

WE CAN END AVOIDABLE BLINDNESS BY 2020



Fight for vision

Dr David Liu Ta-Li—his passion and inspiring thoughts to end avoidable blindness

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"He asks why the sky is always dark... and why the dawn still hasn't come." Several months ago, there was a heart-breaking news report about a six-year-old boy whose eyes were gouged out by a woman in Shanxi province, China. Not only was he unable to see the dawn anymore, he would also face numerous challenges in daily living and study in the future, as eyesight is perhaps the most important of perceptions. While it is unlikely that current medical technology can restore the vision of this unfortunate victim, Dr David Liu (劉大立醫生), a private ophthalmologist, explained that eighty percent of blindness worldwide was actually avoidable.

After graduating from the Shaw College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1996, Dr Liu showed his interest in voluntary ophthalmic service early on during his days of residency training in the Prince of Wales Hospital. He participated in several Action for Vision (光明行動) outreach programmes to give health talks and undertake eye screening for Hong Kong elderly with walking difficulty. In 2008, he joined Project Vision (亮睛工程) to train doctors to perform cataract surgery in the mainland.

Project vision

Currently it has been estimated that 6.7 million people in China suffer from blindness due to cataract. In response to the urgent needs of these millions of patients, Project Vision was initiated in 2006. Its aim was to establish a total of 100 sustainable charity eye centres (CECs, 扶貧眼科中心, 簡稱「亮睛點」), train 1000 ophthalmologists and perform one million cataract surgeries in rural China

by the year 2020. In 1999, the World Health Organization launched *VISION 2020* that espoused *The Right to Sight* as a global initiative that aimed to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020. For each cataract surgery, the charge was only about 300 RMB, which was well within the affordable range for patients in rural China.

Being one of the executive committee members of Project Vision, Dr Liu contributed as part of a think-tank with frequent brain-storming meetings with other members to make executive decision on the working direction of Project Vision. In addition, he served as one of the frontline workers, rendering charity service to patients, and provided professional training for local doctors. He also collaborated with local government, selected suitable county hospitals to work in, and undertook fundraising. Dr Liu is pleased to see that community services are entering a mature stage. By the end of 2013, there will be a total of 27 CECs established in eight provinces (eg Inner Mongolia and Yunnan).

Among the patients Dr Liu has served to date, he remembered a farmer who had lost his job because of severe cataracts in both eyes. Being a breadwinner for three kids and a wife, his family lived on the edge of poverty and hunger, and his children were forced to drop out of school. Subsequently, charity cataract surgeries were provided for both eyes, and he regained his vision immediately after the operation. He burst into tears as he was able to work again and take care of his family. He was truly grateful to Project Vision, since he did not have enough money for the operation without the help from Project Vision. This case illustrated how a cataract operation allowed a patient to regain confidence and

dignity, and how the future of a family could also be improved by such an operation.

Service for other sight-threatening diseases

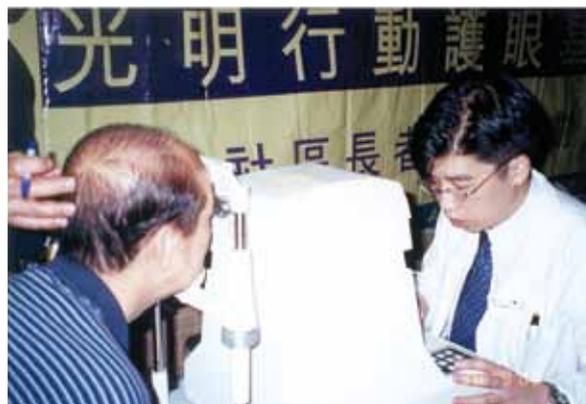
Moreover, he is the founding general secretary of the Asia-Pacific Society of Ocular Oncology and Pathology (APSOOP) as well as being the scientific secretary of the Asia Pacific Vitreo-retina Society (APVRS). In these roles he has been devoted to improving the standard of care for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and eye tumours, locally and internationally. Owing to increasing life expectancy, AMD is now a leading cause of blindness in the elderly in the Asia-Pacific region, and still increasing. In contrast to cataracts that can be cured by simple surgery, treatment for AMD (intravitreal injection of anti-VEGF agents, photodynamic therapy) is an expensive undertaking. Therefore prevention and early diagnosis are of critical importance. Last year, the APVRS co-organised the first Asia-Pacific Eye Care Week. Dr Liu was responsible for giving live radio talks about AMD and other common retinal diseases. At that time, he and other colleagues also provided eye screening for the public.

Ocular tumours (eg retinoblastoma, choroidal melanoma) are relatively rare, but can be both sight- and life-threatening. "There are about 3000 new cases of retinoblastoma in China every year". Apart from provision of training to doctors from developing countries, APSOOP also undertakes teleconferencing for patient management. For example, a doctor in a remote mountainous region of Indonesia can consult international experts via teleconferencing. Dr Liu remarked that the questions raised could be answered there and then "on the same day". In 2012, his work was recognised by receipt of the Nakajima Award (from the Asia-Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology), which honours young doctors for their outstanding international work in ophthalmology.

Reflections

Over his more than ten years of eye care service, Dr Liu has encountered several challenges. "For instance, time management and allocation of resources are important. There are many types of sight-threatening diseases, and we need to prioritise them according to predefined criteria. For example whether to label them as life-threatening (such as ocular tumour), and so forth." Moreover, before advocating changes in health care policy, he explained that there needs to be supporting data. In future, he plans to do epidemiological research on important eye disorders in Hong Kong and the mainland, increase public awareness, and improve the standard of care offered by doctors in developing countries.

For the approximate 31 million of the world's inhabitants who suffer from various types of avoidable blindness, their sky is still dark, and the dawn has yet to come. Poverty is both a cause and consequence of blindness, and people with disabilities, including visual impairment, have less access to health care and education. Are we willing to provide help for this worldwide mission to restore vision by 2020?



(Facing page)

The front page of a promotion brochure for "VISION 2020: The Right to Sight", designed by the Fred Hollows Foundation, Sightsavers, and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

(Top)

Dr Liu of Action for Vision, performing eye screening in a local old-aged home

(Middle)

Dr Liu (second from left in the front row) and other members of a Project Vision team, during an early visit to establish charity eye centres in China

(Bottom)

Dr Liu (third from left in the back row) and other ophthalmologists during the opening ceremony of the first Asia-Pacific Eye Care Week (2012)

Further reading

Lam DS, Li EY, Chang DF, Zhang MZ, Zhan HK, Pang CP. Project vision: a new and sustainable model for eliminating cataract blindness in China. Clin Experiment Ophthalmol 2009;37:427-30.