

Press Release

Bergen Prepares to Host International Conference on Hansen's Disease Marking 150 Years Since the Discovery of the Leprosy Bacillus

TOKYO, June 19, 2023 /PRNewswire/ -- The Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative and the University of Bergen are organizing a two-day conference in Bergen, Norway, on June 21-22, 2023, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the discovery of *M. leprae*, the causative agent of leprosy, in 1873. The conference, which will be held in the city where Norwegian Dr. Gerhard Armauer Hansen made his groundbreaking finding, will also be streamed online.



When Hansen discovered the bacillus—the first time a pathogen had been identified as the cause of disease in humans—leprosy was endemic in Norway and present throughout much of Europe, but today transmission of the disease has ended in most parts of the continent. However, around 200,000 new cases are still reported worldwide each year, while deep-rooted misconceptions about leprosy persist, contributing to continued stigma and discrimination, and acting as a barrier to case detection by discouraging those who suspect they have the disease from seeking treatment.

Many countries and international organizations, led by the World Health Organization, now aim to achieve zero leprosy—zero disease, zero disability and zero discrimination—. Achieving this goal will require close collaboration between partners, which the Bergen meeting aims to foster.

The Bergen International Conference on Hansen's Disease: 150 Years Since the Discovery of the Leprosy Bacillus brings together key stakeholders in the leprosy field for sessions focused on medical challenges, human rights and dignity, and history preservation—the three pillars on which the Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative structures its activities against the disease.

Special dignitaries scheduled to deliver messages at the event include Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO (video), Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (video) and Ingvild Kjerkol, Minister of Health and Care Services, Norway.

Keynote speakers include Professor Paul Fine of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Dr. Alice Cruz, the UN Special Rapporteur on elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members.

Following the opening ceremony, a statement will be read out on behalf of the organizers, expressing their hope to draw on the knowledge, experience and wisdom of the delegates gathered at the place where *M.leprae* was first observed 150 years ago, and to build momentum to complete "the last mile in the fight against leprosy".

The conference will include a poster exhibition consisting of an academic poster session (<https://hansen2023.org/academic-poster-session/>) and a session on best practices shared by organizations of persons affected by Hansen's disease (<https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/latest-updates/initiative-news/3938/>).

It will also feature a Stradivarius mini concert in cooperation with the Nippon Music Foundation. The music foundation is a sister foundation of The Nippon Foundation, whose chairman, Yohei Sasakawa, also serves as WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination.

Please visit <https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/latest-updates/initiative-news/3515/> for the details of the event, including the program and how to register.

About Leprosy

Leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, is an infectious disease that mainly affects the skin and peripheral nerves. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted case-finding activities, over 200,000 new cases were being reported annually. Leprosy is curable with multidrug therapy, but left untreated can result in permanent disability. An estimated 3 to 4 million people are thought to be living with some form of disability as a result of leprosy. Many myths and misunderstandings surround the disease. In various parts of the world, patients, those who have been treated and cured, and even their family members continue to be stigmatized. The discrimination they face limits their opportunities for education, employment and full participation in society.

About Sasakawa Leprosy (Hansen's Disease) Initiative

The Initiative (<https://sasakawaleprosyinitiative.org/>) is a strategic alliance between WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination Yohei Sasakawa (

[foundation.or.jp/en/who/message/profile](https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/who/message/profile)), The Nippon Foundation (<https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en>) and Sasakawa Health Foundation (<https://www.shf.or.jp/en>) for achieving a world without leprosy and problems related to the disease. Since 1975, The Nippon Foundation and Sasakawa Health Foundation have supported the national leprosy programs of endemic countries through the WHO, with support totaling some US\$200 million to date. In cooperation with the Japanese government and other partners, the foundations have played an important role in advocating with the United Nations, helping to secure a 2010 UN General Assembly resolution on elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members and the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on leprosy by the UN Human Rights Council in 2017.

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