

Exploring new frontiers in philanthropy



Dr. Vadrevu K. Raju

In between his extensive charities especially helping indigent children get eye surgery in time through the Eye Foundation of America, lecturing at a university in West Virginia, and running his own business, Dr. Vadrevu K. Raju also presents lectures at major international conventions and special events at universities. Soon he will be going to Rajasthan where he will offer the Dr. Raneshwar Sharma Oration on *Evolving Medicine through Centuries: What is Next?*

Dr. Sharma was associated with a medical college in Jaipur for many years and became the vice chancellor of the University of Rajasthan.

Dr. Raju will also be discussing the Chakra Club of New York and how, starting in 1898, it had sought to promote ancient Indian medicine. He will also offer arguments why the Western medical establishment rejected the Indian system of medicine.

"With my vast interest in medical history," he says, "and my ongoing reading and research into Ayurvedic way of life, I will attempt to connect present-day technological advances with the wisdom of the ancients."

Dr. Raju, who has helped eye clinics in nearly two dozen countries, including Afghanistan and India, often traveling to these countries to supervise surgeries and give lectures, has been honored four times by the American Academy of Ophthalmology for his teaching, research and humanitarian work. He will be the All Indian Ophthalmic Society President's Guest of honor in February, 2012 at Cochiti.

After getting his medical degree from Andhra University, Dr. Raju traveled to the University of London to complete an ophthalmology residency and fellowship. In the US, Dr. Raju completed a surgery fellowship at Louisiana State University. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and of the American College of Surgeons.

In addition to being a very skilled and experienced ophthalmologist, who specializes in corneal and refractive surgery, Dr. Raju is a clinical professor of ophthalmology at West Virginia University, where he has been teaching since 1976. Before that, Dr. Raju spent two years teaching at the Royal Eye Hospital of London. He is also the director of the International Ocular Surface Society, the director of the Ocular Surface Research and Education Foundation.

All the honors he has received does not excite him as much as his work for the Eye Relief Project in which he travels

periodically to India and other developing countries to volunteer his surgical services and teach advances in ophthalmology. He is particularly interested in teaching and researching ways to prevent blindness in children.

"It costs very little, less than \$200 (including the infrastructure cost and post surgery care), to give a second life to a child," says Dr. Raju who runs the Monongalia Eye Clinic in Morgantown where he has lived more than three decades.

He has also established an endowed lectureship at West Virginia University devoted to issues of ethics and history in ophthalmology.

He started the Eye Foundation of America in 1979 to make eye care available to people who cannot afford it, especially children. The foundation created the Sri Kiran Eye Institute in 1993, which has provided medical care to more than 450,000 patients, and the Goutami Eye Institute, in 2006, which helps thousands of patients, many at no cost.

According to the Eye Foundation of America Web site, 13 million people are blind in India, and 81 percent of this blindness is caused by cataracts. Dr. Raju focuses on the prevention of blindness in children and reaching them early with the latest technology.

"Just a 30-minute operation can cure blindness for 70-plus years," he said in an interview with a West Virginia publication, *The Dominion Post*. "Thirty years ago, nothing existed like that. All of this should be done very early, within the first year or two of [a child's] life. Most modern technology won't help if you don't reach them in time." He also said that sometimes if a vitamin A capsule, which costs only a few cents, is not available to children, they can become blind very early in life. If it doesn't reach in time, the child is already blind or dead," he said.

Although the Eye Foundation of America serves people of all ages, it has a special responsibility for children because it is they who have the most to lose, Dr. Raju says. "Visually impaired or blind children grow up without the same advantages as sighted children," he has written. "Unable to read and write, they often cannot support themselves as adults and become a burden on their families and communities. Education is a great equalizer for children from impoverished families. It can allow them to lead productive lives full of opportunity. Without sight to help them experience their world, blind children often experience a life full of setbacks. Normal development is hindered and education becomes difficult or even impossible. Much of early learning—as much as 80 percent—comes to children through vision. As blind children mature, they find it difficult to learn a trade or start a career. They realize only a fraction of their own potential throughout their lives, which often span 75 years or more."

He adds: "The great misfortune is that much childhood blindness is easily avoided, prevented, treated, or cured. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that as much as half of all childhood blindness can be avoided by treating diseases early and by correcting abnormalities at birth. Such medical and surgical interventions usually take little time and are inexpensive. Surgical removal of the cataracts obscuring a child's vision takes only minutes to perform and costs only a few hundred dollars. Delivering vitamin A also is inexpensive. Each child needs only two doses per year to prevent blindness and provide protection against many other diseases. The cost? About 50 cents a dose."

Nowhere else does so little time and money go so far, he asserts. "If the needed medical intervention was an investment opportunity, the return on this investment would be high—75 or more years of a full, productive life in exchange for a few dollars and a few hours' work. In cases like this, the question is not whether to restore a child's sight as much as it is, *'Can we afford not to?'*"

Dr. Raju, who is in his mid-sixties, has no plans to retire.

"You keep teaching because you have to keep learning, and learning is my true love," he says. "If you do research and keep learning, you give the best clinical care to the patients."

—Arthur J. Poir

'I don't believe in supplements'

Fitness has been V. K. Raju's mantra for more than five decades. The physician, who is in his mid sixties, walks with the energy of someone who is in his early 40s.

Why do you pay so much of attention to being fit?

For one thing, there has been diabetes in my family, I believe, for more than four generations. I have been lucky so far. But more important, all medical professionals should set an example. I hate to see at various medical conventions doctors who have pot bellies.

You are a professor. You have your business, and you do enormous amount of charity work. How do you make time for physical fitness?

When I am not traveling I go to my gym every day. Even when I am traveling, I will try to go to a gym. Walking is also a great exercise. Walking and meditation helps. I believe in the efficacy of Ayurveda but I also believe that much of Ayurveda is a way of life. I pay special attention to diabetes prevention, not just because it has caused a lot of harm in my family but also because how it affects millions across the world, causing damages to many vital organs including eyes.

Susruta wrote long, long ago about diabetes

"It may be prognosticated that an idle man, who indulges in day sleep, or follows sedentary pursuits or is in the habit of taking sweet liquids, or cold and fat-making or emollient food, will ere long fall an easy victim to this disease," as Dan Hurley quotes Susruta in his book, *Diabetes Rising*.

The total number of diabetics worldwide is projected to rise from 171 million in 2000 to 366 million in 2030, India will have highest number of diabetics affecting strategies, real collaboration among the interested groups is needed to combat the tragic complications of diabetes.

How does Ayurveda help you?

I don't believe in using supplements but nutritious vegetarian food, especially greens in salads, helps a great deal. Supplements have become big business and people are selling all kinds of products offering miraculous effects. I have believed that some of the food we love the most, liked fried vegetables, create much harm. So eating right and at the right time is important. Eat at intervals of a few hours and let each meal be light. Even if you a vegetarian, don't think skipping breakfast and having a heavy lunch is not doing harm.

I always say eat right, exercise right, and most importantly, Do not take yourself too seriously (that means start the day with "Good morning God, rather than Good God, morning."

All the herbs in the world are not going to help anyone if the diet is not balanced, and if there is no peace of mind and a life of mobility. People often find excuses not to exercise. I often tell my colleagues and younger people, change your activities instead of cursing the weather. I firmly believe in the saying, 'Exercise gives you more than it takes from you.'

How do you manage to eat healthy when you travel?

It is alright if I eat little healthy food than eat full stomach of rubbish. I depend on yogurt. I mix it with water and drink it, as I did during my recent visit to Iran. I also manage to procure lentils and make a soup out of it. Fruit and vegetables are available everywhere, be it in Iran or Ethiopia. Once you learn that you can manage to eat healthy food, even if it is not available in restaurants, your problems are solved.

—AJP