

International

McSurgery: An Indian hospital restoring eyesight to millions

An estimated 10 million blind people in India

MADURAI: Black ticks on their foreheads marking the eye to be operated on, dozens of patients in green overalls wait in line, beneficiaries of a pioneering Indian model that is restoring sight to millions. With a highly efficient assembly line model inspired by McDonald's, the network of hospitals of the Aravind Eye Care System performs around 500,000 surgeries a year—many for free. More than a quarter of the world's population, some 2.2 billion people, suffer from vision impairment.

Of which one billion cases could have been prevented or have been left unaddressed, according to the World Vision Report by the World Health Organization. There are an estimated 10 million blind people in India, with a further 50 million suffering from some form of visual impairment. Cataracts—clouding of the eye lens—is the main cause. “The bulk of this blindness is not necessary because a lot of it is due to cataract which can be easily set right through a simple surgery,” said Thulasiraj Ravilla, one of the founding members of Aravind.

The hospital was set up by doctor Govindappa Venkataswamy who was inspired by McDonald's ex-CEO Roy Kroc and learned about the fast-food chain's economies of scale during a visit to the Hamburger University in Chicago. “If McDonald's can do it for hamburgers, why can't we do it for eye care?” he famously said. Aravind started as an 11-bed facility in 1976 in Madurai, a city in the southern state of Tamil Nadu but has expanded to care centers and community clinics across India.

Grit and gratitude

The model has been so successful it has been the subject of numerous studies including by Harvard Business School. But it is the outreach camps which have been the cornerstone of its no-frills high-volume work—nearly 70 percent of India's population lives in rural areas. “It is the access that is the main concern, so we are taking the treatment to people rather than waiting for them to come for us,” Ravilla told AFP.

The free eye camps are a boon for those like Venkatachalam Rajangam who received care close to home. Rajangam said he had to stop working because he was unable to see the money customers at his provisions store gave him, and also stumbled on the stairs or when out after dark. The 64-year-old found out about a camp next to his village in Kadukarai, some 240 kilometers from Madurai, where doctors screened his eyes and detected a cataract in the left one.

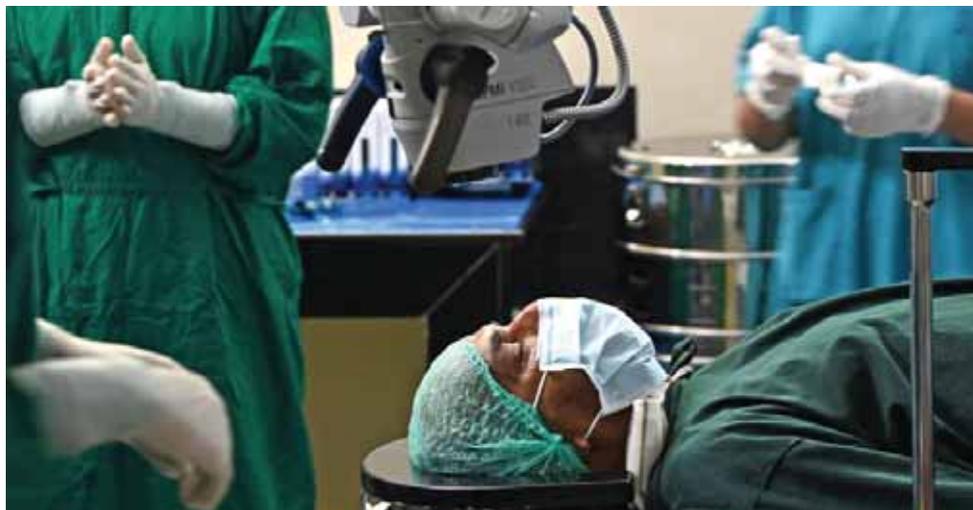
Rajangam was taken in a bus with some 100 others to a shelter run by the hospital, which also provides basic meals and mats to sleep on free of charge, and underwent a procedure to remove the cataract. “I thought the operation would be for an hour but within 15 minutes everything was over. But it didn't feel rushed. The procedure was done properly,” Rajangam said after the bandage roll covering his eye was removed. “I didn't have to spend even a penny... God has created eyes, but they are the ones who restored my eyesight,” he gushed, clasping his hands in gratitude.

'Practice on goat eyeballs'

Aravind eye surgeon Aruna Pai said the doctors receive rigorous training to make sure they can perform surgeries quickly. The complication rate is less than two per 10,000 at Aravind compared to Britain or the United States where it ranges from 4-8 per 10,000, according to the hospital. “We have wet labs where we are taught to operate on goats' eyeballs. This helps us to sharpen our skills,” said Pai, who performs some 100 surgeries in a day.

Aravind said it does not take charity money but instead uses the revenue generated from paying customers to help cover the cost of those who need free treatment. It reduces costs further by manu-

facturing lenses for cataract treatment at its own facility called Aurolab. Aurolab currently produces more than 2.5 million of these lenses a year at a sixth of the cost of those previously imported from the US, the hospital said. Rajib Dasgupta, a community health expert based in New Delhi, lauded the clinics: “The Aravind model has emerged as an important one in blindness prevention.” But he warned that India still needed to look at root causes—including diet, hygiene, and sanitation—that could help avoid preventable blindness. Dasgupta warned: “The communicable causes of blindness due to infectious conditions still exist and remain significant challenges.”—AFP



MADURAI: Medical staff prepares to conduct a free cataract eye surgery on patient Venkatachalam Rajangam at Aravind eye hospital in Madurai in India's Tamil Nadu state. - AFP

EU won't accept UK's North Ireland Brexit red line: Ireland

LONDON: The European Union will not accept London's demands for an alternative arbitrator to settle post-Brexit disputes involving Northern Ireland, Dublin said yesterday after the EU offered other concessions. The EU put forward a host of proposals on Wednesday, including reduced customs checks and paperwork on British products intended for Northern Ireland, in a bid to solve problems caused by the Brexit deal signed last year. But there was no movement on what Britain says is one of its red lines: the role of the EU's European Court of Justice (ECJ) as arbiter in any post-Brexit disputes involving the province.

“There should not be a role for the ECJ in any part of the UK, including Northern Ireland,” British Health Secretary Sajid Javid told Sky News yesterday, calling it “one of the most important issues”. But when asked by Britain's Times Radio if the EU would consider an alternative arbitration

system, Ireland's European Affairs Minister Thomas Byrne said: “No, I don't think so. “It is not a question of the European Court of Justice having any sovereignty over Britain or any part of Britain.

“It is simply the fact that the European Court of Justice arbitrates on the single market of the European Union, in which Northern Ireland has been allowed to remain,” he added. A team of EU negotiators on Wednesday delivered the plans to London a day after the UK's Brexit minister David Frost said the current deal - known as the Northern Ireland Protocol - should be ripped up. “We are looking forward to engaging earnestly and intensively with the UK government, in the interest of all communities in Northern Ireland,” said European Commission Vice President Maros Sefcovic.

The UK said it would look at the proposals “seriously and constructively” and called on both sides to engage in “intensive talks” rapidly. “We need to find a solution which all sides can get behind for the future, which safeguards the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and which puts the UK-EU relationship on a stronger footing,” a UK spokesperson added.—AFP

In Rome hospital, the unvaccinated patients fill coronavirus beds

ROME: In one Rome hospital, the vast majority of Covid-19 patients in intensive care are unvaccinated - and many are urging Italian anti-vaxxers to get the jab. A 41-year-old patient at the ICC Casalpalocco COVID hospital, who gave his name as Francesco, said he was opposed to the vaccine but that if he could go back, he would get jabbed. “The vaccine doesn't inspire confidence but unfortunately we've got to do it, because in any case it's the only thing that can help at this precise stage of the pandemic,” he told AFP.

At the hospital, there are currently 19 patients in the intensive care unit (ICU) for coronavirus, of whom 17 are unvaccinated, according to medical director Roberto Mezzanotte. “Almost 90 to 95 percent in our ICU are non-vaccinated,” he told AFP. In September, an analysis by the hospital found that 69 percent of its coronavirus patients were not vaccinated. “Patients in the ICU for the most part are not vaccinated. And these are the most at risk, those whose condition worsens more readily and need intubation and assisted breathing,” Mezzanotte said.

Scared of COVID

Breathing oxygen through a mask, another patient, Salvatore, said he was a big supporter of vaccines but had not yet had his coronavirus jab before he felt gravely ill. “In the space of a few hours, I went from being a person full of vitality to an empty sack, deprived of force,” the 55-year-old said. He said he had little patience for violent protesters who took to the streets of Rome last weekend against Italy's coronavirus health pass. “When I see these demonstrations against the Green Pass, they don't understand, they don't realise,” said Salvatore. From this Friday, the pass - showing proof of vaccination, a negative test or recent recovery from COVID-19 - will be required for all employees, in public and private workplaces. The announcement of the measure helped push up vaccination rates in Italy, one of the European countries hardest hit by the pandemic, but provoked anger. More than 85 percent of over 12s have now received at least one shot.—AFP