

**Sue Guthrie MRCVS was just one of the veterinary volunteers working abroad through joint funding from BVA and Voluntary Services Overseas. Sue worked as a Veterinary Instructor at the Seti Technical School, Dipayal, Nepal. Sue is the seventh veterinary volunteer to receive BVA sponsorship.**

Sue kept in touch with the BVA Overseas Group with regular 'letters from Nepal' which reflected life at the Seti Technical School.

### **Oscars? What Oscars? (May 2002)**



*Animals tethered to stakes awaiting examination at a local veterinary camp*

A hush falls over the expectant crowd as the dignitaries arrive. From my front row seat I have a clear view of the stage. "And this year's winner is...Parvati". A nursing student! Polite applause from the audience, most enthusiastic from her fellow students who are easily identifiable in their blue saris. Parvati works her way up to the Chief District Officer, grabs the yellow-wrapped package and scuttles backstage. It is not the done thing to open presents in public. No, not quite the Academy Awards, but an important event in our academic calendar - the school anniversary and

annual prize-giving ceremony.

Seti Technical School (STS) opened in 2046. No time travel was involved, it's just that here in Nepal they use the Bikram calendar, which runs 44 years ahead of ours. The school is built on a steep slope in the foothills of the Himalayas, in the far west of Nepal. The region is serenely beautiful but is one of the least developed areas in the country and is well away from any tourist or trekking routes. There is a single road into the district - this is our lifeline as most of our food and other supplies are brought in by truck from the flat terrai and the plains of northern India. Unlike most of the surrounding villages, the school enjoys the luxury of electricity (although we have power cuts almost every day) and piped water (but only from 05.30-06.30). The original idea behind the 12 technical schools in Nepal was to turn out skilled technicians who would then work in the more remote areas of the country.

At Seti, we have three different trades or faculties: Agriculture, Construction and Nursing. The agriculture course takes 2 years and provides a basic training in horticulture, agricultural enterprises and animal health. The focus is on a practical training, although this is difficult with very limited equipment, few medicines and no budget. I work alongside a Nepali colleague, teaching the 2nd year animal health course. This term though, we have made little inroad into the curriculum as we have lost a lot of teaching time to community development field work, religious festivals and the school anniversary celebrations.

The latter was a week-long programme of sports and cultural activities. We started at 07.00 each morning, whilst the weather was still fairly cool, with a fiercely contested volleyball tournament. The cries and excited drumming from the crowd rolled around the surrounding hills and down to the bazaar (market). Teams were single-sex. The 1st and 2nd year nurses had a particularly hard-fought match that went to a tie-



*Students administering Haemorrhagic Septicaemia vaccine to a cow*



*Lalu Gautam, examining a faecal smear at a local veterinary field camp*

breaker. This was followed by athletics events such as the long jump, high jump, 100 metres (well, the length of the playing field) and table tennis. The girls then played musical chairs - very genteel until only 2 girls were left, when it became a complete free-for-all. And then there was a special game for the staff. Blindfolded, you had to try to find the oil drum placed about 25 metres away and hit it with a large stick. Of course, I was called upon to have a go, but I had been expecting this. I run some informal English language classes outside school hours and the week before I had been practicing the commands 'to the left, to the right, in front, behind', with the students, in the hope that they would help me out with the oil drum game. But no chance - they led me a merry dance and I was way off target!

On the cultural front there was a quiz, a song-and-dance programme and a debate about the relative merits of village and town life. It was thought-provoking to hear the students complain about the westernization of their culture and extol the virtues of life in the village. I wanted to remind them gently that whilst village life had much going for it, they should remember that they were the high caste, educated, lucky ones. For most villagers, especially the women (who do the bulk of all the work in the traditional rural societies here) life is extremely tough. This is reflected in the high maternal mortality rate, low literacy rate (40% over all and about 15% in women) and low life expectancy (just over 50 years). In fact, Nepal is one of the few countries of the world where women do not live longer than men!

The prize-giving ceremony itself mirrored many aspects of Nepali society and school life. The boys and girls sat apart. The ceremony started late, but opened with a blessing to the King and Queen. You could tell the relative importance of the people from where they were sitting. The ceremony was quite formal, but a troop of young children belonging to various members of staff added an air of chaos to the whole thing by drowning out the speeches and playing noisily on the periphery. Ceiling fans whirred overhead when there was electricity, and when the power went off you just got hot. The audience patiently sat through it all, waiting for the refreshments at the end. There were sugary sweets, balls of rice and toffees. Once these were out of the way, the audience quickly dispersed, and that was it for another year.



*Housing for buffalo in the local village*

*Second year students taking their terminal exam in the sunshine*

Now thunderstorms and strong winds in the run up to monsoon have ripped down all the bunting. We are back in the classroom wrestling with the intricacies of the nervous system, but Parvati has a smart, new notebook.

*Sue Guthrie*

## The times they are a-changing (June 2002)

The word that best describes the last month in Nepal? Changeable. The weather, the politics, the animals, the students and the teaching.

Monsoon started early, and daily rain has made this a lush land. I remember that school last May was just one long sweat, with no respite. In comparison, this year has been positively cool, the changing weather patterns seeming to cause global cooling in Nepal.

The political situation is even more changeable than the weather, and considerably hotter. First, there was the high of Mr Deuba's trip to the US and UK, and his address to the United Nations Conference. On his return, he swiftly dissolved parliament in a stunning move that completely trumped his opponents, avoided a vote of confidence that he would have lost and allowed him to extend the state of emergency. So now we have the uncertainty of a November election. And Mr Deuba has been expelled from the National Congress Party for unconstitutional behaviour - although it's likely that he'll be reinstated soon, because you can't really have a partyless Prime Minister! Power plays, backbiting, wheeler dealing and the usual political skullduggery are rife.

Whilst Sher Bahadur Deuba has been fighting for his political life, it's also been a tough time for the school goats. The tropical weather may have made the crops grow, but it's also led to an abundance of a certain plant that has tasty cyanide-filled buds. Of course, the goats had to eat these! Our female died, along with one of this year's kids - good teaching material for the post-mortem class, but we couldn't even eat them afterwards.

Student faces have also changed. The Agriculture Second Years went off to do field work at a couple of veterinary centres down on the flat land of the terai. I stayed at school as the security situation is still unstable, with continued fighting across the country. No time for sitting around though, as I've found myself teaching a plethora of diverse subjects.



First Year Agriculture students have been doing some human First Aid, and we've had some dramatic role plays à la Bollywood. I've also learnt a lot about snake bites.

One student said that his local treatment was to put a chick on the bite, with the chick's cloaca in contact with the wound. The chick absorbs the toxin and when it dies, you slap on another one. He has seen 13 chicks used in this way to treat one bite! Another person explained that you can use a certain insect that lives in the 'glands' of storks. (Read on - it gets more bizarre). Some women in each village keep one of these dead insects in their hair. If you are bitten by a snake, find the appropriate woman and put the insect on the wound - it will absorb the venom and fall off. Put it in some milk and a blue colour will appear as the poison comes out. Then put the insect back on the bite. Keep repeating this until no more blue colour comes out in the milk. Return the insect to the

woman. Of course, this makes my first aid - keeping the patient still and keeping the bite area low - positively boring by comparison. I can't even recommend heroic slashing and sucking out poison anymore.

In 'Community Action and Environmental Health' we've been looking at practical measures to prevent disease like HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and malaria, all of which are big problems in Nepal.

I've been helping a colleague teach the English syllabus to the First Year Engineers. So, at 6am we have been wrestling with 'stream of consciousness' and Garcia Marquez - I do sometimes wonder whether this is really useful when the students' understanding of basic English is very weak. But the curriculum is law, even if it's a greater work of fiction than the texts we study, so on we go.

Second Year Engineers have not escaped either. I teach them the Management syllabus, as, in a nice example of mismanagement, the school failed to realize that they had no Nepali teacher qualified to cover this subject. But I'm not complaining, because life is never dull. And they did say in VSO training that flexibility was the name of the game!

*Sue Guthrie*

## **Living the high life (June 2002)**

June got off to an ominous start with an emergency recall to Kathmandu - due to the India-Pakistan situation. It's very strange that you can be going about your daily business in a remote spot that few people have heard of and suddenly your life can be turned upside down by the decisions of politicians thousands of miles away! It was an uncertain time as no-one knew if we would be allowed back to our placements or whether we would have to leave the country.

Fortunately things seem to have quietened down somewhat, and whilst school is closed at the moment for monsoon holiday, I should be back in the far west for the start of the new term in July.

So for the moment I am enjoying the delights of Kathmandu, far removed from life in Doti. Like much of Nepal, Kathmandu is a city full of strange contrasts and juxtapositions. The weather is wet and humid at the moment, which means that much of the city literally stinks, with piles of rotting rubbish.



It seems the city dwellers can produce waste at a greater rate than it can be cleared away, and I try not to think too much about where it all ends up - completely spoiling some remote valley I suspect.

Being an adventurous crowd, VSO volunteers grounded in Kathmandu have undertaken some serious research into Nepali beauty parlours. Exhausted from this labour, we have had to chill out poolside at the Australian Embassy. I have also drunk my first 'thomba' - a hot millet beer brewed by Tibetans and drunk with a straw. Much like Guinness, you feel the thick concoction must be highly nutritious and doing you good - after the second though you just don't feel! I've also had my first steak in 18 months - buffalo meat and tough as old boots, but I wasn't going to leave any!

And finally, on the animal front, I'm pleased to report that the British Embassy in Kathmandu has the finest, friendliest cat in Nepal!

*Sue Guthrie*

### **And it's back to school (July 2002)**

Whilst July in the UK sees schools breaking up for the long summer vacation, here in Nepal July signals a return to school after the monsoon break (bit of a misnomer as monsoon carries on until September). For me, this meant checking my security plan first with VSO (after all the India/Pakistan problems) and getting the OK to travel, before setting off on the 3-day bus ride back to Dipayal from Kathmandu. The final day's bus journey up into the hills of Doti deserves special mention for a fine display of synchronised vomiting, Nepalis being poor travelers on the winding mountain roads. Fortunately the conductors are usually adept at dangling passengers out of the open doorway, and as many of the windows are missing, you are never far away from an exit.

Monsoon has been light here in the west, but has wreaked havoc this year in the Kathmandu valley and the east. At one point there were more than 150 landslides along the east-west highway alone. Flooding has also been severe and many people have died. The monsoon weather also brought with it a host of tropical diseases. Down on the flat land of the terai, malaria has been on the increase, including the more serious cerebral form. Thousands of houses are now being sprayed with insecticide, but the problem is proving difficult to control. Japanese Encephalitis has also started, along with meningitis, typhoid and pneumonia.

Our school, being up in the hills, avoids many of these problems. But we too have been affected by respiratory problems. I'm sure these have been able to spread rapidly because we have to use the ceiling fans within the relatively confined space of the classroom. Almost all our second year students are laid low with fever and 'flu-like symptoms. Some staff are also affected and my counterpart has had to take his young baby to hospital 2 days away for treatment for pneumonia. They may have their problems, but suddenly you really appreciate the NHS and our ambulance service!



We have managed some theory teaching so far this term, and on the practical front both the first and second year have been out in the surrounding villages debeaking chickens. The birds had been distributed to households by the Government as part of a poverty alleviation programme. Apparently cannibalism can be a problem because a commercial ration is not available here and the birds' diet is poor. Some 3,000 beaks later the students have developed a pretty slick system, and I am looking forward to 'coq au vin' in a few months (except it will have to be without the 'au vin' as red wine travels to Dipayal just about as well as the people do)!

*Sue Guthrie*

## **Summer highs and lows (August 2002)**

The month of August has had its ups and downs. Nationally the main festival season has started, with parades, singing and dancing. There have also been a lot of deaths however, due to flooding, landslides, bus accidents and a plane crash.

Here at Seti, on the formal teaching front we have pushed on with the bulk of the course, because it's likely that we'll lose a lot of teaching time next term to the forthcoming elections - the students will have to travel to their homes to vote and staff may be deployed as election officers.

First, we got the post mortem practicals out of the way - and this year I was prepared for the fact that we would eat the hapless goat and chickens afterwards. So it wasn't surprising to see onions and seasoning on the equipment list. The goat was swiftly dispatched with one clean cut from a huge gorkha knife. Nepalis are particularly fond of these knives, and you often see small children heading off to cut grass with a 'khukuri' that reaches almost to the ground tucked into their belts. The chickens weren't quite so lucky because the students wanted to keep the heads and necks intact to see the anatomy - this is the only chance they will get. So the birds were pithed, but I was appalled to see that they were still alive as they were plucked and plunged into boiling water. The students couldn't see that there was anything wrong with this, which was the most disappointing part. Our attitudes towards animal welfare are still poles apart.

We have also been teaching some basic fluid therapy, and in the practical class the students had to make up some oral rehydration solution using ingredients that were available in the local bazaar (market). It was sad to see that many students did not know how many ml were in a litre, and could not do the simplest math. I think that this is a reflection of the very poor education they receive right from primary school onwards, with demotivated teachers who often fail to turn up, large classes, few facilities and a system that rewards you for rote learning and who you know rather than what you know and how you apply it. They have very little capacity for independent thought. I remember when I first came to the school the Vice-Principal asked me what I hoped to achieve and I said I would like to develop problem-solving ability in the students. He laughed and said I would never manage that. Unfortunately he was right - by the time the adolescents get to our school it's a bit late. Education is so important. And although we complain about aspects of the UK system it really is light years ahead.

But on the bright side, some of last year's students have been coming back to collect their final certificates. They have helped in the clinic and it has been good to see that they have metamorphosed during their 5-month on-the-job training into competent animal handlers.

We've seen a run of injuries in the clinic as a result of fights between bulls. Most of the animals here are not castrated and many graze freely, herded only by small children, so violent encounters between oxen are common. And of course, because they all have horns there is usually some damage. We've done a roaring trade in assorted wounds and broken horns. The worst injury to date has been a prolapsed eye that I had to remove. Unfortunately we have no medicines in the clinic now other than potassium permanganate disinfectant and a tube of antiseptic ointment. This is compounded by a water problem - namely, we don't have any of that either!

But a previous volunteer left me some sedatives and the medicine shop in the bazaar could supply the bull's owner with penicillin and local anaesthetic solution. I found some catgut hidden away in a cupboard. The human clinic we have attached to the school lent me some sterile equipment and off we went. The surgery went fine and I must say it was nice to get back to some operating. However, we haven't seen the bull since - I just hope that someone is giving it the rest of the antibiotics.

The lack of water is an ongoing and major problem. The supply is piped from a reservoir tank on some land owned by the school but several miles away. Villagers wash clothes, themselves and their buffalo in the water too, so it comes out of the tap alarmingly muddy sometimes. Often the pipe is cut or disconnected by locals who want to use the supply. Last time it dried up it was because a frog had got stuck in the pipe! The pressure is always too low to supply the whole campus at one time, so we have water on a rota system for 20-30 minutes per day. Sometimes though, there just isn't enough, and then students and staff alike are all late to class as they scabble around to fill buckets. Unlike the health trade's clinic, we have no storage tanks near our classrooms, which are some 200ft further down the hill from the main school buildings. It's hard to teach the students basic hygiene when you can't even wash your own hands! There are some possible ways around the problem, but unfortunately the animal health staff would rather sit and moan about it than actually do anything. This is a very pervasive Nepali attitude and the one I find hardest to deal with. And I regret to say that it is a predominantly male attitude. Still, I have my buckets full and a secret stash of Betadine scrub. I shall carry on in the meanwhile and maybe something will eventually get done, although I shall probably be long gone by then.

*Sue Guthrie*

### **Monsoon, landslides and casserole cadavers (six monthly report)**

The last six months in the far west of Nepal have seen monsoon come and go. At the height of the rains travel was just about impossible, with more than 100 landslides on the one road to Kathmandu. Now the route is passable again, and we are enjoying the warm autumn weather. Monsoon was also marked by outbreaks of 'flu, colds and dysentery that swept through the school campus - this seems to happen whenever there is a change in weather and the medicine shops in the bazaar did a roaring trade.

The political and security situation has had its ups and downs over the last six months. Maoists continue to attack across the country, although a large police and army presence keeps them away from Dipayal. Away from the road there really aren't that many buildings left to burn! The brinkmanship between India and Pakistan also led to an emergency recall to Kathmandu for a month - understandable but disruptive. But at least we were luckier than our colleagues in those two countries, who saw their programmes close completely.

The bulk of the second year teaching has now been completed. The practical work has taken quite some time as we have a large group of students. In addition to teaching the Animal Health curriculum, I have been teaching First Aid, Community Health, English and Management. It's been a mixed bag, but most enjoyable to work in new areas.

Post-mortem classes were held as it's the only chance the students get to learn some anatomy. As was the case last year the cadavers were spiced up, casseroled and eaten after the class! It's amazing just how many staff happened to be wandering past the animal classrooms on those days.

The lecture notes to support the Animal Health course have been written, and will shortly be finalised and printed in English. My counterpart is translating them and we hope to have the Nepali versions ready after Christmas.

Only a few cases have been seen in the clinic. This is due mainly to the fact that we have no drugs, and no budget (the government has just cut the school funds by 52% as it is using the money to support the Nepalese Army). But it is amazing what you can do with potassium permanganate and magnesium sulphate. There has been a selection of fight wounds, usually maggot-infested. One ox had to have his eye enucleated after one such encounter - bit of a challenge to do under local anaesthesia.

The school bull chanced his luck and started to terrorise the stockman - so far a new nose ring has sorted him out, but if his behaviour worsens again then the Burdizzos beckon! Unfortunately two of the school goats died at the start of monsoon, from cyanide poisoning after eating plant buds. So that's something that magnesium sulphate didn't cure.

Although the clinic has been quiet, the students have had the opportunity for a lot of poultry field work, as the government started a local poverty alleviation scheme and gave 100 chickens each to 500 households in the district. The birds all needed debeaking and vaccinating against Newcastle Disease and then Fowl pox, so the students are pretty good at avian handling now. We also worked on a local vaccination programme for Haemorrhagic Septicaemia.

Terminal exams were the usual battleground, with the students trying to cheat and me wielding my red pen and deducting marks. Slowly the process has improved, with staff setting realistic exams and taking it all a bit more seriously.

The festivals of Krishna purnima, Teej and Rishi Panchami fell during term time and were celebrated at school with the usual singing and dancing. During the monsoon holiday, fellow 'VSO-ers' all got together for a hen night as one of the volunteers was getting married. We mixed Nepali

and British customs, blessing her with plenty of rice and coloured dyes. Fortunately we were the only guests at the resort at the time.

Some of last year's students came back to the school to collect their final certificates, having completed their five-month on-the-job training at veterinary sub posts across Nepal. It was good to see that during that time they had become competent animal handlers.

We have recently had a change of Principal, and the new man is already making improvements around the campus. He asked me to provide a report on how I found the school and what could be done to improve things further. It was good to have the opportunity to give some feedback, and in the light of the report we are now tackling issues such as the poor staff motivation and performance, budget shortfall and lack of communication. This is going to be a long process, but hopefully this work will start to show benefit in the next 6 months.

*Sue Guthrie*

## **Boating, bandhs and bombs (October 2002)**

Well, I cannot tell a lie, October was one big holiday, with the school closed for the main Hindu festival of Desain. This is a very bad time to be a male goat in Nepal, as thousands of them are sacrificed to appease the bloodthirsty goddess, Durga. To escape this ritual slaughter, I traveled to southern India with another VSO volunteer. We couldn't find much to recommend in Bangalore, but the Maharaja's palace at Mysore was better than Disneyland - illuminated by 90,000 twinkling lights. And the state of Kerala was incredibly beautiful - a lush region with coconut palms fringing quiet waterways that we explored slowly in an old rice barge and rather more quickly in a speedboat!

It's funny how your perspective changes. The first time I went to India (admittedly the more hectic north) I found it dirty, poor and a total assault on the senses. Now having worked in Nepal, I noticed that in fact it was cleaner than Nepal, people didn't chew tobacco and didn't spit everywhere (so my colleagues can no longer pass these off as Hindi customs), it was richer, had more infrastructure and generally ran better. But just to make us feel at home, there was a one-day bandh (general strike) called to protest at the government fuel taxes. And the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu were having a serious squabble over water rights. This disrupted our travel plans when some activists dug up the main railway line!

When we got back to Nepal we ran in to 2 Maoist bandhs that again brought the country to a halt. There have been so many of these days in the last 18 months, and they are stoppages that the economy can ill afford. To ensure that the bandhs were observed, the Maoists carried out a spate of bombings in Kathmandu, which we could hear clearly from our rooftop. It turned out that one of the bombs was at the cinema we had intended going to that night - obviously someone was not a big fan of Tom Cruise!

*Sue Guthrie*

## **Return to the Wild West (November 2002)**

November started with a trip to the far east of the country - an area that I had never visited before. It was interesting to see the obvious differences between the east and west sides of the country. Generally, the east was richer, with a better developed infrastructure. The high number of retired ex-Gurkha soldiers and their families living there gave the region a more international feel – they were used to white faces. The eastern women wore their saris slightly differently, with the end loosely draped over their heads. They also carried all their things on their heads rather than in a doko (a woven basket carried on the back with a rope line around the forehead). This made them walk more upright and elegantly than their western counterparts. The land in the east was very fertile, and supported a wide range of well-developed agriculture, with lush vegetation. White farmhouses built up on stilts nestled in clumps of banana trees. Buffalo were in abundance, often ridden by small children who supervised the grazing. The kids also greatly enjoyed washing the buffalo in the many ponds and rivers.

We travelled up into the eastern hills to the impressive rolling tea estates of Ilam, with stunning scenery that was again very different from the west. On the way back down, the steep and seemingly endless mountain road made our car's brakes so hot that the tyres were smoking. Miraculously, our driver stopped the car right over the only hosepipe within a hundred mile radius!

We stayed in the dusty east terai town of Janakpur for the festival of Tihar. The whole town was lit by thousands of small oil lamps and candles, burning brightly to attract Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. The celebrations had a fairytale magic, but then it said on the radio the next day that smoke from burning mustard oil was highly carcinogenic – nothing in life is risk-free!

Back in Kathmandu there was yet another 3-day strike, further crippling the fragile economy. The VSO office remained open, however, and I actually got quite a lot done, finishing off all the Animal Health notes in English. I took these to the backdoor of a printing shop, and behind their closed shutters they happily produced the copies for me. These have been well received by the Agriculture staff and Library at school. That's the first part of the project finished and now I am working with my counterpart on the Nepali version which will be far more useful for the students.

Returning to Dipayal, I found autumn weather had also arrived – just perfect. Warm days and cool nights, it was a real treat to be able to wear a sweater and sit in the sunshine. Monsoon rain had long been forgotten and the hills were rich shades of brown. However, this also meant that it was time for all the male staff to insist on wearing an array of tank tops knitted by their wives and sisters. Shops in the bazaar were doing a roaring trade in bright wools. I assure you that the end result can be pretty frightening. Although it's culturally insensitive, I really think the Style Police need to intervene here – please!

Curriculum-wise, we're in the run up to Finals. This month we tackled the intricacies of the reproductive system and dystokia – it was entertaining to watch the blindfold students trying to work out whether it was the goat's front or back leg that they were feeling.

I received a small grant from VSO and some artwork from the BVA to decorate our bare and rather shabby classroom. School found a professional painter and now we have some great anatomy drawings all over the walls – life-size cow, horse, and a huge mutant chicken – photos to follow! We decided not to label the paintings, as the first thing that the students said was, “great, labels will really help us in the exams!”

November was also full of preparations for World AIDS Day, held on 1st December. Claire (a Peace Corps volunteer nurse who also works at school) and I decided that we would run an awareness/educational programme on the day. AIDS is increasing rapidly in Doti and neighbouring western districts due to ignorance, the poor status of women, social taboos, and the fact that many men go to India to find work and unfortunately bring HIV back to their families. Indeed, they call AIDS ‘Bombay Disease’ here. So we thought that it was actually really important that our students knew how HIV was spread and what a condom was. Their lives are hard enough without the devastation that AIDS brings and if we could prevent even one of them from becoming another statistic then our time in Nepal would not be wasted. During the holiday in Kathmandu we had got red ribbons and condoms donated, along with a small sum (\$25) for poster materials, prizes, sweets etc. Back at school we delivered invites by hand to all the local dignitaries, the police and army camps, medicine shops, secondary schools and NGOs. We spoke to the staff and students about the programme and the latter quickly signed up for the speeches, drama and song/dance competitions. We distributed the information to the students that we wanted converted into Nepali posters, and we spent Saturday making sweets and worrying that no-one would turn up. And on the day? Well, that was 1st December so you’ll have to wait for the next letter!

*Sue Guthrie*

## **Christmas Nepali Style (December 2002)**

December got off to a good start with our "World AIDS Day" programme at school. Nepal's neighbour, India, has the second largest HIV-positive population in the world. With an open border and an increasing number of Nepalis seeking work in India (heightened by the poor security and economic situation in Nepal), HIV and AIDS are serious issues for Nepal. In the very traditional and highly patriarchal far west, it is difficult for women to ask men to use a condom - indeed it is hard to talk about any issues concerning sex. So Claire (Peace Corps, Nursing Tutor) and I were very pleased that almost 500 people came to our programme - students, staff, army doctors, the local women's group, other NGOs, staff from the secondary school and the hospital, villagers and the Regional Director of Health (complete with his armed police guard).

We decorated the school with bunting made of huge red paper ribbons. We decided to chance our luck and blow up some condoms - some of the peons and the school receptionist were helping us and at first they wouldn't even touch the condoms, let alone blow them up. But when they saw that the condoms were far superior to the local balloons, they soon forgot their qualms and threw themselves into the work.

The students put on a lively programme of speeches, song and some Oscar-winning drama. Hari's descent from peaceful retirement into madness at the news of his beloved son's death from AIDS was extremely humorous, but the underlying message was clear - AIDS, a preventable disease, tears families apart.

The competitions went down well (especially 'guess the number of condoms in the jar') as Nepalis are highly competitive, as did all the sweets that we handed out. Students from all 3 trades at the school won prizes, which was good - and not fixed. The atmosphere was very convivial and it was nice to see the male and female students socialising - quite a rare occurrence here. Claire and I decided to take advantage of the excellent penis model in the Health Trade (sadly it rarely sees the light of day) and do a condom demonstration - important because many people had never seen one let alone used one. We presented it as a double act, with Claire providing a Nepali commentary while I did the Blue Peter actions. We certainly had the undivided attention of the audience - you could have heard a pin drop. Actually what happened was that one of the condom balloons burst and Claire thought that the police had opened fire!

In our regular classes my counterpart and I finished teaching the Animal Health course. We got the 3rd term exams out of the way which left the time clear for revision before the final exams. In contrast to UK students, the class turned down the offer of revision classes, preferring to study on their own. I think that this reflects the education system here in Nepal and partly explains why I find exam time a depressing time. Students scurry off to private corners of the campus and the air is filled with the soft sound of chanting, as though they are repeating mantras. This is how they learn their notes - reading at speed over and over again. Unfortunately they are tested on their ability to remember and repeat the notes, their actual understanding is very poor, which means they struggle to apply their knowledge in differing situations.

Christmas fell in the middle of this revision period. As per last year, decorating my quarter was a team effort. Mr Dhami found a suitable tree and Dev Raj cut it down (teaching staff can't get their hands dirty so the actual manual work is done by a peon), the children put up the decorations (including the tree) and Mr Laxmi made the lights. I scaled the slope behind the school fields in search of some greenery to fashion a wreath of sorts. It was pretty hard to come by as most vegetation had already been cut for winter animal fodder. The only plant remaining - in abundance (which should have alerted me) - had wicked thorns!

As it was my last Christmas at school, I decided to bite the bullet and throw a party for the staff on the 24th. Fortunately friends and family back home had sent a selection of Christmas goodies, so everyone could try mince pies. The kids who live on the campus came through the house like a plague of locusts and pretty soon stripped the tree of all its chocolate decorations. Sugar mice and chocolate insects were big crowd pleasers. The male staff all arrived in one group, filled their plates with cake and cups with hot rum punch and disappeared up onto the roof. This made way for the ladies' group to take their turn - same format but they had tea instead of punch (I'm afraid I didn't).

Five of us sat down to full Christmas dinner on the big day, with crackers, silly hats and a flaming pudding. I'm pleased to report that the cake has now been finished. But I think that the biggest luxury over Christmas was having 2 consecutive days off work - I find a 6-day week a hard slog sometimes.

After getting house chores out of the way on Saturday, I'm ready for a lazy Sunday and not a return to the classroom.

And how did the year end? Rather appropriately with the Animal Health theory and practical final exams. Lalu and I have developed a fairly tight system now for running the practicals - having been VN Chief Examiner has helped. And whilst it was disappointing to see so many of the students struggle to write a prescription, it was really encouraging to see the weakest student put on a bandage that would have scored well in the VN exams! And after a long day examining, the New Year may have stormed in with some wild partying but I don't know - I was fast asleep!

*Sue Guthrie*

### **January brings the snows (January 2003)**

The New Year got off to a gloomy start with 24 hours of heavy rain. Of course, higher up this fell as snow, which unfortunately brought two pylons down. So we spent the first two weeks of January without electricity. When I look at the terrain here and the most unlikely places that they have been able to put pylons, bearing in mind that in many places all the materials would have been carried in, I am amazed that there is power at all, but it does mean that repairs are slow. And one thing I have learned during my stay in Nepal - I really like electricity. It is nothing short of a miracle that light floods your room at the flick of a switch. I marvel that our ancestors survived for centuries with just candlelight. I'm definitely up for shares in Southern Electric when I get back!

At the same time as the electricity failed, the telephone system in the Far West also inexplicably crashed. Snow drifts blocked the only road, so there were no deliveries of fresh food or supplies to the bazaar - and then my cooking gas ran out. Saddam might have weapons of mass destruction, but nothing is more dangerous than cooking on an unruly kerosene stove! But we all clubbed together on the campus and with no hassle from the outside world we quite enjoyed our splendid isolation.

During this time the students were tackling their finals. I have tried and tried to find something positive to say about the examination system and here it is - I didn't get as upset this year as I did last year.

Firstly, the exams in Nepal test memory, not understanding. Hearing the students chant their way through their revision and knowing that they cannot apply the knowledge is fairly depressing. For example, if I ask the students what details should be included on a prescription they can reel off the information. But if I give them the patient details and ask them to actually write a prescription, they cannot do it - and this is, after all, going to be an important part of their work. They absolutely cannot grasp the concept that you can apply the information that you get from a textbook.

Secondly, the students cheat outrageously, and I have to say that the girls are the most devious. They write on their arms, on the walls, floors, ceiling, desks and benches. You have to have eyes in the back of your head. They will talk at every opportunity, even if you are standing right next to them,

and ask the teachers a lot of questions in the hope that they will get some help. On the last day I asked to see the toilets, as it seemed that bladder capacity was significantly reduced on the days with the toughest exams. It was spooky how students seemed to be wracking their brains before a toilet break, but completely inspired afterwards. Well, of course, I don't think anyone had actually urinated in those toilets for a very long time! The bowls, basins and window sills were full of pages of notes and textbooks. The Principal asked what I had found, knowing full well how the system worked. I could only reply that it was so ridiculous I wasn't even going to comment. It was either keep cool about it, or pack my bags there and then.

This brings me to the third and saddest point. The staff choose to condone and perpetuate this system. They could invigilate properly, they could even stay in the exam rooms rather than sitting outside in the sunshine, they could use negative marking or cancel papers, and they could burn all those notes in the toilets. (They are, after all, getting extra pay for doing this work.) But they don't. They tell me that the exam system is not good and that we should be strict and stop the cheating - and then they do nothing. And this charade is repeated in almost every school and college in the country.

So I have come to feel that there is little real value in my formal teaching. Change needs to be driven by the Government through all levels of education, but they are too busy fighting the Maoists. In Nepal, no-one is responsible for these things and no-one cares. And I have come to realise that you can only help the people to bring about lasting change if they want it. It has to be done with them and through them. Who am I to impose my value systems on them?

Needless to say, when term ended I pretty swiftly jumped into that jeep to Kathmandu. Let's see what February's new term brings.

*Sue Guthrie*

## **New faces and a plea for world peace (February 2003)**

I spent early February on winter break in Kathmandu, awaiting the arrival of the new VSO volunteers – six eager faces wondering at the strange mysteries of Nepal and worrying what their placements would hold. I was wheeled out to help with some of their initial training, long days on Nepali buses travelling the length of the country qualifying me to talk on the issue of personal safety. It made me think back to my own arrival in the country – and realise just how much I had assimilated and acclimatised in the last two years. When I left Kathmandu they were wrestling with their first language classes, something that for me turned out to be an ongoing struggle.

For once, the journey back to school was relatively uneventful. However, I did think it was slightly odd that I got the last seat on the bus as usually nobody books ahead and few people travel up into Doti. It turned out that a major religious festival (or mela) was being held in the region, in Silgadhi.

Silgadhi is the district headquarters for Doti, a small, Newar town perched on the hill above Dipayal at 1700m. It has a single, narrow main street that straggles along the top of the ridge, and the houses are built in the traditional half-timbered Newar style with balconies and tumbling bougainvillea – very attractive. The main Hindu temple in the town is dedicated to the goddess Sailesori – ‘the goddess who lives in the hills’. She is a reincarnation of the all-powerful Parvati, wife of Shiva, and it is believed that if you worship her you will get all your wishes granted, so definitely a good goddess to keep in with. Temples usually have an annual festival, and a larger, more important event every 12 years. But the most auspicious time to worship falls once every 144 years, and 2003 just happened to be the big year for this temple. So tens of thousands of Nepalis were heading to Silgadhi from all over the country. Our bazaar was absolutely packed, and there was a continual stream of buses and jeeps ferrying the pilgrims up the hill. After all the Maoist problems in the region it was nice to see businesses doing well for once. In school, students were conspicuous only by their absence and it was impossible to get much sense out of the staff as they had been up continuously for several nights singing and dancing at the temple.

This was obviously an event not to be missed, so Claire and I fought our way on to a jeep and then joined the steady stream of people walking up the main street to the temple. This was such a change from the previous month, when I had visited and been just about the only person up there. The place was packed, with two long queues (males and females) waiting to enter the temple. Of course, being non-Hindu, beef-eating heathens we were not allowed in the temple itself. Outside was a bright marquee housing forty Brahmin priests all clad in yellow. They were receiving offerings from the public (fortunately mainly rice, fruit and flowers rather than animals). These were beautifully arranged on special plates and decorated with flowers and coloured dyes. The amount of food being handed over was quite staggering, the more you give the more likely the goddess is to fulfil your wishes. And then it was all put in a huge heap and burned (bit of a waste but a good spectacle). The priests were all chanting prayers for world peace in 12-hour shifts. I hope that sufficient rice was incinerated for their wishes to be granted.

All the pilgrims were in their best clothes. There were bright saris everywhere you turned. There were numerous small groups of musicians and drummers and the volunteer we have who lives up there said that she would be glad when the two-week festival was over and she could get some decent sleep. She’ll have 144 years to catch up!

I think that February is my favourite month here. In contrast to the UK, where the month is just a dreary, cold extension of winter with little promise of spring, in Dipayal the season is perfect – warm, T-shirt weather but without the fierce heat that will arrive in March. After a couple of days of rain, the sun has brought the fields to bright green as the wheat shoots up and village women are already harvesting the mustard. The trees are shooting fresh new leaves and even the school cows are happy to give a decent amount of milk. There is a clarity and quality to the daylight that pulls you out-of-doors and I have been snapping photos madly in an attempt to capture some of the beauty of the hills and the daily activities of the people.

Not that there’s so much activity for me at school at the moment. It was the usual slow start to term and then my counterpart had to return to his home town to perform some important worship (puja).

Still, it has given me time to crack on with the Nepali course notes, so at least my typing has got faster.

I'm pleased to report that my milk lady's cow calved safely and daily deliveries are back on. She's up at 4am and is at my door by 6.45am. She's my first caller in the morning and it's always a delight to open the door to catch up with her latest news. Last week she was without shoes (flip-flops) – not good on the mountain paths and I kept thinking of hook worm burrowing in through her skin. I reckoned that I could afford the 50p for a new pair of shoes, even on a VSO allowance, so I gave her the money and told her she must get some. Being somewhat enterprising she turned up the next day with mended flip-flops (yes, you can get spare parts for flip-flops in the bazaar) and told me that she had had enough money left over to also buy a sleeping mat. She was pleased and that's fine with me. We've also been swapping foods and recipes – she's tried my bread and carrot cake and in return she's given me what must be just about the two biggest radishes in the world and the instructions for radish pickle – watch this space! Today she brought a pot of moi (I think this is a kind of buttermilk and whey, but I haven't a clue yet as to what to do with it).

Actually, cooking out here continues to be a big pleasure. This term I've finally got the bread sorted and discovered the dekkshi oven – basically a big pot that you put a few stones in and then balance your cooking pot on top. This means that I can make pastry now, so I've been trying a variety of pies. I reckon that meringue should be possible hopefully before I leave - I'm starting to dream of Pavlova! Let's see what the milk lady will make of that.

*Sue Guthrie*

### **Complete mayhem and madness... (March 2003)**

Just when I was looking forward to winding down and thought that Nepali life could spring no more surprises, March turned out to be possibly the craziest month so far.

March 1st was Shiva Raatri, a nationwide festival to honour the god Shiva (one of the trinity of top Hindu gods). Thousands of devotees flock to the Pashupati temple in Kathmandu to worship and sadus smear themselves in ash and contort their bodies. An alarming amount of hash is smoked, and indeed the police have to turn a blind eye on this day as it's an integral part of the festival and if not allowed a terrible fate would befall the nation (of course).

With some improvement in the security situation and the ceasefire holding up this was the first chance that the Doti locals had had for a serious celebration. Drumming and singing started at first light and continued all day. Everyone was out and about, meeting friends, visiting the temples, selling homemade produce and generally enjoying themselves. A carnival atmosphere prevailed, with the women in their best dress and children playing everywhere – loud whistles and trumpets were the 'must have' items. The bazaar was just crazy. The hillside behind it looked bright red from all the saris. You couldn't even get near the shops for the crowds, and I had to abandon my shopping mission – it was that serious!

A couple of weeks later was the colour festival of Holi, probably my favourite event in the religious calendar. It marks the occasion when a demon king tried to get rid of his son, who was showing some alarmingly humane traits. His daughter, who had the power to withstand fire, was to take the boy on her lap and sit in the flames. However, when she did this she died and the son survived instead. In celebration, people offer best wishes and bestow blessings by liberally smearing each other's faces with brightly coloured dye powders. Basically you put on your oldest clothes (really they should be white to show off how 'blessed' you have been – unless you're Nobby No-mates, in which sad case black is for you), arm yourself with a serious amount of tikka powder and patrol the area looking for victims. There is no escape, especially for foreigners and animals! Of course, there's also singing and dancing – a satirical song where the leader makes up suitably witty verses appropriate to the person in the middle, and a huge dance where you all go round in a circle. Staff and students managed to keep this up for six hours!

Following the colour theme I planned to serve red rice at dinner, having found a dangerous looking substance in the bazaar that the shop owner assured me was edible food colouring (at least that's what I understood). I had expected a pale pink result, but this was powerful stuff that turned the rice and alarming scarlet – fortunately much appreciated by the amazed diners and with no untoward effects.

Holi was slightly marred by one student who got drunk and smashed some windows before starting a fight in the boys' hostel. So we had to call the police to the campus. The whole of the next day was taken up with meetings with the local bigwigs and the school management board, resulting in a few suspensions. The footpath leading to the bazaar was closed off to improve campus security, but then there was huge uproar from the Teacher Training Centre next door that also use the path, culminating in threats to cut our water supply. A lot of tea and several heated meetings later the closure was grudgingly accepted, whilst we now get around to making a gate.

A few nights later one of the health students left a suicide note and disappeared. So more police and frantic searching of the campus and surrounding jungle. She was found unconscious, in the school farm fields and after a spell in the police hospital has returned to class. Her main reason for the attempt? She felt worthless because her father had died when she was young and now her husband had divorced her for producing a daughter not a son! This is not uncommon in Nepal – indeed, my milk lady tells me that her husband has left her and taken another 'wife' as she had produced three daughters. I'd really like to meet these men and explain about X and Y chromosomes. I'd also have to tell them that actually it's not good to banish your wife to sleep in the buffalo shed when she has a period – another quaint custom that they have here. I'm no ardent feminist, but there are some serious gender issues here in the west.

A few nights after this the peace of the evening was shattered when the girls' hostel opposite my quarters exploded into hysteria. Apparently a man had tried to get in, but staff doubted this as there was no sign of him. That was because he was now sitting in the shadows on my steps! He was extremely drunk and the Vice Principal had to step in to stop the students from beating him. But yet more aggravation and police.

However, on the work front (I suppose I should mention this) things have been going well. In class we have been injecting oranges, but this year I was wise to the fact that the students would eat them afterwards and had got sterile water. We've been using the anatomy murals and the students have the circulatory system fairly well sorted now. We have also seen some good teaching cases in the clinic, including a pony with a glorious buffalo horn wound which looked very dramatic and that buffalo with classic pus in the foot. These new second year students are the best I've had and are a joy to teach. Although their level of knowledge is fairly low at the moment, they are keen and can actually problem-solve and manage tasks, which makes a refreshing change. They were amazed when I gave the pony some sugar sweets after its daily injections, but now they see that I can catch it easily (it's roaming freely outside the classrooms) whilst they have to chase it around all over the place. They know how to dispose of clinic waste now and know that the wrath of Miss will descend upon them if anything is dropped on the ground. Fortunately the new uniforms that we have to wear now have capacious pockets!

So, the last month approaches and there's no sign of a let-up yet. But April surely can't be as mad as March.

*Sue Guthrie*

### **The end is in sight (April 2003)**

April can pretty much be summed up in a word - computer. My counterpart and I worked all hours in the computer room to finish the Nepali version of the course notes. Nepal Electric did their best to upset our plans by turning the electricity supply off for days at a time, and so we could be found working away on days off, at midnight or 6am, whenever there was power. And I'm pleased to say the notes were all finished, copied and bound the day before I left! They look good and the students can't wait to get hold of them. Now he won't have to dictate notes, my counterpart is planning all sorts of interactive ways to teach - much more interesting and more rewarding. The school has all the computer files, and hopefully will be able to sell the notes on to other schools, so generating some income too.

There was big excitement when the King announced that he would visit the far west in April. He flew to Silgadhi (our district headquarters, 45 minutes up the hill) for half an hour to visit the temple and speak to some of the locals. The principal of our school was able to present some flowers, which was quite an honour. In Nepal, the King is revered because he is thought to be a reincarnation of a Hindu god. In the present climate the people need strong leadership to keep them together, and the King seems to be providing this. The Government then announced that, as a mark of respect to the King and a symbol of their pride to be Nepali, all male Government employees (that's about 99.9%) should wear a topi at work. That included all the technical school teachers. The topi is the traditional Nepali, brimless hat. It is a very simple design but can be worn any number of ways - high on the head, down over your forehead, with a peak at the front, like an air force cap etc. And there are a number of traditional fabrics that say something about your caste and the type of work you do. I kept wondering what would happen if such an edict was issued in the UK. In Nepal, they all just got their

topis out and quietly got on with things - although 2 weeks down the line bare heads started to emerge again.

This month Dipayal has also seen some big political meetings. First, Sher Bahadur Deuba (the ex-Prime Minister) and his party held a meeting. It was pretty poorly attended. A few staff went and reported that the speakers spent most of the time apologising for the corrupt things they had done whilst in power, and saying that Mr Koirala (the leader before Deuba) had made them do it - ah! With the ceasefire holding up, the Maoists then decided to hold a rally - a brave move as Dipayal has a huge police and army presence. Thousands of people came from the villages by bus, truck and on foot. All the students went and the rally was peaceful. Many of the people who attended had protein-deficient brown hair. They were so dirty and dressed in rags that made the people in our bazaar look positively well dressed! It made me realise that although people in Dipayal don't have much, there are many who are even worse off. No wonder the Maoists get support.

It was a varied month on the animal front. I saw my 3rd case of 'tiger bite' in a dog. I don't know what animal actually bites these dogs, and I don't know where the army keep taking their dogs so that they get bitten, but all the ones I have seen have had a nasty, infected wound under their necks. The dogs also seem to have some generalised toxic reaction - ? to the saliva. However, the students are enormously diligent now when it comes to wound cleaning and so the dog healed ok. Then there was an emergency call to the Brigadier's dog - 4 soldiers and a jeep were dispatched to collect me. I was introduced to Simba, the cleanest, happiest golden retriever in Nepal. He was in retriever heaven, living on an army camp where he could scoff the leftovers from 500 soldiers. Needless to say he had been pigging out on all sorts of rubbish and now had enteritis and worms! I noticed that the Brigadier had a fitted carpet in his office (I notice these things now because I haven't seen one for 2 years) and it was absolutely spotless - he must have a squad on full time carpet duty 'cos that dog was moulting!

One evening I was visited by the largest spider in the world. I noticed it just as I was about to go to bed - it was huge, and no joke, I swear it had claws at the front. It was practically hissing at me! Now, I freely admit I am crap with cockroaches and spiders. As it was after 10pm, everyone else on the campus was asleep (I'm one of the last to go to bed, but they all get up at about 4am - I don't). I had to wake up one of my neighbours and then drag out all the bedroom furniture to catch the beast - even my neighbour was impressed by this spider.

Warmer i.e. hot weather finally arrived and this brought out the geckos. Quite a few of them don't have tails, and a colleague was telling me that some Nepalis cut their tails off and smoke them as they are some sort of hallucinogen. It all sounded very strange and I felt sorry for the geckos - having your tail minced and wrapped in a Rizla!

The warmer weather also brought the water crisis. The peon who usually opened the valves each morning had some time off, and his replacement just couldn't get water into my dhera for some reason. There's nothing more annoying than hearing water gushing out of your neighbours taps and watching them watering their gardens with a hose when not a single drop comes out of your own taps! Two weeks of that and I was actually ready to leave!

The students continued to work well and we had the post mortem/picnic practical as per usual. Nepali New Year came and went, and my departure loomed. The students held a traditional ceremony for me, presenting me with flowers and tikka (powder dye) for good luck. They also gave me a truly fantastic carpet that is a map of Nepal. Although I have only taught this last group for a few months, they have been the best - very receptive and hard-working. My counterpart and I are pleased that their behaviour has changed. They no longer drop rubbish on the floor but work in a much safer and professional manner. They also treat the animals more humanely in the clinic, which is nice to see. I hope they will take these new ways of working out to their placements and on into their final workplaces.

So now I am about to return to the UK, after 27 fantastic months in Nepal. I have gained so much from my experiences here. I hope that, in return, Seti Technical School and its students have also gained from having Susan Miss on the staff.

*Sue Guthrie*