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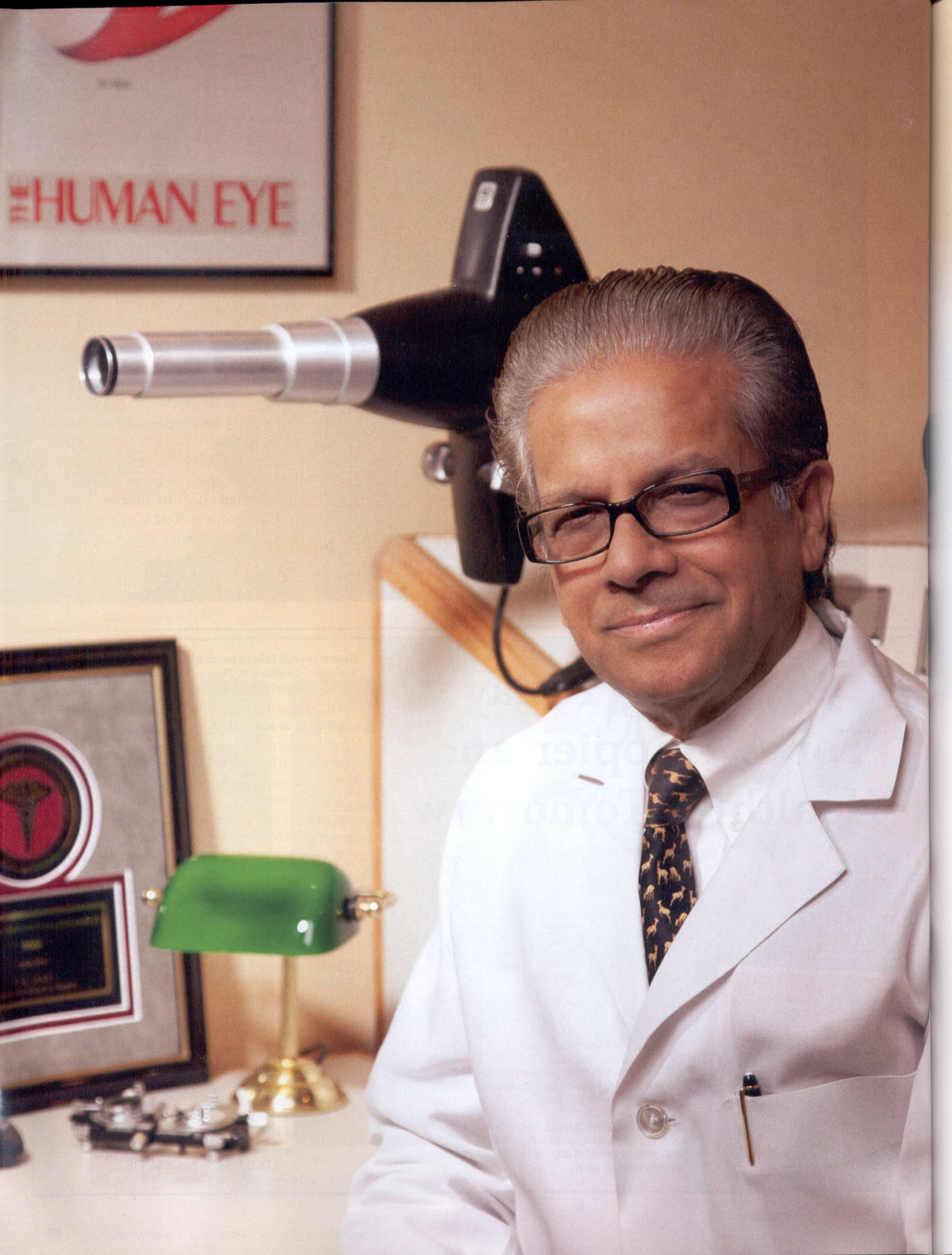
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THE MIRACLE MAKER

Dr. V.K. Raju

**Back to
the Future**
The New Tech Park

**THE HEARTBEAT
OF HEALTH CARE**



The Miracle Maker

A Global Outreach

The institute, also a teaching hospital, has trained 200 ophthalmologists, served 400,000 patients and performed 20,000 surgeries.

BY JIM
MATUGA

CHILDHOOD BLINDNESS is a pressing issue worldwide, primarily in developing countries where access to health care is often very limited. The Eye Foundation of America (EFA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving vision and eliminating avoidable blindness by delivering eye care to those who need it most, often bringing it right to their doorstep—and EFA is doing this work from right here in West Virginia.

The Eye Foundation of America was established in 1979 in Morgantown by V.K. Raju, M.D. EFA grew out of Raju's passion for providing services and treatment near his birthplace in Rajahmundry, a town in Southeast India's Andhra Pradesh. Raju organized teams to go to remote regions and deliver eye care in areas where there otherwise was none. These traveling clinics were known as eye camps. Eye camps remain a standard part of the foundation's services today as outreach programs.

Visually impaired or blind children grow up without the same advantages as sighted children. Unable to read and write, they often cannot support themselves

as adults and become a burden on their families and communities. According to the World Health Organization, there are as many as 1.4 million blind children worldwide. Every minute, one child goes blind. Additionally, combating childhood blindness has been identified by the World Bank as the most cost-effective of health interventions.

Most childhood blindness is caused by illness and disease that occurs early in life; many eye problems or defects are inherited. In low- to middle-income countries, the number of children born blind is high and other childhood eye problems are more prevalent because medical care is not available or affordable. Often the conditions must be treated early or the child remains blind throughout life. Sixty percent of children die within one to two years after they become blind.

"Education is a great equalizer for children from impoverished families. It can allow them to lead productive lives full of opportunity," says Raju. "Without sight to help them experience their world, blind children often experience a life full of setbacks. Normal development is hindered and education becomes difficult or even impossible. Much of early learning—as much as 80 percent—comes to children through vision. As blind children mature, they find it difficult to learn a trade or start a career. They realize only a fraction of their own potential throughout their lives, which often span 75 years or more."

The great misfortune is that much childhood blindness is easily avoided, prevented, treated or cured. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that as much as half of all childhood blindness can be avoided by treating diseases early and by correcting abnormalities at birth.

For 32 years, Raju has dedicated virtually all the spare time he has outside his busy ophthalmological practice in Morgantown and has used his own funds to cover many of the expenses.

ExEdge

A recent analysis of data indicates that vitamin A deficiency is the leading cause of childhood blindness. It was estimated that 70 percent of the 500,000 children who become blind annually do so because of this deficiency.

Source: <http://lighthouse.org/about-low-vision-blindness/causes-of-blindness/>



Dr. Raju examines a young patient in an eye camp.



Goutami *Eye Institute*

- 386 outreach camps for adults and 64 camps for children have been established
- 34,000 school children per year have been screened since 2007
- 500 teachers have been trained to perform eye screenings on children
- 22 fellows from Nigeria, Afghanistan, China, India, Denmark and the U.S. have received training
- 65,000 outpatient visits have occurred at the base hospital
- 20,000 surgeries have been performed
- 4 continuing medical education programs have been attended by 92 ophthalmologists
- 22 children residing in schools for the blind have received surgery and were restored with functional vision
- 1,500 pediatric surgeries have been performed
- 3,843 tribal members have been operated on for cataracts

Around the World

The Eye Foundation of America provides services across the globe. EFA has helped prevent blindness in many countries, including:

Afghanistan	Philippines
Iraq	Vietnam
Nigeria	India
Peru	Bangladesh
Namibia	Nepal
Uganda	Pakistan
Mali	Cambodia
Malawi	Indonesia
Ethiopia	United States

EFA has recently partnered locally and internationally with Rotary International in its mission of eliminating avoidable blindness in children. Much in the same way that Rotary International led the crusade to eradicate polio worldwide through PolioPlus, Raju hopes that through Rotary a worldwide initiative can mobilize to have a lasting positive effect on children in developing countries forever. EFA has been working with rotary clubs in India since 1980.

EFA provides services in 18 countries, including Peru, Namibia, Uganda, Mali, Malawi, Ethiopia, Philippines, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, Cambodia, Indonesia and the United States. Raju conducted training and free surgeries in India and Iran in November 2011. The organization has built modern eye hospitals in India and trained ophthalmic assistants and other personnel to carry on its work. EFA provides workshops and fellowships for physicians and medical students throughout the world. It also conducts research to find better ways of preventing blindness, to learn how to distribute vitamins and supplements efficiently and to determine how to maximize its efforts so that it can do more with less.

In 2006, Raju and EFA founded the Goutami Eye Institute, a fully-equipped eye hospital in Rajahmundry, India, with a wing dedicated to children's eye problems. The institute, also a teaching hospital, has trained 200 ophthalmologists, served 400,000 patients and performed 20,000 surgeries in the short time it has been in operation.

Service is simply eye care delivery—the most visible part of what EFA does. It ranges from conducting eye examinations to performing eye surgery that restores sight or corrects vision problems. Service may be delivered in an eye camp that travels to a remote area near a patient's home. Some patients are transported to hospitals for treatment and crucial follow-up care. Others visit the eye hospitals EFA has built near their homes.

The conditions EFA most often treats are strabismus, also known as crossed eyes; cataracts, which many children in developing countries are born with, and corneal dystrophy, or scarring of the cornea, which may be caused by repeated infection, disease or other irritation and may require a corneal transplant. Such medical and surgical interventions usually take little time and are inexpensive. Surgical removal of the cataracts obscuring a child's vision takes only 30 minutes to perform and costs approximately \$500.

Delivering vitamin A is also inexpensive. Each child needs only two doses per year to prevent blindness and provide protection against many other diseases. The cost of this important and life-saving supplement is a mere 50 cents per dose.

Raju is a proud ambassador for West Virginia as he continues his efforts to eliminate avoidable blindness in children worldwide through missions and speaking engagements around the world. For more information on EFA, visit www.eyefoundationofamerica.org. ■

*Photography by Tracy Toler and
the Eye Foundation of America*

