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CLEAR VISION AS MISSION: MOBILE EYE HEALTH CARE



Dr. Matabai "Tabs" Lim of the Vision 20/20 Cataract Charities Project

“I saw levels of blindness that most Western doctors don’t see anymore. In England, cataracts are more of an inconvenience than a cause of blindness, and it was depressing to see so many patients out there who hadn’t received this simple treatment,” a visiting English doctor said of his experience in coming to the Philippines to perform charity cataract surgeries.

He was not exaggerating. According to the World Health Organization, there are eight million blind in Western Pacific region alone, and the Philippines, China and Vietnam account for more than 80 percent of these. A US-based foundation, Restoring Sight International Inc., estimates that more than one-fifth of the world’s blind live in the Philippines. About 500,000 of Filipinos are blind due to cataracts, and a further 1.3 million live with severe visual impairment. As in most other developing countries, 80 percent of the causes of blindness are preventable or treatable.

Blindness can be paralyzing. The person can no longer perform the basic life functions — dressing, eating, walking, even his or her motions — without need for a guide. The family thus has to keep watch, practically full time. But with the country’s scarce fiscal resources, eye health care is one of the most neglected areas of public health management, the rationale being

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that blindness is not life threatening. The Department of Health's decision in 1999 to scrap its blindness prevention budget elicited from Dr. Kadil "Jojo" Sinolinding a scathing letter to the editor that was published in a major daily.

Yearly, an additional 120,000 become blind due to cataracts because the cost of surgery is staggering to ordinary Filipinos at PhP6,000 to PhP20,000 (Cdn\$150 to Cdn\$500) per eye. When Jojo was a child, he saw his grandmother become unnecessarily blind because simply because the family could not afford the cost of cataract treatment.

Across the country, in cases of eye vision problems, the invariable solution seems to be "Eye-mo," an eye-drop brand. For that matter, ophthalmology is not an especially popular specialization for doctors, and there are less than 2,000 licensed ophthalmologists in the country.

Multiply this problem a thousand-fold for a picture of eye health in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), where the incidence of preventable blindness in the country is highest. There are only four Muslim ophthalmologists in the entire Mindanao, reckons Dr. Matabai "Tabs" Lim.

Tabs and Jojo are two of these four. They are also the main personalities behind "Vision 20/20 Cataract Charities Project."

The myths surrounding eye care exacerbate the situation. "They put honey in the eyes, sometimes mother's milk, sometimes urine!" People in the ARMM areas, Tabs added, make tea out of a local variety of grass called "tawa-tawa" and use this as substitute for over-the-counter eye drops.

The therapeutic properties of "tawa-tawa" have not been established.

"Another common misconception with surgery is



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Dr. Kadil "Jojo" Sinolinding with patients during a free clinic

Vision 20/20 project staff
Monera Tumagantong and
Delia Racca with the
surgical microscope
donated by Canada Fund
for Local Initiatives



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that the eyes could pop out in case something goes awry. Did you know that?” Tabs said.

Free clinics

Once a week, Tabs leaves her private practice in Cotabato City, seat of the ARMM government, and travels two hours to Kabacan Polymedic Cooperative Hospital in North Cotabato to join Jojo for the free eye clinics offered by the Vision 20/20 project, which seeks to develop an eye health care system in the provinces of Cotabato, Maguindanao, Basilan and Lanao del Sur.

Aside from the weekly clinics, Vision 20/20 brings Tabs and Jojo to seven other small public and private hospitals that act as project partners. The hospitals provide the operating room, while Tabs and Jojo bring the necessary equipment, instruments and supplies, in addition to donating their surgical services. Their luggage during these “mobile surgeries” includes the portable operating microscope and cataract surgery sets acquired with the support of Canada Fund for Local Initiatives in 2002.

The microscope is transported encased in a box trolley made of hard plastic as protection from the rugged trips — inland and by ferry — around the region.

Patients learn of the project by word of mouth, and via the radio programme “Suara Mindanao,” (Voice of Mindanao) where Jojo is one of two anchors who talk about “virtually anything under the sun” that concerns Muslim Filipinos. Jojo announces the clinic and surgery schedules on the air, and sure enough, when the two doctors reach the partner hospital, there is a long queue waiting to be served.

So far, under Vision 20/20, Tabs and Jojo have performed nearly 1,500 surgeries (738 men and 702

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women), mostly for cataracts, but also glaucoma, pterrigium and squints.

Training for sustainability

Aside from the mobile surgeries, Vision 20/20 undertook capacity-building activities not only to promote knowledge and skills in eye care and blindness prevention, but also as a sustainability mechanism. The two-day training, conducted to five doctors and more than 60 volunteer barangay health workers, included a pre-test to determine the participants' knowledge of basic eye care and eye diseases, and a post-test to measure absorption and comprehension. "Not all doctors are trained in ophthalmics, so we teach them the basics so they can help screen cases, sometimes even issue prescriptions for simple treatments," Tabs said.

The barangay health workers, on the other hand, are taught how to recognize and differentiate the kinds of blindness, and distinguish referable from non-referable cases. "Our objective is to equip them with the knowledge and skills for quick but sound diagnosis," Tabs noted. "We review the dos and don'ts."

The training participants were provided ophthalmic kits that were part of the support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives. Each kit contained a flashlight, eye ointment, eye occluders and charts of common eye diseases. The grant also covered the transport expenses and meals of the participants during the training.

The support from Canada Fund for Local Initiatives also financed the publication of a poster as an information, education and communication effort to promote the idea that cataract blindness is treatable. The poster design is simple and easy to understand. There are three pictures: the first is a woman with the telltale white cataract spots in the eye; the second, the woman with the surgical eye patches removed; and third, the same woman, this time reading a book. These posters are found in the waiting rooms and several other areas of the hospitals the project works with, as well as other clinics in the region.

Cost-sharing strategy

Vision 20/20 is based in Kabacan Polymedic Cooperative Hospital for a specific reason. Because the two doctors are members of the cooperative, the two doctors can "dictate the prices," explains Tabs. In a traditional private hospital, they would have been forced to match the usually higher rates. "A minimum PhP6,000," Tabs estimates.

Working from a government hospital is well nigh



(top) Ismael Mantangao's hypertension was also discovered by Vision 20/20, his first and only encounter with a doctor all his life; (bottom) Rocaya Ambolada no longer loses the watermelons she sells in the market to filchers.



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impossible, as most government hospitals in the region lack an operating microscope and offer only outpatient services.

As much as the two doctors want to spare their patients from any expense, this renders the project unsustainable. The lens implanted during a cataract surgery, for example, cost PhP3,000 to PhP4,000 (Cdn\$75 to Cdn\$100) alone. A cost-sharing strategy was thus adopted. Patients pay usually PhP1,000 (Cdn\$25) to cover the protective goggles and post-surgery medications. “We always explain to the patient, ‘You have to have the medications or you might as well not have the surgery at all,’” Tabs said.

Amina Nawawi, for example, was operated in one eye for glaucoma for over a year now. But she is at risk of irreversible blindness in the other eye unless she can prepare PhP1,000 for a second surgery. Project staff Monera and Delia persuaded her to consult Tabs again right away. Amina knows the follow-up surgery is urgent, but shows no particular hurry. “I need to save yet,” she said. It will take her six months, she estimates, before she can come up with her counterpart.

“Of course, in very dire circumstances, we forget about our cost-sharing scheme and say, ‘Never mind, we’ve got to do it on this one,’” Tabs noted. She recalls the case of an old man who was not only cataract-blind but also completely deaf in the last 10 years. It was his first visit to the clinic, and he was not ready with his share of the surgery expense. But for Jojo and Tabs, the man had suffered long enough. There and then, they decided to operate him.

After two hours, the two joined their patient in the recovery room. He sat still for a few seconds after the eye patch was removed. Then he began pointing his finger at each of four or five members of the family who

He began pointing ... at each, calling out their names. It was the first time he was seeing his family after a decade.

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Before Rocaya Ambolada, well into in her 70s (as with most senior Muslims from ARMM, she does not have records of her birth and cannot tell her exact age), was operated in her left eye for cataracts, she was fully dependent on family. Even for the most basic activity such as eating, she needed to wait until a child or one of her seven grandchildren would sit with her and guide her hand to where her plate, and the serving bowls were. Only then was she able to start eating.

In the market, there were innumerable times she would learn from other vendors that someone stole one of the watermelons she sold. (The watermelons were grown by the family.) Worse, Cotabato being in the “war zone,” when the bombs dropped and it was time to flee, she had to make herself completely limp so she could be dragged to the evacuation centre like a sack. Life, for Rocaya, was frustrating.

Vision 20/20 Cataract Care/Postop
POLYMEDIC EYE CARE NETWORK
 KABACAN POLYMEDIC COOPERATIVE HOSPITAL

Sa loob ng 30 minuto...
 Maaring mabago ang ating paningin at muling masilayan ang gardo ng mundo...

ALAM BA NINYO...
 ... na may dalawang milyong Pilipino ang bulag o nabubulag ngayon.
 ... na ang karamihan ay dahil sa Katarata (Cataract)?
 ... na ang pagkabalag dahil sa Katarata (Cataract) ay maaring gamutin sa pamamagitan ng mabisang, 30-minutong epektibong operasyon (Cataract Surgery)

HENYAW! HAYAANG MANATILI SA DILIM...
 Para sa karapalagang kasiliman, kumangapuri sa pinakarapalag na
 POLYMEDIC EYE CARE NETWORK AFFILIATED HOSPITAL:

HOSPITAL	PLACE	DATE OF CONSULTATION

Tawag sa Kabacan Polymeric Cooperative Hospital, Tel. Nos. (954) 240-2883 / (954) 281-1788
 Canadian International Development Agency

The “Did-you-know?” poster emphasizing that cataracts are treatable

He could no longer farm or go to church; he would bump into walls. But now the rest of the family can leave him by himself in the house so they can tend to their rice fields.

Now, after surgery, Rocaya threatens to chase anyone who tries to steal her watermelons again. (In fact, no one has attempted to, the watermelon filchers probably realising now that she is no longer blind.) She has also been able to resume the rolling of beetle leaves into cigarettes, which she also sells in the market. In her free time, she can visit the neighbours and swap stories with them. Life is back to being a joy.

In the case of Ismael Mantangao, also in his 70s, and a grandfather to 15 children, until the surgery performed by Jojo, he felt stuck and useless. He could no longer farm or go to church; he would bump into walls. But now the rest of the family can leave him by himself in the house so they can tend to their rice fields. He even helps out on the farm sometimes. “Now I can see the beautiful women again,” Ismael teased.

Ismael is also on a strict diet of rice and *patola* (gourd) with a little salt. Jojo discovered the old man’s severe hypertension when he came for a consultation and recommended a strict weight-watching programme. “When I lied down for Dr. Jojo to check my eyes, he said, ‘You will not die of cataracts, you will die of your high blood pressure if you don’t watch out.’” Ismael’s surgery took place only after three months, when Ismael’s hypertension had somewhat abated.

The doctor was Ismael’s first sight after his surgery. The doctor, he added, is the first and only he has had since birth.

Jojo firmly believes that “the best investment in life” is on people. “They deserve nothing but the best in us,” he said.

Through Vision 20/20, Tabs and Jojo are able to give back to their community their expertise and skills. Through Vision 20/20, the elderly Muslims with vision problems in ARMM regain the power of sight and become whole again. Not only they, but also their families, regain independence and become productive again. Vision 20/20 gives hope for a better, clearer quality of life.