



NEPAL

The doctor who took eye surgery to the mountains

A poor boy from the Nepali mountains became an eye surgeon. He made sight cheap enough to reach the poor.

WHERE Kathmandu

WHO Dr Sanduk Ruit, an eye surgeon from Nepal

WHEN 1980 to 2012

4 min read

The story

Sanduk Ruit was born in a remote mountain area of Nepal. It was so poor that the nearest school was many days away on foot. There were no health posts.

When he was 17, his older sister died of tuberculosis, a lung disease. Her death made him want to be a doctor. A scholarship took him to medical school in India. Then he came home and worked as a government health officer.

Clouds over the eyes

In Nepal, many older people were going blind from cataracts. A cataract is a cloudy patch in the eye. It blocks the light. Surgery can cure it. But people in the mountains had no way to reach a surgeon.

In 1980, Ruit worked on a blindness survey. He met an Australian eye doctor, Fred Hollows. Later, in Australia, Hollows taught him a new method. The surgeon takes out the cloudy lens and puts a tiny plastic lens in its place. Ruit brought the method to Nepal in 1988.

Some Nepali eye surgeons did not like the change. Ruit taught them patiently. Slowly, some came round.

Then he took the work to the villages. He and his team trekked to far-off towns and ran eye camps. Hundreds of people were treated on the spot. The camps were

plain, so he found ways to keep the work clean and exact. He also found a way to operate without stitches. Surgery got faster, and people healed sooner.

If you can do it in Nepal, it can be done anywhere in the world.

SANDUK RUIT, TO REUTERS, 2012

\$4

for a Tilganga lens, in
2012

\$100+

for an imported lens
before

125,000

operations by Ruit
himself by 2012

A lens for four dollars

A lens from abroad cost over \$100. Few patients could pay that. In 1994, Ruit opened the Tilganga Eye Centre in Kathmandu. It makes its own lenses. By 2012, each one cost about \$4.

The centre sells lenses to other countries. That income helps pay for the centre's work. Patients pay what they can. The poor pay nothing.

Ruit also trains others. By 2006, more than 500 surgeons across Asia had learned his methods. In June 2006, he and his team treated over 1,000 patients in six days in North Korea.

At one camp in eastern Nepal, a woman saw her four-year-old son for the first time. She had been blind when he was born. Ruit says she grabbed the boy and wept

with joy.

In 2006, Ruit won the Ramon Magsaysay Award. It is given in the Philippines to people who serve others in Asia.

How it unfolded

- **1980** Ruit works on a blindness survey and meets Fred Hollows.
- **1988** He brings lens surgery to Nepal.
- **1994** He opens the Tilganga Eye Centre.
- **2006** He wins the Ramon Magsaysay Award.
- **2012** He has done nearly 125,000 operations.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Many inventors try to make things better. Ruit tried to make them cheaper. Cutting the price of a lens from over \$100 to about \$4 put surgery within reach of the poor.

He also built something that lasts. Lens sales and paying patients help cover free care, and he trains other surgeons to do the same.

OUR TAKE

He made a skill cheap enough to reach the people who needed it most.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Teach what you learn

Fred Hollows taught Ruit a new method. Ruit then taught hundreds of other surgeons.

Try this: Pick one skill you have and show it to one person this week.

2 Go to the people

Ruit trekked to far-off towns and ran eye camps, instead of waiting for patients to come.

Try this: Think of one person who cannot reach you. Go to them once.

3 Cut the costliest part

A lens from abroad cost over \$100. His centre made its own for about \$4.

Try this: Find the costliest part of your work and ask how to do it for less.

4 Let those who can pay help those who cannot

Patients pay what they can. The poor pay nothing.

Try this: Find one way a paying customer can help someone who cannot pay.

**A skill is worth most when it reaches
the people who need it.**

Sources

Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation

[Ruit, Sanduk \(2006 awardee profile\)](#)

Nepali Times

[The vision thing \(editorial, 2006\)](#)

Reuters (via Fox News)

[Procedure pioneered by surgeon brings vision back to thousands \(2012\)](#)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story. They differ on small points. The nearest school was eleven days away on foot (Magsaysay Foundation) or a week's walk (Nepali Times), so the story says many days. Lens prices are under \$5 (Magsaysay Foundation, 2006) and about \$4, against more than \$100 for an imported lens (Reuters, 2012). The story uses the Reuters figures and treats them as 2012 numbers, which may be out of date. The 125,000 operations is Ruit's own count as given to Reuters. The Magsaysay Foundation says he learned the new method from Hollows in Australia; the Nepali Times says the 1980 blindness survey first brought them together; the story uses both. The woman who saw her son is Ruit's own account. The lens count is given as nearly 1.5 million and as exported, so the story leaves it out. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.