

Helping Raja to help himself

Thirty-five-year-old Raja lives in a small village called Kenganayakkampatti in South Tamil Nadu, located about 90 km away from Vellore. He has two sons and a daughter, all below the age of 10, and they live together in a cramped house, without a toilet or running water. To reach the nearest town of Tiruppattur, they have to travel for about 15 kilometres. The only mode of transport is the state bus, infrequent and unreliable in remote places.

Raja who could not pursue his education past ninth grade, left home for long periods to work a temporary job as cleaner of a private lorry. The lorry was used for transporting mud, sand and other materials to a small town, located about 600 km away from his village.

In August of 2015, during one of his visits to his home while on vacation, he fell into an open agricultural well, ie without side walls. As a result of the fall, he had a spinal cord injury and became a paraplegic. However, his employer was not willing to offer him any kind of aid to meet the medical expenses incurred as a result of his grave injuries; neither did he have any support in terms of social security.

Seeing that the hapless Raja was left to fend for himself - by the State, his employer, his relatives and other families in the village - a few of his friends decided to take him to a nearby hospital. Once there, they made arrangements to make possible the intensive care and surgery that he required immediately.

After this initial treatment, Raja returned home but was living in a state of total confinement to the bed. His wife, a homemaker till then, took up manual work in a Government-sponsored scheme that ensured wages of 150 rupees per day (around two US dollars), for 100 days. Apart from the provisions supplied through the Public Distribution System for people living below the poverty line, like rice, pulses and sugar, all other needs had to be met with these meagre wages.

For more than a year, the family continued like this, with Raja living out his days in helplessness and despair. Then one day, he came to know about CMC Vellore and its department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PMR) through a patient who had been rehabilitated by the efforts of the doctors and nursing staff at the Rehab Institute. His wife, along with some of his friends, approached PMR to request for concessional treatment. A few of his friends also came forward to meet his travel expenses and to arrange for money to meet a portion of his treatment costs at the Rehab Institute.

Raja's request for concessional treatment was looked upon favourably and his admission



Raja, who was in treatment at the Rehab Institute from 19th January to 8th April of 2017, relearns walking.

for rehabilitation was initiated in January 2017. During admission, the doctors explained to Raja and his wife the implications of the injury, the nature of the rehabilitative process and the extent of rehabilitation possible.

In order to get him back on his feet as soon as possible, he was taught to walk with a KAFO (Knee Ankle Foot Orthosis) brace and elbow crutches. Money for the KAFO brace came from one of the funds of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and for the elbow crutches, from the Vellore – Ludhiana Committee of Canada's Rehab Fund.

After starting rehabilitative treatment, Raja began to have

hopes of complete recovery and felt that he could become a driver, a dream that he had nurtured as a cleaner. He had even learnt driving before the accident took place. After a period of patient counselling, the social workers at Rehab helped Raja to come to terms with the challenges of his reality, while also instilling in him the confidence needed to make the best use of the skills and abilities that were still his.

They showed him inspiring videos of physically challenged patients who, after receiving treatment at Rehab, were able to acquire a significant amount of autonomy. He was also taken to the Mary Varghese Rehabilitation Centre for an exposure visit to interact with others who had survived spinal injuries and learnt to live independently. Soon, Raja began to see light at the end of the long tunnel that he had been trapped in for so many months.

The social workers, who were looking after Raja, also contacted his friends in the village and had discussions with them about modifications that needed to be made to his home including removal of steps at the entrance, construction of a toilet with financial support from the local administration, as well as about general mobility and vocational plans. Later, they had a detailed discussion with Raja and his wife to help them plan out their future. He was also guided in getting a disability Identity card to receive government benefits.

To help him earn an income, Raja was offered the job of watchman by one of his friends, who runs a paint manufacturing company close to his village. The friend also helped him acquire a motorised tri-wheeler from the government for his daily commute to and from the factory.

Today, Raja is a changed man. He moves around independently, both inside and outside his home, and makes a significant contribution to the family income. His children are being educated and his wife continues to work in the local leather factory, on a part-time basis. With Raja no longer an invalid and an overwhelming responsibility, the family of five can now look forward to the future, with renewed courage and hope.