

tackling superstition

Cairn India has embarked on a programme at village level to educate young families about the need to monitor infant and child health. It has backed this up with simple medical interventions

Pawni Devi, a 30-year-old mother from the remote Barmer district of Rajasthan in India, was once convinced that she was cursed. The elders in her village blamed her for various medical calamities in her family, including cases of infant mortality. But thanks to some pioneering healthcare work by the energy company Cairn India, she has been liberated from many of her anxieties.

Cairn, one of the major players in the Indian oil and gas industry, was able to provide assistance to Devi through its child and maternal health programme, which has been set up to help parents manage the wellbeing of their children more effectively.

As part of the programme, a Cairn employee, Bhavar Singh, had a series of conversations with Devi and her husband about poor health and hygiene, stressing the importance of seeking regular pre- and post-natal checks. Cairn also provided simple health interventions, including vaccinations to reduce infant mortality, and convinced the couple to pay heed to the advice they had been given.

The visits were important, as the area where Devi lives was more or less devoid of elementary healthcare education or basic medical facilities and amenities. The situation was exacerbated by age-old traditions, limited exposure to the outside world, and early marriages that led to pregnancies at a young age for many poorly-educated women who received little support from their husbands.

The benefits have been tangible. Today, Devi is a confident villager who no longer accepts that previous health problems in her family were down to anything else than a lack of a good healthcare regime. Her third child, born since the intervention, is healthy and

happy, partly due to regular visits to a health clinic.

There are benefits for Cairn too. It has extensive operations in Rajasthan, having drilled more than 150 oil wells. It believes it has a moral duty to help the people living near its sites there, especially given that government resources are thin on the ground. But it also sees a business imperative, as efforts to improve education, health and infrastructure will help with the company's license to operate. They will also provide a better educated, more healthy and self-sufficient local rural population that can work with the company, directly or indirectly, to create economic growth.

Cairn's corporate responsibility team established the project by contacting leaders of the local Panchayat (assembly) who could act as gatekeepers in various villages. Having gained the trust of these elders, it dispatched health

volunteers into 32 communities, reaching more than 7500 adults with information on maternal and child health – and providing referrals to clinics if necessary. An extra 17,500 people were also reached through health vans and fairs at venues in the Barmer district.

As a result, the partnership between the company, local leaders, healthcare professionals and Cairn employees has changed the landscape. 'Earlier, it was considered very shameful if a man took his wife to the hospital,' says one elder. 'Today, if they don't take their wives to the hospital that is considered shameful.'

Cairn worked with local Panchayat leaders who could act as gatekeepers to the people of various villages

■ Cairn's child and maternal health programme reaches isolated communities in various ways – including through health vans

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Cairn India recognized the need to partner with local people to succeed. By engaging with the Panchayat, it earned credibility. Long term, the company is insuring its licence to operate, and creating a sustainable workforce.

Points to note:

- Cairn's ability to engage and partner with local people
- The innovative ways it has communicated its message, such as at health fairs in various parts of the district
- Cairn's success at changing attitudes through backing up practical initiatives with education.

JUDITH IRWIN, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS

