

The Singing Tree to spread awareness on preventable child blindness

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New Delhi: Orbis, an international non-profit dedicated to prevention of blindness and the treatment of blinding eye diseases, on 3rd October launched an illustrated book on the problem of visual impairment due to refractive error in children. The book titled '*The Singing Tree*' will be available in English and six other local languages and distributed to 75,000 children free of cost to spread awareness on visual impairment and its easy identification and treatment.

The story of *The Singing Tree* is inspired by the author Kenneth Youngstein's personal experiences as a child. The book talks about a little girl who cannot see the birds due to impaired vision and assumes that the beautiful songs she heard were sung by the tree under which she spent her time. The book also touches upon the feelings of isolation and rejection that a child with impaired vision, or any disability, may experience. It ends on a positive note where, with a simple pair of spectacles, the girl's vision is improved, and things that held her apart are no longer a barrier to a full life. Orbis India has adapted *The Singing Tree* as part of

its programme to reach over 3 million school children, screen and treat them for refractive error.

Speaking on the occasion, the author of *The Singing Tree*, Ken Youngstein who has spent forty years developing health education programmes for professionals and patients throughout the world said, “The story highlights the problems of children with any kind of vision problem, their inability to interact or play at school and the resulting isolation. I sincerely hope that *The Singing Tree* helps children, their parents, and their teachers to understand the need for testing children for eye problems and for providing appropriate care to allow children to realize their full potential.”

Globally, uncorrected refractive errors account for over 80 of visual impairment among school-aged children. A problem that can be easily diagnosed and corrected with a simple test and a pair of spectacles. Still, uncorrected refractive error remains the main cause of moderate and severe visual impairment among millions of people across the globe. In India, over 9 million children are visually impaired.

Mr Rahul Ali, Country Director-India, Orbis International further added, “When a child cannot see clearly, they not only suffer poor vision but also face critical setbacks in development since 80 percent of learning is visual. Therefore, we at Orbis believe that every child has the right to an early, good quality eye examination, care and support to fulfill their fundamental right to education. We urge each and every one of you reading or hearing me today to take your child for an annual eye examination.”

In the recent past, Orbis has collaborated with Room To Read, a leading non-profit focused on girls’ education and children’s literacy to publish *The Singing Tree* in many local languages for South Africa, Zambia and Cameroon. While Room To Read is distributing the book to local schools and libraries, Orbis distributes the book through its clinics and public outreach programmes.