

An Eye-Opening Experience

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Poverty; what do we know about the way people suffer under these abject conditions? What does this word mean to us? Most of us cannot even begin to fathom abject poverty until seeing it for ourselves. This summer, I had a life-changing experience when I was afforded the chance to spend some time at Tejas Eye Hospital, a charity hospital in rural India. The hospital's motto has always been, "No one should become blind or remain blind needlessly for want of services."¹ I was told that most villagers earn a daily average of 26 rupees, which is roughly less than fifty cents per day!² With this meager income, they must build a home, raise children, and buy food. Forget about electricity because even the simplest necessities of everyday life such as a bar of soap are considered a luxury for most. As for their health, all they could do is pray that they would not fall seriously ill.

With the support of donors from around the world, an old 16,000 square foot diamond factory was transformed into a forty bed eye hospital that can provide necessary eye care to those in need for little to no cost depending upon the patient's financial conditions.³ After opening its doors on May 22, 2011, Tejas Eye Hospital has served thousands of needy people just in the surrounding areas alone. Its location was carefully selected to be built in a small town called Mandvi (population 25,000) within the state of Gujarat, so healthcare providers have easy access to four tribal areas that are in dire need for medical support and counseling.⁴ In addition, the hospital provides free meals, a place to sleep for both the patient and one relative, and transportation to and from the hospital. One afternoon, as lunchtime approached, I watched the procession of post-operative patients, each with an eye patch from surgery and a relative guiding them towards the cafeteria. When I looked into their tired eyes, I saw pain and fright. Many of these patients did not even have shoes to wear, and I could tell that they were grateful for the rare assurance of a hearty meal for that day.

In the Out Patient Department, Dr. Uday Gajiwala (vice-president and one of the founders of the hospital) and his colleagues screen the patients for cataracts and retinal problems, prescribe medications for eye infections, treat allergies, remove foreign bodies, and much more. Hence, patients can get their vision tested and then go

down the hall to select a frame for their glasses at the hospital's store, which sells glasses at a subsidized cost (or free if the patient cannot afford it). As for medications, the hospital pharmacy not only dispenses ophthalmic medications, but they also carry medications for a variety of problems (such as diabetes) at discounted prices.

Since diabetes can cause permanent damage to the retina, patients are urged to visit the hospital on a yearly basis. The hospital has its own retina clinic to diagnose and treat retinal problems caused by other pathologies such as diabetes. I had the chance to follow hospital workers while they conducted field surveys as they walked from door to door in tribal areas to run diagnostic vision tests and test for diabetes. Along with on-foot surveys, the hospital sets up biweekly make-shift clinics in selected areas to provide free eye care services and diabetes testing. Those needing surgery are provided transportation to the hospital on the same day.

I was fortunate enough to have unprecedented access to the OR, scrubbing in for over twenty-five cataract surgeries performed by Dr. Rohan Chariwala. Within the first ten months of opening its doors, 2900 out of 3600 operations performed were cataract surgeries.⁴ One of the hospital's success stories involved surgery on a six-month old baby boy born with congenital cataracts.¹ In rural areas where children with disabilities would face many societal prejudices, surgeries like this improve the physical as well as the social aspect of life. The same concept applied to a nearly blind twenty-one year old female that I met before her treatments. Such circumstances would have left her as a social outcast, making it difficult for her to get married. Still, opportunities are provided for those who have permanent blindness as well. The hospital has a teacher who moves throughout the tribal areas to teach Braille. This hospital is not just providing medical care; it is providing love, relief, and hope for a brighter future.

Hence, whatever your definition of poverty may be, there are ways to help those living in these conditions. Whether you are involved in raising awareness or donating to these causes, you contribute in helping to end the cycle of poverty. For more information about this hospital, visit <http://www.divyajyotitrust.org/index.htm>



¹Divyajyoti Trust. (2010). *Vision*. Retrieved from <http://www.divyajyotitrust.org/index.htm>

²Chatterjee, Mihika. (8 May 2012). *Counting the Poor*. *The Oxonian Globalist*. Retrieved from <http://toglobalist.org/2012/05/counting-the-poor/>

³Divyajyoti Trust. (2010). *Present Activities*. Retrieved from http://www.divyajyotitrust.org/present_activities.htm

⁴Divyajyoti Trust. (2010). *Project Area*. Retrieved from http://www.divyajyotitrust.org/project_area.htm