

Women & ophthalmology my journey into ophthalmic entrepreneurship and lessons learned

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Introduction

After completing my medical training and ophthalmology residency from AIIMS, New Delhi, and fellowship training from Australia, my professional journey progressed through an uncharted path. I returned to India and decided to start an ophthalmic practice from scratch in a non-metro city. I faced several challenges during my journey as an entrepreneur while managing a private ophthalmic practice. My formula for success in the medical field consists of 6 Cs that include “Commitment, Competence, Care, Compassion, Communication, and Constant Improvement.” 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.

My journey to vision

I consider myself very fortunate for completing my medical education (MBBS) as well as Ophthalmology residency from the country’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 work-life and work-family balance. Ophthalmology offers the adrenaline rush associated with performing delicate sight-restoring surgeries, yet you do not deal with a stressful life and death situations. It is also possible to do predominantly medical ophthalmology or medical retina etc., so it is suitable for everyone.

In my own case, I have been lucky that I have had the 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). My husband, Dr. Suresh K. Pandey and I have established SuVi Eye Institute & Lasik Laser Center in Kota 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 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 the doctor-patient relationship as far as possible, which has been a very rewarding experience.

Entrepreneurship and overcoming challenges for female eye 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 hardworking 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 excellent training in Ophthalmology from the prestigious Dr. R. P. Center for ophthalmic sciences, AIIMS, New Delhi and the Sydney Eye Hospital, University of Sydney, Australia where I have been trained in oculoplastic surgery, pediatric ophthalmology, etc. This ensured that I do a 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.

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Received: 14-September-2021, Manuscript No. oer-22-001-Pre Qc 22; Editor assigned: 04-August-2022, PreQC No. oer-22-001-Pre Qc 22 (PO); Reviewed: 18-August-2022, QC No. oer-22-001-Pre Qc 22; Revised: 25-August-2022, Manuscript No. oer-22-001-Pre Qc 22 (R); Published: 29-August- 2022, DOI: 10.35841/oer.6.8.139-143

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 & Lasik Laser Center in Kota, having good relations with our patients.

Health care and women power

Women empowerment in health care 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's 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 that 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 & 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 as an ophthalmic entrepreneur, I have also conducted a few sessions for young ophthalmologists (including women) about career options, challenges for women ophthalmologists and other topics. Also, I have written articles and made YouTube videos on these topics. It has been my honor 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.

Description

Secrets to establishing private medical practice

After returning from overseas, I, together with my spouse (Dr. SureshK. Pandey) started ophthalmic practice with little money and tried to set up SuVi Eye Hospital & Lasik Laser Center, in Kota (Rajasthan) in rented premises on February 5, 2006 (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Inauguration of SuVi Eye Hospital, Kota on February 5, 2006. Left to Right: Dr. Vidushi Sharma, Mrs. Ghose, Dr. Supriyo Ghose (Chief, Dr. R. P. Center, AIIMS, New Delhi), Dr. Amita Birla, Shri Om Birla (Current Lok Sabha Speaker), and Dr. Suresh K. Pandey.

Within a few years, we built a new building for our hospital having all the latest gadgets. We started with an auto-refractometer, an operating microscope and a phacoemulsification machine. Initially, our O.P.D. was 5-10 patients per day. Within one year, the good word spread about our work and the patient numbers increased slowly and gradually to 100-120 patients per day and now we see approximately 250 patients every day and perform 8 to 10 laser/major and minor eye surgeries per day. So far, our team of doctors has done more than 100,000 successful eye surgeries and laser procedures with a high success rate and

about 2,000 eye surgeries free of cost to the needy patients.

SuVi Eye Hospital & Lasik Laser Center, Kota 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

Citation: Vidushi S. Women & ophthalmology my journey into ophthalmic entrepreneurship and lessons learned. *Ophthalmol Case Rep.* 2022;6(8):139-143.

Master (for lens power calculation), Retinal Green Laser and Fundus Fluorescein Angiography (FFA) and several other valuable diagnostic and surgical equipment 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. Abhishek 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 & Lasik Laser Center provide complete eye care services in all sub-specialties, with all the 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 (ophthalmologist 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 a 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 the 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 backgrounds. 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 the “Women of the Year Zonal Award” from the former Chief Minister of Rajasthan, Smt. Vasundhara Raje. The Government of Rajasthan also felicitated myself and my husband (Dr. Suresh K. Pandey) for the significant work in the field of Ophthalmology and elimination of preventable blindness.

Book for coaching students

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, especially 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 were from small towns and cities and were 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 positive mindset so that they give in their best efforts and also remain happy in all situations in life (**Figures 2 and 3**).



Figure 2. Release of Dr. Vidushi's book *Meri Kitab Meri Dost* done on August 12, 2017. Left to Right: Sh. Govind Maheshwari, Dr. A. Q. Khan, Dr. Pramod Tiwari, Prof. Girish Verma, Sh. Rohit Gupta (IAS, District Collector, Kota), Sh. Nitin Vijay, Sh. Rajesh Maheshwari, Dr. Vidushi Sharma, Dr. Suresh K. Pandey.



Figure 3. Dr. Vidushi and Dr. Suresh K. Pandey sharing their professional journey with medical aspirants (NEET coaching students) of Kota City.

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Conclusion

Take-home message & lessons learned: advice to young doctors, especially 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 a 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 your own definition of success and then stick to it, so that you are not just successful, but also truly happy.