

Giving the gift of sight

Cataract blindness is a major problem in countries like PNG where teams see some kids who are almost blind



Donated glasses ready for distribution
Right: The donated Anaesthetic Machine



As a medical student, anaesthetist Dr Fergus Davidson took time out from his training in Australia and went to work in a bush hospital in Tanzania.

Now the Director of Anaesthetics at Canterbury Hospital and Staff Specialist Anaesthetist at Concord Hospital in Sydney, that experience remains as a central reference point of his working life, inspiring him to take leave each year to work in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

“Working in Tanzania taught me the great value of spending time in such places, where your work even over a short period of time can have such an enormous impact,” he said.

“I enjoy working within the framework of fundamental needs and even though I have been to PNG on six visits, it still thrills me to work within hospitals that survive with so little.

“PNG is only a short flight from Sydney, yet it remains a world away from our world in that their needs are so basic and it can still be a bit confronting to walk into one of their hospitals and see rubber gloves hanging on the line and plastic syringes being washed.”

Dr Davidson travels to the Pacific island nation as part of the PNG Eye Care Program headed by Sydney Ophthalmologist Dr Frances Booth.

The program is co-ordinated through the College, and supported locally by Callan Services for Disabled Persons, a charitable mission established by the Christian Brothers in 1991.

Recently, following a visit to Alotau Hospital in PNG's far south east, Dr Davidson organised the donation and the delivery of a new anaesthetic machine to replace one that had been broken down for more than six months.

With the hospital performing up to 2000 surgeries a year, the loss of the machine slowed patient treatment and required the manual inflation of lungs.

Given by Canterbury Hospital, the machine had been determined to be superfluous to the Hospital's need, but still perfectly workable, and in accordance with World Health Organisation standards for donations of medical equipment.

“The central reason behind organising this donation was that on the original visit to Alotau,

I realised the machine they were using was exactly the same as the machines no longer required at Canterbury Hospital,” Dr Davidson said.

“That is crucial when you are providing equipment, to actually find out if the donation is appropriate because the local biomedical engineers need to know how to support it, fix it and the staff need to know how to use it.

“It may not be at the dizzy standard that we require in Australia, but it is perfectly workable and efficient and will allow the anaesthetist to work hands-free, and automatically monitors the patient.

“There is a constant tension in these matters between reconciling our standards while trying to provide practical help and when I return to Australia sometimes I'm forced to laugh at the things we find absolutely necessary when you see how other people manage.”

Speaking just days before his next trip, this time to Wabag Hospital in the PNG Highlands, Dr Davidson said the team expected to conduct more than 100 cataract surgeries over the two week visit.

All will be suffering severe blindness, yet though the majority of patients will be older, some will present as virtually blind even as children.

The patients have their lenses replaced in surgery and then provided with donated glasses to further correct their vision.

“Cataract blindness is a major problem in countries like PNG and while children in Australia can have them, they are usually treated very early whereas we see there some kids who are almost blind,” Dr Davidson said.

“They are believed to be caused by a combination of diet, genetics and sunlight, but we don't really know. Yet we can treat them. Each procedure takes about 45 minutes and we use the old-fashioned method of scissors, knives and stitches rather than the vacuum method now used in Australia.”

On this trip, Dr Davidson will be accompanied by Ophthalmologist Dr Frances Booth, theatre nurse Louise Rogers and will work alongside local Ophthalmologist Dr David Pahau who divides his time between



Coke bottle as ventolin spacer, Ingenious



Production line anaesthesia

“The patients have their lenses replaced in surgery and then provided with donated glasses to further correct their vision.”

government services in Wewak and working with Callan Services.

The team will also be taking an Australian trainee Dr Ethan Nguyen who is hoping to join the ophthalmology training program.

Under the Eye Care Program, the team stays in convent or student accommodation while there, take all their own disposables and drugs provided as donations by pharmaceutical companies, with all packs sterilised through the generosity of Canterbury and Concord Hospitals in Sydney.

“These visits have become the highlight of my year, even though on day three of each one I think ‘never again’, but it is the local people who work so hard to make this work – the people who co-ordinate the visit, who screen the patients and who manage them while we are there and after we have gone – who deserve the credit, but get very little recognition,” Dr Davidson said.

“It is also very exciting and a major advance to have David Pahau working outside Port Moresby.”

Dr Davidson said one of the highlights of his work in PNG was treating a young girl named Barbara who was only nine when she presented as almost completely blind.

“We treated Barbara on one of the earlier visits and a year later when we returned we met her again,” he said.

“She was in school then, reading picture books, and it was wonderful to see. She was severely blind when we operated on her and really wouldn’t have had a chance to live the life she deserved to live.”

With Karen Murphy



Logistics for the donations of the anaesthetic machine and spare parts were provided by TNT Australia, TNT Papua New Guinea and Burwood Pack and Send, while the cost of freight was funded by AusAID and the College.

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