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Community Eye Care in North East India

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Abstract:

The Blindness and community eye care services has been one of the top priority area of national health planning. National Programme for Control of Blindness was launched in the year 1976 as a 100% Centrally Sponsored scheme with the goal to reduce the prevalence of blindness from 1.4% to 0.3%. Under this programme various services are being introduced to reach the community through various outreach services. In this regard different NGOs/Hospitals/CBOs and international agencies are taking initiatives to improve the community eye care services in India. This article intends to highlight the community eye care services rendered by of Sri Sankaradeva Nethralays, Guwahati, Assam- an tertiary eye care centre of North East India.

Keywords: Blindness, eye care, Community outreach, NPCB, charity

1. Introduction

Our eyes are a unique gift of the Almighty. 90% of all our activities depend on vision without which our quality of life gets jeopardized. Assam has the largest number of blind in the country. Established in 1994 Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya has been doing yeoman's service in the field of eye-health care in North Eastern India.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya in Assam is a not-for-profit hospital having a full fledged community wing that has served northeastern region of India for more than two decades. With approximately 250 medical staffs, SSN cares for more than a lakh patient a year.

Not satisfied in giving service to the people who came to them, SSN reached out to the people to introduce the quality eye care services and to establish an integrated approach to eradicate blindness. Ophthalmologists and paramedical staff provide a full range of ophthalmic care and a wide array of outreach services at many remote locations. Keeping in view the idea of reaching out to the people, especially the underserved section of the society SSN started its outreach activities since the year 1996.

2. Our Mission

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya is committed to the eye health and eye wellness of our community. As such, we dedicate ourselves to being a centre of excellence in providing eye care of the highest quality. We played compassionate support, personal guidance and uncompromising standards to our patients in their individual journeys towards health of body and minds. To ensure innovative and unsurpassed care for our patients, we are dedicated to maintaining our position as regional leader in select medical specialties i.e. eye care. And to enhance the wellness of our community, we commit ourselves to providing a diversified array of educational and outreach programs.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya is dedicated to providing excellence in eye care with an overriding concern for the health and wellbeing of our community we have been a leader in eye care since our opening in 1994. For the last 12 years we have been treating patients without discrimination due to age, sex, creed, race, national origin or source of payment. All patients are treated equally with regard to charges, bed assignments and medical care, regardless of ability to pay. In addition, we maintain a supportive, healing environment for our patients and their visitors by providing a full service cafeteria, utility shop, optical shop and a health resource centre (drug centre).

3. Not-For-Profit Communities Focus Resources

Because SSN is not required to return profits to share holders like taxable organizations, we reinvest revenues in excess of expenses to enhance our capacity to deliver high – quality eye care to the communities we serve and in providing free eye care services to the marginalized underprivileged patients of our community. These resources provide for a long term focus on the recruitment and retention of outstanding eye care professionals, enhanced research and technologies, and new facilities and services.

In addition, such resources enable us to provide numerous other services that benefit the community. The information presented in this report demonstrates the level of community service and benefits we provide to the communities we serve. These community benefits enhance and further support our core business of providing hospital- based services. Our commitment to community service is a vital element in establishing the strong relationships, education and outreach efforts for which we are known in the communities we serve.

4. To Benefit Our Communities

Community benefits are the unreimbursed goods and services provided by local health care institutions that address community-identified health needs and concerns. In simpler terms, they are the things that a hospital does that improve the health of the community, but for which the institution does not expect or receive payment. Some common examples of community benefits include free or “charity” care at hospitals, health education campaigns, free health screenings, free flu shots, and so on. Traditionally, most hospitals are nonprofit institutions formed for charitable purposes. This means they are generally exempt from local, state and federal taxes, and are able to solicit tax-deductible donations. These financial benefits are intended to allow nonprofit hospitals to provide needed goods and services to the community.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya defines Community Benefit as – services and activities that address community eye health needs primarily through eye disease prevention, community eye health promotion and eye care education, improving access to eye care services and working with others to improve individual and community eye health status. Community benefit activities highlighted in this article include:

5. Charity Eye Care

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya has converted into reality the belief that that the most modern and best service is useful only if it is provided at an affordable cost. A team of experienced, qualified and competent medical professionals and paramedics remain vigilant to serve throughout the year. Latest technology and techniques enable the institution to serve with precision and perfection. The hospital building has a total of 85,000 sq. ft area to cater to the needs of the patients.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya, Beltola, Guwahati, a Centre of Excellence, is the premier Eye Care Institute in the Northeastern region. Along with several super-specialty clinics in various departments of Eye Care, the Hospital is also running a Community Department which does two-fold duty of providing service to poor patients suffering from eye ailments both within the hospital premises and outside, in the villages, where little or no access to proper eye care is available.

The institute has a Structured Outreach Programme and under these we frequently conduct eye camps in rural areas where we detect patients requiring surgery and subsequently bring them to our hospital for surgery. The entire cost of treatment (including investigation procedures and surgery with Intra Ocular Lens implant) is borne by our institution.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya started its free Outreach community service programme to provide eye care facilities to the poor people living in far flung rural areas of the region. The component of the out-reach program consist of screening and identification of patients suffering from eye disease at their door steps in the rural areas, picking of the patients and transportation of the patients to base hospital at Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya, Guwahati. In the base hospital the surgery / treatment is extended and on completion of the treatment the patients are dropped to their own villages. The entire cost of treatment including transportation, stay at the community centre of the base hospital and medicines are provided by the hospital free of cost to the patients.

The hospital gives free treatment to all the patients who are below the poverty line. The surgeries are also made free of cost. The patients are also referred from various NGOs, organizations, institute and respectable citizens. In spite of these, the hospital provides free treatment for many other eye diseases to both indoor and outdoor patients. Lets summarize the basic patient load of the hospital for last 10 years (2004-13).

Details	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Out Patient Visit										
Paying (Fresh)	23890	30520	34606	41323	42356	45632	49870	56002	61234	69012
Free (Fresh)	3450	6104	7566	9023	8900	9342	9809	11232	12765	13456
Surgery										
Paying	5100	5456	6053	7666	8234	8890	9231	10569	11065	12678
Free	1484	2013	2560	2789	2607	2956	3122	3654	4098	5102

Table 1

6. Education for Community Eye Health

6.1. Training of Future Eye Care Professionals

The institution maintains its academic calendar. The institute is an acclaimed center for post graduate fellowship programme, DNB course, training centre for SICS, academic seminars etc. Doctors from all over the country as well as abroad come to the hospital for training and seminars. The fourth batch of post graduate students will appear in their final examination. The students completing post graduate courses in ophthalmology has established themselves in the country and abroad. The institution also successfully conducts SIC Surgeries and other educational programmes under Govt. of India’s National Programme for Control of Blindness. Doctors from the institute participate in various national and international seminars and meetings and present papers or medical topic. The doctors are also invited in various national and international conferences. Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya also participates in various blindness control and disaster management programmes of NPCB, National Rural Health Mission etc. Consultants of the hospital are also taken as examiners in the panel of FRCS examinees & DNB examinees. A total of 24 DNB students, 28 SICS trainees, and 55 fellows were trained from this institute till date. A total of 20 ophthalmologists were completed short term observer ship from this institute till date.

6.2. Continuing Medical Education

SSN arranges scientific seminars regularly. It had also organized a national symposium on phacoemulsification and Oculoplasty where delegates from all over the country came and participated. It had also organized an International Conference on Cataract. The consultants of the hospital attend and actively participate in different regional, national and international conferences / seminars / symposia / workshops.

6.3. Eye Donation Awareness Meetings

SSN has the first accredited eye bank of the northeast. It is one of the most active out of the five eye banks of Assam. The need of the eye bank per year is 40,000 eyes but it gets only 20,000 per year. Thus to increase the numbers of eye donors SSN organizes eye donation awareness meetings to make the people aware of such a gesture. SSN has organized more 79 eye donation meeting in Northeast India till date.

6.4. Counseling & Awareness on Eye Care

The hospital organizes awareness sessions for teachers and community workers on eye care and motivates them to work for prevention of blindness in our community. Apart from these, it organizes counseling session for patients and gives tips for effective eye care at base hospitals.

7. Broad-based Community Outreach / Special Events

7.1. Outreach Centres

A free rural satellite centre of SSN was inaugurated on 26/03/1996 at the Bonda Charitable hospital. This centre has adopted 47 villages under it. The centre aims to control the percentage of blindness in these 47 villages. Like the base hospital the vision centre too provides free service to people below the poverty line. Apart from day-to-day interventions, every Sunday a team of consultants from the base hospital visit the centre for further evaluation of more complicated cases.

A vision centre was opened during the period Dec, 2004-Feb, 2005 at Kalapahar in the premises of Bharat Sewashram Sangha. Every Sunday, a team of ophthalmologist and an optometrist or a fellow along with health care personnel goes to the centres to see patients. Medical treatment in the form of spectacles and medicines are prescribed. Surgical cases are referred to the base hospital for further treatment. Another vision center was also established in Bongaigaon which is around 250 k.m. away from the Base hospital in collaboration with Bharat Bikash Parisad, Bongaigaon.

7.2. Outreach Temporary Facility Cataract Screening Centre

We know Assam houses the largest number of blind in the whole country. Cataract is the leading cause of blindness in North east India. It is also the most easily curable. All that is needed is – a simple operation of 10 – 15 minutes. Since the year 1997 SSN has been doing free cataract service for people living below the poverty line.

According to this scheme started in 1997, SSN organizes outreach temporary facility cataract screening camps in villages within 60-80 km radius of Guwahati city. In these camps poor people from the villages are called and then taken to the base hospital at a given date and operated upon free of cost. Later they are taken back to their villages. From Oct 2002 to May 2006 SSN has organized 114 outreach temporary facility cataract-screening camps.

It is for the first time in Assam that such a step has been taken to bring relief to the ophthalmic health of patients living below the poverty line.

7.3. ORBIS Project

For better pediatric eye care, Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya has established a dedicated pediatric ophthalmology unit with ORBIS International, USA. Under this project, service will be delivered upto the grass root level in collaboration with other non-governmental organization. The aim is for primary screening of school children for eye diseases and development of manpower.

7.4. Eye Banking

The Eye Bank of Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya was established in 1997. Besides carrying out a number of corneal transplantations the eye bank has conducted a number of public awareness programmes. Till date the eye bank has conducted 181 numbers of corneal transplantations with a success rate of over 80%.

7.5. Empowering Other Hospitals

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya has assisted in establishing and developing human resource for a number of eye hospitals at different locations in order to cater to the greater human need and to spread quality eye care services to a wider are. The Baba Behari Nethralaya, in Sirsa, Haryana, Bawri Nethralaya, in Shillong, Meghalaya, Charitable Dispensary, in Bonda, Assam, Lions Eye Hospital, in Guwahati, Assam and P. C. Chatterjee Memorial Eye Hospital, in Dharmanagar, Tripura. programmes of the hospital.

8. Health Fairs / Screenings

This year, from January to June 2006, 15 such Temporary Facility Cataract Screening Programmes (Camps) have been conducted in which a total of nearly 3000 outreach patients were screened and over 800 patients were detected with some stage of Cataract. Of this number, nearly 600 patients were successfully brought over to Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya for the requisite surgery, which was provided free of cost to the BPL patients. Some of the organizations which have collaborated with Sri Sankaradeva

Nethralaya for such Camps are Rotary Club of Guwahati, Y's Men's Club of Guwahati, Dimu Byabasayik Santha, Dimu, Assam Buddha Vihar, Amingaon, Government Pensioners' Association, Assam, Lions' Club of Guwahati City, Jyotirupa Sanskritik Bikash Kendra, Dharapur, Rupkonowar Jyoti Sangha, Maligaon etc.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya in collaboration with National Rural Health Mission, a Govt. of India programme for ensuring rural health, a special drive on school eye screening was planned in the few districts of Assam. Through this initiatives 358 teachers from 179 schools 6 selected blocks of Nagaon and Dibrugarh district of Assam and screened over 45,000 school going children. Those with refractive errors provided with spectacles by respective district blindness control societies. This effort was made possible with active support of ORBIS International and UBS.

Our effort is to minimize the incidence of eye problems in this part of India for which we cordially request all of you to join hands in this noble mission of ours. We are sure this association of ours will bring fruitful change in the blindness scenario of our region.

9. Community Volunteerism & Collaborations

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya also involves community based organizations in conduction out reach activities in conducting outreach activities. Local NGOs like ASHA, Bharat Bikash Parishad, Praytush, Lions Club, Rotary International etc. are engaged in various community programmes of the hospital. Few of the organizations are taking up activities of their own in their locality in the field of community eye care.

9.1. Collaboration with Other Agencies

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya aspires to provide a comprehensive eye care service to all. It has collaborated with the following government and non government agencies:

- ORBIS International, USA
- Light for the World, Austria
- North Eastern Council, Ministry of Home Affairs, GOI
- Department of development of North Eastern Region (DONER)
- National Programme for control of Blindness (NPCB)
- Ministry of social justice and human empowerment, GOI.
- Ramkrishna Mission.
- Lions Club International, India.
- Rotary International, India.
- Bharat Vikaas Parishad, India.
- Helpage India

10. Future Community Benefit Plans

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya plans the following activities in future:

1. The institution plans to make the community outreach service more intensive and include larger number of people of the region within its eye screening programmes for reduction and eradication of blindness. The support in the form of government grants for formation of a corpus fund for community service, donations from philanthropists, business houses, banks etc., co-operation from non government agencies working for eradication of blindness, internal sources of funds generated from hospital collections will be the chief sources for financing community services.
2. Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya plans to open a separate OPD for senior citizens in the near future
3. The incidence of eye cancer is high in the North East, particularly the occurrence of retinoblastoma is very common. Also there is a lack of institutions providing specialized treatment for eye cancer in the region. The hospital plans to open up a specialized centre for treatment and research of ocular oncology.
4. The hospital also intends to construct up a new building for providing for support services of the hospital. The proposed building will provide hostel facilities to students, accommodation to paying and non paying patients etc.
5. The hospital also plans to set up the most modern methods of patient record keeping. SSN plans to install Electronic Medical Recording device because it is ideal and recommended method of record keeping. In this system, record maintaining, reproduction, retrieval and transmission is very smart. It eliminates the need for huge space for storing MRD files and as the system is very prompt, patient waiting period and the probability of misplacement of records is almost nil.
6. Sri Sankaradeva plans to open up a center for paramedical training.

Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya is an institution focused on Excellency, equity, affordability and compassionate attitude for the economically under privileged population.

11. Our Commitment

“We measure the success of our efforts by number of residents we reach with our messages related to eye health and wellness. Our mission is to work to positively impact the overall eye health of the communities we serve. Charity, education, outreach and community service allow us to broaden our impact beyond the wall of our facilities.”

-Sri Sankaradeva Nethralaya Family

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