

Experts highlight urgency to expand infrastructure for corneal transplants in India

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Policies and infrastructure to be created for a robust, self-reliant system to eliminate corneal blindness



Dr Gullapalli Nageswara Rao, Founder of LV Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), highlighted the critical shortage of corneal transplants in India and the urgent need for significant improvements in the country's corneal healthcare infrastructure.

The occasion was the announcement of a historic milestone by LVPEI's Shantilal Shanghvi Cornea Institute of becoming the world's first and only institution to complete 50,000 corneal transplants as of August 2024.

Dr Gullapalli Nageswara Rao, Founder, of LV Prasad Eye Institute said, "India is facing a severe shortage of corneas for transplantation with demand far exceeding our capacity to meet it. With this gap widening each year, we must take immediate and comprehensive action to prevent millions from losing their sight. We must expand corneal donation programmes, establish more eye banks, institution of the hospital cornea retrieval programme and develop comprehensive policies to build a robust corneal healthcare system in India."

India faces a pressing public health challenge with approximately 100,000 corneal transplants required annually to combat corneal blindness, a condition affecting an estimated one million people nationwide. Currently, the healthcare system can only provide around 30,000 transplants each year, leaving a huge gap between demand and supply.

By 2030, the goal must be to increase the number of corneal transplants from 30,000 to 60,000 annually. The eye bank network must be expanded with at least 50 standard eye banks nationwide, each requiring an investment of approximately Rs 1 crore. The Hospital cornea retrieval programmes should be instituted in 500 major general hospitals along with placement of grief counsellors and linked to the eye banks. A pool of Cornea Specialists must be readied by training at least 500 ophthalmic surgeons capable of performing corneal transplant surgeries.

Dr Rao outlined a multi-faceted approach to address the shortage with state-of-the-art facilities that meet international eye banking standards, recruiting and training cornea specialists and ophthalmologists to increase surgical capacity, and encouraging the local pharmaceutical industry to produce medications essential for corneal care.

Stakeholders at all levels, including government, the private sector, and the medical community, must join forces to overcome this challenge.