

## Neurology on wheels: This AP doctor is treating patients in villages for free



Dr Bindu Menon recalls that it has been a long time that she has taken a vacation from her job. A doctor at a hospital in Nellore by the weekdays, on Sunday she is a traveller who visits nearby villages in a mini-bus. No, Dr Bindu doesn't go on a leisure trip but rather she is greeted with warm smiles from villagers, awaiting the sight of her bus for their medical check-ups. Armed with assistants from the Dr Bindu Menon foundation, the doctor spends almost a day in the village, treating patients with epilepsy, strokes and other neurology-related diseases. The check-ups are free and the doctor hasn't had a break in this routine in the past four years.

Born and brought up in Bhopal, for Dr Bindu, neurology always seemed as fascinating as mathematics. "I was always amazed at the way brain functioned like a CPU for our body. The way we talk, laugh or cry - each action is intricately connected to the way our brain functions. Back in my day, when women mostly chose gynaecology as their subject, my heart was in studying neurology," the 49-year-old neurologist tells TNM.

In a career spanning over two decades, Dr Bindu worked as a neurologist in a couple of hospitals in Andhra while also starting the Neurology Department at the Tirupati medical college in 2008. A well-known figure in her field, Dr Bindu was a regular at schools and colleges in the state, holding awareness classes on brain-related diseases.

"My major area of focus was on patients suffering from epilepsy and strokes. While the rich sought immediate treatment, people belonging to weaker economic sections either were not aware of the severity of the disease or there was a gap in availing the right kind of treatment. For the same reason, I started the Dr Bindu Menon foundation 2013, with the aim of providing free medical treatment and check-ups to people suffering from epilepsy and strokes," the doctor recalls.

Providing treatment to the poorest of poor, the foundation gives free medical treatment to patients for up to a month. "We analyse how the patient is responding to medicines and over time if we feel that the treatment needs to continue for a longer duration, we take them into the foundation and treat them for free until the patient is cured. For others, we prescribe medicines and insist on regular follow-ups," the doctor explains.

However, it became clear that the foundation wasn't reaching as many people as Dr Bindu wanted to. Patients started narrating stories of people back in their villages with similar diseases.

"I understood there was a treatment gap - people, especially the old, didn't think it was important they



treat themselves after a stroke or an epilepsy seizure. They often were made to think that they are doomed to live with it for the rest of their lives. From patients who visited me at the foundation, I realised only a very few out of the affected came forward to be treated and that's how we conceived the idea of 'neurology on wheels'," the doctor narrates.

Dr Bindu, along with few of her assistants at the foundation, visit villages for check-ups every week. So far, the team has covered 22 villages in and around Andhra. The programme took some time to materialise and was meticulously planned, the doctor shares.



"It isn't an easy task to arrange the travel. First, we need to convince the village chief to let us hold the camp on a Sunday.

Secondly, he needs to inform every villager about the camp and the kind of symptoms that they can be checked for.

Our mission is to reach, teach and treat," Dr Bindu says, adding, "It's difficult to make people realise why they need to be treated.

For example, instances of a disease like cysticercosis, which is caused by tapeworms inside brains, can be effectively reduced by washing hands after ablutions or following simple practices like washing vegetables before cooking. And this is the reason we hold a 45-minute session before we start the check-up in each village."

The mini-bus consists of a small set-up where the doctor and a patient can be seated and preliminary examinations be performed. The tests are conducted by the other staff from the foundation.

"We provide them medicines for a month and if the condition is found to be one that needs immediate attention, we either refer them to surgeons or even to doctors at the nearby PHCs," the doctor says.

Over time, Dr Bindu says she has noticed a lot of women turning up at the camps, "and this, I must say, is because most of them do not prefer or do not have the means to travel to a nearby hospital," the doctor adds.

Dr Bindu has also developed a toll free number for patients. "We also have an app called the Epilepsy Help, where patients can get help managing their sickness, from timely alerts to take their medicines to helping them with check-ups," she shares.



The doctor and her team are now working on conducting follow-up treatment in villages, which according to Dr Bindu, requires a lot of resources and planning. "We tried conducting a follow-up at one village where my assistant helped me talk to the villagers at Agraharam with the help of Skype. We hope to develop a means soon and assist them with treatment until the patients are healthy enough not to worry about follow-ups," she adds.