

SPECIAL FEATURES

optometrists, general practice clinics, Diabetic Society of Singapore and the National Kidney Foundation combined. By all accounts, this would still qualify as the largest on-going screening programme for diabetic retinopathy worldwide.

“Uniquely Singapore”

My brief was to write on the “Uniquely Singapore” aspect of the DRP Programme. What is “Uniquely Singapore” apart from this programme being the largest of its kind worldwide? No, we did not invent the retinal camera. Neither were we the first to use the retinal camera for diabetic retinopathy screening.

Perhaps our “uniqueness” was that we recognised a pressing need and plunged headlong into it. Perhaps it was because despite the various obstacles and difficulties in the beginning, the prime movers did not falter but instead rooted for the eye screening program and sustained it for the last 15 years.

When you consider the (disturbing) fact that even to this day there are no other nation-wide programmes on a similar scale or concerted efforts to do mass screening for diabetic retinopathy (including developed countries with high standards of healthcare), we can perhaps label this programme “Uniquely Singapore”.

One may ask, if retinal cameras are so readily available and basic

to preventing blindness, relatively affordable, effective (as shown by numerous studies) and cost-effective (compared to the costs of rehabilitating a blind diabetic and the incalculable social cost of blindness) why is it not being adopted by the world?

It still surprises me that the programme in Singapore to this day continues to be the largest programme of its kind worldwide. Granted, Singapore is compact and easily accessible but so are many of the heavily populated and diabetes-prone cities, First World countries included. With technological advances, even remote regions can now have retinal screening programme linked in cyberspace with urban reporting centres.

Our pervasive DRP Programme is not just about being “number one” in the world. It is not to accord us the bragging rights. Rather, it is about helping the world to see that before long, such as in 2025, over 300 million people will be afflicted with diabetes and half of them will be at risk of diabetic retinopathy.

Our DRP Programme is simply about not turning a blind eye to a pressing need. No funds, no time, no resources, no interested people are really no good reasons for a simple programme that can potentially and significantly reduce perhaps the most devastating diabetes-related complication which is diabetic blindness. In short - just do it!