



## This AP Neurologist Has Treated Over 3000 Patients in Remote Villages for Free!

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“We reach, we teach, and we treat!” While Dr Bindu Menon, a Nellore-based neurologist, chooses to sum up her philanthropic efforts through this simple phrase, we beg to differ because they hardly do justice to the lives she has saved through her noble endeavours.

A leading neurologist from Andhra Pradesh, Dr Menon started ‘Neurology On Wheels,’ the country’s first and only medically-equipped van exclusively dedicated to neurological patients in 2015, and in the past four years, the van has covered 23 remote villages in Andhra Pradesh.

One Sunday every month, Dr Menon can be spotted in her minivan with her team of volunteers. The van moves through remote hamlets of Andhra Pradesh, raising awareness about stroke, epilepsy and common neurological ailments while treating hundreds of patients completely free of cost.

In addition to Neurology On Wheels, in 2016, she launched Epilepsy Help, an app which sends alerts to families of epileptic patients in emergencies like sudden seizures and also started a country-wide toll-free 24X7 helpline which provides crucial information about neurological disorders.

Dr Menon has been practising for nearly two decades and began her non-profit initiatives in 2013 by setting up Dr Bindu Menon Foundation.



“In 2013, I started a free check-up camp and medicine distribution centre for underprivileged neurological patients. At present, I have 200 registered patients who regularly come for a consultation. They are provided with medication for a minimum of one month. In case a patient needs further intervention, they are treated for free at local hospitals until recovery,” explains Dr Menon.



### The rural healthcare scenario in India

The human nervous system and its nuances have always intrigued Dr Menon, even when she was a schoolgirl, and she grew up determined to choose neurology as both her passion and profession.

During her days at a government medical college, she would see hordes of patients coming in from villages in critical conditions. For most of them, the situation had worsened owing to years of negligence and lack of awareness.

“Later, when I started my practice, somehow, my niche got limited to urban patients. I always had the calling inside that I have to stand beside the rural patients. Finally, in 2013, I succeeded in starting my foundation and have been able to help many,” she recalls.

The severity of neurological disorders is much more critical and complex than other health conditions.

For example, a stroke victim needs a minimum of 3 to 5 years for recovery, with regular medication and physiotherapy. In case of severe bouts of cerebral stroke, the patient might be paralysed partially and will need lifelong medical support.

However, in remote villages of India, medical awareness is an alien concept. As a result, there is a glaring treatment gap among patients of stroke. They abruptly stop taking medicines the moment they feel a little better□ which enhances the risk of another stroke, often fatal.

Even medication is a luxury for some, who brush stroke attacks aside as a minor ailment. Worse, they approach quacks and fraudster healers for ‘cure’ whose herbal concoctions aggravate the illness.



Alongside stroke, epilepsy awareness is still at an appalling juncture in India. Dr Menon believes it to be an overlooked and prejudiced illness in India since most of the epilepsy cases in India stem from Neurocysticercosis□—a tapeworm infection aggravated by bad hygiene.

Simple practices like washing hands after using the loo or washing vegetables before cooking can go a long way in preventing the disease.

Patients rarely understand the root cause and continue living in filthy, unhygienic conditions while also treating epileptic individuals as outcasts.

Their sudden bouts of seizure are frowned upon as a ‘supernatural omen’, making life difficult for young men and women, newlywed brides and even children.

“Before Neurology on Wheels, I had little idea about the scary healthcare scenario in these villages. I cannot pinpoint how much of a dent my services have made, but one thing is for sure□—the awareness has certainly improved in the villages I visited,” she remarks.

### **A typical day at Neurology On Wheels**

During every visit, Dr Menon follows a holistic approach of treating as well as raising awareness. Shalini, a physiotherapist and Dr Menon’s close acquaintance, shares, “We generally select a very remote village which you would call ‘Gramam’ in Telugu. Days before the camp, the sarpanch is intimated about our plan and we proceed with his/her support. Once a date is fixed, the village authorities declare about the event to the entire population.”

Word travels fast, and people are inherently curious to listen to a doctor from the city, thus the turnout at most of the camps is amazing.

Dr Menon generally speaks about the A to Z of stroke, epilepsy, hypertension, diabetes etc. which tend to affect a large chunk of the population. She focuses on the importance of long-term treatment and consistency of medication, while also explaining the lifestyle practices that lead up to the diseases. “She also clears each and everyone’s doubts and queries. We mostly find the village women to be extremely interested,” informs Shalini.



The next part comprises the treatment camp, set up inside Dr Menon’s well-equipped van. Patients are enlisted, and one by one screened for underlying ailments. The average number of patients in each village reaches up to 150, around 20 per cent of whom are diagnosed with serious and untreated neurological issues.

“We provide medicines for a month for at-risk patients or those with minor disorders. Critical patients are registered under the ambit of our foundation, and we completely fund their treatment. We also provide all long-term medication and treatment for impoverished families,” informs Dr Menon.

Often, villagers fail to understand the source of their discomfort and come up to Dr Menon with cardiac, gynaecological or even orthopaedic problems. She turns no one away and patiently redirects them to the local hospitals or doctors they need to attend for definitive treatment.

Dr Menon’s father KMR Nambiar, who is also the acting president of her foundation, feels proud to be a part of his daughter’s societal endeavours. “I have been associated with this for the last five years. Our initiatives have really impacted a lot of lives positively. We hope to continue our efforts with the same dedication and enthusiasm for years to come,” he says.

So far, Dr Menon has conducted over 160 awareness camps. At the school and college camps, she advocates the basics of a healthy lifestyle for the youngsters, which will protect them from lifestyle disorders in future. They are also made aware of the emergency actions to be taken in case a family member suffers a sudden stroke or seizure.

“The camps at schools are my most favourite. The children are so curious and ask such intriguing questions. It prompts me to think and learn so much more,” Dr Menon asserts.

### **Making neurological care accessible to all**

People from every nook and corner of the country can access Dr Menon’s awareness guidelines by simply dialling 18001020237. A long recorded message tells people everything they need to know about stroke, epilepsy or hypertension. The best part? The helpline is bilingual—it operates in both English and Telugu—to benefit the rural population as well.



Her app Epilepsy Help is available in English, Telugu and Hindi, allowing users to record their medical history in just a few steps. Whenever an epileptic patient senses a seizure, he or she can immediately alert their emergency contact at just a click.



While Dr Menon spearheads all operations of ‘Neurology on Wheels’, she specifically acknowledges the contribution of her support team—a bunch of young college-goers who volunteer with her from time to time. “Without their support, I wouldn’t have achieved this success rate,” she mentions.

Dr Bindu Menon now envisions to launch a more effective follow-up procedure in each village with better networking and connectivity.

“Because, at the end of the day, being a physician is all about serving the people,” concludes the gritty doctor.

