

# Defining Medical Philanthropy

**An eye doctor from Singapore helps out in India**

**M**edical school taught me a lot of things, but there were two things it did not prepare me for. The first was how to start and run a successful private practice. The second was how to be a successful on medical volunteer who gives back to society.

One of the basic tenets of medical practice is "Do no harm". This has been drilled into me from day one of medical school and I still adhere to this. I think another medical ideal that should be drilled into medical students is "Make time to do some good elsewhere, as well as at home".

Eye surgeons are a philanthropic lot. Many of us are involved in helping the poor in rural places around us in Southeast Asian countries by doing free cataract surgery. Some of us devote a few days of our time every few years involved in cataract camps in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and other countries in the region. The amount of good that comes out of this is unquestionable and extremely commendable. However, because of the great numbers of the needy in these countries, such efforts are



but a drop in the ocean. Then there is the fact that that such camps tend to be poorly funded and resources have to be stretched, so you have to work within limitations. One example relates to the type of cataract surgery that can be done in these cataract camps.

Modern cataract surgery as practiced in developed countries such as Singapore is small-incision phacoemulsification surgery, or "phaco". It is however machine and technology dependent, and technology cost money. Cataract surgery in mass cataract camps tends to be a more ancient form called extracapsular cataract surgery, also referred to as "extracap" or ECCE. This is a low-tech method that many Singapore surgeons have long abandoned for the better "phaco" technique. A comparison between

laparoscopic and open cholecystectomy might be appropriate here.

The form of medical volunteerism I have chosen to spend time on involves teaching local doctors in these countries modern techniques of cataract surgery so that they can be up to date with the latest developments and hopefully be able to give more to their patients.

## The Multiplier Effect

I am a strong believer of the multiplier effect teaching a doctor has. By volunteering time and skills and doing 10 good surgeries I would have benefitted 10 people. But by teaching 10 doctors to do good modern operations, I would have benefitted hundreds of people. This effect will last long after I have left the host country. It is an awesome



realization when one thinks about it, and it is this that keeps me going back for more.


I started out in medical volunteerism in 2004 when I became volunteer faculty with ORBIS, "The Flying Eye Hospital". In 2007 I was involved in an ORBIS mission to Syria and had the privilege of doing complex eye surgery on a fully equipped surgical theatre onboard a DC10 aircraft.

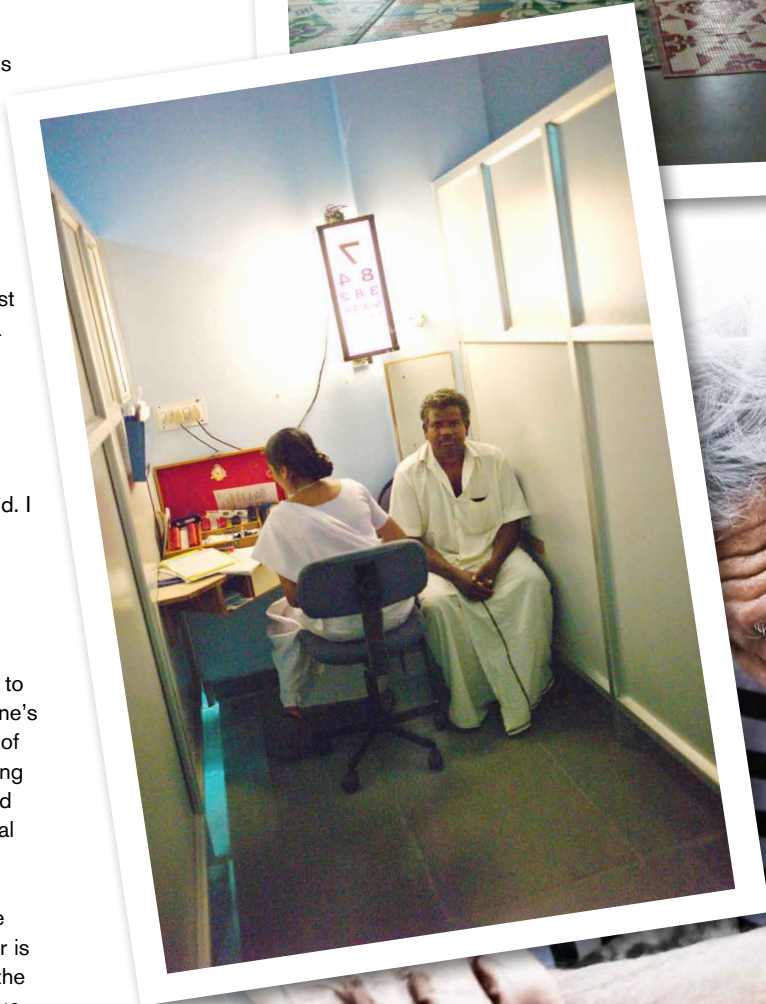
Earlier this year, I was requested by another organization to help out in India, as invited faculty at an international eye meeting that was sponsored by Alcon and held in Chennai. My contribution to this doctors' meeting was to teach fellow eye surgeons the latest surgical techniques, and to showcase the latest technology in cataract surgery. At this meeting, one of my duties was to perform "live" demonstration eye surgery beamed to 300 eye surgeons in the meeting hall.

I was also invited to visit Aravind Eye Hospital, which is among the world's most prolific eyecare centres, in Pondicherry, a 3-hour car ride on an uncompleted road from Chennai city. On this visit, I gained a better understanding of the economic impact of the eye conditions in India. It was enlightening to be immersed in the rich culture of India and to see it first hand. I tremendously enjoyed sharing time and knowledge with friends in India, both old and new.

**Dedication to Skills**

In order to do the most good, one needs to be able to dedicate oneself to growing one's skills. I try to do this by keeping abreast of the newest medical developments by being involved in international eye meetings, and sharing medical expertise with the medical community.

The most fulfilling aspect about being an eye doctor is the ability to help people see. One of my loves is to travel; another is Ophthalmology. Being able to combine the two is a natural fit and allows me to pursue my two passions. I look forward to being able to use my knowledge and experience to help the less fortunate, and to working closely with the international team of professionals from India and around the world. 



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