NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center’s Tele-Ophthalmology Unit Pioneers Anti-Blindness Effort

New York, New York (September 14, 2017) – NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center (CUMC) recently unveiled a state-of-the-art mobile testing unit in a push to reduce blindness-causing eye diseases across the city. The unit, called The Tele-Ophthalmology Unit, is the first of its kind in the country, targeting communities where residents are most vulnerable to four major sight-threatening conditions: glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy.

“You can treat these eye conditions and prevent blindness if they’re caught early,” said Dr. Lama Al-Aswad, an ophthalmologist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia, associate professor of ophthalmology at Columbia University Medical Center and the Director of the Tele-Ophthalmology initiative. “But unfortunately, many people in underserved communities don’t have access to proper eye care, and by the time these diseases progress, it’s often too late. This project leverages technology and mobility to help these patients get the care they need, when they need it.”

Under Dr. Al-Aswad’s leadership, the Tele-Ophthalmology Unit expects to conduct up to 2,000 free screenings each year at locations in the Bronx, Washington Heights and Harlem. Dr. Al-Aswad and her team utilize an array of diagnostic equipment in the mobile testing station, which includes highly secure, WiFi-based data transmission that allows clinicians in NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia’s reading center to evaluate data in real-time. Screening participants are then given instructions or referrals to clinics that can handle follow-up care.

“Our model pursues health care management by targeting high-risk populations and screening them for diseases free of cost,” said Dr. Al-Aswad. “If we are able to identify these problems in patients before they progress, we’ll reduce the cost of care and improve their health drastically.”

So far, the mobile unit has screened about 160 individuals, with plans to visit Washington Heights, Harlem, Flushing, Fort Greene, Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn later this year.

Ophthalmological diseases and blindness are increasingly becoming a public health problem. “In our old model for community screening, we found that 57% of individuals never saw an eye doctor in their lifetime regardless of having insurance. They may develop a preventable blinding disease such as glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy or macular degeneration without even realizing it,” said Dr. Al-Aswad.

The Tele-Ophthalmology Unit is an innovative approach to combat preventable blindness through critical testing, and one that could become more popular if it proves effective.
NewYork-Presbyterian

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