

An Ophthalmologist's Journey into Medical Entrepreneurship and Lessons Learned

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COVID 19 pandemic posed challenges for medical professionals and for everyone. As we are overcoming challenges and getting used to New Normal. Nothing in this world can take the place of Dedication, Determination and Diligence to achieve success. As someone said- Talent alone will not get you success: nothing is more common than unsuccessful person with talent. Genius will also not get you success; "unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will also not get you there: the world is full of educated derelicts. Patience, persistence and perspiration make an unbeatable combination for success in any field".

-Dr. Vidushi Sharma

Journey to become an eye surgeon

Ophthalmology is one of the most preferred branch of medical science that offers the adrenalin rush associated with performing delicate sight restoring surgeries, yet you do not deal with stressful life and death situations. It is also possible to do predominantly medical ophthalmology or you can work part time etc., so it is suitable for everyone, specially for women doctors who are busy due to family responsibility.

I consider very fortunate for completing my medical education (MBBS) as well as ophthalmology residency from India's premier medical institute, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. A career as an ophthalmologist (eye specialist) is extremely rewarding and is especially useful for women wanting to maintain a work life and work family balance.

In my own case, I have been lucky that I have had opportunity to study medical curriculum in India (AIIMS, New Delhi) and overseas (John A Moran Eye Center, Salt Lake City, USA and University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia). We have established SuVi Eye Institute and Lasik Laser Center in Kota, Rajasthan (India) on February 5, 2006 and our practice in the field of ophthalmology has been successful in every way. It is not just satisfying in terms of work satisfaction and rewards, but it has also given me a platform to engage in various activities and make my own contributions to helping the doctor-patient relationship. I have spoken at the Indian Medical Association (IMA) meetings, national and international ophthalmology conferences, Kota's coaching institutions and other organizations. I have also contributed articles in the scientific journals as well as in the local press and I have utilized many opportunities to try and improve and strengthen doctor-patient relationship as far as possible, which has been a very rewarding experience.

Entrepreneurship and overcoming challenges for women doctors

Many patients have a certain mindset about women doctors. While they may trust you more, and also consider you to have more empathy, some patients may feel that female doctors are surgically not as competent. If you have an extremely hard working and ambitious

husband (and in the same specialty like me), it often becomes even more difficult to carve a distinct identity for yourself, and this has been my biggest challenge. Luckily for me, I have had an excellent training in ophthalmology from the prestigious Dr. R. P. Center for ophthalmic sciences, AIIMS, New Delhi and Sydney Eye Hospital, University of Sydney, Australia where I have been trained in oculoplastic surgery, pediatric ophthalmology, etc. This ensured that I do a good variety of ophthalmic surgeries – not just cataract-lens implant surgery, but also Lasik Laser Refractive Surgery, oculoplastic surgery, glaucoma surgery, squint surgery, routine and complex ocular trauma and so on, which are not done by most ophthalmologists and this helped me to carve a distinct identity for myself.

As a medical entrepreneur, the most difficult thing is human resource management, just like in most other fields, and I have been lucky that we have been able to find and develop an outstanding team, which has made a huge difference to the smooth working of the SuVi Eye Hospital and Lasik Laser Center in Kota having good relations with our patients.

Women empowerment into healthcare

Women empowerment into healthcare is a bit of a loaded term, and it would be vain to think that I can make a significant contribution towards that single-handedly. However, currently there are many efforts to ensure that women health care professionals form their own groups to get good mentoring and ensure their career progress. The Indian Medical Association (IMA) is coming up with women wings in all states, and sub-specialties are also forming women societies, like the Women in Ophthalmology Society, which has affiliated chapters like the Women Ophthalmologists' Society (WOS) in India.

I am happy to be a part of these initiatives, which provide women doctors with tools and opportunities to advance their professional growth. Wider interaction among women colleagues is a great inspiration to motivate young doctors. Also, among the staff working at SuVi Eye Hospital and Lasik Laser Center in Kota, I have always tried to ensure that we have a sympathetic attitude towards the genuine problems faced by women, and ensure that their male colleagues also understand the importance of giving slightly more space to women. Based on my experience of an ophthalmic entrepreneur, I have also conducted a few sessions for young ophthalmologists (including women) about career options, challenges for women ophthalmologists and such other topics. Also, I have written articles and made YouTube videos on these topics. It has been my honour that after seeing my videos, several young doctors have contacted me to seek guidance about their careers, and it is my privilege that I have helped and counseled them to the best extent possible.

Secrets to establish private medical practice

Complete your medical studies and specialization training at the right age, before you plunge into family responsibilities, and get the requisite qualifications, training and exposure. Do not compromise on your medical training. Get the best possible training that you can get and empower yourself. It depends on you how much knowledge you can gather from your teachers or mentors. If you are receptive, obedient, hard-working and eager to learn, there is no end to how much you can learn from them. Always keep patient welfare topmost in mind, even if you are in private practice. Follow ethical practice. Learn how to deal with patients and cultivate good communication skills. Be approachable and accessible to your patients. Be determined and thick-skinned. Setbacks are bound to come in life. In the end, the one who succeeds is the one who does not allow setbacks to affect him. As Churchill famously said, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal".

After returning from overseas, I together with my spouse (Dr. Suresh K. Pandey) started ophthalmic practice with little money and tried to set up SuVi Eye Hospital and Lasik Laser Center, in Kota (Rajasthan) in rented premises on February 5, 2006. Within few years, we built a new building of our hospital having all latest gadgets. We started with auto-refractometer, operating microscope and a phacoemulsification machine. Initially our O.P.D. was 5-10 patients per day. Within one year, good word spread about our work and patient numbers increased slowly and gradually to 100-120 patients per day and now we see approximately 250 patients everyday and perform 8 to 10 laser/major and minor eye surgeries per day. So far, our team of doctors have done more than 90,000 successful eye surgeries and laser procedures with very high success rate and about 2000 eye surgery free of cost to the needy patients.

SuVi Eye Hospital and Lasik Laser Center has “World Class Eye Surgery Facilities” including Visx Lasik Laser Machine (for freedom from glasses), Signature Phacoemulsification machine/Zepto Cataract Surgery system (Phacoemulsification or suture-less cataract surgery), Zeiss Lumera operating surgical microscope and DORC Eva phaco vitrectomy machine (for suture-less vitreo-retinal surgery), Oculus Pentacam (for diagnosis of corneal disorders), Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT), Specular Microscope, IOL Master (for lens power calculation), Retinal Green Laser and Fundus Fluorescein Angiography (FFA) and several other valuable diagnostic and surgical equipments to treat all routine and complex eye problems.

We have a team of competent doctors (Dr. Suresh K. Pandey, Dr. Nipun Bagrecha, Dr. Satyendra Kumar Gupta and myself), one visiting retinal doctor (Dr. Abhiskhek Kothari) and total 40 staff members to help us in day to day activities of the hospital. My father (Late Gp. Capt. K.M. Sharma) was the force behind this vision. He inspired us to return to India from overseas and he also put in a lot of effort for staff training and human resource management at our hospital.

SuVi Eye Hospital and Lasik Laser Center provides complete eye care services in all sub-specialties, with all latest diagnostic and therapeutic modalities in the Tier two city of Kota (Rajasthan) by the best trained doctors. We pride ourselves on having a patient friendly atmosphere and immensely value the enormous support and trust that we have received from our patients. Several doctors (ophthalmologists trainees and observers from India and abroad) have visited Kota, India including from USA, Switzerland, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan and Iraq to observe our model of private practice.

Why a non-metro city to start a medical practice?

This question is often asked by several colleagues, well-wishers and occasionally by few coaching students (medical aspirants and their parents) while coming for an eye check up. While it would be tempting to give a clichéd answer like “we wanted to come back to our roots and serve our own people”, which of course is true; the bigger reason is that it makes much more sense to settle down in Tier two cities in India today. Even while I was pursuing further training overseas, and my juniors doctors asked me about future prospects, I always encouraged them to settle down in these non-metro cities, as it is less expensive to establish and faster to build up a medical practice in these cities. The family contacts provide the initial patient base, and good services provide word of mouth publicity, which is very effective in these non-metro cities. Life is more relaxed, you do not have to travel large distances, and can use your time more productively.

Doctors and social services

At our hospital, we have always tried to provide the best services to all patients, irrespective of their paying capacity. I consider it an achievement that in spite of providing cutting-edge high end surgery like micro-incision cataract surgery and premium IOLs, refractive surgery etc., we have also been able to provide equal quality of service to all our patients and have a wide spectrum of patients from all kinds of socio-economic background. We have also organized many free OPD check-up camps, where patients are provided free follow-up and necessary investigations in the hospital and have seen more than 90,000 patients in these camps. Apart from this, we have also done free surgery for needy patients. I am humbled and honored to get “Women of the Year Zonal Award” by the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Smt. Vasundhara Raje. Govt. of Rajasthan felicitated myself and my husband (Dr. Suresh K. Pandey) for doing significant work in the field of ophthalmology and elimination of preventable blindness.

Book for coaching students and young doctors

During the course of my practice in Kota, I interacted with a lot of coaching students who visited me for their eye problems. Many of them were interested in talking to me, specially the Medical aspirants, as I have done M.B.B.S. and M.D. from AIIMS, New Delhi, which is still on the top of the list for most of these students. I also observed that a lot of students are from small towns and cities and are not as confident as their counterparts from bigger cities. For this reason, I wrote a motivational book in Hindi for coaching students, as well as

other youngsters from not so privileged backgrounds. The book is titled “Meri Kitab, Meri Dost” and engages in a friendly conversation with the reader. It is an attempt to help them develop a more positive mindset, so that they give in their best efforts, and also remain happy in all situations in life. We have also written two book and shared secrets of successful doctor [1,2].

Lessons learned: Advice to young doctors, specially women doctors

My first advice to young doctors would be to focus on getting the best possible training at the earliest opportunity. This is even more important for women, as it becomes very difficult to devote time to full time rigorous medical training programs at a later stage in life, particularly after marriage and kids. At an early age, it is possible to travel far and wide for the best training opportunities, especially in surgical disciplines. Medical practice is not easy because of heightened patient expectations and an aggressive consumer culture that is spreading fast. In such a scenario, it is absolutely essential to get the best possible clinical training, so that our competence is our big strength when starting clinical practice. I would also like to advise young doctors to choose their work based on their own personality and preferences. Some people are very good at communication and interpersonal relations and therefore do well in private practice. Some other people are interested in teaching and do well in an academic setting. Some realize that they would do well in non-clinical branches, and some others decide they would want to change their field altogether. Assess your priorities and desires, and take an informed decision, as you can't keep changing these decisions. The most important thing is to decide on your own definition of success, and then stick to it, so that you are not just successful, but also truly happy.

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