

A New Year

As I sit down to write this note to mark the new year, I look back at 2023 with mixed feelings. While we have been successful in declaring the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world continues to remain fragile. With seemingly no sign of an end to the 18-month-long Ukraine – Russia war, a new conflict brewing in the Middle East, and no sense of urgency to agree on a concrete strategy to protect us from climate change, we have a long way to go before we can sigh in relief. This new year, I hope to see a positive turn for these festering issues. I hope we will be able to make a conscious effort to create an environment where all creatures live in harmony, with dignity, and with respect for each other. I hope to see a world soon where sustainable development is ensured. On this note of hope, from all of us at LVPEI, I wish you a very happy 2024.

I strongly believe that in times of adversity, we need to work harder and make a difference – a difference for the good of our society and humankind. LVPEI is committed to this philosophy. We did it in the past, most recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we will continue to do it in the future – this drive is what makes us humans unique. I am delighted then that LVPEI offered up some positive news to the world before the year came to a close.

Eye care in Rayalaseema

The Rayalaseema region is in southern Andhra Pradesh, bordering the state of Tamil Nadu to the south, Karnataka to the west, and Telangana to the north. It has a population of about 16 million people and covers an area of 27,000 square miles. It is mostly barren land, with persistent drought, erratic rainfall, and acute water scarcity. While LVPEI has a well-developed eye care network in the coastal Andhra and northern regions of Andhra Pradesh, we have a limited presence in the Rayalaseema region. In 2021, realizing the need for better eye care services, LVPEI accepted the responsibility of strengthening eye care in the region, at the invitation of the state government. On December 24th we inaugurated our 4th tertiary eye care centre, the Dr Y S Rajasekhara Reddy campus, at Kadapa located in the YSR District of the region. Honourable Chief Minister of the state Sri Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy and minister for health and family welfare, Ms Vidadala Rajini graced the occasion and inaugurated the centre. This centre and a network of the 'village vision complex', comprising primary and secondary centres, will take care of the eye care needs of the people of the region. I would like to thank the Naraindas Morbai Budhrani Trust, Wen Giving Foundation & Mission for Vision, ICICI Foundation, Smt Kavita Kalathur & Sri Ravi Kolli, USA, Parasakti Cement, and other philanthropists who came forward with their support for setting up this much needed facility.

Cell therapy

Corneal blindness is a key cause of vision loss and blindness in the developing world. From its inception, LVPEI has dedicated itself to tackling this important cause of blindness on multiple fronts. A key strategy we had started very early on was a

dedicated stem cell and cell-based therapy program, and today we have the distinction of being a global leader in this field. Our team is pioneering new techniques, technologies, and knowledge in the management of ocular surface diseases. They invented the novel Simple Limbal Stem Cell transplantation (SLET) technique, obviating the need for cultivating cells in laboratories before transplantation on to the ocular surface. Today, this technique is practiced all over the world facilitating sight restoration in patients with complex ocular surface diseases and ocular burn. In December 2023, Sayan Basu, our Head of Research, and Vivek Singh, a cell biologist, secured a patent for a novel composite of stem cells derived from the eye surface and two clotting factors layered together. This composite can be used to repair a damaged cornea. This innovation has the potential to facilitate the expansion of cell-based therapy to many clinicians across India. Congratulations to Sayan and his team for this patent and for bringing laurels to the Institute year on year.

A special honour

Let me end this note with yet another achievement that brought laurels to LVPEI. My colleague, Javed Ali, received the prestigious “J C Bose fellowship” for medicine for his outstanding research and pioneering contributions to the tear drainage system of the eye. The fellowship is awarded to active scientists in recognition of their exceptional performance by the Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB) of the Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India. Javed received several recognitions and awards including the most prestigious Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar award for his pioneering work and significant contributions to dacryology. This recognition is special - with this award, Javed has become the first ophthalmologist to receive the J C Bose fellowship. My hearty congratulations to Javed, on all our behalf, for this new recognition, and wish him many more in the years to come.

To recognize this achievement the institute has given Javed a new role and designation – Director, Clinician Scientist Development Program. He has agreed to work with the younger colleagues of our team and motivate them to pursue a productive and fulfilling professional career as clinician-scientists and create a pipeline of successful clinician-scientists. It will be a dream come true for me to see more of my colleagues receiving such recognition and making meaningful contributions to eradicate needless vision impairment.

Once again, a very happy new year.

-Prashant Garg