

Status of Foot and Ankle Surgery in India: Where Do We Stand in 2022

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Journal of Foot and Ankle Surgery (Asia-Pacific) (2022): 10.5005/jp-journals-10040-1259

Foot and ankle surgery has developed into a well-recognized subspecialty of orthopedics worldwide; in developed nations such as USA and European countries, foot and ankle surgery has well-established specialists and departments in medical schools. In India, and it is only now, that it has begun to come of age, emerging slowly but steadily from the neglect it suffered in the past. The last decade witnessed some painstaking yet sustained efforts by many surgeons in India, who had a special interest or special training in this field; the Indian Foot and Ankle Society (IFAS) has been the torchbearer in spreading the tenets of foot and ankle surgery, so to speak. The various programs and events hosted by IFAS, notably the annual conference, have become a well-attended landmark event in the academic calendar of orthopods. However, before patting ourselves on the back, a hard look at the nationwide scenario would be prudent.

It is a well-established fact that the awareness of foot and ankle problems in the Indian population is still limited in 2022; foot and ankle problems may result not only from injuries but also from certain chronic infective diseases such as tuberculosis, and from congenital and acquired deformities. The poor understanding of the problem of foot and ankle, unfortunately, is not only limited to the lay public but many a time, the medical practitioner (*who is the first contact of the patient*) may also not be well versed with the know-how of tackling these problems. Road traffic accidents are ominously on the rise in our country, turning our roads into killing fields; even by conservative estimates, there is a death on the roads every 2 minutes. Many polytrauma patients also have debilitating injuries to the foot and ankle; however, it is not uncommon to find that when such a polytraumatized patient is attended to in a hospital, his foot and ankle injury is accorded less than adequate attention. A “fresh foot and ankle” trauma, is thus converted into a neglected foot and ankle injury, adversely affecting the final outcomes and significantly modifying treatment. It is, therefore, of paramount importance, that sufficient awareness is spread among the general public as well as the medical fraternity.

The gradual progression from treating acute traumatic conditions to old and neglected post-trauma sequelae and severe deformity conditions with rheumatoid arthritis and degenerative arthrosis has evolved over the years in India. Surgeons are now routinely dealing with deformity correction due to posterior tibial dysfunction, treatment of Haglund’s deformity, hallux valgus corrections, and lesser metatarsal issues. The discussions among surgeons on various social media are a reflection of this fact, and many surgeons have now taken up practices based on foot and ankle problems alone. An additional factor is evolving interest in arthroscopic treatment of almost all these conditions, and arthroscopic techniques are now increasingly being practiced, as surgeons are now trained and skilled to perform them.

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How to cite this article: Anand KS, Dave M, Kudchadkar M. Status of Foot and Ankle Surgery in India: Where Do We Stand in 2022. *J Foot Ankle Surg (Asia-Pacific)* 2022;9(S-1):S147–S148.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None

Although minimally invasive techniques for correction of hindfoot and forefoot pathologies have still not gained nationwide exposure, these are now frequent at select centers in major cities, with other surgeons getting to know them better. One practice component that has remained unavailable has been total ankle replacement; the systems are not routinely available in the country, due to multiple issues including implant licensing, and total ankle replacement (TAR) has still remained elusive for both the patient and the surgeons.

Some facts about the role of IFAS need to be pointed out; established in the year 1987 by the visionary Professor Sureshwar Pandey, and a few like-minded colleagues of his, and subsequently registered in the year 2010, IFAS has been very active in promoting the principles and methodology of foot and ankle surgery in India.

The current Indian scenario as of the year 2022, can be highlighted as follows:

- The number of super-specialists practicing only the foot and ankle subspecialty, by conservative estimates, stands at around 50 nationwide and is rising steadily.
- The membership base of IFAS has increased to 863 (with 150 new members in the last 2 years); various academic activities of IFAS including its very active “Academics only” official WhatsApp group.
- Inland and foreign fellowships: the last 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic affected travel, especially international travel, due to obvious strictures, but hopefully things are looking up now and the activities of fellowships and observerships will resume. This will enable members of IFAS to obtain skills and be better prepared to handle foot and ankle problems in their clinical practice.
- Representation in international forum: IFAS has been regularly represented in various international foot and ankle societies like IFFAS, AFFAS, and APOA Foot and Ankle Council. Indian Foot and Ankle Society members have been invited as faculty and speakers in these prestigious fora. There also has been delegate participation in ample numbers from India in the meetings of these societies.

To conclude, foot and ankle surgery is currently the fastest growing subspecialty of orthopedics in India, as demonstrated by the steady rise in the membership base of IFAS. However, much work still remains to be done in the form of creating more training

opportunities, generating more public awareness, and cultivating the attitude and habit of research and publication in the field of foot and ankle surgery. These are onerous tasks, but our combined and sustained effort will overcome all obstacles.