The Sankara Nethralaya Experience: An Eye-Opening Journey

The 2010 graduating class of Optometry students from IUCTT had the experience of a lifetime when they were posted to India for two weeks internship at the Sankara Nethralaya eye hospital in Chennai!

As planned, 34 of us were divided into 3 groups, having ourselves two weeks internship at ‘The Temple of the Eye’ — Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai. Sankara Nethralaya is a very well known eye hospital in Chennai. Patients come all the way from the Northern part of India, from Bangladesh, from Sri Lanka, etc. to be seen here. On average 1200 patients are seen daily at this eight storey eye hospital!

During these two weeks of internship, we were posted under the supervision of optometrists from different departments like low vision clinic, contact lens clinic, binocular vision clinic, biometry, Humphrey visual field and refraction clinics.

Our daily routine started at 6:45am local time when the hospital van picked us up from the hostel. Busy day starts at 8:00am when each one of us is posted under respective optometrists. We admired how the Indian optometrists are so respected by the patients and ophthalmologists. Most of the patients know their last checked blood pressure and blood sugar level; which eyedrops to use on which eye and how many drops per day. All this information provide the optometrists with easy detailed history taking. All the data at this hospital is fully computerized! This was so out of our expectation as places like the Chennai International Airport is yet to be fully computerized.

We attended classes on different topics like low vision aid, vision therapy aid, gonioscopy, etc after the daily posting. It was amazing to see how the optometrists upgrade themselves. Grand round is held every Wednesday among the hospital’s optometrists and the latest news on different areas is presented each week in a big auditorium at the hospital. We also had the opportunity to attend a video conference session with another hospital on our first Saturday, after posting. It was a great discussion on amblyopia!

We can still recall how we used sign language to communicate with the people and knew nothing but alphabets on Snellen chart during the first few days. However, we were able to pick up some simple Tamil and Hindi during our second week of posting so we could understand a little here and there of the whole procedure!

Our breakfast and lunch were provided by the hospital. We really liked the tomato rice served with pappadam, Indian thali, dosai, coffee and fresh milk. Yummy! Anyway, having been reminded several times before coming to Chennai, we drank only mineral water. Never tap water!

The two weeks of internship at Sankara Nethralaya was a great exposure for all of us despite the language barrier and all the long-hours of tiring work. We treasure what we have learnt from this Sankara Nethralaya experience.
Clinical Posting at Sankara Nethralaya Eye Hospital, India

Article by Paulvinne Tan

We, Optometry Student Batch 5 year 2011 of IUCTT, are having a breathtaking journey in Chennai, India. A journey for deeper understanding of the world in practical eyecare at SANKARA NETHRALAYA Hospital in Chennai. The name means THE TEMPLE OF THE EYE. It is a charitable not-for-profit eye hospital built in 1976 by Dr. Sengamedu Srinivas Badrinath together with a group of philanthropists when His Holiness Sri Jayendra Saraswathi, the Sankaracharya of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam spoke of the need to create a hospital with a missionary spirit.

Besides hospital programmes there is a unit of MEDICAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION that is involved in the development, investigation and research related to ocular diseases such as cataract, Eales disease, Diabetic Retinopathy, pathways of homocysteine and proteoglycan, novel protein isolation, use of amino acid as antiglycating substances to mitigate diabetic complications, Inborn errors of metabolism and amino aciduria.

All of us were lucky enough to be the first batch of optometrist interns from abroad to be accepted into their training programmes with open arms and warm hearts. The internship programme starts from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm daily, Monday to Saturday. It involves eyecare practice with patients under the guidance of the experienced optometrists in different departments and the ophthalmologists. The technical assistance, knowledge and experience were shared willingly by the senior optometrists whom we trained under. We were able to interact and conduct basic eye examination like visual acuity taking, preliminary examination, pachymetry, A-Scan and the important part of slit-lamp eye examination of the patient under the guidance of the senior optometrist.

Although language is a communication barrier, in time we believe we can overcome this minor hurdle and it is a fun journey to understand another culture and its people. (For the moment we have picked up some simple words such as look straight - Nera parenga/ samni dekae, look down- kela parenga/ neche daka, look up- mel parenga/ upe dakea........... (tamil/hindi).

We also attended lectures every Friday from 2.30pm-5.00pm. Continuing Medical Education (CME) programme was extended to us to further our knowledge in the expanding and ever growing world of eye care. The latest knowledge and technology updates of equipment and new standards of care from other departments was shared among all optometrists and interactive discussion was conducted to ensure all optometrists were updated so that they can provide better service and care to all patients.

On average, more than 1000 patients walk through the doors and 100 surgeries are performed every day where the optometrist and ophthalmologists work together as a team to provide better service and eyecare for patients. Not just with senior optometrist, befriending and networking with other internal and external interns from different hospitals and colleges from all around India such as Calcutta and Nepal also broaden our perspective on eyecare practice.

The list of departments/specialities that we are involved in are:

- General Out-patient Department
- Paediatric Out-patient Department
- Glaucoma Out-patient Department – involvement in Pachymetry, Tonometry and Gonioscopy
- Vitreoretinal out-patient Department
- Glaucoma Review Clinic
- Digital Biometry Review Clinic
- Computer Vision Clinic
- Contact Lens Department
- Low Vision Clinic
- Binocular Vision Clinic
- HVF (Humphrey Visual Field)

With this humble and selfless journey, we hope to broaden our knowledge and experience in the boundary less world of eyecare. We will definitely come back to Malaysia to share all that we have learnt from this journey.