

# Setting Up a Counselling Department in an Eye Hospital

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Counselling is an integral part of eye care service delivery at Aravind Eye Hospital. The patient satisfaction has tremendously gone up ever since counsellors were introduced at Aravind. Counselling in eye care is basically done with the following objectives:

- To provide awareness about eye care
- To increase compliance(acceptance) to treatment
- To market the hospital services
- To moderate patient expectations
- To improve the patient satisfaction

A request often received at Aravind after the visiting team has observed and learned about counselling is how to start a counselling department. This article provides an overview of how it is possible to start a counselling department.

To start counselling department, the following steps can be followed:

- Getting sanction of the senior management
- Recruitment and selection of counsellors
- Job Specification
- Induction training for the new counsellor
- Infrastructure requirements
- Counselling aids
- Monitoring performance of counselling

## **Getting sanction of the senior management**

Setting up of a counselling department is often thought to be a good idea by the Administrator or the Manager or the community outreach person, as they directly see the benefit of having a counselling department. It is essential to create an interest in management about the possible benefits that they could derive from counselling. This can be easily

articulated if the hospital is clear about why they require a counselling department. The reasons could include:

- For increasing the number of patients.
- For increasing uptake to services.
- As counsellors have time to spend with the patients to communicate, employing them becomes a cost effective solution. This allows doctors and nurses to focus on activities they are trained in.
- Counsellors are able to speak in a language the patient understands in terms of explaining the medical terminology as well as disease condition using analogies which are familiar to them thus helping the patient to make informed decisions better.

## **Recruitment and selection of counsellors**

### **a) For recruitment there are various options available**

1. Looking at the existing staff of the hospital and seeing whether anyone is interested or can be reassigned to this post.
  2. Finding out whether the existing staff could share the job of a counsellor depending upon the work load.
  3. Hire a new person: This option again is a multiple choice. One could go for trained social worker or could get a graduate or a plus two person with interest in mixing with people. Yet experience shows that the hospital is comfortable neither with the social worker nor does the trained social worker have full satisfaction in the job. So it is better to take a graduate level person or a higher secondary level person and train.
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### The various options for getting candidate

1. Telling the staff about the new vacancy for a counsellor.
2. Communicating to patients and other visitors and stake-holders of the hospital about this vacancy.
3. Communicating with local colleges for recruiting suitable candidates. This should preferably be done when the candidates are in their final semester.
4. Display a notice about the vacancy in the hospital notice board.
5. As a last option, one could also place an advertisement in the local newspaper in the event of other alternatives having failed to provide a candidate.

Once the option is decided the position should be informed to your hospital staff as research shows that it is easier to retain an employee who has been referred by your staff.

#### b) Selection

Quality of the person plays an important role in counselling rather than only the qualification. While selecting a counsellor the personal specifications one has to bear in mind are:

##### *Individual quality of the person:*

1. Pleasant personality
2. Cheerfulness
3. Interested in interacting with people
4. Independent, responsible, bold, bright, smiling.
5. Openness and committed

##### *Skills required:*

6. Ability to empathise
7. Understand and speak local languages
8. Ability to speak multiple languages is an added asset.
9. Able to talk clearly, audibly and politely.
10. Able to develop the conversation.
11. Listens well.

Panelists for interviewing the candidate should comprise of representatives from senior management, human resources department, administrator and also from the counselling department.

### Job Specification

It is important to work out what the counsellor will be required to do. If it is a hospital providing cataract and refractive error services as well as community outreach the counsellor could be used for the following:

1. Communicating to the patients about diseases and systems and about the treatment option.
2. Communicating to the patients about facility offered by the hospital. This should range from room type, payment option and length of stay.
3. Motivating patients who are advised for cataract surgery and are unwilling to undergo the surgery to accept the surgery.
4. Providing information to the patients about what to expect during the operation and other details about operation. Be with the patient just before the operation to remove any fear so that they are at "ease" with themselves.
5. After surgery provide information to the patients about how the surgery went.
6. Provide discharge instructions.
7. Encourage the patients to come for follow check-ups and also to motivate the patients of all discharge instructions.

The hospital can decide which of the above-mentioned choice could work for the hospital. Ultimately the involvement and interest of the counsellors play an important role to reach the goal of counselling.

### Induction Training

1. It is very important that a proper orientation program be conducted to help the candidate to do his/her work properly, as currently there is no centre offering training for counsellors, mainly due to language problem. The following provides alternative to overcome this problem. The counsellor is required to be trained in three areas:
  - a) Clinical details
  - b) About the hospital
  - c) Counselling skills.

#### a. Clinical skills:

It is important that the counsellors should have required knowledge about the disease (s) that he/

she to counsel the patient. This will cover aspects like:

- Anatomy and physiology of the diseases.
- Vision 2020 priority eye diseases.
- Diagnosis–symptoms - treatment options, type of surgery.
- Read and be able to interpret the case sheet what doctors have written to know what has to be explained.
- Pre and post operative instructions - it can be in the printed format in the local language as well as English.

All these may be provided to a counsellor by the ophthalmologist or the senior nurse of your hospital.

**b. About the Hospital: The counsellor needs to be well-versed in:**

- i. Genesis of the hospital
- ii. All the management staff are to be introduced
- iii. The hospital working time
- iv. Policies of the hospital
- v. The facilities offered by the hospital to the patients in terms of room type, food and stay.
- vi. Reimbursement facilities - for state government and central government employees, providing of leave certificate if the person is working as well as corporate reimbursement procedures .

All these can be provided to the counsellors by the administrator or manager of the hospital.

**c. Counselling Skills:**

This is the only area where there might not be expertise in the hospital to train the counsellor. To address this, some of the options available are: send the candidates for a short-term course on a general course in counselling, or source a person from local college offering Masters Degree in social work to come and to run workshop or training programme to help the new person pick up counselling skills. Some of the areas to be covered in this include: principles of counselling, values of counselling, handling difficult patients, improving communication skills, issues of confidentiality and consent, how and why eye care counselling is different from other counselling (problem solving, drug abuse alcoholic etc.) The counsellor must also

know the objective, limitation, and the boundary of counselling. Counselling a psychiatric patient with eye problem as well as counselling to family members all require additional counselling skills.

**Infrastructure**

To provide counselling especially if it is more than one counsellor one would need to decide in terms of whether a separate centralised counselling department should be started or counsellors will be spread across the different departments. For the counselling to take place there must be a desk, chairs, registers and shelf. However with eye diseases like cataract, there is no stigma attached to the person who has it unlike in the case of HIV or it does not have major psychological issues like in cancer, privacy hence is not as big an issue for eye care counselling as it is compared to other diseases. However one does need to think of space and furniture requirements like desk, chair, and shelf.

**Counselling Aids**

Counselling does not involve oral communication only between the patient and the counsellor. The process of counselling can be enhanced by the use of counselling aids like: Simple intraocular lens, model of eye, patient education brochures, posters, leaflets. All these help the patient to understand the disease much better. There are lots of materials available on the Vision 2020 e-resource website: [www.laico.org/v2020resource/homepage.htm](http://www.laico.org/v2020resource/homepage.htm). These materials include Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) by the patients on various topics. It also contains job description of the counsellor as well as other articles related to counsellor including a manual on counselling.

**Monitoring Performance of Counselling**

Once counsellor is appointed one needs to know whether they are impacting on improving patient satisfaction. For this patient satisfaction surveys are very useful. It is also important to monitor the counsellors performance. This can be done by evaluating the following:

- a. Acceptance rate - Ratio of number of patients accepting cataract surgery to Total number advised for cataract surgery.

- b. Follow up rate - Ratio of number of people who turn up for the follow up, to total number advised for surgery.
- c. During the initial period (after a month) a feedback survey can be conducted in counselling itself.

### **Conclusion**

Putting all this in place it is possible to introduce counselling. To reach the Vision 2020 goals developing the cadre of counsellors is important for human resource development. This way a lot of barriers to utilization of eye care services can be reduced.