

Visually Impaired Medical Practitioners

When you think of a doctor or a nurse or any medical professional for that matter, what comes to mind is a picture of a person who is there to help you come out of your acute ailment or to chart a course for your chronic condition – and we take some things for granted, that the person treating you is healthy, happy and has all their senses intact and primed to pick out your symptoms. Nothing more can be said about the first two, which have been talked about extensively, but the senses are something we all need to know about.

The five senses we have known of since our first science class – vision, smell, hearing, taste and touch – all form an important part of the clinician's toolkit in establishing a diagnosis; except perhaps for taste. A doctor sees the patients' mannerisms, hears their complaints, and elicits various signs by the same touch that they use to comfort the patient. When such a multitude of tasks depend on the most primary senses, is it possible for a doctor to function without them?

This was the question asked by the National Human Rights Commission when it questioned the decision of AIIMS, New Delhi to not let a final year student – who had developed sudden onset blindness – graduate with an MBBS degree. At the time, the authorities argued that the disability was a severe one and the student could not work in the medical profession. Subsequently he was offered a degree in Human Biology. This story however, was just the start of the equal opportunity movement, which sought to elevate the disabled groups into normal professional jobs at the same level as their peers. In the year 1977, Dr Y.G. Parameshwara became the first blind doctor of India and only the second blind doctor in the whole world. He too lost his vision in his final year – due to

retinal haemorrhage – and despite the obstacles and repeated failures, persevered on to receive his degree, serving as an inspiration for millions and proving that visual impairment is not a permanent obstacle for the medical profession.



Dr Y.G.
Parameshwara,
India's first
blind doctor

But barriers still persist, despite a quota for disabled individuals in higher professional courses and government jobs, the requirement of 70% or less disability and the fact that interviewers have an individual bias during recruitment have ensured a not-so-equal situation in the case of the visually impaired. The latest case popped up in 2022, when a student who had qualified NEET-PG was denied entry into the psychiatry course because visual impairment makes them ineligible to become a psychiatrist. It has emerged, in this case that the individuals who framed the criteria for recruitment themselves took the interview, putting a major bias on the selection.

While such cases might feel justified to the average reader, who might believe that the visually impaired are not fit to be doctors; research has proven this thought to be untrue. While visual impairment caused significant difficulty for the affected physician, it did not affect how they treated their

patients or the quality of care provided during the course of their medical career.

To summarise the points so far, apart from personal obstacles, visual impairment does not make anyone less capable of being and working as a doctor. It is now up to us to open our minds and systems to making our facilities and institutions more conducive for such individuals to add value. Let us begin by making small changes – making campuses disabled friendly and converting textbooks to audio format to enable them to have the same level of knowledge and skillset as everyone else. Instead of glorifying the struggles of the past, as has been the case so far, we should strive to make a better future for all, together.