Seven-minute miracles: a plan to reduce the number of children with cataract blindness by 0.5% worldwide

Friday 19 November, 2021

The Tej Kohli & Ruit Foundation will seek to reduce childhood congenital cataract blindness by 25% in Nepal. The charity will identify and cure 1,000 children of cataract blindness, which is thought to represent 0.5% of the worldwide total. Co-founders Tej Kohli and Dr Sanduk Ruit are already on a mission to screen 1,000,000 people and to cure between 300,000 and 500,000 of cataract blindness by 2026.

LONDON & KATHMANDU: The Tej Kohli and Ruit Foundation will cure 1,000 children of cataract blindness in an attempt to reduce it by 25% within Nepal and to reduce its prevalence by 0.5% worldwide. Since its launch in mid-2021 the Tej Kohli & Ruit Foundation has already screened 52,541 people and cured 4,243 of cataract blindness at microsurgical outreach camps where surgery to prevent or cure blindness can take as little as seven minutes.

If not treated in time congenital cataracts in children can lead to permanent blindness. Investment in the prevention and cure of cataract blindness outweighs its cost by more than 1500% in terms of social and economic improvement. Yet many families living in the low-income communities that account for 90% of all blindness cannot access any treatment.

According to the World Health Organization, childhood cataract is one of the most prevalent causes of blindness in children and is responsible for between five and twenty per cent of pediatric blindness worldwide. The majority of the 200,000 children worldwide who are blind due to cataracts live in the developing world where the prevalence of childhood cataracts is 1.5 cases per 1,000 live births compared to 0.3 cases per 1,000 live births in the UK and USA.

The Tej Kolhi & Ruit Foundation project relies on the mass scalability of an interocular lens that Dr Sanduk Ruit developed to reduce the cost of cataract surgery. Ruit's lens and surgical method has the same success rate as Western techniques (98% after six months) but its low cost has made quality cataract surgery affordable to the world's poorest populations.

The Tej Kohli and Ruit Foundation is a restricted fund operating under the auspices of Prism the Gift Fund, registered UK charity number 1099682. It has united Dr Sanduk Ruit with technologist and philanthropist Tej Kohli in a joint mission to combat the prevalence of cataract blindness by making direct grassroots treatment interventions on a huge new scale.

Amongst the children who have already been cured of congenital cataract blindness by the Tej Kohli and Ruit Foundation is Jesika, a ten-year-old from Dolakha in Nepal, whose story is captured in this blog post and also in a video linked here. Another is 14-year-old Bipana from Solukhumbu in Nepal, whose story is documented here.

The social and economic impact of the cataract surgeries will be documented by the Tej Kohli and Ruit Foundation with a longer-term objective to fuel research and development within the field of early childhood blindness in developing countries. During 2022 the foundation also plans to be active in Nepal, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Laos and Bhutan.

Dr Sanduk Ruit said:

"The incidence of early childhood cataracts within the developing world is still very high, highlighting the urgent need for investment in prevention and cures. In addition to curing 300,000 to 500,000 adults of blindness by 2026 we will make a very sincere effort to reduce the prevalence of childhood cataracts in the developing world by curing 1,000 children."

Tej Kohli said:

"My hope is that by leading by example and by capturing data about socio-economic impact, other organizations will follow our lead in a global coalition to close the congenital cataract treatment gap that needlessly robs too many young children of their future prospects."

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A series of photographs following ten-year-old Jesika through her journey of getting cured at free microsurgical outreach camp can be found at: https://www.flickr.com/photos/tej-kohli/albums/72157720154230586

A video documenting the work of the TejKohli and Ruit Foundation is available on the Tej Kohli & Ruit Foundation YouTube channel.

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