

# The Liberia Eye Center

Liberia, in Western Africa, has an estimated age-standardised prevalence of vision loss of 17% (all causes). India has about 22%, but with a population that is many times bigger. For many years, Liberians needing treatment for most cases of vision loss had to travel to other countries. The country with a population of 5 million people has an acute shortage of eye care human resources and infrastructure to tackle this vision loss.

In 2013, the noble laureate and former President of Liberia H.E. Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf visited LVPEI. Impressed by the quality of care provided by us, at her request, a team from LVPEI visited the national referral hospital of Liberia, the John F Kennedy Medical Center, to assess local eye care needs. This led to the development of the "Liberia Eye Health Initiative" with a focus on local capacity building. On July 24, 2017, the Liberia Eye Center (LEC) was inaugurated by H.E. President Sirleaf. The key partners who contributed towards its development were the Lions Clubs International Foundation, Operation Eyesight Universal, Indo-American Eye Care Society, the Latter-Day Saint Charities, and OneSight Essilor Luxottica Foundation.

Seven years later, in October this year, the Liberia Eye Center celebrated a key milestone: the centre serviced 100,000 outpatient visits. Of these, 37% of services were offered at no cost, as part of the commitment to accessible, high-quality eye care for all. This milestone also includes 8,700 surgeries (50% free-of-cost), over 40,000 community screenings and more than 500 low vision and rehabilitation services offered.

This is a significant milestone in Liberia's healthcare journey. All of this became possible thanks to the vision of H.E. Dr. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Dr Gullapalli N Rao, our Founder Chair, and the dedication of the LEC team who overcame numerous challenges with innovation and enthusiasm. The LEC team received regular education and training by LVPEI faculty, administrators, and senior leadership, which bolstered the Liberia team's efforts ably led by Dr Niranjana Pehera.

## The LEC journey

The Liberia Eye Center began with two full-time Indian comprehensive ophthalmologists and local support staff who were trained in India. Over time, sub-specialists in cornea, glaucoma, retina, and oculoplasty began to visit once a month from India. As the activities at the centre expanded LEC introduced additional programs in the form of community outreach and school screening programs, low vision and rehabilitation services and setting up permanent eye care facilities in remote areas.

In the meantime, LEC also collaborated with the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Liberia, the Liberia College of Physicians and Surgeons, and EYEliance, USA to set up an Ophthalmology residency training program. Over time, the centre has trained 4 ophthalmologists. In addition, the centre started enrolling Liberian candidates as mid-level ophthalmic personnel, who are trained both in LVPEI, India and LEC, Liberia. They also benefit from LVPEI's ongoing education programmes. These are deep investments into the future of high-quality ophthalmic care in West Africa.

## The scale of the promise

Today, the Center is a self-sustainable, modern, comprehensive eye care facility within the larger JFK Medical Center complex. LEC offers tertiary-level care and serves as a national resource for the country. It is a state-of-art facility capable of treating all types of eye conditions, ensuring that no patient needs to leave Liberia for any of their eye care needs.

Last week our colleague, Vishal Raval, returned from Liberia performing 20 complex vitro-retinal surgeries – something that was unheard in the country and a dream-come-true for many of these patients who would otherwise lead their lives with severe vision loss. I would like to thank Vishal and many of our colleagues who are part of our mission in helping build an excellent and equitable eye care model for this country with enormous challenges and opportunities.

With time, the centre and services provided through it are not only accessible to all Liberians, but also to patients coming in from neighbouring countries like Sierra Leone, Guinea, The Gambia and even several Liberian-American diaspora who are choosing to get their eye problems treated at the LEC.

One of our Liberian Residents, Vickie Fayiah has had an interesting life journey. Vickie is currently pursuing her retina fellowship at the GMR Varalakshmi campus in Visakhapatnam. A few months ago, she shared her story with us. I reproduce her story below, with some edits for clarity and length.

*Once upon a time, in a little country on the West Coast of Africa called Liberia, a little girl was born named Vickie. At the age of 10, while playing outdoors, her friend injured her knee, and Vickie helped her clean the wound. From then on, her friends started calling her “little doctor” and that’s how her dream of becoming a doctor began.*

*When she joined high school, her biology teacher, who later joined medical school, motivated her to become a doctor. During her medical education, Vickie faced a tragedy: her aunt’s death during childbirth. She immediately decided to become an obstetrician to help prevent maternal mortality. As luck would have it, though she had qualified for her entrance, she and two other friends were asked to wait until the next session as the department could accommodate only 4 candidates for residency training.*

*A mother of 5 children by then, Vickie decided not to waste any time and joined Ophthalmology, her second choice at that time but now her passion.*

*Soon, Vickie will become the first fellowship-trained retina specialist from Liberia, and she is very excited about it. Vickie not only wants to become famous in Liberia but across the African continent. She desires to be an inspiration for many young Liberians who should get educated and build a robust healthcare system for Africa, they should usher in a better life for their country.*

We are proud of you Vickie – you are already a role model and an inspiration for many across the continent. We are happy to be a part of your journey. May God bless you with all success.

-Prashant Garg