

Student Visionaries Create Non-Profit Organization - News Center

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Several globally minded medical students believe that one good model of care deserves another one just like it, especially when it comes to curing blindness in developing countries. Forming the nonprofit organization CatarACT, these students from Northwestern intend to combat the vision-robbing ravages of untreated cataracts by borrowing a solution that works in one area of the world and applying it to others.

“Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness in the world, affecting 20 million people,” says Yuna Rapoport, a second-year MD/MPH student at the Feinberg School. “Unfortunately the backlog of untreated cataracts is increasing, even though the cure is a quick, relatively inexpensive, and effective surgery. However, hospitals in India have developed a sustainable model for delivering high-quality, low-cost cataract surgeries to large numbers of patients.”

Cataracts occur when the eye’s natural lens begins to cloud over due to the often age-related clumping of proteins in the lens. Other risk factors include long-term exposure to UV light and diabetes.

Working on the premise that the developing world faces unique challenges best solved by solutions conceived in the developing world, Rapoport and Prajwal Ciryam, a Feinberg MD/Medical Scientist Training Program (MD/PhD) student, embarked on a research project last summer. They first visited Arasan Eye Hospital in Erode, India, to learn all they could about this hospital’s ability to provide some 10,000 free cataract surgeries a year. (Ophthalmology fellows, in part, help provide some of the gratis surgeries to needy patients.) They studied the financial, logistical, and clinical conditions there before traveling to two hospitals in Ghana to see how the Indian model of cataract care might work in West Africa.

The two students interviewed patients, met with hospital administrators, collected clinical data, assembled financial records, and observed surgeries. “Our project has been a combination of everything a student could possibly hope for in a global health experience,” shares Rapoport. “We saw the provision of care in various settings; interacted with doctors, nurses, and others; asked and answered

important questions about health care in the developing world; and prepared ourselves to continue the endeavor, conceiving of ways to give back to the communities that so warmly welcomed us.”

CatarACT International was born from the “eye-opening” experience of Rapoport and Ciryam upon their return to the States and the Feinberg School. Run by a small core group of individuals, the organization includes second-year medical student Amar Vira as well as Northwestern undergraduates and students from other universities. The group’s long-term goal is help health care workers in Ghana launch sustainable, high-volume cataract surgery clinics.

To achieve its vision of empowering developing countries to fight blindness, CatarACT works closely with V. Panneer Selvam, MD, founder and director of Arasan Eye Hospital, and Michael Gyasi, MD, a well-respected ophthalmologist in Ghana. In fact, CatarACT presented a Healthcare Pioneers Week in Chicago this past April and hosted a visit from the two physicians to raise awareness about their work.

Drs. Selvam and Gyasi also met with the group to discuss some of its initiatives, including the development of a global visionaries program to enhance the training of West African eye care professionals in performing effective cataract surgical techniques. The hope is that these individuals will then go on to support future CatarACT network hospitals in their homeland. A second CatarACT project currently in the works focuses on creating a computerized method of keeping records on cataract procedures and outcomes.

For more information about CatarACT, visit www.catar-act.org.