

A conversation with Sightsavers, May 15, 2017

Participants

- Julia Strong – International Foundations Manager, Sightsavers
- Dr. Imran Khan – Chief Global Technical Lead, Sightsavers
- Mike Straney – Director of Major Giving, Sightsavers
- Morna Lane – Head of Major Donors & Trusts, Sightsavers
- Maureen Stickel – Manager, IDinsight
- Jessica Press-Williams – Associate, IDinsight
- Natalie Crispin – Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: These notes were compiled by GiveWell and give an overview of the major points made by Julia Strong, Imran Khan, Mike Straney, and Morna Lane.

Summary

GiveWell and IDinsight spoke with Ms. Strong, Dr. Khan, Mr. Straney, and Ms. Lane of Sightsavers to learn about Sightsavers' cataract program as part of GiveWell's partnership with IDinsight to support the identification or development of a GiveWell top charity focused on cataract surgery (more detail here:

<http://www.givewell.org/charities/IDinsight/partnership-with-idinsight/cataract-surgery-project>). Conversation topics included an overview to Sightsavers' cataract work and its room for more funding for cataract surgery.

Sightsavers' cataract work

Sightsavers' cataract work is part of its comprehensive eye health services program, and accounts for the majority of the work within this program. This is integrated with other eye health work; for example, in some cases, a cataract surgery patient also receives eyeglasses afterward to correct refractive error, which are provided by the facilities that Sightsavers supports.

Cataract surgery is included in all of Sightsavers' eye health programs. Sightsavers runs large cataract programs in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2016, it facilitated about 260,000 cataract surgeries.

Budget allocation

In Asia, Sightsavers tends to work in countries with good existing infrastructure. Sightsavers' funding generally supports a range of work including: situational analysis (including rapid assessments of avoidable blindness), community and school eye screening, advocacy and community awareness, refurbishment of existing facilities, construction of new facilities, equipment, consumables, and in

some cases, training. In these countries, Sightsavers tends to work with larger non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which deliver the majority of healthcare, as well as with government. In the countries in Africa where Sightsavers works, there is typically less robust non-governmental infrastructure, and Sightsavers works with ministries of health through their existing systems. Much of its funding in these countries goes to building infrastructure and training eye health professionals in a range of cadres, including ophthalmologists and ophthalmic nurses.

In both locations, the NGOs or governments that Sightsavers works with typically cover staff salaries, while Sightsavers covers other costs (such as consumables and training).

Creating new programs in Africa

When Sightsavers is considering starting a new cataract program in a certain location in Africa, it begins with a situational analysis, which includes:

- Mapping of existing services
- Examining existing prevalence data or commissioning surveys to collect prevalence data (known as rapid assessments of avoidable blindness)
- Eye health systems assessments
- Determining the need for training, equipment, infrastructure, and capital investment

Based on this information, Sightsavers then co-designs projects with its partner organizations. Where possible, it works within existing systems, such as by upgrading an existing facility to enable it to deliver cataract services. In other contexts, it may invest in building new operating theaters.

Sightsavers typically funds these projects via grants to the country's ministry of health. It buys equipment directly from suppliers through its central procurement system to ensure cost-effectiveness and covers the costs of training for eye health professionals in a range of cadres including surgeons and nurses, which it commissions from training institutes.

Room for more funding

Sightsavers could use a large amount of additional funding to scale up its cataract work in both Africa and Asia. In rural settings in Africa, it would use additional funding for building infrastructure, training surgeons and nurses, and increasing

awareness of and demand for cataract services. In Asia, it would use additional funding to increase the volume of cataract surgeries delivered.

Among a number of eye health programs in development, it plans to invest in infrastructure for cataract work in Nigeria, which has a population of about 182 million and a backlog of 460,000 cataract cases, suggesting the largest burden of blindness due to cataracts among countries in Africa. Sightsavers views this as an opportunity to engage in large-scale cataract work, building on its existing partnerships in the country and the work it has done there previously. It is currently working to identify the needs related to cataract services in Nigeria.

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>