

AWARD CITATION

IJME Ethics Award 2018: Citation

FORUM FOR MEDICAL ETHICS SOCIETY

The Forum for Medical Ethics Society (FMES) has instituted the *IJME* award for *Outstanding Contribution to Ethical Practice and Improved Access to Healthcare for the Marginalised*, from 2018. The award honours dedicated individuals and organisations that have made ethics a focus of healthcare practice and discourse in India. Their exemplary efforts are immensely valuable, especially to the communities they serve, in an increasingly profit-driven healthcare sector.

FMES is proud to name Sr Aquinas Edassery as the first recipient of this award for *Outstanding Contribution to Ethical Practice and Improved Access to Healthcare for the Marginalised* for 2018.

Sr Aquinas was born Jemma Joseph Edassery in Kerala's Ernakulam district where she graduated from Maharaja's College. She then joined the Sisters of the Holy Cross with the name Sr Aquinas, to pursue her dream of a life dedicated to serving humanity. After studying medicine at St John's Medical College, Bengaluru, she served in rural hospitals for four years, followed by an MD in General Medicine.

Throughout her busy schedule, she was always painfully conscious of the innumerable needy patients who were deprived of good quality care, simply because of their poverty. This impelled her, in 1988, to move away from her tertiary care hospital into community healthcare in Chamarajanagar district, rural Karnataka. Her team built a Comprehensive Rural Health Programme in Kollegal Taluk, based on the Jamkhed model. Over seven years, they succeeded in bringing down infant mortality in the community substantially and achieving an 84% success rate in curing TB. These gains strengthened Dr Aquinas' conviction that it was essential to move from hospital-based healthcare to community-based healthcare to serve 'the unreached'.

Then came 2012. She was 61, when most would be preparing for a well-earned rest from years of labour. But that was never Sr Aquinas' chosen path. Inspired by P Sainath's accounts of the drought-stricken Kalahandi district and its people, who

were untouched by progress and starved of healthcare, she felt its irresistible call and responded. Sr Aquinas was only too conscious of the difficulties of living among an unknown people with a very different language and culture, with her age being an additional limitation. She prepared herself by working for two years at Jan Swasthya Sahyog in Bilaspur, where she familiarised herself with the local conditions and with neighbouring Odisha.

Taking the plunge in 2014, she and her team set up Swasthya Swaraj Society, a secular, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making good health possible for the poorest. The team comprised of Dr Aquinas, Sr Angelina, a lab technician, and Sr Biji Mery, a nurse, and the area was Thuamul Rampur block, which government officials did not even know existed. The team took on dense forests, flash floods, irregular or no power supply, dirt tracks with no local transport, and terminal cases of severe acute malnutrition, malaria and TB. Trudging 25-30 kms every week in search of the sick who could not reach them, they built a neglected primary health centre into two comprehensive healthcare centres in Kaniguma and Kerpai villages.

Today, the two centres cover 77 villages, comprising 11 clusters. Two trained mobile forces — Swasthya Sakhis, who are local women, make basic diagnoses, provide medication, and collect data; and Siksha Sathis, male health educators, create awareness of prevalent diseases and their treatment, conduct regular health camps, and give nutritional and crop advice. The laboratories run on solar power, and two vehicles facilitate work. Today, government officials attend events at the clinics. This is a far cry from the dismal start just four years earlier. This thriving comprehensive community health project is the culmination of a lifetime's unswerving dedicated service by Sr Aquinas and her team, all 'warriors', in the words of a young intern. We are honoured to tell the story of her efforts as leader of this team and to present the first FMES/*IJME* award to Sr Aquinas Edassery.

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