



July 2017 at LVPEI

Liberia is a West African nation with a bounty of natural resources. This one hundred and seventy years old republic of about four and a half million people has been a victim of the ravages of civil war, dictatorship, and more recently of the havoc caused by Ebola. Under the dynamic leadership of one of the most respected leaders in the world, President Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the country is going through a process of rebuilding. A Nobel Peace Laureate, President Sirleaf is inspirational. Her life story is one of courage, determination and grit. When we were invited by her to be part of the rebuilding of health system in her country, on her visit to India about four years ago, we have readily accepted the task of contributing to the development of an eye health system. THE LIBERIA EYE CENTRE was inaugurated on the 24th of July by the President herself. It was a simple yet elegant ceremony on the campus of John F Kennedy Medical Center, the country's main medical centre, in the capital city of Monrovia. Renovated space was provided as per our specifications and the necessary equipment was obtained with grants from Lions International SightFirst programme and Operation Eyesight Universal of Canada. OneSight Foundation set up the optical unit. Over the past two years, staff from the Centre were trained at our Institute and one of our ophthalmologists was deputed to the centre. The center is equipped to provide care for most of the major eye problems, and regular visits by our specialists along with tele-consultation will cover complex problems. A visiting corneal specialist from our Institute performed four transplants during this visit and created history, since these were the first ever corneal transplants in this part of the world. We are grateful to SightLife of the US for the supply of corneas pro bono to make this possible. The biggest boost for advocacy came with the President's son getting one of these procedures done. Our colleagues Sam Balasundaram and Rajashekar, through multiple visits and regular communications, made this a reality. To them and to Gurcharan Singh, who volunteered to go as our first ophthalmologist leaving behind his family including a newborn baby, I express my personal compliments and thanks. Gurcharan has already become a popular physician locally. Thanks also to the very supportive officials of Health Ministry including the Minister of Health and the Kennedy Medical Center team headed by Dr. McDonald, without which this would not have been possible. To Her Excellency, the President, we are grateful for this privilege of serving the people of Liberia. Special thanks to Jennie Bernard, the President's sister, for her efficient coordination and support for the project. I am appreciative of the many gestures of support from the Indian Consul, Upjit Sachdeva, who made our visits to the country so pleasant. Gautam Sawang, the dynamic Police Commissioner of Vijayawada, played a very critical role in this connection. He encouraged us to work with the Liberian government as he saw the need first hand from his stint there as UN Police Commissioner.

Speaking of Presidents, we were delighted that T P Das was one of the elite group of twenty five invited participants for the special celebration to launch the "House of Kalam" by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in memory of Former President Kalam in his home town of Rameswaram at the southern tip of India. President Kalam was a strong supporter and friend of our Institute, and one of the most loved leaders in the history of India.



As Indian population ages along with the prevalence of age related vision problems on the rise, special focus on the care of the elderly is critical. We have inaugurated the first component of such care a year ago in the form of "Aurobindo Geriatric Eye Care Institute" supported by Aurobindo Pharma. With additional support from them, this facility was enhanced with a special surgical complex in our Visakhapatnam GMR Varalakshmi tertiary care campus. We are grateful to the Vice-Chairman of Aurobindo Pharma, Mr. Nityananda Reddy for his encouragement and support. The plan is to now replicate this across our network. At the other end of the spectrum, our public health specialist, Srinivas Marmamula, is looking at the issue of "Visual Impairment in Elderly Population in Homes for Aged Institutions" with support from Wellcome Trust India Alliance.

On the education front, a hands-on workshop on surgery of lacrimal passages and a closed-door discussion on clinical pearls pertaining to corneal problems, with live interactive discussion with the participants, were the highlights. Both corneal and lacrimal problems are significant in India. Early diagnosis and appropriate intervention go a long way in ameliorating these conditions. The Tej Kohli Cornea Institute and the Govardhan Seksaria Institute of Dacryology respectively organised these two events.

Over twenty awards were received at the National and International levels during this month and my compliments to each of the recipients for holding our torch high. We are gifted with very bright and productive talent covering all areas of our work.

Our rural network continues to expand with the addition of two more primary care vision centers taking the total to 154. We are excited with the way our "Vision Centre Model" is proliferating across the world with several organisations replicating it. High quality primary care closer to the door step of those who need it most, is the objective of this initiative.

A 4-year old boy, Friday Jacob, with advanced childhood eye cancer, Neuroblastoma, travelled thousands of miles from Liberia but could not be saved despite our best efforts. The story of Godvin, a one-year old boy with childhood glaucoma, however, is different. He travelled the same distance but came at an early stage of his disease and prompt surgical intervention by our team preserved his sight that set him for a full productive life. This happened because of a chance meeting with our visiting team in Liberia. Our hope for the Liberia Centre is that everyone in that country will have the benefit of early diagnosis and prompt care for their problems. It is this hope that has taken us outside India for the first time. We are happy for this opportunity to be a small part in President Sirleaf's vision to transform the lot of Liberians.

- Gullapalli N Rao