



## December 2016 at LVPEI

A little over twenty years ago, we embarked on a journey, which at that time faced dire predictions. This was our foray into rural eye care with the dream of creating a model of high quality, comprehensive eye care to ALL people that is sustainable, using an eye care team approach. We were very clear that the choice of location would be one of the most neglected areas, and offer of services would be secondary level – preventive, curative and rehabilitative. Accordingly, our first choice was Mudhole, a small village of 2000 people located in Adilabad district of the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh State (Telangana State now). It was one of the least developed districts with significant poverty. What came out of that experiment was a unique and successful model. For the first time, Sightsavers International, UK and Christoffel Blindenmission, Germany, jointly supported a project. Additional funding came from a local philanthropic gesture from Bhosle Gopal Rao Patil's family, after whom the centre was named. All thirteen employees, except the ophthalmologist and the administrator, were recruited from the local community. Everyone in this group continues to be with us as we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this centre this month.

Along the way, nearly 320,000 outpatients were provided service, 42,000 surgical procedures were performed (over 60% at no cost to the patient) including recent introduction of cornea, glaucoma and ophthalmic plastic services (all of whom came to the centre on their own); screening of almost the entire population of 500,000 in the coverage area, development of a complete cluster of ten vision centres; and a community based rehabilitation programme, which provided rehabilitation training to victims of irreversible blindness. The Mudhole centre today is a solution for the provision of high quality eye health services to a remote rural community. This experience is now replicated in sixteen other such rural locations with four more in the pipeline.

The next stage in the evolution of rural eye health programme is full scale exploitation of the benefits of technology to enhance our care and access. Partnership with the right technology groups is critical for this.

The launch of a global eye care network, in partnership with Microsoft, the Microsoft Intelligent Network for Eyecare (MINE), was the major event this month. The first phase included four global partners from the US, Brazil and Australia, and this will be soon enlarged to include many more eye care organizations. This is a mission-driven global consortium of like-minded commercial, research and academic institutions to apply artificial intelligence and data analytics for the elimination of avoidable blindness and scale delivery of eye care services worldwide. The benefits of this will extend to centres like Mudhole in future. We are grateful for the leadership of Microsoft for its unreserved support to this venture and to our international partners who readily agreed to be part of this consortium.

Our Tej Kohli Cornea Institute (TKCI) celebrated its first anniversary at the end of an action packed year. The volume of work in our network has grown considerably touching the lives of many more with corneal ailments through preservation and restoration of their sight. Progress was made in every area of activity. Better and more care of corneal problems was taken closer to the doorsteps of remote rural populations such as Mudhole including procedures such as corneal transplantation and stem cell transplantation using novel approaches. Innovative education



programmes to expose more ophthalmologists using technology were initiated, and more professionals were trained from all over the world. Research has proliferated at a faster pace. Eye banking activity multiplied with many more donor corneas made available for transplantation for surgeons across India. National and international partnerships have been initiated with potential for a greater impact on the problem of corneal blindness globally. Nearly 1989 corneal transplants were performed at our Hyderabad campus alone, a record for us and definitely for any Indian institution, and one of the highest in the world. 6564 corneas were harvested and 1563 corneas were provided for corneal transplantation to surgeons across India from our eye bank in Hyderabad alone. Through all these, TKCI is building a strong foundation to impact the problem of corneal blindness in a significant way.

As one of the eleven World Health Organisation collaborating centers for the prevention of blindness in the world, it was a pleasure to host the Regional consultation workshop of South East Asia. Following intensive discussions, the elements for a roadmap to realize the World Health Assembly Resolution mandating a 25 percent reduction in blindness by 2019 were identified, and implementation will commence in the next few months. South East Asia is the home for the largest magnitude and disproportionate share of blindness and visual impairment in the world. The presence of the Regional Director, Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh signified the importance given to this public health issue in the region.

The inauguration of the “Institute for Vision Rehabilitation” by Dr. Singh, Regional Director of WHO-South East Asia, is the culmination of over a past quarter century of providing comprehensive low vision rehabilitation services, along with training of eye care and other rehabilitation professionals, research on various aspects, capacity development in other eye care organizations, and product development in collaboration with our Innovation Centre that have been added through these years. The recent major physical expansion of this unit in our Hyderabad campus will now double its capacity. This will not only focus on increasing capacity across our network but will now also serve as a major global resource centre for this area.

Several in our team have won different forms of recognition for their work during this month but our vitreo retinal specialist, Jay Chhablani deserves special mention. A brilliant clinician-researcher, Jay delivered the first “Ian Constable Lecture” at the Annual meeting of Asia-Pacific Vitreo-retina Society (APVRS), which was much appreciated. The likes of Jay in our Institute make our future very promising.

The key to all our progress has been our people and their unflinching commitment to our standards and values. The story of Hamid at our Mudhole centre is an exemplary one. Starting as a construction labourer when the centre was being built, he performed all kinds of tasks in the earlier years ultimately settling in the role of gardener. He has been an eternally cheerful face on the five acre campus greeting all visitors with a smile, proudly showing off his plants. He retired a few months ago but continues to work. The Institute has decided to provide a special life time pension support for him, in appreciation of his total dedication. The likes of Hamid and the twelve others who continued for twenty years at our Mudhole centre, make us optimistic of high quality “Universal Eye Health” being available in remote rural areas.

- Gullapalli N Rao