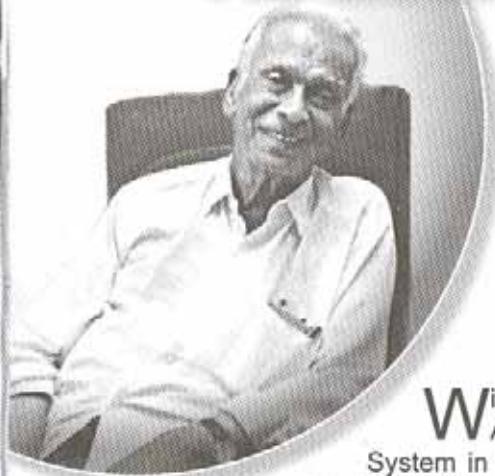


He Looked at Life in the Eye...



Last year, doctors in the five hospitals (Aravind Netralaya) he had built with the aid of his family and supporters, performed 200,000 major eye surgeries and treated 2 million people. Most of this was at little or no cost to the patient, but supported by modest fees from those who could. Meet Dr Govindappa Venkataswamy, lovingly called "Dr V", through the eyes of **Arun Vaidya**.

With millions served, the Aravind Eye Care System in India is in a way the McDonald's of cataract surgery: efficient, effective, influential and – rare for healthcare in the developing world – a clear financial success. It began with one man, Govindappa Venkataswamy, an ophthalmologist who died on July 7, 2006, at age 87, leaving behind an inspiring legacy of his vision, that unnecessary blindness caused by cataract can be avoided, that necessary medical services can be made available to the needy, irrespective of their ability to pay. "Intelligence and capability are not enough. There must be the joy of doing something beautiful," said Dr G Venkataswamy, Founder, Aravind Eye Hospitals. "Dr V", as he was universally known, created one of the largest eyecare systems in the world, catering largely to the poor in Tamil Nadu.

Dr Venkataswamy's basic insight was that healthcare can be marketed to the poor if a programme is closely tailored to a local niche – what is called 'social marketing'. In a country with roughly 20 million blind eyes – 80% of them due to curable cataracts – the appeal for patients was financial.

As an ophthalmologist, Dr V was exposed to the enormity of rural blindness in India. He researched vitamin A deficiency, a major cause of blindness in children, and organised rural fairs for eye treatment. In 1976, at age 58, he opened the Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. With him came two others: his sister and her husband, both eye surgeons, placing their savings and home on the wheel of service.

He was a great admirer of McDonald's success in franchising consistent product-service experience to its consumers around the world – service without

discrimination. This is what he did in the field of eyecare. He offered, free of charge, a comprehensive cataract treatment including medical evaluation and treatment, transport to and from a medical facility, lodging and boarding during the period of eyecare, and supply of essential products.

To the Manner Born

Born in 1918 in a small village in South India, Dr Venkataswamy received his medical degree from Stanley Medical College, Chennai, in 1944. He joined the Indian Army Medical Corps, but had to retire in 1948 after developing severe rheumatoid arthritis that left his fingers crippled, and changed the course of his life. After a year's hospitalisation, he returned to medical school for a Masters in Ophthalmology. With hard work and determination, he trained himself to hold a scalpel and perform cataract surgery. In time, he personally performed over 100,000 successful eye surgeries.

He joined the faculty at Madurai Medical College as the head of the department of ophthalmology and later served as the Vice Dean. In these capacities, he introduced a number of innovative programmes to attack the problem of blindness in India, including the outreach eye camps and the world's first rehabilitation centre for the blind.

For much of his life, Dr V has been a pioneering eye surgeon. What is so inspiring is that, in 1976, on retirement, he started his mission with a modest 11-bed hospital and by 1988, had successfully created a highly admired network of eyecare hospitals, where everyone is treated with dignity and compassion. In a few decades, Aravind has transformed into a global conglomerate – Aravind Eye Care System (AECS), the world's largest and one of the most admired self-sustaining organisations, offering a wide spectrum of services for eyecare, patient care, teaching,



Arun Vaidya

INSPIRATION

training, research, policy advocacy, capacity building, as well as manufacturing and distributing ophthalmic products and publications.

Dr A P J Abdul Kalam penned, recited and dedicated this poem at the inauguration of the fifth Aravind hospital in Pondicherry (Puduchery) in 2003:

"You gave light to blind eyes and
Nature's beauty entered the soul,
The Mind blossomed, And Faith was born
Believing in service to mankind.
O bringer of light
Hero of action — Long may you live!"

This is a timeless tribute that represents the deep admiration of millions around the globe who were privileged and fortunate to have come in the sphere of Dr V's universal persona.

Guiding Philosophy

Started with a mission to eradicate needless blindness, Aravind Eye Hospitals are named after Sri Aurobindo, Dr V's Guru, and one of the most revered spiritual leaders. At Aravind, one finds, combined with modern technology and management practices, a measure of compassionate spirituality, an awareness beyond the matter-of-fact, and the impetus of a mission. The hallmarks of the Aravind model are quality care and productivity at prices everyone can afford. A core principle is to provide services to the rich and poor alike, yet be financially self-supporting. This is achieved through high quality, large volume care and a well-organised system.

But Aravind's greater success lies in being a global centre of knowledge and expertise-sharing with participants from all over the world. The UK and the USA have been significant collaborators in this wonderful venture. Further, the Aravind model of management systems are taught as case studies in prestigious business institutes including Stanford, Harvard, Michigan, IMD-Lausanne, and the Indian Institutes of Management.

"To do more with less" is a contemporary management mantra practiced with diligence at Aravind. What motivates them is the vision of the Mother:

"It is not what you do that matters,
but the way you do it
and the

consciousness you put into it." Pema Chodron said it so well, "True compassion doesn't come from wanting to help out those less fortunate than ourselves, but from realising our kinship with all beings." Aravind has demonstrated it convincingly.

And Then Came the Awards...

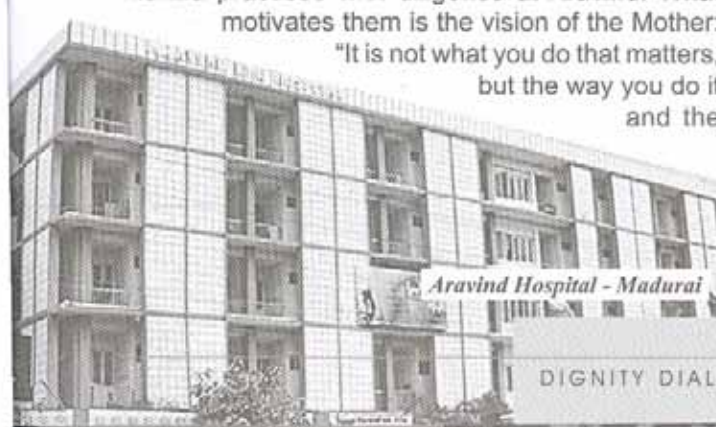
Dr V's pioneering work-methodology and its unparalleled results have won him worldwide admiration, respect, and many national and international awards. The Padmashree award from the Government of India, Medal of the Presidency of the Italian Republic, The Helen Keller International Award, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness Organisation Award, and the Schwab Foundation's "Outstanding Social Entrepreneurs" award, are a few among them. He was the first Indian to be honoured with the fellowship by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. Also, the first Asian to be inducted into the "Ophthalmology Hall of Fame" of the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery. He has a unique distinction of being invited as a distinguished speaker to a famous American institute on three different disciplines: Ophthalmology, Divinity, and Business Management.

Dr V was inspired by Sri Aurobindo's revelation, "There's a Power within that knows beyond our knowings". He was extremely simple in his life, his dress, and food. He knew suffering from his own lifelong battle with arthritis. He knew about the highest possibilities of the human spirit from Sri Aurobindo, and about persevering to achieve one's goals from Gandhiji.

Despite Aravind's voluminous growth, he maintained his Spartan-lifestyle with the modest pension from his govt job.

Alan Robin, MD, Associate Professor at the Wilmer Eye Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, represents the views of the millions around the world: "Dr V was probably one of the greatest and most visionary ophthalmologists I've ever met. He was able to think outside the box and conceptualise things nobody had ever done. He created a sustainable, profitable, healthcare system in India that has enabled more people to see and maintain their vision." He has thus, in a small way, paved the path for the world to discover its innate goodness and actualise its divine potential. Quoting Voltaire, in a positive sense, "All is for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

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Aravind Hospital - Madurai