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Wilmette surgeon performs volunteer eye surgeries in South America



Sondheimer and a happy patient are all smiles after surgery.

Staff Report
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Wilmette's Stuart Sondheimer, MD, an ophthalmologist and eye surgeon based in Skokie, recently taught a course entitled "Small Incision Cataract Surgery" to both experienced ophthalmologists and residents-in-training at a medical conference held in Orlando, Florida.

This specific type of eye surgery is commonly used in the developing world where expensive, technically-advanced surgical equipment is not available. The surgery is also safer for very advanced cataracts. Immediately following the conference, Sondheimer departed for Juayua, El Salvador to perform cataract and pterygium surgeries for people who would otherwise remain blind. Sondheimer was part of a medical team sponsored by Eye Care International and SEE International that examined the eyes of over 5,000 patients, dispensed over 3,000 pairs of eyeglasses, and performed 84 major eye surgeries over a two week period. The doctors and staff are volunteers, paying their own airfare, room and board.

Cataracts result in reduction in vision due to cloudiness of the lens of the eyes. People with severe cataracts can only see light or darkness. Those who are severely blind from cataracts can't see to walk, work, take care of others, take care of themselves, or enjoy the simple things in life.

For most people, it is hard to imagine losing their sight from cataracts and lacking the financial means and access to medical care to again have full vision. The World Health Organization estimates that over 45 million poor people, suffering with cataracts, could have their vision restored if they had access to an eye surgeon. Cataract surgery is one of the most successful surgeries performed today, quickly restoring excellent sight for most patients. In the United States, about 6,000 people per million have their sight restored with cataract surgery. In the poorest countries, approximately 600 people per million are able to have their cataracts treated. Insufficient access to quality care, high costs, fear, resignation, superstition, and people thinking that they are not worthy of the effort may keep people blind from cataracts.

Volunteer physicians with SEE International have examined over 3 million patients and performed over 400,000 surgeries since 1974. Corporations, including Alcon, Dutch Ophthalmic, and Microsurgical Technologies have donated many thousands of dollars of surgical supplies for the missions. Donors in the United States help support the International Aid organizations.

Before going on his first mission trip many years ago, Sondheimer trained himself to perform small incision cataract surgery without the expensive high technology ultrasound systems and supplies used with modern cataract surgery in the U.S.

Mission cataract surgery is usually performed at a low cost with older technology equipment and supplies.

When the El Salvadoran patients received their cataract surgery, it was the beginning of a life-changing event. They regained their independence and dignity. Many returned to work or school. Family members were no longer required to take care of them, as they are now self-sufficient. The organizations Sondheimer volunteers with have raised funds to purchase new equipment for the host surgeons and taught the surgeons advanced surgical techniques. The result of these volunteer efforts provides everyone involved in the charitable missions with the sense of accomplishment and pride.

For more information, call (847) 677-2794 or visit www.DrSondheimer.com.