

Plenary Lecture 1

Speaker: Dr. Mohamad Aziz Salowi

The Cataract Free Zone Project



Opening the plenary session at the recently held 31st Malaysia-Singapore Joint Ophthalmic Congress (MSJOC) in Pullman Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, Dr. Mohamad Aziz Salowi, Ophthalmologist (Public Health), Ministry of Health, Malaysia, presented and discussed key highlights of Malaysia's Cataract Free Zone Project (Projek Zon Bebas Katarak).

The Cataract Free Zone Project is the prevention of blindness component of the eye-health initiative of the Malaysian Ministry of Health. Started in

January 2015, this project was based on population survey data, National Eye Survey II in 2014 (NES 2014). The National Eye Survey III will happen in 2019.

The project's main objectives, noted Dr. Salowi, are:

- To create access and provide equal and equitable affordable comprehensive eye care to people in both rural and urban areas
- To reduce prevalence of blindness/cataract blindness
- To increase cataract surgical coverage (CSC) and cataract surgical rate (CSR)

With a total population of 28.33 million, Malaysia has an average of 1.2% prevalence of blindness with Sabah having the highest prevalence (1.9%), followed by Sarawak (1.6%), Northern Territory (1.5%), Eastern (1.4%), Southern (0.9%) and Central (0.5%).

There was no significant difference between genders within the different zones. However, emphasized Dr. Salowi, illegal immigrants in Sabah have a significantly higher prevalence of blindness compared to the local population.

To illustrate the magnitude of blindness and low vision in Malaysia, noted Dr. Salowi, the numbers speak for themselves. Based on the NES 2014 population, cataract is the main cause of blindness (58%) and low vision (68%). These figures, translate to:

- 413,000 are visually impaired (presenting vision <6/18 in the better eye);
- 113,000 are blind (presenting vision <6/60 in the better eye).
- 668,000 cataract surgeries need to be done on visually impaired eyes (corrected vision <6/18)
- 1.3 million cataract eyes (corrected vision <6/12)

The better news is that, according to Dr. Salowi, 80% of these cases are preventable and/or treatable. To address this issue, different components of the Cataract Free Zone Project 2015-2019 are working together to eliminate blindness in Malaysia by the year 2020.

The core components (Outreach) include Klinik Katarak 1Malaysia (KK1M) and the Cataract Finder Program. Other components (Hospital) include community screening/awareness, cataract carnivals, enhancement of output by 'Inter-hospital Cataract Care Pathway Standardization', among others.

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Dr. Mohamad Aziz Salowi, Ophthalmologist (Public Health), Ministry of Health, Malaysia

“One year after its launch, the Cataract Free Zone Project is proven to be able to reach out to the population,” shared Dr. Salowi.

However, emphasized Dr. Salowi, the project is a collaboration among members of the community, the Ministry of Health, private institutions, universities, and even the army.

“The strategies deployed can possibly reduce prevalence of blindness/cataract blindness and increase cataract surgical coverage (CSC) and cataract surgical rate (CSR) for the country,” he said.

The project’s success also depends largely on the participation and contribution of surgeons, optometrists and paramedics. “Please see beyond the day to day clinical work in hospital,” Dr. Salowi appealed to the meeting’s delegation. “The solution to the problem is in the community. Many blind people outside of the hospital have no access to eye care,” he added.

“Blind people do not come by percentages, hundreds, thousands or millions; they come by ‘persons’. How many is considered too many? One blind person is too many,” Dr. Salowi concluded.