

Restoring eyesight for Gambian children

Geoffrey Hunwicks (Geoff), a 68-year-old British living in the Gambia, in West Africa, has been working with differently-abled children since 2002. For over two years Geoff has been suffering from a peculiar eye problem. Diagnosed as 'lower lid Spastic entropion of left eye', it is a medical condition where the eyelash was growing inward, irritating the eye. On an advice from Sanyi Sergo, Regional Eyecare Coordinator for One Sight, he visited the only major eye hospital in Gambia, the Shiekh Zayed Regional Eyecare Centre (SZRECC) at Kalifung. The doctors there could only trim the eye lashes as an immediate solution, and this was done on a regular basis for nearly two years.

Geoff got a lasting solution when Indian ophthalmologists visited Gambia on a surgical mission in April. He was operated upon by Dr Milind Bhide, a senior ophthalmologist from Hyderabad, who was part of the mission.



The Indian medical team with beneficiaries at the Gambia, Africa.

Dr K V Ravishankar, a Vitreous-Retina specialist and member of Rotary Bangalore D 3190 E- Club, led the mission to Gambia. He has visited several African countries and Bangladesh on 21 such surgical missions. The country, with a population of over two million, has just three ophthalmologists, two of them being Nigerians. Since the time SZRECC was established in 2008, the Ministry of Health Services has been requesting Dr Ravishankar, who is the Director, Usha Kiran Eye Hospital, Mysuru, to help them with treating children suffering from complicated eye disorders.

Two senior ophthalmologists, Dr Ravishankar and Dr Milind Bhide; an anaesthetist Dr K R Vasantha Kumar, who are part of the mission, and I spearhead the Avoidable Blindness Projects in RID 3190. During the six days of stay, the team performed 39 surgeries in 36 patients, of which 29 were children. Two children and an adult were operated on both eyes. We raised \$20,000 to meet the cost of travel, accomodation, food, local conveyance, cost of surgical consumables, IOLs and other miscellaneous expenses. Rotary Clubs of Ivory City Mysuru, Mysuru Central and Mysuru Midtown of RID 3181, Bangalore D 3190 E Club, Cubbonpark and Koramangala of RID 3190, India, Rotary Senhora-da-hora, RID 1970, Portugal and three clubs of Banjul, RID 9101, West Africa were the main contributors. Combat Blindness International, a US-based NGO, has been a constant supporter of eyecare projects in Africa. The Consul General of India in the Gambia Ram Mohan facilitated the local support and the Indian entrepreneurs in the country actively participated in this mission to help poor Gambian children.

During our first visit in 2017, the three Rotary clubs in Gambia put together had 76 members. Inspired by Rotary's

humanitarian activities and the impact of our surgical missions in restoring eyesight on little children, more Rotarians are participating in the project and the membership has increased to 120 Rotarians in the Gambia, with an addition of two more clubs.

When we were all set to board our flight to India, Ram Mohan said that the Indian medical team brought brightness not only to the young patients but also to their families and to the people of Gambia, more particularly to the Indian community and Gambian Rotary.

*The writer is member of RC Bangalore Koramangala, RID
3190.*
