

socialwork

“An Eye Opener”: Giving the gift of seeing

The Indian non-profit Sankara Nethralaya reaches out to needy with super specialty eye care

By ELA DUTT

Back in the 1970s when Dr. S.S. Badrinath returned to India after getting his ophthalmology degree from the famous Dr. Charles Schepens, pioneer in retinal detachment surgery in Boston, he thought of coming back to the U.S. in sheer frustration. But a chance meeting with a sage from Kanchipuram inspired him to give up private practice and start a philanthropic effort with just two doctors and a few patients.

Today, that Sankara Nethralaya (Temple of the Eye), a part of the Medical Research Foundation has grown to be an army of 85-90 eye doctors examining 1,500 patients a day; an institute with 20 operation theaters, consultants in 11 specialties (cataract, cornea, community ophthalmology, excimer laser, glaucoma, neuro ophthalmology, ocular oncology, orbital oculoplasty, pediatric ophthalmology, uveitis and vitreoretinal;

Nearly 125 simple and complex surgeries are performed daily; and the mission has branched out from Chennai to establish centers of excellence in Kolkata and Bangalore.

“And the duty is, since the leader made a sacrifice, all those employed are salaried and have no practice outside,” Dr. Tarun Sharma, director of the Vitreo Retinal Service at SN, told News India Times during a trip to the U.S. at the end of September, to attend conferences, drum up support for SN, and tie up partnerships with eye institutes in this country. One of his listeners punning about his talk said, “It was an eye-opener.”

“The Indian American community’s response has been very encouraging,” Sharma said,

“Many do know about us but most of them do not know the quality of the services we offer. I have spent the past three days making representations,” Sharma said. The first eye hospital in Asia to get an ISO quality certification, Sharma said, the NGO has over the last 30 years, treated more than one million patients from all over India and countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Oman, Mauritius and Saudi Arabia. More than 400,000 surgeries have been performed.

Apart from its five branches in Chennai and one in Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, and the ones in Bangalore and Kolkata, Sankara has hospitals in Jamshedpur and Mauritius in the pipeline. Every year it receives a significant number of patients from across the world.



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Top, the staff at the Department of Biochemistry Cell Biology and Bioinformatics at Sankara Nethralaya. Above, Sankara Nethralaya’s massive agenda and expanding institutions are supported largely by generous donors and through partnerships with American and other pharmaceutical companies and research institutions to conduct clinical trials, or build state of the art laboratories. Above right, Sankara Nethralaya’s eye hospitals in Chennai and elsewhere, have state of the art technology to diagnose patients. The institution treats patients from around India as well as from countries like Mauritius and Sri Lanka, among others. Below, Sankara Nethralaya conducts research and education in its institutions. It says it contributes one third of the new ophthalmology research that is published in India in a year.

It recently forged ties with the Sultanate of Oman and Mauritius to offer quality eye care treatment to their citizens.

Sankara Nethralaya is a recognized academic institution, conducting graduate, postgraduate, research, fellowship and continuing medical education programs.

It also publishes books to share scientific practice in eye care. According to Dr. Sharma, one-third of all ophthalmology research publications, from India, come from Sankara Nethralaya, which also has collaborations with academic and research institutions around the world.

One of its arms, the Vision Research Foundation (VRF) conducts research that over the last 20 years has been invaluable in areas such as cataract, tumors and genetic basis of eye diseases. The VRF has research laboratory facilities in the areas of Pathology, Biochemistry, Genetics and Microbiology.

This fast expanding NGO that

needs massive infusion of funds, is however, run mostly by donations from generous individuals and institutions. “We are funded entirely by societal support. Each room, each piece of equipment, bed, or block is named after a donor. We approach the people and they support us in large measure,” Sharma said.

But day to day operations are self sustaining. Those who can do so, pay for their care, and those who cannot, get it free, and it is the same quality of care for anyone, whether you are a president or homeless, Sharma says. Sankara gives 50 percent of outpatients care free of cost and 33 percent of surgeries are free.

Patient safety and well-being is its top priority, the organization says. Standards are equivalent to those in the U.S., says Sharma. In some ways it may be better because every patient gets equal care regardless of their financial situation. “We have introduced Total Quality Management policies at our institution and have trained



more than 300 Ophthalmologists all over India,” the organization says, and these personnel and the ophthalmic nursing assistants provide twenty-four hour nursing care. In-patient services are fully supported by a drug counter and canteen facilities for the patients as well as their attendants. One innovative project Dr. Badrinath started was tele-ophthalmology, launched in 2003, to reach remote areas.

A customized bus with an ophthalmology lab, equipped with a satellite provided by Indian Space Research Organization, sees patients in far flung villages, transmits images to Chennai, and the diagnosis is done.

Sankara is involved in “large amount” of research, and recently set up a one of a kind

research institution in the Asia Pacific region that conducts research on everything from stem cells to bioinformatics, Sharma said.

In the U.S., Sankara has a non-profit which through tax exempt donations can be channeled. Named Sankar Nethralaya Ophthalmic Mission Trust or SNOM, details of how to donate are on the website at www.sankaranethralaya.org, or call the number 1-877-eye-snom.

For more information and donations, visit:
www.sankaranethralaya.org
www.omtrust.org
www.supportsankaranethralaya.org

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