

ijo

Indian Journal of
Ophthalmology



official journal of
ALL INDIA OPHTHALMOLOGICAL SOCIETY

ISSN : 0301-4738
Vol 68, Issue 6, June 2020



International Association of Contact Lens Educators: Exceptional education—Exponential impact

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The International Association of Contact Lens Educators (IACLE) is the leading provider of educational and information resources essential to contact lens educators worldwide. The New IACLE Contact Lens Course is its most important resource, used by members around the world to teach their students, the contact lens practitioners of the future. In 2019, IACLE celebrated the 40th Anniversary of its founding meeting. In this article, we trace the early years of the organization and describes its impact on contact lens education in India.

Key words: Asia-Pacific, contact lens, education, modules

Over four decades, one organization has influenced the lives of an estimated 250 million people around the world who have experienced the benefits of contact lenses. The International Association of Contact Lens Educators (IACLE) held its founding meeting of just 16 educators on 6 November 1979.

Since then, IACLE has brought together a total of 2,500 members at 1,500 institutions in 91 countries, who have instilled their knowledge to as many as 170,000 students. In turn, that knowledge has been instrumental in fitting approximately 250 million contact lens wearers worldwide. Working together, the global impact of IACLE, its members, and industry partners has been exponential.

In the early years, IACLE meetings were held annually in Europe. But from 1990-1991, the first major meetings to take place outside Europe began in the Asia Pacific region. The following year saw the formation of a new regional structure, each region having its own office bearers. IACLE would then grow into a global network of educators that was to extend its reach around the world.

Educators held a meeting in November 1979 and agreed to establish what was to become IACLE. Around 16 attended, from France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Switzerland, and Germany, and also from the US, Australia, South Africa, and Canada, all representing their colleges/schools and contact lens teaching programs. Australian researcher Brien Holden was present, and the Bausch and Lomb (B and L) representative, who acted as facilitator, was George Mertz [Fig. 1].

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Received: 09-Nov-2019

Revision: 26-Dec-2019

Accepted: 02-Jan-2020

Published: 25-May-2020

Access this article online

Website:

www.ijo.in

DOI:

10.4103/ijo.IJO_2065_19

Quick Response Code:



Three major areas of interest were identified:

- Comparing curricula of contact lens education
- Exchanging educational materials
- Sharing didactic methods and courses on various contact lens topics.

B and L offered to facilitate these exchanges, while educators and institutions would organize the content of events. A similar educational meeting would take place at the next B and L European symposium, to be held in London. Educators from around the world would be invited to join the meeting and bring 35 mm slides to be incorporated into a bank of educational slides that could be used by all future members of IACLE.

Official Foundation

This second meeting was in October 1980 in London, when a Contact Lens Educators' Seminar was held alongside B and L's Third European Symposium on Soft Contact Lenses.

It was agreed that membership of the new association would be open to all educators responsible for teaching contact lens fitting at a recognized training institution. The purpose was to exchange information in the contact lens field. IACLE was to be independent, nonpolitical and, importantly, multidisciplinary.

The 25 participants from 13 different countries commented very positively on the event and agreed to meet yearly. Voted in as members of the board for the first two years were President

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Cite this article as: Shinde L, Thite N, Naroo SA, Ewbank A. International Association of Contact Lens Educators: Exceptional education—Exponential impact. Indian J Ophthalmol 2020;68:984-7.

Hilmar Bussacker, from Switzerland, Vice President Holden from Australia, and Secretary John de Brabander. IACLE had now been officially founded.^[1]

Annual Events

Meetings were held annually throughout the 1980s. Dr Holden wanted to bring together contact lens educators from around Europe at these meetings. The aim was to achieve more consistency in what was being taught in contact lenses, and to help educators keep more up to date with technological innovations.

The meetings were initially hosted and supported financially by B and L. In 1989, B and L began a four-year investment in IACLE sponsorship totaling US\$1m. This was prior to the other multinational contact lens companies that were subsequently invited to support IACLE.

At the 1991 meeting, Dr. Holden was elected as the new President and a new constitution was drafted, the principal amendment being the establishment of a regional structure. That year, IACLE is recorded as having 50 members in 15 countries, and delivering 30 educational programs to 600 students worldwide.

Global Structure

1992 was a crucial year for IACLE.^[2,3] Office bearers at this time included President Dr. Holden, Vice President Dr. Fonn, Secretary Dr. Deborah Sweeney, and Treasurer Charline Gauthier. Luigina Sorbara and Nathan Efron were Assistant Secretary and Assistant Treasurer. The association now had four regions: Europe, Africa–Middle East, Asia Pacific, and Latin America. Asia Pacific regional office bearers were President Maurice Yap (New Zealand), Vice President Shinji Seki (Japan), Secretary Dr. Sweeney (Australia), and Assistant Secretary Meredith Reyes (Philippines).

Initially, IACLE held just one annual meeting, in Europe, but from 1990 regional and national meetings had been set up, often held in conjunction with other major scientific and research symposia. Prominent among these were Asia Pacific Regional Meetings [Fig. 2] and IACLE India events. At the same time, IACLE had gained new corporate donors. By mid-1992, it was receiving financial support from CIBA Vision, Allergan, and Johnson and Johnson, in addition to its continuing major sponsorship from B and L.

Introduced that same year was the IACLE Educator Fellowship Program, to provide educators with exposure to contact lens education and research at other institutions, in order to broaden their experience.^[3] In the first three years of the Fellowship Program, IACLE provided opportunities for 24 educators from seven countries to visit more than 20 contact lens teaching institutions in other countries.^[4] IACLE also drafted Minimum Standards for Contact Lens Education that would form the basis for a planned IACLE Contact Lens Syllabus.^[3]

Also in 1992, IACLE announced its intention to establish IACLE Accreditation, the forerunner of Fellowship of IACLE (FIACLE), described as “an internationally accepted system for accreditation” of contact lens educators.^[3] The first Accreditation Exam held in India and globally took place four years later, when 86 candidates (20% of the membership at that time) in 23 countries took part.

Meanwhile, IACLE’s presence in Asia was increasing. By the end of 1992, 51 of IACLE’s 130 members were in the Asia Pacific region. Europe followed with 41 members, with 17 in North

America, 16 in Latin America, and five in Africa–Middle East. In October 1993, the IACLE secretariat was established in the Asia Pacific region, at the Randwick Campus of the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

The same month IACLE held its largest regional meeting, in conjunction with Wichterle’s Days of Contact Lenses, an event celebrating the 80th birthday of the inventor of the soft contact lens, Otto Wichterle. The European Regional Meeting in Prague, Czechoslovakia attracted 100 educators from 19 countries. The event was supported by IACLE’s sponsors at that time: major corporate sponsor B and L, corporate sponsor Johnson and Johnson, corporate donors Ciba Vision and Allergan, and donor Paragon Vision Sciences.

With industry support, IACLE went on to conduct three World Congresses on Contact Lens Education, bringing members together to discuss the latest developments in teaching worldwide. The 1994 and 2000 Congresses were held at the Centre for Contact Lens Research and School of Optometry at the University of Waterloo, Canada. The Third IACLE World Congress, “Shaping the future of contact lens education,” was hosted by The University of Manchester, UK in 2015.

Most recently, the 2017 IACLE Congress on Contact Lens Education took place in Hyderabad, India on the theme of “Translating knowledge into increasing contact lens penetration [Fig. 3].” IACLE representatives delivered as many as 50 presentations at the 2nd World Congress of Optometry in Hyderabad that followed the IACLE event.

IACLE Today

From those early days in Monaco with just 16 educators involved, much has changed. As its 40th year began, IACLE had 845 active members in 78 countries, teaching at 625 institutions and reaching an estimated total of nearly 20,000 students each year. Asia Pacific has the highest proportion of members of IACLE’s current three global regions (451), followed by Europe/Africa–Middle East (207) and America (187).

In India, IACLE currently has 123 members, second only to China which has the highest membership of any country worldwide (186). India also has the second highest number of FIACLEs (71) and is the country with the most IACLE Resource Centers (25). India has also led the way in delivering Web Lectures broadcast live online to institutions, as well as hosting many Educator Meetings, Train-the-Trainer Programs, and Industry Seminars.

The current Asia Pacific Regional President is Dr. Rajeswari Mahadevan, an Associate Professor at the Elite School of Optometry and Sankara Nethralaya Academy, who took over from Dr. Gullapalli N Rao of the L V Prasad Institute in 2016.

Notably, all the current IACLE Education Team are based in the Asia Pacific region: Director of Global Education Lakshmi Shinde (Bangalore), Director of Educational Programs Nilesh Thite (Pune), and Director of Educational Development Dr. Lewis Williams (Australia). Regional Operations Administrator Kavitha Mahesh is based in Bangalore as well.

IACLE’s flagship resource is the New IACLE Contact Lens Course (New ICLC), a series of 33 PowerPoint lectures in six modules, fully revised and updated since 2015 by the world’s leading authorities in contact lenses to keep pace with



Figure 1: Pictured at the gala dinner at the European Symposium on Soft Contact Lenses in Monte Carlo in 1979 are (front, left to right) Brien Holden, Desmond Fonn, and George Mertz, who were among the educators at IACLE's founding meeting (image courtesy of Brien Holden Vision Institute)



Figure 3: Former IACLE Asia Pacific Regional President Dr. Gullapalli N Rao addressed more than 100 delegates from 20 countries attending the IACLE Congress on Contact Lens Education at the L V Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad in September 2017

developments. Initially in English and now being translated into other key languages, presentations cover all aspects of contact lens education from the anatomy of the cornea to the business of contact lens practice.

The modules provide educators with the materials they need to teach a high-quality contact lens course and are also suitable for students and practitioners. Case reports and image galleries support the course. The self-study IACLE Distance Learning Program, revised in 2018, helps educators improve their own contact lens knowledge and teaching skills. The IACLE Student Trial Exam tests final-year and postgraduate students' progress and addresses areas of concern.

Fellowship of IACLE (FIACLE) is unique in recognizing accomplishments in contact lens education. FIACLEs are



Figure 2: IACLE's Asia Pacific Regional Meetings included a 2006 event in Hyderabad with nearly 100 delegates from throughout the region and beyond



Figure 4: Among the new IACLE Fellows in 2018 was Anitha Arvind from Sankara College of Optometry in Bangalore

seen as leaders in their field, are frequently invited to speak at educational meetings, and often provide practitioner and student education within their professional communities. The Fellowship Exam is open to all IACLE members and is held every two years. All members who achieve a successful outcome and have held active membership for at least 1 year may apply for FIACLE status. Applications must then be approved by the IACLE Executive Committee. FIACLEs are required to promote IACLE's educational goals and objectives, continue to make a contribution to contact lens education, participate in programs that advance contact lens education, and renew their FIACLE status every 3 years by completing a Declaration of Participation. As of January 2019, there were 351 active FIACLEs worldwide [Fig. 4].

Annual IACLE Contact Lens Educator of the Year Awards and IACLE Travel Awards also recognize achievements in contact lens education and have allowed members in India to travel to major international meetings. Among recipients of the Educator Awards have been Dr. Mahadevan of Elite School of optometry, Professor Monica Chaudhry of Amity University Gurgaon, Professor Prema Chande of Lotus College of Optometry in Mumbai, Runa Mazumder of the Vidyasagar College of Optometry and Vision Science in Kolkata.

IACLE continues to hold Educator Meetings and Train-the-Trainer Programs to develop the teaching skills of educators and maintain their standard of knowledge. Increasingly, it is using technology to extend its reach, through live Web Lectures and Discussion Forums. Web Lectures have allowed up to 14 institutions in India to take part in a lecture at one time. Educators in China can now participate in lectures through WeChat.

Research Update—sent monthly to IACLE and British Contact Lens Association members—is a summary of key publications appearing in the peer-reviewed literature. Many IACLE members and Fellows are also involved in their own contact lens research and regularly have their work published in peer-reviewed journals. Research ranges from basic science and randomized controlled trials, to studies of the scope of practice in individual countries and annual reports on international prescribing trends. IACLE's network helps facilitate collaboration in research as well as in education. Most recently, a group of FIACLEs in India, led by Nilesh Thite and Lakshmi Shinde, published a study challenging traditional approaches to contact lens recommendation.^[5]

Challenges for the Future

As it celebrates its 40th year with anniversary events around the world, IACLE remains the leading provider of educational and information resources essential to contact lens educators worldwide. It continues to fulfil its mission to increase the number of qualified contact lens educators and improve the quality of contact lens teaching, thereby increasing the number of skilled contact lens practitioners throughout the world and facilitating the use of contact lenses worldwide, in partnership with industry.

A survey of members in 2018 showed 92% were extremely or very likely to recommend other contact lens educators to join IACLE, and providing the resources needed to teach contact lenses was seen as the principal benefit of membership; the New IACLE Contact Lens Course was the highest-rated IACLE resource for satisfaction and importance, and the most used.^[6]

Research studies in India have also investigated the benefits of IACLE membership. Optometrists graduating from Indian institutions with greater IACLE collaboration and support report greater satisfaction with their training, especially with theoretical aspects.^[7] Higher levels of education among practitioners, greater experience and FIACLE status are associated with advanced contact lens fitting.^[8] IACLE members also found contact lens fitting provided more professional satisfaction and a better business proposition compared to non-members.^[9]

IACLE will need to provide new resources, programs, and events, delivered via new platforms, to keep its members

abreast of advances in education and in contact lenses. Its most important resource, the New ICLC, will in future be reviewed and updated every two years to keep pace with developments, starting with ICLC 2020. Tools for assessing students' practical skills, raising awareness of contact lenses, and how to use technology in teaching are among the resources that members would like IACLE to provide in future.^[6]

Over the past 40 years, IACLE has established a global network of contact lens educators to interact and learn from each other. Indian contact lens education and practice has benefited as a result. IACLE pays tribute to the foresight of its founding members who were committed to the cause of raising the standard of education worldwide, and to all its members and industry partners across four decades for their support. In future, IACLE will need to evolve still further to help its members navigate the coming decades, when educators and their students—the practitioners of tomorrow—can expect to be challenged to an unprecedented level.

Acknowledgements

This editorial is based on an article *The Early Years: 1979–1993*, published at www.iacle.org to mark the 40th Anniversary of IACLE. Thanks to the following contributors for their help in preparing the article: John de Brabander, Hilmar Bussacker, Richard Pearson, Deborah Sweeney, Des Fonn, Juan Carlos Aragón, Pamela Capaldi (O'Brien), Yvette Waddell, Barry Brown, Brien Holden Vision Institute (BHVI), Richard Franz, Sylvie Franz (Sulaiman), Christine Astin, ETTY Bitton, Lester Caplan and Hans Bleshey. IACLE is currently supported by Platinum Sponsor Alcon, Gold Sponsor CooperVision, Silver Sponsor Johnson and Johnson Vision, Bronze Sponsor Bausch + Lomb and Donor Sponsor Euclid.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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