



Cataract surgery

Group funds standardized eye care units to treat blindness in Africa

An ophthalmic outreach organization is trying to improve the way eye care is delivered.

By Erin L. Boyle

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Many people who are blinded by treatable cataracts cannot reach hospitals or eye clinics for treatment. An initiative by the One World Sight Project is seeking to bring eye care directly to those who need it.



The project has been raising funds for adaptable eye care module units to be placed throughout Africa, along with the implementation of community outreach and standardized practice models, according to One World Sight Project (OWSP) founder and president, Richard Weiss, MD.



**John A.
Hovanesian**

The Eyes of Africa initiative's modular eye care units are a unique concept, Dr. Weiss said in a telephone interview with *Ocular Surgery News*. Architect Brion Jeannette has developed plans for the units, which are standard trailer modules. Those parts can be combined into space for waiting rooms, administrative rooms, examination rooms, operating rooms and outpatient care rooms, according to the project's Web site.

The units, which will first be placed throughout Tanzania, can be transported to developed or remote areas, increasing their potential for use in other African nations, Dr. Weiss said. The project is looking to donate the mobile eye care models to organizations already based in other African countries.

"We can utilize different eye care organizations that are already providing the care and have established track records in various countries in Africa," he said. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel by creating new people on the ground. We can utilize what is already there, and prompt it and guide it along in a different direction."

A new treatment model



**Richard
Weiss**

Dr. Weiss said the Eyes of Africa initiative is tackling the overwhelming need for ophthalmic outreach around the world by taking eye care directly to the people who need it. In addition to the eye care modules, the program will implement a community outreach program and a standardization model developed at two eye care centers in India. The community outreach model was based on work by Nag Rao, MD, president of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, at L.V. Prasad Eye Institute in Andhra Pradesh, India, Dr. Weiss said.

The standardization practice was developed by Govindappa Venkataswamy, MD, who founded the Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai, India. Dr. Weiss first met Dr. Venkataswamy in 1991 on a trip to Madurai with a representative from National Geographic to learn and document his innovative methods. He said the initiative is dedicated to Dr. Venkataswamy because of his outstanding contributions to

standardizing cataract extraction and blindness prevention in India. The program will seek to replicate its standardized training, facilities, delivery of care, as well as public awareness of treatment opportunities.

Dr. Venkataswamy's methods are modeled after what might be considered a unique approach for ophthalmology – a fast-food restaurant. He based his model of eye care on the way McDonald's sells hamburgers, by standardizing surgical procedures, making practice patterns similar around the world and serving the same product to millions of people through advertising and public awareness, Dr. Weiss said.

"In many places of the world, people who are blind think it is a matter of course. They don't even realize that something can be done," he said.



Patients shown outside clinic in Tanzania, waiting for eyecare.



Postoperative patients in Tanzania.

Images: Weiss R

The organization

Dr. Weiss, a musician, said he was inspired to start OWSP one day in 1988, when he sat down to the piano and composed a song about blindness. As a resident at Georgetown University, he did outreach work in Haiti, where he saw the need for affordable eye care in the developing world, he said.

The song that he composed that day, called "One Spirit," helped inspire the organization's mission, Dr. Weiss said.

It also caught the attention of musician Stevie Wonder. Mr. Wonder, who lost his vision in infancy, lent his support to the organization, becoming an OWSP Special Adviser. The organization has also received support from former South African President Nelson Mandela, other musicians and leading members of the ophthalmic community, Dr. Weiss said.

OWSP was incorporated in 1991. Over the years, the organization has honed its outreach to funding specific goals and projects in specific regions for maximum impact, expanding as programs met with success, he said. The project has supported the goals of Vision 2020, the International Eye Foundation, Seva and other programs and organizations.

Dr. Weiss said the group is not only helping treat cataracts but also providing relief and development to prevent

cataracts and other causes of blindness worldwide. The project's goal is to create sustainable eye care services around the world.

"Basically, what we're trying to do is improve the way eye care is delivered," he said. "Specifically, the One World Sight Project was formed to allow organizations to become more effective at fundraising and, to the extent that we were successful at raising funds, support organizations that we can help or provide more suggestions and solicit requests for proposals for different projects."

The group has hosted numerous fundraisers and has corrected severe visual loss in hundreds of people around the world. The organization has employed different ways of fundraising, including social events, a "Web-athon" and an exchange of cosmetic services, according to Dr. Weiss.

The cosmetic services fundraiser was sponsored by Allergan Medical, a division of Allergan, which donated the company's Botox (botulinum toxin type A) product to 45 physicians. The physicians also volunteered their time, administering the donated botulinum toxin type A injections to 1,000 patients during an 8-hour period, with all fees donated to OWSP, Dr. Weiss said.

All proceeds from that event supported the completion of the Kilimanjaro Centre for Community Ophthalmology, the first comprehensive training center for community ophthalmology in Africa, in Moshi, Tanzania. The building will assist in the hospital's mission to reach Vision 2020 goals, training ophthalmologists at a heightened pace to meet the growing need for cataract extraction, Dr. Weiss said.

For more information:

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