

Legendary Eye Care Innovator Shares His Wisdom

Written by YourStory Team

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Dr. Namperumalsamy of Arvind Eye Care System provides advice to entrepreneurs

He is a social transformer. He is a legend. He heads the world's largest eye care service. Meet Dr. Namperumalsamy, Chairman of Arvind Eye Care System, Madurai. At the end of 2008, Arvind Eye Care System consulted 2.7 million patients and performed 2.85 lakh operations in its five hospitals. In 1976, Dr. G. Venkatswamy founded Arvind Eye Care System after his retirement from government service. Dr. Nam (as he is affectionately called) was only 27 years old then. Today, he heads the organization and is a legend in providing exemplary service to human kind.

Arvind Eye Care was started by mortgaging houses as a 11-bed hospital in Madurai, as no bank was ready to lend. Even today, Arvind Eye Care is a self-funded institution with no venture capital or private equity. Arvind Eye Care's mission is to reach 1 million patients by 2012. Following a model of cross-subsidy to fund operations, Arvind Eye Care System is not only providing eye care for the masses but is also a financially vibrant and profitable organization. What is cross-subsidy? It is a model where the affordable pay more for the same care they received where the less endowed are charged less. If India is only known for its technology services prowess, it is equally well known for this health care innovation. Arvind's endeavor provides "vision" to not only the rich and wealthy, but also the poor and deprived. This institution has made Madurai, the temple town, synonymous with excellence in eye care throughout the world.

Arvind's outreach program reaches out to villages and screens patients who need care. They are transported by buses to one of the five hospitals for surgical intervention as simple intervention can prevent blindness, which is prevalent in 12 million people in India according to WHO estimates.

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The legend of health care innovation Dr. Namperumalsamy was kind enough to talk to K. Venkatesh to provide his wisdom to young entrepreneurs during Villgro UNCOVENTION at Chennai. In the event, Dr. Namperumalsamy moderated a panel discussion on health care innovations and was part of a panel on scaling social enterprises. Here is his wisdom...

On his mantra for success...

Hard work and small innovations keeping community at large as the prime focus by working with the community and providing affordable health care.

On his inspiration...

I head Arvind Eye Care System, which started with 11 beds has grown to 4000 beds in three decades. The organization is self-funded and works using a service as well as business model. Business is not commercial but social by educating people about eye care options available.

Cataract is the most common eye disease. We use an artificial lens to be placed in the eye. This lens costs \$150. In 1990s, we imported the technology and using young educated girls started manufacturing the lens ourselves. The cost has now come down to \$3. This is our biggest success—innovation that helps poor people in the villages. This is affordable for everyone and after surgery, a person can go back to work in 2 or 3 weeks. Little bit change and innovation. [Helping poor people inspires him.]

On use of technology...

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Information technology has grown by leaps and bounds. So using a telemedicine and teleconference model, a permanent centre can be set up in villages. Using this, each patient can talk directly to a doctor who is in a hospital. Using wi-fi technology or sharing images, their condition can be ascertained. We can easily treat them then. This is done by trained technicians and not doctors. We don't need as many doctors and it cuts down the cost. This is rural technology.

How can social entrepreneurs or entrepreneurs contribute to health care? Your health care movement has reached the masses.

Social entrepreneurs should think of working as allies and not rivals with a singular focus. Like Southwest Airlines points all its focus on ground transport and converting all people who use ground transport to fly. They haven't succeeded fully but still their focus is in ground transport. Entrepreneurs should not think of their endeavor as commercial venture but social marketing showing people that they can be helped. That should be the aim.

7 to 9% of school children need glasses. Nobody knows. Only 0.5% wear glasses. This is a huge market.

India has 46 million people with diabetes. One fourth of them will go blind. How to prevent them from going blind? These people should be educated on how diabetes can lead to blindness and making them take care of diabetes. This is social education. Social entrepreneurs can engage in such social marketing showing people that their diseases are not only curable but preventable. The patients should be told their condition does not need treatment with sophisticated instruments but they are preventable first.

Advice to doctors going to rural areas to serve the poor people...

Rural or urban, the disease is the same. Doctors have a social responsibility of curing them. You haven't become a doctor by paying fees. The society has given you an opportunity to become a doctor. They need not give back entirely what they earn. But they should give back partly what they earn. Societal responsibility should be foremost because in the society privileged people exist in form of doctors or engineers.

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Biggest challenge to be overcome when executing a grand vision of eye care for the masses...

Human resources was the biggest challenge. And to get like minded devotion from people is difficult.

Initially we had problems with funds. Even then we did not go for fund raising. Even now we don't raise funds. We generate money from people who can afford to pay so that we can give back to people in society who cannot afford to pay.

Also you have to maintain quality, respect, and reputation in the society. You have created a market and satisfied customers. When demand goes up, you have to maintain everything. Money is not a problem.

But the challenge has been our human resources—the doctors and paramedics. We have to train them and retain them for a long time. But we have succeeded in that.

Final word...

The rural and urban divide has to go. Everyone has a right to vision. The public or the private doctors have a social responsibility to improve the society and develop India as a good place to live.

We now clearly understand this legend's vision—social responsibility for the masses by the privileged sections of the society and making our country a proud place to live. Doubtless, Arvind Eye Care has scaled many a peak and is internationally acclaimed today because of this vision.

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We sincerely thank Dr. Namperumalsamy for sharing his wisdom and we hope it would inspire many people.