

Hearing impairment

It is very important to consider those patients who are hard of hearing and in need of eye health services, as well as the large number of patients with combined visual and hearing impairments. Results from a population-based study in Telangana state, India, suggested that 25% of people with visual impairment also had an additional moderate or severe hearing impairment.⁸ It is easy to imagine how difficult it might be for them to get information and to communicate with health workers during the COVID pandemic, and all the stress this brings. Recommendations for medical personnel to facilitate communication with patients who are deaf, hard of hearing or deafblind⁹ include the following:

- 1 Integrate accessible communication in pandemic preparedness plans. During a pandemic,

health systems are overwhelmed. It is essential that medical facilities optimise accessible communication with patients with all types of impairments before a pandemic, so that they are prepared accordingly.

- 2 Every hospital should have pen and paper, or whiteboards and markers, so that people with hearing impairments can communicate with health care workers.
- 3 Transparent (see-through) face masks offers speech reading (lip reading) advantages for listeners with severe-to-profound hearing losses, especially in noisy hospital settings.¹⁰ Instructions for self-made transparent masks are circulating in social media; however, these masks have not been tested against common safety standards, so the level of protection they provide may be no greater than that of a fabric mask.

CASE STUDY: INDIA

An eye hospital's humanitarian response to COVID-19

NIRPHAD (Naujhil Integrated Rural Project for Health and Development) Rural Eye Hospital is a secondary eye hospital in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Northern India. It focuses mainly on eye patients from vulnerable populations and has strong links to community-based rehabilitation services, as well as organisations of people with disabilities.

Since the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the eye hospital offered services to emergency

Figure 1 NIRPHAD Rural Eye Hospital distributed sanitation packs to people queuing in front of the hospital's entrance



Figure 2 NIRPHAD Rural Eye Hospital distributed food and sanitation packs to a man with a physical disability who is using a three-wheeled vehicle



patients only. At the same time, staff members decided to organise humanitarian response activities. NIRPHAD Rural Eye Hospital is located next to one of the main national highways in India, and the sudden announcement of a national lockdown in India at the end of March resulted in thousands of migrant workers passing by on their way back to their homes in rural villages. Hospital staff members handed out around 1,500 sanitisation kits and food packs in this time (Figure 1).

Eye hospital personnel also started to distribute soap, masks and food to poor and vulnerable people in Mathura town, focusing on people with disabilities (Figures 2 and 3). This targeted humanitarian response was possible because the health workers already had access to information about people with disabilities in the community, including where they live, thanks to a disability-disaggregated community survey that was conducted before the pandemic.

Personnel trained in disability-inclusive development supported the district authorities to provide accessible health information, for example by using plain language that is understood easily by everybody, including people with cognitive disabilities.

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Figure 3 A man with visual and physical impairment received food and a sanitation kit



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