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The boys call him "Abu" or father

**By Susannah Price in Karachi**

Pakistan's welfare system is in a state of collapse.

People no longer look to the government for help, but to one extraordinary individual, Abdul Sattar Edhi.

Mr Edhi, who is 72, is known as Pakistan's answer to Mother Teresa of Pakistan in recognition of his work for the poor and needy.

He runs the largest social welfare network in Pakistan, funded entirely by voluntary donations.

It includes a fleet of 500 ambulances as well as homes for children, the mentally ill and drug addicts.

Mr Edhi says: "We have one basic principle and that is to be there as soon as we are needed to help people and humanity."

“ We have one basic principle ... to be there as soon as we are needed ”

Abdul Sattar Edhi

**Emergency lifeline**

The wail of ambulance sirens on Karachi's dangerous roads is a familiar sound and each day sees countless traffic accidents, violent murders and sudden illnesses.

There is no emergency transport at the public hospitals for the city's 12 million residents.

The only ambulances, along with two planes and a helicopter, are

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run by the Edhi Foundation.

Edhi ambulances are known for being first on the scene of an accident, despite Karachi's appalling traffic.

After an emergency call to the call tower we were taken to a terrible sight - the body of a newborn baby who was left next to a cattle shed to die.

His parents abandoned him and the state would do nothing.

The neighbours called the Edhi workers, knowing the boy would receive a proper burial.



The office is piled with files, emergency numbers on the wall

### **Children first**

The man behind the whole extraordinary operation has a small office in the centre of Pakistan's largest city, Karachi.

Mr Edhi says his mother inspired him to start his social work by encouraging him to spend only half his pocket money on himself.

He says the plight of Pakistan's unwanted children has always been one of his main concerns.

Amina, another newborn bab, was left in one of the cradles Edhi has placed outside all his centres.

He wants mothers to leave their children there instead of killing them or leaving them to die.

He explains there are many reasons mothers become so desperate.

"One is poverty, illegitimacy is another and the third is that some families do not like girls."



The village offers boys an alternative to life on the streets

### **Arranged marriages**

Hundreds of boys who were abandoned by their parents live in a sprawling compound outside Karachi called Edhi village, where they eat, sleep and have their lessons.

Mr Edhi enjoys his visits here to quiz the children on their classes. and they all know him as "Abu", or father.

The centre is run with strict discipline and the boys can only go out on arranged trips.

Mr Edhi and his wife arrange marriages between the young men and women from other centres.

He has been accused of encouraging families to break up, but without the village many of these boys would be on the streets, struggling to survive.

### **Outcasts welcome**

The centre does not cater only for children. Drug addicts, the mentally ill and even unwanted animals all find sanctuary here.

The recovering drug addicts live in a large, bare, tiled room with bars on the doors.

They complain about the conditions, but this is almost the only treatment available in Pakistan.

Some are brought here by their families, others come of their own accord.

Tariq Aziz says the centre has made him face up to his heroin addiction.



Tariq Aziz says he has been "shocked" into giving up drugs

"In other rehabilitation centres there are facilities such as beds, but seeing the people here and hearing how they lived has shocked me into realising that I have to stop."

### **Family affair**

Mr Edhi himself lives a simple life, always wearing the same grey clothes and never taking a holiday.

It is his personal commitment - and the public's trust in him - that make the centres such as success.

His wife, son and daughter are his closest workers and advisers, but there are fears about what will become of the organisation when Edhi is no longer around.

He hopes his family will carry on where he has left off and calls the children he has helped his "missionaries", saying they will carry on his work after he has gone.

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