

From Chennai to China: 'Train doctor' helps restore vision

Dr Jayakumar's Lifeline Express, a hospital train, provides affordable high-tech eye surgery for poor people in China

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It's a long way from the southern Indian metropolis of Chennai to China, but an Indian eye surgeon is using his skills to bridge this distance to help in an initiative that restores the vision of poor people in rural China.

Dr Navin Jayakumar, who served for years at Chennai's famed Sankara Nethralaya eye hospital and is currently a visiting scholar at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in Hong Kong, is actively involved in a programme to train Chinese eye surgeons in neuro-ophthalmology, an area of specialisation that can detect brain diseases through an eye examination.

Jayakumar has also travelled into China's rural hinterland near Jinan in Shandong province and conducted cataract surgeries on board the 'Lifeline Express', a four-carriage hospital train that runs from Hong Kong and provides affordable high-tech eye surgery options for hundreds of thousands of people in remote, poverty-stricken areas of China.

"One of the most striking differences between India and China," notes Jayakumar, "is that



Dr Navin Jayakumar and his team.

whereas in India it's possible for the poor to avail of totally free cataract operations — either at government hospitals or through philanthropic interventions — in China the poor don't have a safety net, and have to fork out nearly 6,000 yuan (\$700) for the surgery. But on board the 'Lifeline Express', the surgery costs are subsidised, and patients pay only a tenth of that."

The 'Lifeline Express' project, which has been chugging along for eight years now, is run by the Lifeline Express Foundation, a Hong Kong-based charity. It's modelled pretty much on India's hospital train that has the same name. Three trains travel across some of the most remote areas of China, and are parked in pre-assigned towns for three to four months at a stretch. Heavy-duty publicity is given ahead of the

train's arrival, which gives the locals a chance to enroll, through a local hospital, to avail of the service. The local hospital pre-screens the patients and gets them "surgery-ready".

On board, the surgeons carry out 25-30 surgeries a day. Says Jayakumar: "Since only topical anaesthetic drugs in the form of eye drops are administered, the patient is conscious throughout the surgery, and can hazily see the doctors at work." Also, since the anaesthetic effect is short-lived, these surgeries require a higher level of skill; each surgery takes only 10-15 minutes, and the patients are wheeled off to a 60-bed ward that makes up one carriage of the train. After a night's stay and a post-surgery check-up, they are sent back to their local hospitals.

Jayakumar says that he no-

tices a higher susceptibility to myopia and age-related problems among the Chinese, and reckons that the genetic make-up of the people may account in part for the incidence of myopia. But otherwise, he says, the Chinese are a reasonably hardy race — and their general health profile and longevity is manifestly better than in rural India. "I've performed surgeries on many 80-year-olds, and on at least two nonagenarians," he adds.

During Bill Gates' recent visit to India, he noted that he was being asked about 'China vs India', "but I always say 'how about China plus India — or Chindia?'" Well, as an eye specialist from India who is helping elevate surgical skills in China, Jayakumar may well have earned himself citizenship in Gates' Republic of Chindia.