LEPROSY CONTINUES TO MAIM AFRICANS

DAKAR: Modou Gaye sits on a hospital bed in Senegal, his left leg stretched the length of the mattress, the right one amputated below the knee. Afflicted by recurrent yet mysterious sores, he had done the rounds of traditional practitioners and physicians who prescribed him various plants and potions but were unable to tell him he had leprosy. He didn’t know anything about the disease, “the 32-year-old street peddler from central Senegal tells AFP in his native language, Wolof.

Gaye’s story typifies the experience of many patients who one day notice an innocuous, painless blemish on the skin, and later discover they have leprosy, a condition which is easy to combat yet which continues to cripple and exclude millions worldwide. When Gaye was finally diagnosed the young father was lucky to receive care from the Hospital of the Order of Malta (HOM), a medical facility in the capital Dakar at the forefront of treatment of the disease.

But it was too late to save his right leg, the bone already too badly damaged. Leprosy, transmitted in overcrowded conditions with poor sanitation, “afflicts the poorest, the most vulnerable”, says Dr Charles Kinkel, chief medical officer at HOM, which provides free care for the destitute. “They often wait until the last minute to be seen,” laments the 32-year-old street peddler from Dakar at the forefront of treatment of the disease, “least contagious communicable disease”. Treated in 1976 and cured permanently, 60-year-old Moustapha Seck stayed at HOM and now manufactures orthopedic shoes for those crippled by leprosy. “When they put them on, first they walk, then they dance with joy,” he says proudly.

Between 200 and 300 new cases of leprosy are reported each year in Senegal but doctors believe that only a small proportion of patients are detected. “If nothing is done we can expect an increase in prevalence,” warns Professor Charles Badiane of HOM. Considerable progress has been made in the fight against leprosy but it remains present in more than 100 countries in Africa, America, Asia and the Pacific. World Leprosy Day—a period of three days, in fact, aimed at raising awareness of the disease—began yesterday and organizers hope to communicate the message that, despite more than 200,000 new cases being detected in 2012, it can be eradicated. — AFP

NO HEALTH SHIELD FROM VITAMIN D PILS: STUDY

PARIS: Vitamin D supplements have no significant effect on preventing heart attack, stroke, cancer or bone fractures, according to a review of scientific evidence published yesterday. Researchers led by Mark Bolland of the University of Auckland in New Zealand looked at 40 high-quality trials to see if supplements met a benchmark of reducing risk of these problems by 15 percent or more.

Previous research had shown a strong link between vita- 
mamin D deficiency and poor health in these areas. But the new study, published in The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology, strengthens arguments that vitamin D deficiency is usually the result of ill health—not the cause of it. Its authors say there is “little justification” for doctors to prescribe vitamin D supplements as a preventive measure for these disorders. “Available evidence does not lend support to vitamin D supplementation and it is very unlikely that the results of a future single randomized clinical trial will materially alter the results from current meta-analy- ses,” they write. Vitamin D is a key component for healthy bones, teeth and muscles. It is produced naturally when the skin is exposed to sunlight or derived from foods such as oily fish, eggy yolks and cheese. In March last year, British scientists, in a comparison of 4,000 women, found that vitamin D supplements taken in pregnancy made no difference to the child’s bone health.

And in September 2012, researchers at New York’s Rockefeller University saw no evidence that vitamin D supplements lowered cholesterol, a factor in heart disease, at least over the short term.

In contrast, a November 2012 investigation into preg- nant women who lived in high-latitude, northern hemi- sphere countries with long, dark winters found a link between low levels of natural vitamin D and an increased risk of multiple sclerosis (MS) in their offspring. For these women, taking vitamin D supplements to offset the effects of long periods without sunlight could be advisable, according to the research. — AFP

M’BALLING, Senegal: Four former lepers sit on a bench in Mbälling, renamed by the authorities as a village of social rehabilitation in Senegal. Authorities began grouping leprosy patients in villages such as Mbälling by fear of contagion. Since the discovery of a cure for leprosy in the 1980’s the leper villages have grown yet are still stigmatized by the image of a leper colony.— AFP

Subway joins first lady’s healthy eating effort

WASHINGTON: Michelle Obama has a new partner in her campaign to get kids to eat more fruits and vegetables. The Subway sandwich chain will spend $41 million over three years to encourage them to eat more food that doesn’t come from a box, the first lady announced Thursday at one of the Connecticut-based company’s restaurants just north of the White House.

Subway will also offer a kids’ menu that mirrors federal standards for school lunches, including offering apples on the side and low-fat or nonfat plain milk or water as a default bev- erage. Speaking as a parent, Mrs Obama said Subway’s commit- ment will help moms and dads choose healthy food for their kids. “It’s a menu that will help eliminate the worry some parents may have when taking their kids out,” she said.

Subway will work with the Partnership for a Healthier America, a nonprofit organization that produces TV’s “Sesame Street” after the September gathering, Mrs. Obama announced that the nonprofit organization that produces TV’s “Sesame Street” had agreed to let the produce industry use Elmo, Big Bird and its other furry characters free of charge in its kid-focused advertising.

Sam Kas, a White House chef and executive director of the first lady’s campaign against childhood obesity, told The Associated Press that Subway was “raising the bar for what a responsible, quick-service restaurant can do to help support the health of the nation.”

Subway will work with the Partnership for a Healthier America, a nonprofit organization that works with the private sector to help advance the goals of “Let’s Move,” the child- hood obesity initiative Mrs. Obama launched in 2010, a year after becoming first lady. — AP