Eye Camp – Gujarat

'Sarvendriyaanaam Nayanam Pradhaanam' – of all the sensory organs, eyes are primary - a saying in Sanskrit.

Introduction

Women in rural India predominantly suffer from major eye disorders due to a lower level of education, income and literacy. Cataracts, Glaucoma, Night blindness, Diabetic Retinopathy and Age Related Macular Degeneration are the most common eye problems faced by women. They are found to utilise eye care services 40% less than men, hence eye care amongst women from the rural poor has been a major cause for concern.

Our aim behind organising this eye camp is to create awareness among the rural poor and in particular widows, to highlight the importance of eye care education and also encourage them to understand the need for routine eye check-ups to prevent major eye disorders.

About the Rotary Eye Institute Hospital

The Hospital based in Navsari, Gujarat, is among the foremost eye care hospitals in the region. Since its inception in the 1970s the hospital provides cost-effective, quality treatment for all, irrespective of the socio-economic differences for all types of eye disease and vision problems.

The Partnership

Kamla Foundation partnered up with the Hospital to conduct an eye screening camp for some of the most marginalised rural communities. We focussed on widows in the main, as they are often unaware of available treatments, or simply unable to reach a hospital because of poverty and lack of transportation. With scattered populations spread across great distances, surgical eye camps are the most efficient way to reach the rural poor. Over 200 people participated in the programme and the cost of their treatment was met by the Foundation. Significant numbers were treated with spectacles and were afforded related eye care and some 40 widows were referred for more specific consultation and cataract surgery. The eye screening camp played a crucial role in generating awareness about the importance of eye care and also highlighted the fact that ignorance can lead to severe eye disease and blindness.

The plight of women

Within rural society more often than not, the ultimate victim of poverty is the female. In most cases, the women are classed as secondary level citizens. Within these communities women are extremely vulnerable, asset less and invisible on the socio-economic front. They do not have access to any form of financial credit and are denied rights to property. They are therefore engaged in even greater menial work than their spouses to eke out a meagre living.

The Target Group - Widows

Furthermore, within this group widows are even further marginalised. It is estimated there are 33 million widows in India, considered the country with the largest widow population in the world. It has become home to the “husbandless”. Many are thrown out of family homes by their children or abandoned by their in-laws as evil women who caused the death of their husbands. Unfortunately, without a man by her side a woman has no respect in rural Indian society. It is part of a patriarchal culture where a woman is respected only if she is a mother, daughter and wife.
Although the horrific practice of sati—requiring widows to throw themselves on their husband’s funeral pyres—was abolished in 1829, widows still undergo ritual humiliations. Her very presence is considered so inauspicious that even her shadow may not fall on a married woman lest her terrible fate befall the other woman. In order for these women to break the “cycle of dependency” and to help them supplement their poor economic situation, the Foundation has sponsored the Eye Camp. This may provide a path for their personal liberation from societal oppression, thus creating a cycle of change which is powerful and sustainable.

The Foundation seeks to provide a strong legacy where re-gaining full eyesight empowers the women to stand independently, thus enabling them to gain personal freedom. Otherwise, their voices will be stifled and status in society unchanged. Therefore, this is the single most important project the Foundation has undertaken in its short life. The widows are the unacceptable face of India, agencies including central and local governments have failed them, politicians with rare exceptions have ignored them and the rest of rural society continues to exploit them.

Most Common Cause for Vision Loss

Cataract

A common eye disorder that can occur with little warning is a cataract, which is the clouding of the lens within the eye. The lens is composed of water and protein. The protein is arranged so that light can pass through and focus on the retina. If the protein clumps together, however, it starts to cloud over a small area of the lens. In time, this cloudy mass of protein called a cataract can grow larger, making it hard to see. That’s when it becomes a problem.

Cataracts account for half of the blindness around the world but they are estimated to be responsible for nearly 80% of blindness in India. Europeans typically develop cataract symptoms in their sixties and seventies. Asians begin to show symptoms more than a decade earlier, many during their working life. While by age 75, 25% of British adults will develop cataracts, 67% of over-70s in the rural India have cataracts in one or both eyes.

Describing the typical impact of cataracts, the UK Department of Health website instances the inability to read or drive. The indirect effects of cataracts on a poor family in rural India may be significantly more serious. The sight loss of an adult can rupture the household economy, whether a breadwinner becomes another dependent mouth to feed or a grandmother is no longer able to provide primary care for the children.

Diabetes

The statistics say that 8% of the world population is diabetic. India is growing rapidly with diabetic cases. Diabetes is a silent killer that causes eye problems if care is not taken in the early stages. Unfortunately 50% of the people don’t even know that they are diabetic. Diabetic retinopathy caused by diabetes can be cured easily if detected in early stages.
India has the greatest number of blind people in the world and currently about 19 million blind people live in India of which 80% live in rural and slum areas. Unfortunately, this number is increasing everyday.

The problem is acute in rural India, particularly in the over 60s.

The backlog of patients suffering from eye diseases, especially cataract, is huge and increasing. Unfortunately, government hospitals / eye surgeons in the districts are not able to cope with this challenge.

Long distances from remote and backward areas to cities where hospitals are situated prevent patients from receiving treatment.

Private doctors /nursing homes are beyond the reach of the general masses to afford financially.

Most of the agencies working in this field are reluctant to reach out to the rural and slum population.

Ignorance prevails that blindness is the effect of old age and it is not curable. Also poor and old people refer to fate and destiny when becoming blind.

Due to the devaluation of old traditions, there is a general apathy from family members towards aged parents and grandparents when it comes to looking after their ailments.