

Zero infections at SNEC last year

■ BY AMRESH GUNASINGHAM

THE Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC) is making waves for its efforts at keeping infections at bay.

Last year, it recorded a zero infection rate for nearly 17,000 operations, including cataract surgery and Lasik to improve vision.

The majority of these – 10,000 – were operations to remove cataracts that cloud vision and can cause blindness.

The centre does half of all cataract operations in Singapore, which involves replacing the faulty lens with a synthetic one.

A zero infection rate is rare, said experts.

According to a study listed by the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the world's largest association of eye physicians and surgeons, one in every 1,000 cataract patients worldwide is known to develop post-operative infection.

Dr Wong Hon Tym, head of ophthalmology at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, described SNEC's low infection rates as a "laudable"

achievement that placed it "very well" on the global scale.

Dr Chan Tat Keong, a senior consultant at the centre, added that the prevention of infection from cataract surgery is considered the "gold standard" internationally for measuring eye surgery success, because many more such procedures are done than any other eye operations.

Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation, which estimates that 15 million cataract procedures are performed yearly.

Age-related cataracts, for example, are responsible for 18 million people going blind every year. This makes such cataracts responsible for just under half of the cases of blindness worldwide.

Last year's record is in contrast to 2007's, when the eye centre imposed a two-month ban on Lasik operations after 17 patients developed an inflammation over two days.

The cause was later pinned down to a dye used in a new pen to mark the patients' eyes before

surgery. The dye was found to be toxic.

Last year, the centre performed 5,000 Lasik operations without incident.

Professor Donald Tan, the centre's medical director, attributed the low infection rates to an "obsessive-compulsive" approach adopted in the areas of clinical services, education and research.

For example, the centre, which is staffed by 50 senior specialists and 120 nurses, was among the first in the world to film all its operations, a practice to help identify lapses in infection prevention.

"Many doctors initially felt disconcerted about having 'Big Brother' watching over their shoulder," Prof Tan said. "But now it is routine for us."

Renowned ophthalmologist Arthur Lim, who now chairs the Singapore Eye Research Institute, said a stringent infection prevention programme and state-of-the-art research facilities had enhanced the centre's reputation as a world leader in the field of ophthalmology.

But Prof Tan conceded that maintaining zero infection rates, while ideal, would not be achievable every year given the high volume of operations performed.

"The more practical aim is to ensure an absolute minimum number of infections occur every year, which surpasses international standards."