

# Holistic Eye Care

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Sankara Nethralaya, Chennai, run by Medical and Vision Research Foundation, is a superspecialty institution for ophthalmic care receiving patients from all over the country. Each day, about 1500 patients are seen in the out-patient department of the hospital. And, about 120 surgeries are performed in the hospital, out of which 35 per cent are done free of charge.

In an interview with eHEALTH, **Dr S S Badrinath, Chairman-Emeritus, Sankara Nethralaya**, talks about the recent developments at the hospital. A Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan awardee, Dr Badrinath founded the Medical and Vision Research Foundation in 1978 with an objective of practicing quality eye care in ophthalmology. Excerpts:

**What makes Sankara Nethralaya stand apart from other eye hospitals?**

Sankara Nethralaya is a non-profit organisation run by a board of trustees who do not have any financial interest in the institution. Whatever surplus is made is spend on the upgradation of the facilities as well as on the expansion activities. Nearly 40 per cent of the surgeries at Sankara Nethralaya are done free of charge. The surgeries are not only cataract surgeries, but also complex surgeries such as those for vitreoretinal disorders, orbit and oculoplasty, cornea, glaucoma, uvea etc. And, if some patients who need multiple surgeries express their inability to continue with the treatment, the hospital offers them subsidised treatment depending on their socioeconomic status.

Our community ophthalmology center Jaslok Community Ophthalmic Centre has infrastructure to perform nearly 40 cataract surgeries a day. We have tie-ups with several NGOs like Tulsi Trust, Lions Club, Sri Sathyasai Baba Trust etc., which get patients screened at nearby suburbs and villages, and are brought to the centre for free of charge treatment. This programme has been running successfully for many years.

**What are the new initiatives undertaken by the hospital on the Health IT front?**

The Electronic Medical Record (EMR) was developed in collaboration with TCS and is currently being implemented at the out-patient department. For the in-patient department we are still in the process of implementation. Currently, the data of the patients visiting OPD for the first time is being entered on the EMR system. It has already benefited the hospital in many ways. For example, it has reduced the paperwork and given an instant access to the patient records from any geographic location. As data entry is parameterised, the data is easily retrieved and analysed, thus helping in the research work. However, considering the large number of consultants and several geographic locations, the process is bound to take time before it is fully functional. Also, the Hospital Information System has helped us in streamlining the patient flow and extracting information such as patient waiting period etc.

The institute has been running a website [ekalavya.org](http://ekalavya.org) for many years which hosts a number of CME programmes and case discussions for ophthalmologists, optometrists etc.

**What are the recent advances in ophthalmic research at Sankara Nethralaya?**

Sankara Nethralaya is researching into tumours, such as, Retinoblastoma and Melanoma. Collaborative research in these areas is going on within the country as well as with several other countries. Epidemiological studies in Diabetic Retinopathy and Glaucoma and a major study on phenotype– genotype conversion of ocular traits in collaboration with the National Eye Institute, USA, is underway.

Prof. H N Madhavan, Director of Research, Vision Research Foundation, has recently patented one of the techniques of Polymerase Chain reaction (PCR). He was also instrumental in developing a Macro DNA chip for the rapid diagnosis of certain infections of the eye both within the eye (endophthalmitis) and externally. He is currently involved in developing a similar chip for blood infections and brain infections in collaboration with CSIR. Vision Research Foundation is a sister organisation of Medical Research Foundation. So, all the research done at Sankara Nethralaya is effectively done at the foundation.

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**Can you tell us about the patientcentric services started by the hospital in recent years?**

Sankara Nethralaya has a quality control programme, which monitors the needs of the patients and aims to improve the process. We have recently implemented changes in the appointment scheduling system in order to reduce the patient waiting time and it has been successful to a great degree. We have also introduced outpatient facilities in the evening hours especially for the office goers. Our LASIK service for correction of refractive errors is now available on a few Sundays in a month. We have also started a specialty headache clinic for which will look after the serious conditions causing headache by surgery or other appropriate means.

**What are the challenges faced by**

**the hospital in achieving its goals?**

Shortage of manpower and lack of money are the main challenges faced by the hospital. Nowadays, trained and experienced manpower is in short supply in the country especially in highly-specialised areas. And, as the hospital is a charitable organisation providing free treatment, the money generated from the treatment of paying section fall short to finance all activities of the hospital.

**What are the expansion plans of the hospital?**

Sankara Nethralaya has established a new facility in Mukundapur, Kolkata. The newly-built hospital has 11 consultants and offer all kinds of modern healthcare facilities. We also have plans are to start a hospital in Bangalore in the near future. And, we have signed an MOU with the Mauritius government and would possibly start a hospital in Mauritius.

**What, according to you, is a ‘must-do’ reform needed in the Indian healthcare system?**

Health insurance is definitely the way to go forward, so that every citizen of the country has access to medical care. The state government's initiative to insure the families below poverty line would be a welcome move.