

Curing blindness

Sightsavers' partner in southern India arranged cataract surgery for Rafel Panniyamma at her nearby hospital

The issue

Cataract is the world's leading cause of blindness, with around 17 million people blind as a result. Although cataract is found all over the world, getting treatment for it is much more difficult in developing countries, and it affects children as well as adults. Many people are needlessly blind from cataract because they don't know that it can be cured.

Fabienne Fosseuz/Sightsavers



Sightsavers solution

Curing cataract - Although cataract cannot be prevented, it is relatively easy to cure. In fact cataract surgery has been described by the World Bank as "one of the most cost-effective surgical interventions". Sightsavers and our local partners work in communities to identify people with cataract, as well as performing surgery and providing follow-up care.

Treating child cataract - Our partners make sure community health workers are trained to recognise the symptoms of cataract in children, and to know when to refer on for surgery, as well as to support paediatric teams to run specialist eye clinics. Although child cataract surgery is more complex than adult surgery it's still a quick, relatively cheap procedure. After children have had surgery follow up care is provided.

Training eye care staff - One of the main problems in providing surgery for cataract is the shortage of eye surgeons. As well as training eye surgeons, we provide specialist training for eye nurses enabling them to perform straightforward cataract cases leaving the surgeons free to deal with the more complex ones.

Reaching remote communities - In order to reach people with eye problems such as cataract who live in rural areas, health teams go out to remote villages and hold eye camps. Leaflets are distributed prior to the camps and announcements are made on local radio to encourage people to attend. During the camp each person will undergo a visual ability test. If they are found to have cataract they are taken to the hospital to have surgery.

FACT FILES

Cataract

- A cloudiness of the lens, cataract stops light from entering the eye, and eventually leads to blindness.
- Although cataract cannot be prevented, it is relatively easy to cure, and a straightforward 20-minute operation to replace the cloudy lens with a clear plastic one can restore sight to someone with cataract.

Childhood blindness

- Of the 37 million people worldwide who are blind, around 1.4 million are children under 16. The vast majority of childhood blindness happens before the age of five - a period when 75 per cent of learning is through sight.
- In the developing world cataract affects children as well as adults, who may become blind if not treated early.

a closer look

James Lwanga quite literally can't stop smiling. He's just had his bandage removed from his right eye after undergoing cataract surgery at the Jinja Regional Referral Hospital in Uganda.

"I'm very happy and know that very soon I'll be able to look after myself," he tells us. "I'll be able to do my daily activities and be independent. I expect life now to come back to normal, and am looking forward to being able to work again."



Smiling again

Kerstin Hacker/Sightsavers

"Now I love to play and watch cricket with my friends"



Zul Mukhida/Sightsavers

Arif who is seven years old, from North Bagabari in Narsingdi district, Bangladesh was blind from birth.

His sight was restored last year by a double cataract operation as part of the Bangladesh Childhood Cataract Campaign which aims to find and cure 10,000 children by 2009.

"Now I love to play and watch cricket with my friends" he tells us.