

"The community came to us because of the eyeglasses program.": Derartu Ahmed, Health Extension Worker, on adding presbyopia to the bundle of non-communicable disease health services.

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Can you tell me your name and describe your work?

Derartu Ahmed: My name is Derartu Ahmed. I am a health extension worker at the health post. I have a Level 4 diploma, and I serve the community in this area.

Rollo Romig: What do you like most about being a health extension worker?

Derartu Ahmed: What makes me happy is working on 18 preventive and basic curative health packages for the rural communities we work in. I educate them about hygiene and sanitation. When the community is happy and satisfied, it makes me happy.

Rollo Romig: How do you feel about including eyeglasses in your work?

Derartu Ahmed: It makes me happy, especially when I see people who used to struggle with sight now able to read and go to school. In our community, most people go to the madrasa. Their prayers and blessings make me happier than my salary. We get exhausted from working under the scorching sun, but their excitement makes it worthwhile. The last man I gave glasses to was so happy, as if I opened his eyes. He rushed to thank the organization that brought the glasses.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about the training you received for screening people for presbyopia.



Derartu Ahmed: Previously, I only had awareness training. I referred people with cataracts because we do not offer treatment here. The eyeglasses organization gave us one day of training.

Rollo Romig: Did you learn everything you needed to know from the training, or are there other things you would like to learn that you still haven't learned yet?

Derartu Ahmed: The orientation I took focused on screening and distribution only, which was good, but I would like more training on treatment of eye problems.

Rollo Romig: What was the most useful part of the training for screening and distribution of eyeglasses?

Derartu Ahmed: Screening people first to identify who is short sighted or long sighted and giving them the glasses according to their needs.

Rollo Romig: Before you started screening and distributing glasses, you were already doing so many other things. How did adding in the glasses change your work?

Derartu Ahmed: The distribution went well, and the campaign did not take long because many people came and received the glasses. The only challenge was that while we were doing this work, we could not focus on our health post duties. Besides that, it was a very interesting experience.

Rollo Romig: Do you think that giving out the glasses makes people in your community more interested in getting help for other health problems?



Derartu Ahmed: Yes, it did. They were happy to receive the glasses. After the eyeglasses screening and distribution, members of the community who had previously shied away from us began coming for other health services. Because they knew we distributed eyeglasses, they started coming for services such as children's vaccinations, cervical cancer screening, TB treatment, and care for other diseases. The community came to us because of the eyeglasses program.

Rollo Romig: How do you create awareness and spread the word about the presbyopia screening?



Derartu Ahmed: First we use megaphones and move around informing people. Then we work with village health leaders, and we have all their contact information. We call every village elder and inform them about the screening and distribution. They then mobilize the community. That is how we do it. The village elders also have megaphones, which they use to spread the word and reach people.

Rollo Romig: Tell me more about the response from people in your community. Is there a story that you like of someone who the glasses had a big impact on?

Derartu Ahmed: Yes. For example, there are women who struggled when sorting through grains, so they couldn't even remove chaff from their harvest. After we gave them eyeglasses, they can now sort easily and sew. Seeing them receive these services and protect themselves from harm makes me happy.

There are elderly men who used to recite the Quran, but because of their eye conditions, they had stopped. After we gave them eyeglasses, they can now see and recite properly. Seeing them recite again makes me happy, and you even receive favor from God because of this action.

Rollo Romig: Are there other kinds of work that the glasses have really been helpful for?

Derartu Ahmed: It is mostly helpful for people who recite the Quran and for those who teach at school. Some teachers use it while teaching.

Rollo Romig: What feedback have you gotten from people who received eyeglasses?

Derartu Ahmed: We were in a village for other work when a group of women who were chewing khat saw us. One woman in the group said, "You've given us light; may it shine upon you as well." Another expressed her gratitude saying, "Just recently, I couldn't even see my chair, and I struggled to get work done around the house." They were so excited, as if I had opened their eyes, and they blessed me.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

 **Derartu Ahmed:** It has been great, but it wasn't enough. The eyeglasses ran out while we were distributing them, and not everyone who needed a pair received them. Only those who live close to us were able to get them. People in distant villages did not. We told them that we would bring more. We would be grateful to receive additional eyeglasses so everyone who needs them can have a pair. We saved two or three pairs, but we gave them out after people asked repeatedly. We hope the community can receive more in the future.

Rollo Romig: Thank you very much.

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Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*