

A global community

A landmark initiative from the International Association of Contact Lens Educators is helping to ensure the safe use of contact lenses worldwide

Ipsita Hom Roy is a final-year optometry student at Manipal University in Karnataka. Along with teaching staff and other students, she is watching a live lecture on corneal topography from contact lens educator Dr Shehzad Naroo. Dr Naroo is in his office at Aston University in Birmingham, UK.

Ipsita is one of more than 1,000 students and educators so far to take part in a groundbreaking programme of online lectures, broadcast live in countries across the world thanks to the International Association of Contact Lens Educators (IACLE) and support from its sponsors within the contact lens industry.

Established 35 years ago - IACLE is dedicated to raising the standard of contact lens education and promoting the safe use of contact lenses worldwide. Web Lectures are just one of a raft of initiatives since IACLE introduced major changes to its leadership and membership structure.

Dr Naroo took over as IACLE President in 2011 with Professor Philip Morgan of the University of Manchester as Vice President. Membership was simplified to encourage



IACLE is creating a global community of contact lens educators

more educators and associates in industry to join. And in 2013 the organisation moved its Annual General Meeting (AGM) to Europe to coincide with the British Contact Lens Association Clinical Conference, the world's largest annual contact lens meeting.

But for Dr Naroo, the main step forward for IACLE has been extending its global reach. 'We are limited with funding so embracing technology has been an important development for us. Being able to deliver distance-learning programmes, and especially live lectures reaching multiple institutions simultaneously – this allows international engagement, directly with keynote speakers in the field.'



Candidates during the Fellowship Exam



The IACLE India Team



Being a member of IACLE has brought many benefits for contact lens educator Professor Monica Chaudhry, Head of the Department of Optometry and Vision Science at Amity University Haryana in Gurgaon. 'It gave me confidence in the subject. It enhanced my career as educator. It gave me opportunities to interact with global leaders in this field. It gave me resources through which I could perform my task as an educator in the best way. And I gained recognition and respect amongst my colleagues,' she says. 'IACLE was the turning point in contact lens practice and education in India.'

Going places

IACLE's Web Lectures were first piloted by Dr Naroo, via Skype at a hospital training centre in Pakistan. Director of Educational Programs Nilesh Thite then took the trial to the next level, using the WebEx platform to broadcast live to four priority institutions in India.

Since then, expertise has been shared across the Americas, with educators and students in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Perú among the latest to benefit. Many more lectures are planned, in countries such as China, Korea and Taiwan.

IACLE coordinates these events with local members in priority countries, arranges the speakers and works with educators to set the topics. Lectures average 45 minutes, followed by a question and answer session, and students are encouraged to contact the presenter afterwards if they wish.

'The Web Lectures are fantastic, says Dr Naroo. 'This week I delivered a lecture to 14 institutions signed in worldwide. It's the first time we've had so many. We have such a reach with these lectures and so many students potentially taking part. It's amazing to think of people sitting listening to you thousands of miles away. And the feedback we get from the students is very positive, they're very appreciative.'

The lectures are also raising the profile of IACLE's work around the world. 'When you visit these countries – through IACLE I've been to Korea, Argentina, India and Pakistan – and meet people face to face, there's a lot of respect that our organisation is helping them increase their knowledge.'

Ipsita has certainly found the experience valuable. She has already attended four Web Lectures, delivered by educators from the UK and India. 'The lectures give us the opportunity to

hear experts from different corners of the globe and will help us go on to be successful clinicians. This method of teaching and learning will definitely add value to contact lens practice," she says.

Essential resources

Live online lectures are just one of a range of programs offered by IACLE, which is the leading provider of educational and information resources for contact lens educators.

The IACLE Contact Lens Course is a 10-module programme of lectures, practical sessions and tutorials, in print and DVD Rom formats, for members to download and use in teaching. The Distance Learning Program is a self-study programme to help new educators improve their own contact lens knowledge and teaching skills. And Student Trial Exams can be used to test final-year and postgraduate students' knowledge.

The IACLE Case Report Series comprises 15 interactive problem-based presentations for use in tutorials



and lectures or as a self-study aid for students. Along with other multi-media resources, all these resources are available free to members via the IACLE website, moreover, they are translated into several languages for wider reach. Members also receive Information Interface, an email service with links to key papers from journals and other sources, and a monthly e-newsletter.

IACLE's Fellowship Program, which allows successful candidates to apply for coveted FIACLE status in recognition of their contact lens knowledge and skill, is understandably one of its most popular programs/offerings. Held every two years, the latest Fellowship Exam took place in November 2013.

Train the Trainer and Members' Meetings are also held regularly in priority countries, and Dr Naroo regards these as a crucial part of IACLE's work. "The meetings ensure that educators have confidence in passing on their skills and share ideas for good practice. It surprises me sometimes the lack of confidence, rather than ability, of some trainers and it's great that IACLE is able to tease out these qualities."

Rewarding achievements

IACLE's resources and programs are well established but other plans are set to raise its profile further. In 2013 the association introduced its first Travel Award, giving a member who would otherwise be unable to attend the BCLA Clinical Conference the chance to participate in the event. Nepalese optometrist Kishor Sapkota received the award and travelled to the UK for the conference and accompanying IACLE Education Day.

This year the Awards will be extended to recognise and reward achievements in contact lens education worldwide, with an IACLE Educator of the Year Award given for each of the three regions and another given for an overall winner.

The 3rd World Congress on Contact Lens Education, planned for Manchester in May 2015, will be the next big event for IACLE and will bring together educators and industry partners for a two-day meeting ahead of the BCLA conference in Liverpool, UK. The aim is to set the educational scene for the next decade.

IACLE is also looking at the potential for a virtual conference, and a global awareness event to promote contact lenses in the education sector and beyond.



Challenging times

For all its success, there are major challenges ahead. IACLE received its first funding in 1992, providing a launch pad for many educational programs and resources worldwide. As funding grew throughout the 90s, it was able to expand its scope but funds have diminished over the past decade as companies have merged and gone through difficult economic times.

As a result, IACLE has had to allocate resources carefully and limit how it grows its presence. Current platinum sponsor Alcon, silver sponsors CooperVision and The Vision Care Institute of Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, and bronze sponsor Bausch + Lomb together continue to support IACLE. To expand its activities once again, it has modified its funding structure in the hope of attracting new sponsors.

Dr Naroo explains: "We make the best possible use of the sponsorship we receive and our return on investment, though medium-term, is increasing the number of lens wearers worldwide through excellent education. It's great that key people across the industry share this ethos."

As to the wider challenges facing the contact lens industry and profession, Dr Naroo finds these harder to pin down. "I suppose the answer is a combination of things and the challenges are different in different markets," he observes.

"In Asia-Pacific the challenge would be to increase the number of trained practitioners to increase the contact lens market. In Europe the challenge may be related to dropout, and maybe in North America to the internet, which challenges the traditional retail model of contact lenses."

"What IACLE can do is train the future generation so there's a market there that they can move in to. Without those trained educators there won't be the trained professionals so there won't be a market. It's a long-term approach."

But the ultimate beneficiary of IACLE's work, for Dr Naroo, is the patient. "IACLE's mission is to ensure that wherever someone goes to have contact lenses fitted they are seen by a skilled practitioner, their aftercare is done by a skilled practitioner and the management of their contact lens needs is by a skilled practitioner."

In turn this will mean happier patients, happier practitioners – as their patients are more loyal and less likely to drop out of wearing contact lenses – and happier manufacturers, as we see the whole sector grow and invest in better products for patients for the safe future of contact lenses."

Looking ahead

Funds permitting, IACLE would also extend its role to new parts of the world.

"Russia, for instance, is deemed a priority country by the industry," says Dr Naroo. "We're working hard with Russian educators to try and launch IACLE there in a bigger way but we don't have an active presence there as yet. When they want our help, we're ready."

"In addition to our priority countries, we're looking to increase our presence in Africa. There are good opportunities in East African countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia, where there are trained professionals who want to move education forward, so we might want to make our own move there."

IACLE has already been approached by two Middle Eastern countries – Qatar and Saudi Arabia – where it traditionally has not had a major presence. "The Middle East and Africa may need to be a separate region or regions, since their requirements are different from Europe and they have different levels of training. At the moment we group them together. I can see that changing in the near future."

IACLE in numbers...

- 841 active members in 71 countries
- 3 regions: Asia Pacific, Americas, and Europe/Middle East-Africa
- 3 shared secretariats: in Canada, Australia and India
- 5 local offices: Tianjin China, Shanghai China, Korea, Indonesia, Peru
- 7 global priority countries: Taiwan, Mexico, India, Russia, Brazil, Korea, China
- 598 institutions reached in 2013
- 20,930 students reached in 2013
- 171 Resource Centres worldwide
- 106 meetings held in 2013

Back at Manipal University, Ipsita's teacher Premjit Bhakat is already seeing the benefits of being part of a global community. "We've had good experience with IACLE. It's helped us increase our knowledge and become good practitioners. And with IACLE's help, we're in touch with all the major educators and researchers in contact lenses."

With continued support from its members and industry partners, IACLE hopes to help many more students like Ipsita in future and increase the number of skilled contact lens practitioners around the world.

This article is based on a feature first published in the UK journal, Optician. For more information visit www.iacle.org and view a sample Web Lecture on IACLE's YouTube channel.

Dr Shehzad Naroo (r) with IACLE team members (l-r): Global Operations Manager Siobhan Allen, Global Education Manager Lakshmi Shinde, Director of Educational Programs Niles Thite, and Director of Operations Bonnie Boshart

