“Prevention of sex trafficking is our ultimate aim”

An interview with York dentist Dr Andrea Ubhi

Sex trafficking remains a major issue in many parts of Asia, not only in sex tourism hot spots like in Indonesia or Thailand but also in smaller countries like Nepal. UK-based charity Asha Nepal (hope for Nepal) tries to prevent children becoming involved in the sex trade and helps victims of trafficking and sexual abuse in the country to re-establish themselves in society. Dental Tribune spoke about the organisation’s work and its impact on the lives of survivors with one of the charity’s trustees, Dr Andrea Ubhi from York, who is to take over as chairperson later this year and who runs one of the country’s leading private dental practices.

Dental Tribune: Dr Ubhi, you run a successful dental practice in York. How did you first become involved with Asha Nepal?

Andrea Ubhi: I have been involved with a few charities over the years, however, it has been difficult for me to find as much time as I wanted to give to charity work, as I have been busy building up dental businesses, in addition to bringing up three children. Several years ago, I sold one of my practices, an NHS practice, and that reduced my workload, finally giving me the time and money to expand my interest in charity. Although I had never really focused on women’s issues before, knowing that men and women are equal in the world, I decided to become involved in Asha Nepal, as I had been becoming increasingly aware of the issue of trafficking and Asha was at a small size where I thought my management skills would be of better use than in a larger organisation and, frankly, I wanted to know exactly where my money was going.

Nepal usually does not make the headlines when it comes to sex trafficking. To your knowledge, how extensive is the problem in the country?

Although its neighbour India has much more children involved in sex trafficking, estimated at one million, about 30,000 girls from Nepal are tricked into going over the border each year and trafficked, and they end up as sex workers in the major cities. When you actually consider the difference in size of population between the two countries, proportionally this is a large number. One of the greatest issues is poverty. Attending a reasonably good school requires school fees. That is why many children in Nepal do not have the opportunity to go to school. The only thing they are often left to do is to work in domestic labour, often from as young as the age of four, and they are at risk of sexual abuse.

Once a child is in domestic labour, there is also a high risk of being trafficked. Sometimes, this happens insidiously: someone might say that he or she has a better job in the next town, then someone might offer the child a job in Delhi, which in the end turns out to be captivity in a brothel.

How is your organisation helping victims of sex trafficking in Nepal itself?

Some of the girls who come to Asha have been trafficked and rescued from cabin bars in the tourist district of Kathmandu. They started as dancers and were then forced into the sex trade. Asha has a job coordinator who helps victims of trafficking re-establish themselves in society independently when they are adults. As a job coordinator who helps mothers or trafficking survivors obtain a place in a training programme and then work.

Asha Nepal also works with the mothers of poor families, for example, the father may be unemployed, drink too much or abandon his family altogether. If there are issues with providing for the family, Asha Nepal assists with emergency rent and food so that the mothers can get on their feet. Asha has a job coordinator who helps mothers or trafficking survivors obtain a place in a training programme and then work.

How many of the children you look after find their way back into society?

All of them. In some cases in which children have been trafficked or are victims of sexual abuse by their own family and are in high danger of being re-trafficked, there is no hope of safe reintegration with their own family. Asha assigns such children to foster families. They remain there with Asha until they are old enough to be integrated into society independently when they are adults.

Asha Nepal considers the whole picture and tries to prevent children being trafficked by providing funding to very poor families to help give their children an education, which in turn provides the hope of dignified employment at home and be reintegrated into the community. Independence is one of our main aims.

“I want to see the team consolidate.”

When I went over in September, they were still terrified because it was not just only one earthquake, but about 300. There were continual tremors and many people were sleeping outside, even when it was cold and raining. While the destruction in Kathmandu was significant, in the north-eastern...
region almost four out of five houses were destroyed or signifi-
cantly damaged. When we spoke with one of the children’s minis-
ters in that area to find out what the need was, she said that there were about 7,000 children dis-
placed through the earthquake. Throughout the Sindhupalchowk border, guards were checking pa-
ers of children going out. There was such an increased risk of traf-
ficking and they were trying to reduce that. All children had to
have papers that allowed them to exit the area.

Generally, our work became more complicated and more ex-
pensive, as prices rose throughout the earthquake period. On top of
that, there is the recent fuel crisis that Nepal has been facing over the past few months, as no oil or gas has been available from India for political reasons. This has slowed the country down, which is such a shame considering how difficult the year had already been with the earthquake. It has also in-
creased the cost of our work again owing to the increased costs of supplies because of the increasing
costs of petrol and transport. Nepal is a landlocked country, so everything has come through India or China. If there is a block-
ade, it poses a significant problem to the entire infrastructure in Nepal.

You are soon to take over the re-
sponsibility of chairperson from re-
tiring Asha founder Peter Bashford. What will the focus of your work be in the years to come?

I want to see the team consoli-
date. The organisation has grown dramatically in the last two years, going from eight to 23 employees. Currently, we are looking after 107 children, of whom 51 are in our residential care.

We want to concentrate on re-
integration into the community and more community support, which means fewer children in res-
idential care and more supported by our social welfare team in the community. This way, we keep children more independent and prevent them from being insti-
tutionalised.

However, prevention of traffick-
ing is our ultimate aim. We have just started a new Facebook page for teenagers in Nepal, called “Keeping SAFE,” to teach them to avoid traffickers and recognise
their tricks. The page has an enor-

mous following, with up to a quar-
ter of a million people viewing each post. We are also planning to go into schools and hold pre-
sentations about the dangers of traf-
ficking, not only for the chil-
dren but also for the teachers so that they can teach their future pupils about the tricks that traf-
fickers use to force children into domestic or sex labour and how to avoid being trafficked.

Dr Ubhi, thank you very much for the interview and good luck for the future.

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