First experiences from Malawi, Southeast Africa

Background

Malawi and its neighboring countries in Southeast Africa face an enormous shortage of medical personnel. There is currently less than one ophthalmologist per 1 million people. Most of the available eye care clinics are situated in the major cities – Blantyre and Lilongwe. Moreover, the costs of transportation are often prohibitive for many patients. Outreach programs, often held at local health stations or district hospitals, are therefore essential to provide some degree of eye care to those most in need. However, many outreaches concentrate on the diagnosis and treatment of cataracts and external eye diseases. As a result, retinal diseases or glaucoma are often not recognized or properly documented. At the moment, there are only two retinal specialists residing in Malawi. Tele-ophthalmology using web-based wireless data transfer could be a viable approach in this situation, as nowadays more and more remote areas of Africa have internet access.

The VISUSCOUT® 100 from ZEISS is a mobile fundus camera that Carl Zeiss Meditec, Jena, Germany kindly donated to the Ophthalmology Unit of the College of Medicine at the University of Malawi in Blantyre, Malawi. This camera has a range of features that make it particularly suitable for use in outreaches. Packed into a small, rugged carrying case, it can be transported conveniently. Also, thanks to the camera’s non-mydriatic operation and precise autofocus function, dilation of the eyes is not required. However, better image quality is often obtained when the patient’s pupils are dilated. The camera’s battery power provides added flexibility, while the optional WiFi functionality also enables the instant transfer of images to a PC or mobile device from which the images can be sent to a retina specialist for immediate online consultation.

Case report

A 21-year-old patient complaining of decreased vision in the right eye and right-sided pain during eye movements was seen during an outreach visit at a health center several hours by car away from the next eye hospital. An examination of the patient revealed that her Best Corrected Visual Acuity (BCVA) was 20/80 in the right and 20/20 in her left eye. The anterior segments of both eyes were unremarkable. A pronounced afferent pupillary defect (APD) of the right eye was observed. Fundoscopy could not be reliably performed by the available staff. Thus, fundus photographs were taken by the ZEISS VISUSCOUT 100 handheld fundus camera and sent online to the eye unit in Blantyre where a specialist diagnosed optic neuritis of the right eye due to the normal fundus findings (Figure 2). Based on the recommendation of this online consultation, the patient was given systemic intravenous high-dose corticosteroids. About two months later, the patient was seen for follow-up in his home district and it was noted that BCVA had increased to 20/20 in both eyes. The patient was free of any ophthalmological or neurological residual complaints.

The prevalence of sight-threatening diseases in developing countries is increasing, and along with it the need to provide structured care in order to avoid the long term effects such as loss of vision and blindness. The biggest hurdle facing most developing countries is the lack of resources and trained personnel to both screen and treat the large number of patients. These countries also have the additional problem of unequal distribution of resources between the urban and rural areas. To overcome these challenges, mobile diagnostics and treatment aided by the use of telemedicine may be useful – especially nowadays when even remote and neglected areas have internet access. The presented patient suffered from optic neuritis, a quite uncommon disease in Africa that may present differently than in whites. However, in our patient the use of telemedicine aided prompt diagnosis and saved the patient a long and expensive trip to the next eye hospital. The positive experience with the ZEISS VISUSCOUT 100 handheld fundus camera in Malawi could be replicated in countries facing similar difficulties.

References


Figure 1: Training of ophthalmology residents using the ZEISS VISUSCOUT 100 handheld fundus camera.