



A World of Darkness

World Sight Day: Fighting Avoidable Blindness with Orbis

Imagine living in a world of darkness, unable to see beautiful colours. And imagine not knowing what our loved ones look like, or not being able to do things that need sight - life would be completely different. According to *The Lancet*, an estimated 43.3 million people worldwide suffered from blindness in 2020, with females making up 23.9 million, or 55% of the figure.

The world faces considerable challenges in terms of eye care, including unequal treatment when it comes to preventing, treating and rehabilitating people with vision loss. There is a gross shortage of trained eye care service providers, and health systems generally have poor integration of eye care services, among other issues.

At Orbis, we believe that no one should live a life of unnecessary blindness, which is why we bring people together to fight avoidable blindness.

BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, about 27 million people are estimated to be living with vision loss. Had these individuals been born in a country with adequate medical resources, 4 in 5 of them would have been able to have their visual impairment corrected and go on to live normal lives.

With only 1,000 ophthalmologists in the entire country and 90% of them practising in major cities, 6 million Bangladeshis - 1.3 million of them children - are currently living with

uncorrected refractive error due to the inaccessibility of treatment. For many, a pair of spectacles would mean they could study or work again, as blurred vision makes it harder and harder to do work effectively.

In many parts of Bangladesh, particularly where the terrain is rough, young children (typically girls) are forced to drop out of school just to be eyes for blind family members. The result is a negative ripple effect that impacts the economy and society for generations.

According to research by PricewaterhouseCoopers, every dollar invested into eye care in a low-resourced country like Bangladesh yields four dollars in return. This impacts not only the local economy, but the global marketplace as well. In order to address this issue, Orbis has established Vision Centres in Bangladesh offering affordably priced services to people with low income, and pro-bono services for those who cannot afford to pay.

VISION CENTRES

When needed, Vision Centre staff tele-consult an ophthalmologist at a regional hospital to get a prescription, before dispensing the medication. The Centres also refer people suffering from cataract, which is the leading cause of blindness and visual impairment around the world according to the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, or other eye diseases to the regional hospitals. These hospitals in turn refer those with the most complicated conditions to a tertiary facility.

Beyond providing eye care services, Orbis's Vision Centres are equipped with solar panels to create an environmentally friendly facility that can even make a profit. In fact, solar-enabled Vision Centres are typically able to sustain their operations within three years through income generated from the sale of spectacles and token fees charged to those who can pay. Profits are ploughed back into the Vision Centres, expanding Orbis's reach to help those with the greatest need.

Vision Centres typically have one vision technician assisted by one optician who hands out spectacles and handles basic medicines.

A global leader in the implementation of this self-sustaining model, Orbis has worked with partners to establish 22 Vision Centres in remote and under-served areas in Bangladesh since 2013.

TRANSFORMING EYE CARE WITH TELEHEALTH

Since 1982, Orbis has trained, mentored, and inspired local healthcare teams worldwide to save and restore vision.

With adequate training, eye care professionals can give their patients the quality eye treatment they deserve. This makes it all the more essential for Orbis to keep the programmes running amid the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the pandemic, many countries have diverted their resources from public healthcare to coronavirus containment, and in-person eye care has had to take a backseat. In the meantime, the number of patients with vision loss has continued to rise, leaving eye care teams to brace themselves for a mountain-load of backlog cases when they eventually return to the vision frontline. Furthermore, these healthcare professionals will have to ensure that their patients and they themselves do not get infected with COVID-19 during treatment.

CYBERSIGHT

Orbis Cybersight was already in place before the onset of the pandemic, ready to be used for training eye care professionals around the world to restore sight in countries with the greatest need.

When the pandemic first hit, Orbis saw a huge uptake of Cybersight training by ophthalmologists across the globe. This year, the organisation continues to expand its training and consultation services through Cybersight, and develop its simulation training programme through its virtual Flying Eye Hospital projects around the world. Orbis also plans to fully explore and maximise the simulation training platform that it had developed with Fundamental Virtual Reality.

TRANSFORMING EYE CARE WITH TELEHEALTH

Innovative solutions such as Cybersight and Simulation put Orbis in a good position to adopt to the "new normal"



sgp.orbis.org/en/news/2021/covid19



To do all these and raise awareness on the importance of combating avoidable blindness, the organisation has been working on several campaigns. These include:

- **World Sight Day**

World Sight Day falls on the second Thursday of October every year. This year, we commemorate World Sight Day on 14 October. This is a global event that aims to draw attention to the challenges of living with blindness. The theme for this year is #LoveYourEyes.

- **Dining in the Dark**

To spread the #LoveYourEyes message, Orbis has been organising "Dining in the Dark" events hosted by persons with visual impairment whenever dining-in is allowed in Singapore as well as virtual blindfold lunches sponsored by corporations for their employees.

During these events, participants get to experience first-hand the challenges faced by persons with visual impairment - from eating a simple meal to performing everyday tasks many of us do not give much thought to. They also get to learn about various eye conditions from Orbis's volunteer ophthalmologists and discover how they can prevent the onset of these conditions.

- **Bernard Chew – Orbis Singapore Ambassador**

Orbis speaks out on behalf of persons with visual impairment by providing a platform for them to share their stories.

In July, the organisation rolled out a mini IGTV series entitled *The Story of A Courageous Father*, featuring Bernard Chew, an Orbis Singapore Ambassador. Bernard lost his sight overnight in 2017 and in the mini-series, he shares about the challenges of living with visual impairment and how he overcame hurdles to live his life with confidence.

The mini-series is available on Orbis Singapore's Instagram page @orbisingapore. It is part of Orbis's effort to rally like-minded people to create a more empathetic, inclusive

society that cares for the visually impaired by helping them on the streets, speaking out for them, or giving them jobs.

- **Race4sight**

To raise funds needed to support Orbis's global work, the organisation has organised its first-ever Virtual Race4Sight, a 40-day challenge to run 100km or cycle 500km anytime and anywhere in the run-up to celebrate World Sight Day. Proceeds from the fundraising campaign will support Orbis's sight-saving work outside Singapore as well as campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of good eye care.

The Jebsen & Jessen-Orbis Virtual Race4Sight 2021 flagged off on 3 September, 7am (Singapore time). The event sees employees of corporate sponsors from around the world joining members of the public in Singapore to participate in the Race.

During the 40-day period, nearly 1,000 participants - from Europe and the US to the Asia Pacific - will walk, run, or cycle wearing the Race4Sight T-shirt and Orbis Logo tattoo to help spread the message of #LoveYourEyes on social media. In a demonstration of inclusivity, some Racers will also pair up with visually impaired participants to walk, run or cycle on a tandem bike.

- **United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)**

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are a global call for action to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. Ending poverty goes hand in hand with strategies to build economic growth, and address an array of social needs including education, healthcare, food security, social protection and employment.

Helping to end avoidable vision loss is among the key strategies to boosting education rates, improving community health, protecting the marginalised and ensuring the able-bodied remain so to continue having gainful employment.

Orbis focuses on SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 10 (Reduce Inequalities). Understanding how important sight is to individuals and their communities is a pivotal first step to safeguarding a secure world for ourselves, and future generations. **PRIME**

Ms Elaine Woon is the Director of Development at Orbis Singapore. She possesses over 20 years of experience in business development and marketing communications in both business and non-profit organisations. A serendipitous road trip overseas to a rural place transformed her perspectives of life, and she took the leap into the non-profit sector. At Orbis, she works with her team to raise the organisation's profile and bring quality eye care services to places with the greatest need.

Orbis Singapore

Tel: (+65) 6479-5875 | Email: elaine.woon@orbis.org
sgp.orbis.org | orbisingapore

