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Diabetic retinopathy project for 3 southern districts

By Our Special Correspondent

MADURAI, APRIL 10. A project on management of 'diabetic retinopathy' (DR) will be launched in Tirunelveli, Theni and Madurai districts, with aid from the Denmark-based World Diabetes Foundation (WDF). The project, to be managed by the Aravind Eye Hospital (AEH), aims at evolving an effective model to fight DR at the global level.

Addressing newsmen after the formal launch of the WDF-Aravind Diabetic Retinopathy Project here today, Leif Fenger Jensen, Managing Director, WDF, said it would aim at evolving a holistic model for providing a better treatment, in addition to the creation of a general awareness on diabetes, over a period of three years.

The Aravind project was one among the 12 being implemented globally, he said.

The vice-chairman of the WDF, Anil Kapur, said diabetes was a global epidemic and more people died of it than HIV/AIDS. According to WHO figures, there were 177.5 million people with diabetes in the world in 2000, of whom one third were in India, which was emerging as the "diabetes capital of the world". Only 12 to 14 per cent of them received proper medical treatment for diabetes, which had a high prevalence in urban areas.

In Tamil Nadu, according to Government statistics, 5.3 per cent of the rural population was diabetic. Dr. Anil Kapur attributed the high prevalence to a high genetic predisposition, rapid urbanisation, changing lifestyles, an ageing population and stress of urban life.

Explaining the need for a project to manage DR, P. Namperumalsamy, Director, AEH, said at least 28.05 per cent of diabetics would have DR, irrespective of the duration of the disease. Timely treatment could prevent up to 60-70 per cent of vision loss.

He pointed out that no technology had been evolved so far exclusively for the management of DR worldwide. The project would be implemented in the AEH in Tirunelveli from where expert opinion for treatment would be sought through tele-medicine facility from Madurai. A rural remote screening centre would be established in Theni for screening patients and a mobile screening unit, with V-Sat connectivity, utilised for serving remote areas. The centralised grading centre would be located in Madurai from where the project would be monitored. The objective of the U.S. \$ 714628 project would be to create awareness, in association with existing medical practitioners, he said.