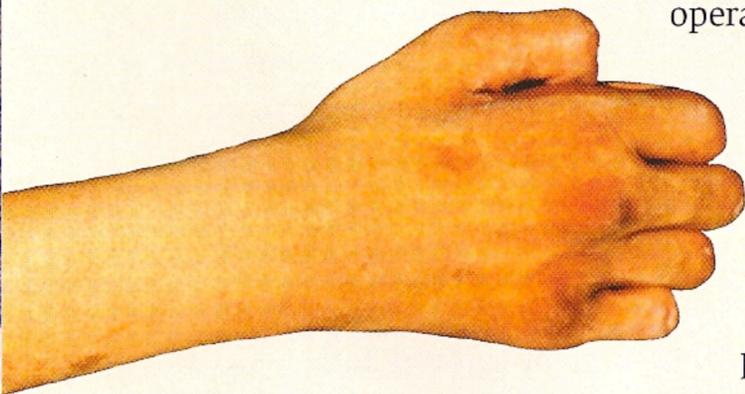
until I retire,' he says as I tick off the last question in my interview list.

First impressions can certainly be dangerous. The fantasy world portrayed by the stars of 'Bollywood' (home of the Indian film industry) brings mere momentary escapism to the masses from the stresses of Indian life. However, the fruits of Dr Vijayakumar's labours, and those of his professional peers within TLM, are

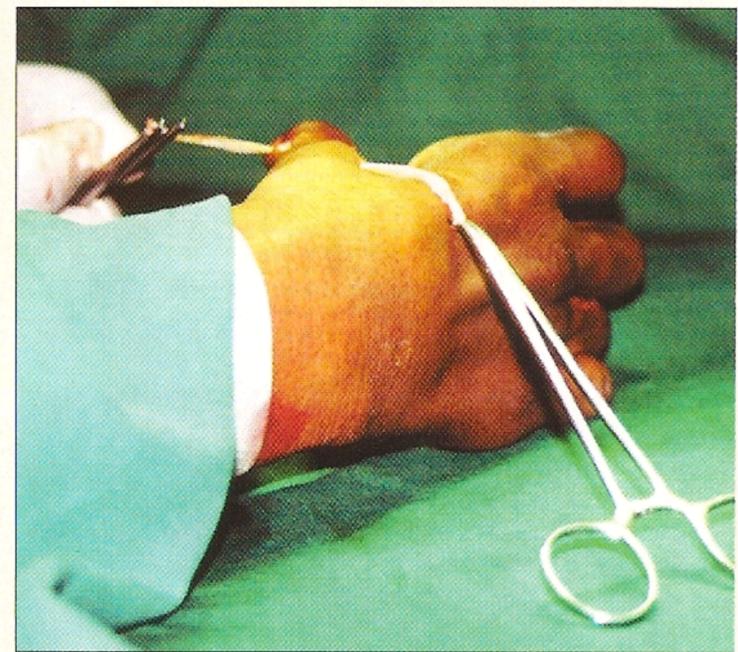
enhancing lives devastated by leprosy and bringing them hope of a future. A total of 18,365 leprosy related operations, of which 1,646 were reconstructive and 6,059 were ulcer surgeries, were performed in TLM South Asia's hospitals and clinics in 1999.

As the daylight is now quickly diminishing and Dr Vijay heads off to another meeting, any thoughts of his returning to an imaginary film set to act out an Indian 'Robin Hood' scene quickly fade into oblivion.

I ponder his inspirational dedication and commitment to improving the lives of his leprosy patients and realise that he is their true hero. ■



A clawed hand



Threading the tendon into the clawed thumb



Taking part of the tendon from the wrist