

## Rural health surveys hazardous — but rewarding

*Marilyn Campbell, editor-in-chief of the IDRC's Publications Division, recently attended a meeting in Nepal on Applied Research for Health Service and Manpower Development. The following article is based on her conversations with the organizers of a rural health research project in Nepal that could well provide an example for other countries facing similar problems. A full description of the project will appear in the report of the meeting, soon to be published by the Centre.*

**I**n a remote village in Nepal, the earnest young interviewer politely questions an old man about his health. Coughing, the old man says he has no complaints. That cough? It's nothing. "If an old man doesn't cough, who does?" he wants to know.

The interviewer is one of a team of

eight young people recruited to survey community health needs in rural Nepal. The old man is one of hundreds of villagers interviewed, and his enigmatic response is typical of the attitude of a people to whom minor ailments, and sometimes major ones, have become so common as to go unnoticed.

That survey was carried out over a two-month period during 1977, and was one of several undertaken as part of a health manpower development project begun in 1975 by the Tribhuvan University Institute of Medicine, Kathmandu, with the support of the IDRC. The aim was to discover at first hand what the rural people perceived as their health needs, and to draw up an inventory of the health services presently available to them.

For the interviewing team, all but one of whom were city born and raised, the assignment took on other aspects — it

became part adventure, part endurance test, and above all an introduction to a segment of their own people and culture that they had never before experienced.

The team members were selected as much for their likely ability to withstand the rigours of two months interviewing as on the results of written and oral examinations. Before going into the field they received four weeks' intensive training, covering everything from interview techniques and the use of forms, to vaccinations and the complications of pregnancy. But it is doubtful that any amount of training could have prepared them for the physical and cultural shock of their mission.

Nepal's terrain is as rugged as it is varied, ranging from jungle to rocky mountainside. The young researchers were often obliged to camp out in the open on treks between villages. All suffered from minor ailments — head colds and diarrhea being the most common. Their biggest problem, however, was simply one of understanding and adjusting to the village people and their way of life.

Arriving late one afternoon at a village after a day-long trek, the interviewers were delighted to find a festival about to begin, and joined in the dancing with enthusiasm. But some of the villagers took offence when the weary travellers eventually decided to call it a night at about 11:30, and they were obliged to barricade themselves in their billet until their irate hosts calmed down the next morning. No interviews were conducted at that particular village.

Fortunately, they learned fast, and while there were doubtless many more embarrassing moments, the interviewers were soon able to develop a rapport with the rural people that enabled them to break down much of the natural reserve that overcomes people when discussing something as personal as their health. It took patience and sensitivity to probe behind that unconscious tendency to conceal information: to find out about the old man's cough, or a woman's backache, or her child's diarrhea.

The wealth of data amassed by this and similar surveys will be invaluable in planning and implementing a health service for rural Nepal that is based on the needs of the rural people themselves, and in developing revised curricula for training health professionals.

As for the team members, now back in the comfort of Kathmandu, they learned much about the rural people — their hospitality, their friendliness, their songs and their stories. They probably grew a little in the process, too.

It is too early yet to talk of the long-term effects of the survey. But it is likely that, whatever the outcome, at least some of those eight young researchers will continue to be involved with serving the health needs of Nepal's villages. Their experience is a unique resource that is too precious to be wasted. □

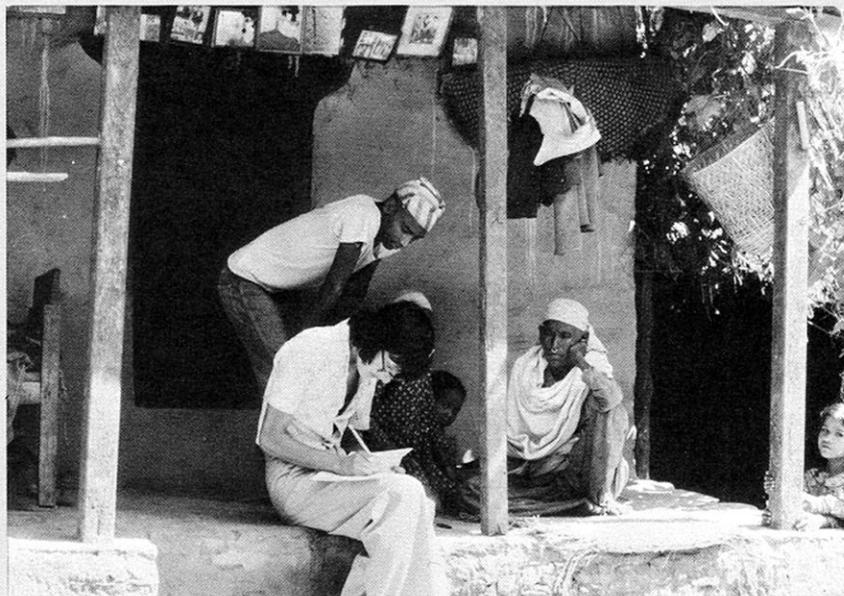


Photo: Marilyn Campbell

*A young interviewer talks to an old woman in a village in the Pokhara Valley — for both it is a new experience.*