REMINISCENCES OF ELEANOR KNOX-LONGMIRE

When I first went to Nepal in 1959 it seemed as if a history book had fallen open at the Middle Ages. Since then there have been enormous changes in the city but in the villages life is much the same. The people are still subsistence farmers, most of them poor. In spite of that Nepalis are cheerful people and God gave me a love for them.

Their thinking is so different from our Western thinking. When describing their symptoms they notice things we don't pay attention to and describe things so graphically. “Hot steam coming out of our ears!” I later discovered is part of a feeling of weakness. One day I was having a meal in a teashop and chasing the flies off my food. One village woman remarked “How greedy these foreigners are! How much would a fly eat?”

In another teashop I overheard someone remarking “We can't eat their food so what good would their medicines do for us?” Foods in Nepal are classified as “hot” or “cold”. If you have a “cold” illness you should eat so called “hot” foodstuffs such as cow's milk. For a “hot” illness eat cold foodstuffs such as pumpkin or buffalo milk. And you certainly don't eat oranges if you have a cough!

There was the time I was called to a village house where a woman had a retained placenta. When I examined her the umbilical cord was tied to a large iron hoe to prevent it going back inside.

Those are some of the lighter sides of medicine in Nepal. There was also a grim side: a man who was my porter had TB. He was given a drug dispensed in little bottles of 4 capsules. He was supposed to take four a day. One day he said to me “Four seemed a lot to take so I've just been taking one. But I always eat the little bag (the desiccant)! Sadly he died of drug resistant TB, as did his wife, brother and son.

Mothers would wait till their child was moribund before bringing them to the hospital. I found this very distressing. Not to mention the bed bugs, bird lice and dysentery. But I believed that was where God wanted me to be so I was glad to be there. It's a privilege to live in another culture. You can never see your own culture in quite the same way again.

The population of Nepal is growing; as are deforestation, erosion and landslides. WHO has been supporting a family planning program. However the popular belief that vasectomy makes a man weak is deeply ingrained. As one man said to me “I couldn't afford to have family planning. I have five children to support! I have to work in the fields” In other words the more children you have the less you would seek a vasectomy.

I started off in hospital work, focusing mainly on paediatrics. I ended up in village community health, living in a poor village, all low caste in the Hindu caste system. It was a village with a lot of TB, but what drew me to them was the atmosphere of hopelessness, no hope for themselves or for their children. I wanted to come close to them and have hope for them and I hoped to introduce them to the God of hope in Jesus. I left the village and Nepal in 1984 but I've been back several times since then. There is a change in the village. There isn't that hopelessness in the atmosphere. Change takes time.