

# SPINEWS

THE SPINE FOUNDATION NEWSLETTER

## TSF goes on a field visit

*The Spine Foundation visits Selvam Ramaswamy at his village to follow up on his health post a tandem surgery during an earlier camp. Here is what they found.*



busy plucking coconuts from the trees. It was difficult to believe that he was the same man that they had operated upon less than three years ago. He had made a complete recovery and was back to work. Eighty-year-old Selvam Ramaswamy's energy and vitality would put a younger man to shame. The happiness in Selvam's eyes was a reaffirmation of the work being done by The Spine Foundation. This man would have wasted away if he had not received super-specialised medical attention when he did. The Spine Foundation knows that there are thousands of poor people like Selvam who need their services. So the work continues.



SELVAM RAMASWAMY is a poor farmer who lives in a small village at Sittilingi, 250 km from Tamil Nadu's capital city, Chennai. Three years ago he was bedridden with debilitating back pain and could not work on his farm. The Spine Foundation's doctors operated on him at a camp held in Sittilingi, a small tribal village in Tamil Nadu. Sittilingi is home to the Tribal Health Initiative, a non-profit organisation founded by Dr Regi George and his wife Dr Lalitha Regi in 1993 to provide quality healthcare at affordable rates to the tribal population. The Spine Foundation has been a regular visitor to Sittilingi treating and operating on these poor patients since 2017. When Selvam came to a spine camp in 2019, the doctors realised that the only solution was surgery. Therefore they did a tandem, cervical and lumbar surgery on the farmer. The surgery was successful and Selvam Ramaswamy was happy to return to his fields. The story doesn't end here.

In early June this year, Dr Shekhar Bhojraj and doctors associated with the foundation decided to visit Selvam's fields and check on Selvam's progress. They drove down to Selvam's village. When they found him, he was





# The Spine Foundation is going places

*The past few months have seen The Spine Foundation team conduct free surgery camps across India, from the foothill of the Himalayas to the fertile plains of Tamil Nadu.*



## KOLHAPUR

The Spine Foundation team spent the last weekend of Feb 2022 conducting a surgery camp at the Dr DY Patil Hospital in Kolhapur. The Spine Foundation team consisted of nine, former and present Spine Foundation Fellows, which goes to show how TSF has grown over

the years. Seven poor patients were operated upon during this visit while others were attended to at the OPD.

Dr Bhojraj also addressed a lecture on Red flags in spinal disorders. The Medical Officer of the District Hospital and ASHA workers were also present during the lecture. Preparing

the next line of spine caregivers. TSF doctors conducted an online Basic Cadaveric Spine Workshop at Kolhapur that was relayed to medical students and doctors interested in spine health. The Spine Foundation was back in Kolhapur a month later where nine patients were successfully operated upon.



## GADCHIROLI

Gadchiroli, in some ways, is the spiritual home of The Spine Foundation. During a surgery

camp on 12th March, the doctors performed 13 surgeries on poor patients and tribals living in the surrounding areas. At another camp

in Gadchiroli on 9th July, they achieved the unique distinction of conducting 23 free spine surgeries in a day!



## SITTLINGI

To reach Sittilingi, you have to fly to Chennai. Thereafter take an overnight train to Salem. After that, it's a two-hour drive to reach Sittilingi. This means that the doctors can catch the evening flight to Chennai on a Friday and reach Sittilingi On Saturday morning. They have the whole day to perform free surgeries, before again catching the night train back to Chennai and flying back in time for their professional commitments in Mumbai on Monday. On 16th April, The Spine Foundation team made the long trip down to the Tribal Health Initiative to conduct two surgeries. The Spine Foundation will go to any length when it comes to serving the poor.

## DEHRADUN

The Spine Foundation travelled to Swami Vivekananda Charitable Hospital in Dehradun on 22nd-23rd April, to conduct a free surgery camp to bring spine care to the pahadi people living in the Shivalik Himalayan range. They also gave a motivational talk to the staff of

the Swami Vivekananda Charitable Hospital in Dehradun, sensitising them to the working of The Spine Foundation. The hospital, founded by Dr Anuj Singhal and Dr Tarashree Singhal, and run by the Swami Vivekananda Health Mission, has 11 satellite clinics in the interior Himalayas at Dharmawala, Dumet,

Gangotri Dham, Haridwar, Kedarnath Dham, Petshal, Pipalkoti, Narayankoti, Barkot, Maneri and Badrinath Dham. This gives The Spine Foundation a great opportunity to go deeper and reach out to patients staying in these difficult-to-reach places.



## RANCHI

While Ranchi is the capital of Jharkhand, quality spine care is out of reach of poor patients. When Dr Nishant Kumar, who hails from Ranchi, finished his Fellowship at The Spine Foundation and returned to his

hometown, they had a person to take charge of the program in this eastern state. The Spine Foundation held its free spine surgery camp in Ranchi on 1st November 2019. Dr Nishant also set up a free Spine Clinic at RIMS, Ranchi, where poor patients could consult him every

Monday. The Covid pandemic slowed down the foundation's operations in Ranchi for some time, but it's now back to speed.

The Spine Foundation's entire team was back in Ranchi on February 2020, where the team conducted three major surgeries plus casting for a child afflicted with scoliosis at the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences. The Health Secretary of Jharkhand Dr N M Kulkarni extended his support to this initiative. Dr Manjhi HOD of RIMS facilitated this exercise.



Dr Shekhar Bhojraj also delivered a talk to the health workers and medical workers in Ranchi's Sadar Hospital.

# Have you seen the film?

The Spine Foundation has a special film for you to see. Shot at the SEARCH campus and various other locations in Gadchiroli and Mumbai, this five-minute film takes you from deep into rural India to the hustle-bustle of Mumbai. And if the voice of the narrator seems familiar, that is because he is one of India's most famous baritones. Any guesses who is the narrator? If you have not yet seen the film, search for The Spine Foundation on YouTube or find it on Instagram @thespinefoundation.





# Art with a purpose

*Dr Shekhar Bhojraj exhibited his art in Kolhapur and Mumbai to raise funds for The Spine Foundation. A few snapshots from the events.*

In October 2019, the world saw another side of Dr Shekhar Bhojraj with the inaugural exhibition of his art at Mumbai's Nehru Centre. The founder trustee of The Spine Foundation was revered for his immense achievements in spine surgery and as a man who was the earliest pioneer of this super-speciality in India. When he put up his inaugural exhibition with the aim of generating funds for the foundation, people were staggered to discover his artistic talents. Dr Bhojraj also released his art book, 'Photo, Paint & Pen'. This exhibition also travelled to Pune and Kolkata.

On 21st and 22nd May 2022, Dr Bhojraj put up the second edition of his art. He chose Kolhapur, the cultural capital of Maharashtra to share with the people the next innings in his artistic journey. Dr Bhojraj exhibited nearly 100 frames at Rajashri Shahu Chatrapati Smarak Bhavan, mostly all new art he had created post the Covid pandemic. He also released the second collection of his art book titled 'Mindscape'. The exhibition was a massive success with the discerning people of Kolhapur who thronged the exhibition,

The 'Mindscape' exhibition then moved to Mumbai's Nehru Centre on the 18th and 19th of June. Even Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray dropped in to see and appreciate Dr Bhojraj's art. He spent nearly an hour at the venue carefully going over every piece of art on display. As usual, the money generated by these exhibitions goes towards The Spine Foundation which offers free spine treatment and surgery to the underprivileged. The question that everyone now has is "When is the next exhibition?"



Scenes from 'Mindscape' exhibition at Kolhapur, the art & cultural capital of Maharashtra.



Snapshots from the Mumbai exhibition. How many people do you recognise here?



# Who is this Fellow?

*Meet Dr Tejasvi Agarwal who completed his Fellowship at The Spine Foundation in January this year.*

COMING FROM AN affluent family of builders settled in Uttarakhand's capital Dehradun, Tejasvi did not need to go through the rigours of medical training. However, even as a young boy, Tejasvi was sure that he did not want to join his family business but rather forge his own path. He also knew that mathematics was not his forte, so after finishing his schooling he joined the Shri Guru Ram Rai Institute of Medical & Health Sciences to do his MBBS. After earning the prefix of Doctor, Tejasvi decided to do his Master's in Orthopaedics since it required more mechanical application than abstruse pedantry. In 2015, he signed up for his Master's at the Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences under Swami Rama Himalayan University. It was here that his life took a sharp turn for Dr Tejasvi Agarwal.

Tejasvi's mentor Dr Vijendra D Chauhan, had met Dr Shekhar Bhojraj at an earlier free surgical camp and had invited him to the Himalayan Institute to run a similar camp. In September 2017, The Spine Foundation came to the Himalayan Institute where Dr Chauhan introduced Tejasvi to Dr Bhojraj and his team. Meeting and talking to the Trustees and surgeons of the foundation was a decisive moment for Tejasvi. He marvelled at their work, travelling hundreds of kilometres and using their super specialised skills to serve the poor and underprivileged. Specialists who treated India's most prominent politicians, film actors, sports stars and industrialists took out time week after week to travel to remote parts of India to bring quality spine care. Till now Dr Tejasvi Agarwal had made his choices by defining what he did not want to do. After meeting the doctors of The Spine Foundation he knew what he wanted to do. The choice was clear.

After completing his orthopaedic training in 2019 Dr Tejasvi Agarwal applied for The Spine Foundation Fellowship and was accepted into the team. He shifted base from the foothills of the Himalayas to the bustling coastal megapolis of Mumbai. He trained under the senior doctors at large corporate hospitals like Breach Candy and Lilavati populated by the rich and famous, but also worked in VN Desai a municipal hospital which catered to the poor. While all fellows get extensive training in all aspects of spine surgery during their tenure Dr Tejasvi Agarwal considered the best part of his Fellowship was his training in rural spine surgery. He travelled with the team to surgery camps at Rural Spine Care Centres to remote locations like Gadchiroli, Ambajogai, Nandurbar and Sittilingi where he had to confront and negotiate unique challenges that spine surgeons normally do not face.

His Fellowship taught him two essential lessons: the importance of teamwork and the confidence to work in any place, under any circumstances. Dr Tejasvi Agarwal finished his Fellowship in January 2022. Despite tempting offers from private and corporate hospitals, he returned to Dehradun. The sense of satisfaction he had tasted during his time with the foundation was too intoxicating to ignore. Today, he has a private practice but he has also



joined the Swami Vivekanand Health Mission Society, a charitable trust hospital started by Dr Anuj Singhal and Dr Tarashree Singhal. The society has 11 hospitals in the remote areas of Uttarakhand that allows Dr Agarwal to reach out to the poor and needy. Today 90% of his patients are poor people from the hills where medical infrastructure is poor or unavailable.

In April this year, Dr Agarwal was part of

The Spine Foundation team that conducted two free complex spine surgeries at a camp in Dharmawala, 50km from Dehradun. He is driving The Spine Foundation's push into this area in partnership with the Swami Vivekanand Health Mission Society. It is young doctors like Dr Tejasvi Agarwal that are going to lead The Spine Foundation's mission of providing quality spine care for all.

# Spine Economics

*Why this is the need of the hour for TSF to reach deeper and further.*



INDIA IS AMONG the countries with the least public health spending according to the latest National Health Profile (NHP) 2018. India's public health spending at 1.02 percent of the GDP is much lower when compared to even lower-income countries like Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. 63% of the total health expenditure in the country is through out-of-pocket expenditure (OPE), while the world average is just 18.2%. According to the National Crime Records, 0.38 million people or 21% of the total, committed suicide in India between 2001 and 2005 due to lack of treatment facilities. 7% of Indians (about 55 million) fall below the poverty line each year as result of indebtedness due to health expenditure, and 23% of the sick cannot afford healthcare.

How does all this translate to spine care in the country? I did a brief search on Google to check on studies published on cost of spine care in India and did not find any. I went on to check PubMed and found couple of articles which highlighted burden of spine pain among rural and tribal populations. These articles highlighted lack of transport facilities and cost of treatment as the two most common reasons for delay in seeking treatment at near healthcare centres.

The above two paragraphs, highlight the need for development of customised spine

care programmes through partnerships with government hospitals, private not-for-profit hospitals, and non-governmental organisations. This is exactly what The Spine Foundation has been trying to do over the last two decades across various urban and rural parts of the country.

I had the privilege to meet Dr. Bhojraj during our visits to Center for Study of Social Change (CSSC), an NGO based in Bandra. During these visits, we discussed about the access and financing of healthcare, which also resulted in both of us making us visits to other NGOs working in Mumbai such as SNEHA, and other medical institutions. Both of us even made a trip to Gadag in Karnataka to observe a secondary care hospital providing medical and surgical care. These visits and engagements provided the foundation for my first collaboration with Dr. Bhojraj, starting with their centre at VN Desai Hospital over a decade ago. We put in structures in place to collect costs and outcomes data as part of routine spine care to identify the financial aspects of providing spine care to the urban poor. However, I had to leave for further education to New Zealand, and we lost touch for a long time.

Earlier this year, we both connected and felt that my education and skills gained over the

years could be used to develop further evidence on the costs of spine care provided by TSF. Two MPH students were selected to join the team and we started to collect data on outcomes and costs of patients. One of the students after her completion is now working full-time as a Research Fellow to continue the data collection over the next one year or so.

We have just begun, but we will slowly reach to document the costs and outcomes of spine care provided in urban and rural areas supported by TSF. We will be aiming to submit our work when it's a good shape to a suitable peer-review journal so as to disseminate the evidence to a larger audience. And, by doing so, we will be highlighting the need for focus on 'spine economics' in the country, which is the need of the hour.



**Dr. Denny John**  
Adjunct  
Professor  
Faculty of Life  
and Allied Health  
Sciences  
Ramaiah  
University of  
Applied Sciences  
Bengaluru





# DR TEJASVI AGARWAL

The Spine Foundation Fellow from Dehradun is a man of many facets. Apart from being a busy spine surgeon he is a tennis fan who plays and follows the game regularly. His other passion is art. Here he shares with us a few examples from his portfolio.

