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An Eye on the Eye

Exhibition was conducted at Aravind Eye Care Systems (AECS) in Madurai from October 9-11, 2012, to create awareness of common eye problems and the need for regular checkups in order to prevent needless loss of sight

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Walking through the dark room is meant to give an understanding of the “blind experience”

Spread the word

How are your eyes today? That is the question you should be asking yourself on a regular basis, according to eye care professionals at Aravind. India accounts for about 25 percent of the world's blindness, making it a national public health problem. However, up to 80 percent of blindness is avoidable, and the mission of AECS is to eliminate needless blindness. The focus of the exhibition is to spread the message and get people to go for periodical eye exams in order to detect illnesses such as diabetes or glaucoma at an early stage, before they create irrevocable damage to the eyes. Chitra Thulasiraj, 55, in charge of Publications, AECS, and one of the people behind the exhibition, puts it this way: "When you start losing vision, you can't do anything more. We need to catch them before they start losing vision, or it will be too late."

The exhibition was mainly aimed at students, but was also open to the public at certain hours. Apart from the students, most of the visitors were the hospital's own patients, and a few who had heard of the event through friends or the media.



The children are being taught about many aspects of eye care, and will hopefully pass on the information to their friends and families

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The hope is that the children and adults, having visited the exhibition, will go home and tell their families and friends about it, perhaps even urging them to go for an eye checkup or to seek medical help for existing eye problems.



Chitra (55) is in charge of Aravind publications and is one of the people behind the Kannae Namalaa exhibition

All about eyes

The exhibition emphasized the consequences of eye problems left untreated. Visitors were first led through rooms illustrating a simplified version of the eye's anatomy, consisting of the cornea, the lens and the retina. To get an idea of what it feels like to be deprived of their eyesight, we then walked through a completely dark room, now and then colliding with various objects. Even though it only lasted a few seconds, this simple exercise left a remarkable impression and helped the visitors enter into a state of

awareness of what it feels like to lose vision. It prepares them to take in the important information highlighted in the exhibition, comprising of informative movie clips, games and stalls explaining a wealth of eye care related aspects.

The most common causes of blindness in adults (and consequently the most heavily featured in the exhibition) are diabetes and glaucoma. For children, it is refractive error and amblyopia (lazy eye). At the various stalls, the causes, symptoms and treatments of these diseases were explained in detail, along with many other illnesses, risk factors and eye care options. The stalls are managed by girls who are in training to become hospital nursing staff, expertly explaining the issues by means of illustrations and models, which they have made themselves. Made with just a few days of preparation, the models are highly illustrative and excellent tools for explaining the often quite complex issues to children as well as adults. Many of the stalls were interactive, something which the children especially seemed to enjoy, but as one of the Aravind employees, K. C. Krishnaveni (19) professionally notes, "This is all very serious." The seriousness is underlined by means of some very detailed pictures and illustrations of untreated eye problems on display throughout the exhibition. Clearly meant to jolt the visitors into action, the sight of eyes in various diseased states - maimed, swollen, infected and bloody, to name a few — created vivid memories and made people want to go for an extra checkup in future!



Self-made models illustrating the deterioration of the eyes at the different stages of diabetes

Making a difference

This year's Kannae Nalama is the third one conducted at Aravind in Madurai. The two previous ones were in 2001 and 2010, and in 2008 a similar exhibition took place at the Aravind Hospital in Theni. While a total of about 80 people were involved in running the exhibition, it was planned by the hospital's communications department, consisting of six people who sat down only one week in advance to outline the structure of the event. When asked what they would like to do better next time, the team responded that they would definitely like to start planning earlier, in order to ensure that the structure of the exhibition and the models would be more adequate. "Basically, whatever we have been doing, we would like to do better next time," says Chitra.

That said, the exhibition appeared to be a great success. On the first day, approximately 1000 people visited the exhibition. The number of invitations has actually been restricted compared to the previous exhibitions, because, as Chitra says, "If they come in too big batches, they are not listening and it is too hard to explain everything properly." The aim is to ensure a better understanding for the visitors, who, in turn, will be better able to convey this knowledge to others.



Eye surgery simulation in one corner of the exhibition. All stalls are manned by girls training to become hospital staff

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A visitor, 54-year-old M. Mohan, had only just read a notice about the exhibition in the newspaper the same morning, and decided to pay it a visit. He was not disappointed, and he says, "It has given me awareness of how to look after my eyes and to be cautious of diseases like diabetes, glaucoma and cataract, and how to prevent these things. It's all very useful information." He also realized that he should probably start going for eye checkups more regularly.



M. Mohan (55), a public visitor, has learned a lot about the things he needs to look out for in order to look after his eyes

The Aravind concept

Even though the Aravind team would like to make Kannae Nalama an annual event, challenges related to human resource make this virtually impossible.

However, the Aravind chain of hospitals- work round the year to prevent avoidable blindness by means of early intervention. Chitra mentions one of the initiatives, the community outreach eye camps that are conducted throughout Tamil Nadu. These camps are conducted in a number of rural villages, where the locals have access to professional consultations through a web cam. If an eye problem is detected, they are invited to travel to the nearest Aravind hospital to receive treatment, free of charge. The camps are set up at the request of locals who have educated themselves on the issue, perhaps visited one of the Aravind hospitals in the past, and who would like to share the opportunity with their local communities.

Both the eye camps, as well as the exhibition, are based on spreading the message through word-of-mouth and local involvement. It is a way of reaching as large a number of people as possible, and eventually reaching the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness in Madurai and Tamil Nadu. The most important thing to remember is that blindness can be prevented, if you take certain precautions. So see an eye doctor, while you still can!