

# Vision Technician – The first port of call

In June, I wrote to you on the importance of healthcare access. That month, some of us attended the annual meeting of the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness (IAPB), an umbrella organisation of international NGOs and eye care institutions working along with the World Health Organization (WHO) for the prevention of blindness and vision impairment. One of the central themes of the meeting was the topic, 'access to healthcare'. IAPB worked very closely with the WHO towards a landmark resolution at the United Nations (UN), the first ever resolution on vision: "Vision for Everyone: Accelerating Actions to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals." Through this resolution, the UN called upon member nations to make eye care services accessible to their populations and mobilize the necessary resources and support in order to reach at least 1.1 billion people with vision impairment and who currently lack access to eye care services. In this context, I had an opportunity to remind my peers at IAPB about LVPEI's eyecare delivery model. This model not only ensures access to eye care in remote rural areas but also connects them to secondary and tertiary as well as advanced tertiary eye care in a seamless manner. This model is now super-charged with technology that enhances both the quality and speed of access.

## Who facilitates access?

You will agree that merely creating infrastructure is not going to ensure access. When I was growing up, I saw that the doctor posted to the primary health centre in my village either did not join the posting or remained absent most of the time. The situation is no different in eye care. Ophthalmologists and optometrists seldom opt to work in rural areas. We found an out-of-the-box solution to this problem – task sharing. The idea is based on the fact that nearly two-thirds of the people with vision impairment require a simple pair of glasses. Do we need the services of ophthalmologists or optometrists for tackling this important cause of vision impairment? Can we not train youth from local communities to impart basic eye care services through a primary vision centre in their own community? With this novel idea, we initiated the Vision Technician training program in 2001 and created a new cadre of eye care human resources. Our experience over the past 20 years clearly suggests that employing trained technicians for eye care provides a crucial, cost-effective, and lasting solution to the problem of access to eye care. Linking the vision centres to secondary and then to tertiary eye care centres provides seamless access to those needing more advanced care for other eye ailments.

## The Vision Technician Training Program

The Vision Technician program is offered at the Bausch & Lomb School of Optometry (BLSO), Brien Holden Institute of Optometry and Vision Sciences, GPR campus, in Hyderabad. Started in 2001 with 11 students, the training course has been running successfully for the last 22 years at no cost to rural youth and assures 100% job placement. The program is now offered at all our tertiary eye care centres as well. The course is accredited by the International Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology (IJCHAPO), an international organisation that certifies training programs and technicians across the world. To date, more than 1300 Vision Technicians have graduated from LVPEI's Vision Technician program. A total of over 150 VTs pursued further studies in optometry and vision sciences as well as management courses. Today, around 400 of our graduates are working in our network including several who were promoted to administrative roles.

## Local Impact

A Vision Technician is a primary eye care provider usually from the local community. The training program equips them to conduct an eye examination to provide a pair of spectacles; identify and appropriately refer individuals with different eye diseases; and conduct screening and health education programs in their communities. Empowering young people from local communities has several advantages. Being from the same community, the Vision Technician enjoys the trust of the community. Employing them in health care helps provide financial and social upliftment for rural youth and improves the level of health education in the immediate communities. The program also promotes community participation in health. We make a conscious effort to enroll women in the Vision Technician program.

Rayapati Vinodha, our Vision Technician at the Thallada Vision Centre, demonstrates the value of this approach. The Thallada Vision Centre was set up in 2012 and is connected to the Nava Bharat Eye Centre, Paloncha in the Bhadrachalam-Kothagudem district of Telangana.

“I am from Namavaram Village in Khammam district. I finished my schooling in Pandillapalli village about 30 km away from Namavaram. However, I could not continue further studies because my father’s income as an agriculture labourer was not sufficient to support my education. Then, I came to know through my friends that L V Prasad Eye Institute is inviting applications for the Vision Technician course, and thought that it would be a good opportunity for me to continue my education.

On the first day of class, I was nervous as I had never been to a city, nor stayed at a hostel, and had never seen such well-equipped classrooms. Initially, I struggled to understand the coursework, but the faculty in-charge of the course, Sitaramanjaneyulu, gave me the required confidence. Anji garu, as we call him, had a very friendly teaching style. The course itself was another revelation: I had never realized before that the eye could have so many problems! An ‘eye problem’ as people usually say is not good enough to capture all its complexity.

After the course, I began to work and offer my professional skills for a good cause – restoring vision. I am delighted to say that my family is financially stable now and I can take care of them and support my children’s education. I live with the satisfaction of serving my community to the best of my abilities.”

The Vision Technician also enables a demand-side solution to the problem of eye care access. This is because their presence in the village engenders health-seeking in the communities. Vulnerable sections—women, children, and the elderly—have a better chance of visiting a health centre if it is in their vicinity. It is because of Vision Technicians that we have been successful in taking eye care to 13,000 villages. The Vision Technician enables empowered eye care access, and we are proud and grateful for their services.

-Prashant Garg