



## **August 2018 at LVPEI**

At the tribal Araku valley area of Andhra Pradesh, a recently widowed woman with two children was struggling to survive. She is just forty years old, but due to poor vision she had no means of livelihood. A helpful neighbor took her to our vision centre in that location (in fact our 100th centre) where she was diagnosed with cataract. Subsequent cataract surgery performed at no cost to her in our nearby centre in Visakhapatnam restored her sight; as well as her dignity as she could become self-reliant. While this result can be achieved easily in adults, surgical care in children is more complex making control of childhood blindness a challenging proposition.

The magnitude of childhood blindness and visual impairment is quite a significant problem in India and many developing countries. Under the umbrella of our “Child Sight Institute”, we are involved in all aspects of children’s eye care ranging from primary to advanced tertiary levels, through a comprehensive care approach. Prevention programmes, promotion of eye health, treatment of problems and rehabilitation for irreversible forms of low vision and blindness are integral parts of our care system. While we have been conducting large scale screening programmes in rural and tribal areas with the greatest prevalence of problems; providing needed service to those identified with problems has been a major challenge. Availability of such care has been traditionally limited to tertiary level, with consequent problems of access and availability, because it involves multiple sub-specialties, very demanding anaesthesia services and expensive infrastructure including equipment. More recently, we have begun to take as much care as possible closer to the doorstep of the people in these areas. This has taken a new dimension this month with the introduction of surgical care for children in one of our secondary centres. Our pediatric ophthalmology specialist along with an anaesthesiologist from our Hyderabad campus travelled to this centre and performed surgical procedures for cataract and squint on a few children thus heralding a new era in our approach to the care of neglected children. Our compliments to Ramesh Kekunnaya, Head of Child Sight Institute, who personally added this new chapter to our story. As we gain more experience, we will work to replicate this in as many other secondary centres as possible. This will make our screening initiatives far more effective as “screening followed by service” will become increasingly possible.

Advocacy at all levels - local, national and global - has been an active functional arm of our Institute. The launch of “Kanti Velugu” programme by our state government of Telangana to screen the entire population for eye problems is a visionary and welcome initiative. With significant funding by the state government, the entire thirty five million population of the state will be covered. Screening will be followed by necessary services provided by most eye care providers in the state. We are happy that we are named as “Technical and Training partner” for this programme, and we have contributed through retraining of over one thousand optometrists and technicians in addition to several health care workers and some physicians from primary centres. We have also deputed about fifty of our Vision Technicians for screening, and all our centres in the state are enrolled for providing necessary services at both secondary and tertiary levels. This, coming after the launch of “Universal Eye Health



Programme” by the Odisha government, which our Vice-Chair Dr. Das is heading, fits within our strategic objective of “robust primary care for the 150 million population of the states of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha” - the states where we are providing direct services. The recent launch of a massive “Universal Health coverage programme” by the Government of India covering the bottom 500 million population is yet another pivotal step that will blunt the menace of needless blindness.

The formal inauguration of the upgraded Surgical Centre, Tej Kohli Eye Bank, and the Centre for Ocularistry Services in our Kode Venkatadri Chowdary campus in Vijayawada by the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh was yet another major advance for us. We are grateful to the management of Laurus Labs and Mr. Tej Kohli for their support for the first two of these.

We have lost yet another of our valued team members this month. Bikash C. Mohanta, one of the most devoted members of our rural eye health team based in Bhubaneswar, succumbed to cancer of the stomach. This again leaves a large void, hard to be filled. Bikash was only thirty eight years old. Having come from a rural background, he was passionate about helping the rural people which he did with utmost dedication. He is survived by his wife and two daughters. While we shared the grief of his loss with his family, we have also celebrated his life and work. He was to receive the “Eye Health Hero” award from the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) this September in recognition of his outstanding work.

As I have mentioned in my earlier communications, an increasing number of our clinician faculty are opting for Clinician-Scientist track. One stellar example of this is Javed Ali. Javed has chosen to pursue an unpopular area as his career option, namely, Dacryology. He went on to develop that into an Institute of Excellence and secured the necessary philanthropic support. He did all this while pursuing the Senior Alexander VonHumboldt Research Fellowship of Germany (one of the most prestigious awards in the Research World), and also working on a doctoral programme. Javed has received his PhD from the University of Hyderabad during this month. He is perhaps the only one who is a Clinician-Scientist in Dacryology. During this time he has also published a major textbook on the subject, considered the most authoritative in the area. Following is a letter he has received from Mark Lucarelli M.D, Dortzbach Professor at the University of Wisconsin, which said it all!

“I want to thank you profusely for the generous gift of your wonderful books! What a pleasant surprise to find them arriving to my desk! They are both wonderful and authoritative works and I will surely enjoy reading them and referencing them, and also sharing them with my trainees. I am so glad that you have improved our knowledge of the lacrimal system in so many ways with your tireless work in this area!”

- Gullapalli N. Rao