A continuing vision

Medford eye doctors help restore sight on Christmas Island

Medford eye clinic serves a global population to help end treatable blindness

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A team of eye doctors from the Medical Eye Center in Medford furthered the clinic's global impact after traveling to the central Pacific to provide vital care to a population that is particularly vulnerable to blindness.

For the Medford clinic, which is involved with several international projects, this is its third trip to Christmas Island, part of the nation of Kiribati. Six specialists spent a week there this month, performing 84 surgeries to ward off or cure blindness for people who have no regular access to eye care.

Doctors Paul Jorizzo and Paul Imperia first visited Christmas Island on a fishing trip 20 years ago and say they were struck by the simplicity and contentment of the lifestyle. They were also struck by how many of the residents suffered from advanced eye conditions, made worse...
because of a lack of available eye care. Most of the diseases were sun-related, such as cataracts and pterygium, a type of corneal growth that can affect vision.

The ophthalmologists knew that if they could plan a trip to come back, performing corrective surgeries to help these patients would be relatively simple. At the time, though, they didn’t have the resources or funding.

“These are people who have so little and are so restricted by their handicap,” said Jorizzo. “Within 10 minutes we could give them their life back … the majority of blindness in the world is treatable.”

After a few years, a chance came when the organization Pacific Island Medical Aid offered to provide funding and transport patients from neighboring islands if the doctors could set up a temporary clinic. With additional support from Surgical Eye Expeditions, which provided equipment, Jorizzo made his first trip to Christmas Island in 2011. Now, it’s an established trip, with a team returning every two years.

It’s far from the only international outreach that the Medical Eye Center does. Another ophthalmologist, Dr. Matt Oliva, is on the board of the Himalayan Cataract Project, a global organization that funds projects to treat blindness and train local doctors. Doctors go to Nepal, Ethiopia, Peru and other countries, performing simple and cost-effective surgeries to restore eyesight to people who suffer simply from a lack of access to regular care. The organizations provide the equipment and supplies, but the doctors pay their own transportation costs.

This year, three eye doctors and three assistants from Medford traveled to the island, spending the week prescribing treatments, handing out sunglasses and training locals to provide care. Jorizzo said another mission may not be necessary in two years because of the number of people who were helped this year. He and Imperia performed 74 cataract and 10 pterygium surgeries to restore vision to everyone who showed up; they were in the operating room from about 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day, he said.

"It’s a lot of work," he said. "You’re tired. For me, though, it’s about post-op day one, when you have patients who have been blind for a decade and you take the patch off and they can see."

This was the first trip for optometrist Rory Murphy, who has worked with the clinic for about six months. Although he said the international projects weren’t a main factor in his move to Medical Eye Center, he expects to participate again.

"I've got the bug now," said Murphy. "There are people who are just very underserved."

Locally, the Medical Eye Center works with La Clinica to provide surgeries for low income and uninsured patients. Jorizzo recommended that people who want to help with any of the eye projects make donations not to the Eye Center but to the organizations they work with: Surgical Eye Expeditions, the Himalayan Cataract Project or La Clinica.

The clinic’s global efforts to increase access to eye care and combat blindness will continue.

"I'd hate to make a statement that blind people are unable to function in society because certainly we see lots of blind patients that function amazingly well," Jorizzo said. "But I think particularly for people who have had good vision and then lose vision, it's very challenging for them to do the daily functions that they were used to.

"Once you've had that experience where you get to be a part of somebody getting their vision back, it's just something you want to keep doing."

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