**PRESS RELEASE**

**Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex lauds efforts to save premature babies’ sight in Hyderabad**

*The Vice-Patron of The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust is on a two-day visit to the city to support their work to address Retinopathy of Prematurity in the State of Telangana.*

**Hyderabad, 29 April 2019:** HRH The Countess of Wessex, in her capacity as Vice-Patron of The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust (the Trust), visited Hyderabad’s two large government hospitals, the Gandhi Medical College and Hospital and Niloufer Hospital for Women and Children. The Countess was here to see how the support from the Trust is preventing babies born prematurely from losing their sight.

India is home to the highest number of premature births in the world – some 26 per cent of all preterm babies are born in India. Since 2007, the Government of India has rapidly accelerated efforts to reduce infant mortality, setting up neonatal units all over the country to improve the outcomes of those born too soon. But as children were surviving, more and more cases of blindness were emerging.

Retinopathy of prematurity (ROP) is the leading cause of childhood blindness worldwide. The disease exclusively affects preterm babies, as the blood vessels at the back of the eye have not had a chance to fully develop before birth. Premature babies are often given oxygen in the incubator to survive, but too much oxygen is highly toxic and can lead to total and irreversible sight loss.

On a two-day visit to Hyderabad, The Countess interacted with heads of Gandhi Medical College, Niloufer Hospital for Women and Children and other government sector paediatricians and eye care specialists in the city working on ROP.

At the Special Neonatal Care Unit in Gandhi Medical College and Hospital, The Countess saw babies born at just 28 weeks, weighing as little as 650 grams, being carefully monitored to prevent ROP. It was here that she met with ophthalmologists, paediatricians and nurses who have all been trained under the Trust’s programme to provide the high level of care required to prevent blindness occurring in these early and most fragile days of life.

Her next visit was to the Special Neonatal Care Unit at Niloufer Hospital. Here, The Countess presented two neonatal cameras to the Director of Medical Education Dr K Ramesh Reddy, which are crucial for retinal screening of newborn babies at risk of vision loss. One of the cameras will be used to screen and treat preterm babies at the Nalgonda District Hospital, a hospital in the state of Telangana which serves a population of over 3 million people.

At the meeting Her Royal Highness met three-year old Rishita, who was born at 28 weeks and weighed just 650 grams, together with Dr Damera Yadaiah of Nalgonda District Hospital who battled to save her life, and later her sight when she developed ROP in her first weeks of life. The Countess learnt about Rishita’s journey and how her story of survival now provides hope to countless patents across the region.

The Countess interacted with Dr Subhadra Jalali, ROP specialist at LV Prasad Eye Institute where they talked about how the Trust’s efforts have been critical in tackling the rapidly increasing occurrences of ROP in preterm babies. Speaking to trainees at the hospital, The Countess said “I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Jalali a few weeks ago in London. To come here and see for myself what you are doing, is fantastic… you are creating a lasting legacy. The Trust has always wanted a legacy that will last on into the future and this is what you are doing. It is going to have a huge impact on the lives of thousands of children long into the future.”

The Director of Medical Education, Dr Ravinder Reddy reiterated Telangana State’s commitment to eliminating avoidable blindness and added, “we are happy and grateful to The Countess for her commitment to arresting and eliminating Retinopathy of Prematurity in our new-borns”.

Before the Trust’s programme began in 2014, there were no national services in place to detect and treat ROP in India. The ROP project was started in 2014 by the Public Health Foundation of India in association with London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and supported by the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust, UK. There was little knowledge of the condition within neonatal care or understanding of the need to screen and treat the condition within the first 30 days of life. During the visit, The Countess witnessed first-hand how the Trust, working under the leadership of the Government of India and the Public Health Foundation of India, has improved neonatal services across the country and through its partners is providing screening and treatment for ROP in hospitals across four districts in India, serving a population of over 47 million people.

The Trust, a time-limited charitable foundation set up in 2012 to mark The Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, is working to help end avoidable forms of blindness and to empower young leaders across the Commonwealth. In January 2020, it will cease to exist, having successfully completed its five-year programmes and created a lasting legacy in honour of The Queen.

**Notes to editors**

For more information or to request interviews with Dr GVS Murthy, please contact Public Health Foundation of India Press Office

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**About The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust**

The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust is a charitable foundation established in 2012 to mark and celebrate Her Majesty The Queen’s 60-year contribution to the Commonwealth at the time of her Diamond Jubilee.

The Trust has received donation from governments, corporate partners, trusts, foundations, community groups and individuals from across the Commonwealth. Its mission is to enrich the lives of people from all backgrounds within the Commonwealth, and its programmes work in alliance towards eliminating avoidable blindness and to empower a new generation of young leaders.

With a five-year timeframe in which to deliver successful programmes, the Trust’s aim is to leave a lasting legacy, owned by the whole Commonwealth, to honour Her Majesty The Queen.

For more information visit [www.jubileetribute.org](http://www.jubileetribute.org)

**About Retinopathy of Prematurity**

Retinopathy of prematurity is a condition that exclusively affects preterm babies, as their retinal blood vessels have not had a chance to fully develop before birth. Premature babies are often given oxygen in the incubator to survive, but too much oxygen is highly toxic to immature retinal blood vessels, causing total and irreversible blindness.

Some babies only develop the milder forms of ROP, which resolves without treatment, but up to 10 per cent can develop the sight-threatening form, which can progress to retinal detachment and total blindness without urgent laser treatment.

The disease usually starts to develop a few weeks after birth. The first screening examination for ROP should take place by 30 days after birth when many babies are still in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Even the smallest babies, some weighing only 500 grams at birth, can be screened safely, even if they are in an incubator. Screening should continue every one or two weeks until risk of ROP has passed or the baby needs urgent treatment. The purpose of regular screening is to identify babies who develop the serious stages of ROP who must receive laser treatment as a matter of urgency, which needs to be done by a trained ophthalmologist. High-quality care of preterm newborn babies, coupled with regular screening with treatment when required are essential for preventing blindness from ROP.

**About The Trust’s Retinopathy of Prematurity Initiative**

The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust is working to increase awareness of ROP across India and develop programmes to detect and treat this condition, and so prevent more young children needlessly going blind. The Trust’s Initiative has introduced national guidelines to help more states implement their own screening and treatment programmes. From Maharashtra in the west right down to Tamil Nadu in the south, ophthalmologists, nurses and health staff are being trained to prevent, detect and treat retinopathy before it can cause irreversible blindness in premature babies.

**Key achievements:**

* Services have been set up to screen for and treat ROP in 21 hospitals across 4 districts in India, serving a population of over 47 million people.
* Through these new services, nearly 10,000 babies have been screened for ROP and referred for treatment if needed
* Training has been provided to health care workers (paediatricians, ophthalmologists and nurses) in 71 special care neonatal units to improve the care provided to premature babies, preventing the risk of ROP.
* Workshops have been set up to support parents who have a child affected by ROP.

**About the Public Health Foundation of India**

The Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI) is working towards building a healthier India. It is helping to address the limited institutional and systems capacity in India by strengthening education and training, advancing research and technology and facilitating policy and practice in the area of Public Health. PHFI is headquartered in New Delhi with national presence through its constituent units of four regional Indian Institutes of Public Health (IIPH) and Centres of Applied Research in core public health themes. The Foundation, established in 2006 as a public private initiative, is governed by an independent board comprising of senior government officials, eminent Indian and International academic and leaders, civil society representatives and corporate leaders. For more information visit www.phfi.org

**About Gandhi Medical College and Hospital, Hyderabad**

Gandhi Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) is one of the biggest tertiary care hospitals in public sector in India. It is also a premier institute for post-doctoral medical education and training in the state of Telangana. Over 1800 patients visit GMCH each day. The Trust’s ROP programme began at GMCH in 2016. So far three ophthalmologists have been trained who have screened hundreds of babies for ROP.

For more information visit [www.gandhihospital.in/](http://www.gandhihospital.in/)

**About LV Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad**

LVPEI's mission is to provide equitable and efficient eye care to all sections of society.

Established in 1987, L V Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI), a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Prevention of Blindness, is a comprehensive eye health facility. The Institute offers comprehensive patient care, sight enhancement and rehabilitation services and high-impact rural eye health programs. It also pursues cutting-edge research and offers training in human resources for all levels of ophthalmic personnel.

LVPEI mentors nurses and ophthalmologists at the district hospitals in screening and treatment of ROP.

For more information visit [www.lvpei.org](http://www.lvpei.org)

**About Niloufer District Hospital, Hyderabad**

Niloufer Hospital for Women and Children is a quaternary care hospital for obstetric, paediatrics, neonatology and maternal foetal medicine. It is one of the largest hospitals of its kind in Asia with advanced training.

With a bed strength of 500 Niloufer has advanced maternity, paediatric, paediatric surgery services supported by diagnostic facilities. The unit is recognised as a training centre for neonatology. It is a very large unit, with 10,000 low birth weight / preterm admissions each year but there was no programme for screening and treatment of for ROP. The ROP programme at Niloufer began in 2015. So far 2 ophthalmologists have been trained to screen for and treat ROP and supported over 2,000 babies.

For more information visit [www.nilouferhospital.in/](http://www.nilouferhospital.in/)