

## Low vision Rehabilitation: Barriers and Prospects

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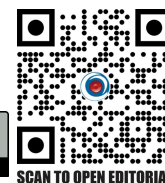
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Low vision is an irreversible loss of vision with some residual potential of functional ability to execute daily activities according to the age and gender of the person with visual impairment.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan National Blindness and Visual Impairment Survey published in 2008, showed the prevalence of low vision is 2.1% in Pakistan. Punjab is the most populated province of Pakistan with more than 110 million population. According to that survey, prevalence of low vision in Punjab is 2.2%.<sup>2</sup>

The College of Ophthalmology and Allied Vision Sciences (COAVS) was established in the heart of Punjab with the aim to eradicate blindness not only from Punjab but also from the whole country. Professionals from across the entire nation joined College of Ophthalmology and Allied Vision Sciences for training and teaching purpose. Low vision clinic at Mayo Hospital was established in 2001 with the support of international NGOs, under the management of COAVS. It was the first clinic in Pakistan where low vision rehabilitation is provided with free of cost Low Vision Devices (LVD).

Moreover, training with LVD, training for mobility and orientation is part of the management plan with comprehensive sessions of low vision counselling. Counselling is imparted to come up with the loss they are facing. In addition, a supportive environment to encourage their independence by addressing their emotional challenges.

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In an era of accessibility and inclusivity, COAVS stands as a beacon of progress in providing essential services for individuals with visual impairment. The commitment to foster independence and enhancing the quality of life for those facing visual challenges is exemplified through robust low vision services. One notable aspect of our clinic is the emphasis on personalized care. This customized approach not only addresses specific visual challenges but also considers factors such as lifestyle, interests, and personal goals. The institution's holistic approach goes beyond traditional clinical interventions, encompassing a range of support services designed to meet the diverse needs of its clientele.

The integration of cutting-edge assistive technologies coped with appropriate training further distinguishes our clinical services. From screen reading software to advanced magnification devices, the institution stays at the forefront of technological advancements, ensuring that clients have access to tools that enhance their independence in daily activities, education, and employment. The clinic has three different categories of services for different age groups with impairment i.e. pediatric group for early intervention, intervention for developmental loss group and acquired loss group.

At the heart of these services lies a dedicated team

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of professionals, equipped with expertise in optometry, rehabilitation, and assistive technology. Persons with impairment are registered in clinical mainstream data profile, they could get all the services including devices, training with devices, and training for mobility from the clinic on daily basis. The collective mission is to empower individuals with low vision, enabling them to navigate the world with confidence and autonomy. Recognizing that each individual's visual impairment is unique, the team collaborates closely with clients to develop customized rehabilitation plans. The cornerstone of our approach lies in education and training, Optometrist from 28 DHQs of the Punjab were trained in Low Vision Rehabilitation. Dedicated low vision clinics were established in respective DHQs with collaboration of INGOs ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of low vision care.

In this era of inclusivity, many issues are identified by the team of low vision clinic from society. Family members and society have a part in marginalizing the persons with impairment, so it's a dire need to address them. The low vision extends beyond the physical aspect, impacting emotional well-being and societal participation.

Persons with impairment get excluded from mainstream departments and they develop a mindset that they couldn't get up through the challenges in life. So, the Low Vision Services include psychosocial and family support and community engagement initiatives. Workshops, support groups, and outreach programs play a vital role in fostering a sense of community among individuals with low vision, promoting mutual support and shared experiences.

To address these barriers, community based awareness programs are designed. A team of professionals from low vision clinic visits Special Education Department, Community centers to fulfill this task. However, despite the commendable strides made, challenges persist. Adequate public awareness and understanding of low vision issues remain crucial. The institution, therefore,

endeavors to not only serve its clients but also to be an advocate for societal change. By raising awareness about the capabilities of individuals with low vision, our institution strives to eliminate stigmas and create an inclusive environment that values the contributions of all.

In conclusion, by combining optometric expertise with personalized attention and cutting-edge technology, the COAVS has empowered individuals with low vision to overcome barriers and lead fulfilling lives. As we celebrate these achievements, it is imperative to continue the journey towards a more inclusive society through some important steps,

- Digital technologies, updated devices and software packages for LV clients are needed and there is need to institutionalize them.
- Awareness, community mobilization and training at community level is required to comply community needs of the LV client.
- Stronger liaison and networking is needed with stakeholders to serve the clients better inclusive education and trainings.
- A generous support from Government and Private Partnership is needed. More of the LVC at district level are required for increasing need of patients with LV.

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