

## **PROPOSAL FOR AWARD OF HONORARY DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MEDICINE**

### **DR GULLAPALLI NAGESWARA (NAG) RAO**

Trained in ophthalmology in the United States, Indian born Dr Gullapalli Rao (universally known as "Nag") is a world leader in blindness prevention. Dr Rao has dedicated more than 20 years of his professional life to the elimination of avoidable blindness through the development of sustainable, locally managed eye care programs and infrastructure, combining his academic and research career with service to the community through leadership positions in a wide range of non-government organisations.

After completing his medical training in India and the United States, Dr Rao has dedicated his career and his life to reducing the prevalence of avoidable blindness in developing countries. With determination to do something about the increasing prevalence of blindness in our world, Dr Rao gave up his established position in New York (as Associate Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Rochester, School of Medicine and Dentistry) to found the L V Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad, India (1986). This Institute is specifically dedicated to the improvement of eye care for the people of India and other developing countries. Through his vision, Dr Rao has helped the Institute evolve into a comprehensive and state-of-the-art eye care complex, a model replicated around the world. Since its inception, the L V Prasad Eye Institute (LVPEI) has provided outpatient services to over 2 million people who live with low vision and provided sight-saving surgical services to over 250,000 others. Each day, the LVPEI's best eye care professionals provide care to over 200 people who cannot afford basic eye care, while hundreds more benefit from the Institute's rural affiliates and satellite clinics in urban slums.

Dr Rao likens his eye care model at times to an airplane, where half the patients travel economy class for free, a third travel business class at cost and the remaining few who pay for first class provide the funds to keep the whole organisation operational. Everybody is treated with the same care and everybody has the same outcome and arrives at the same destination. This model has developed into a pyramidal structure to serve a population of fifty million people and is now being replicated in many places.

In addition to this remarkable integrated eye care service, Dr Rao has developed extensive training and research facilities. These include world class basic research, clinical research and genetic labs, a stem cell research centre, a comprehensive ophthalmology training program including the first subspecialty training in India, and facilities for the training of a range of mid-level health personnel including nurses, community health workers, low vision staff, optometrists and public health workers.

A man widely recognized for leadership and outstanding achievements in his field, Dr Rao has received more than 30 honors and awards from international learned societies, including the Honor Award of American Academy Ophthalmology (1983), Fellowship of the National Academy of Medical Sciences, India (1996) and most recently the International Blindness Prevention Award, presented by the Board of Trustees of the American Academy of Ophthalmology, in November 2006. He is the recipient of numerous Research Awards and Training Centre Grants that support Dr Rao's lifelong work towards preventing avoidable blindness.

Dr Rao served for many years on the Board of the International Agency for Prevention of Blindness. He has served as the Agency's Secretary General from 1998, and since 2004 has been President of the IAPB. He has a key leadership role in advancing the goal of eliminating avoidable blindness world-wide through the global initiative "Vision 2020: The Right to Sight", which was launched in 1999. Vision 2020, a joint initiative with the world

Health Organisation, has the goal of

giving everyone world wide the right to sight. Achievements to date of Vision 2020 include a fall in the numbers of people needlessly blind and having prevention of vision loss and blindness listed as a World Health Organization priority area of work.

Dr Rao has long established professional links with the University of Melbourne through the Department of Ophthalmology and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, one of the University's affiliated medical research institutes and through the Vision CRC. The Department and Centre are actively involved in joint research with the L V Prasad Institute as partners in the successful Vision Co-operative Research Centre.

Dr Rao's Institute in Hyderabad and the Melbourne based Centre for Eye Research have recently been awarded a major grant under the Commonwealth Government Australia-India Strategic Research Fund program, with matching funding from the Indian government, to work on the development of a risk assessment chip for age-related macular degeneration, a disease which is the leading cause of vision impairment and blindness in aging populations.

Professor Hugh Taylor, Ringland Anderson Professor and Head of the Department of Ophthalmology, serves as Chairman for the Western Pacific Region for the programs of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, coordinating the work of this Agency under Dr Rao's leadership. Dr Rao is a regular visitor to Melbourne. In 2006, he was one of the keynote speakers at the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations for the Centre for Eye Research Australia and in May this year delivered a key note address at an international optometry congress in Melbourne.

Dr Rao is a gentle man, proud of his family, committed to his staff and colleagues, fierce in his determination to address inequity and injustice, passionate in his pursuit of excellence, and loved by all.

With the award of this doctorate *honoris causa*, the University of Melbourne pays tribute to Dr Rao, a humanitarian pioneer whose tireless efforts have helped saved the sight of many thousands of people, including some of the poorest and greatly improved their lives.