

UCLA Medical Alumni Bring the Miracle of Sight to People in the Developing World

One of the miracles of life is the ability to see: those we love, beautiful scenery and a starry night. There are also the everyday things upon which we depend on our eyesight that we may take for granted: driving, going to the movies, riding a bike, or watching our children play. Thankfully, people in the developed world who are blind have many incredible resources and new technologies to ensure that their quality of life is as fulfilling as all of us who see. In the developing world, however, blindness can mean the difference between life and death.

More than 30 UCLA medical alumni are using their ophthalmological skills to bring the miracle of sight to thousands of individuals worldwide. These selfless surgeons travel on behalf of Surgical Eye Expeditions (SEE) International, a Santa Barbara, Calif.-based nonprofit, humanitarian organization, to restore sight to disadvantaged blind people.

SEE was founded in 1974 by Harry S. Brown, M.D. (RES '70). During his training at UCLA's Jules Stein Eye Institute (JSEI), Dr. Brown became interested in international ophthalmology and working with doctors with limited resources. Upon completion of his academic studies, he embarked upon an international expedition to experience firsthand the challenges faced by ophthalmologists in the developing world. He was accompanied by his wife, four children and his mother.



Harry S. Brown, M.D. (RES '70) on an expedition to South America in the early 1980s. Photo courtesy of Dr. Brown

“I spent six months in the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, where I was assigned to the 100-bed St. John’s Eye Hospital,” Dr. Brown said. “I spent a month in the remote village of Kadi, India, working with the local eye surgeon. In 22 working days, we saw more than 1,000 patients, all of whom had devastating eye disease, and performed 76 surgeries during that time.”

Dr. Brown spent a month in Kabul, Afghanistan as a visiting volunteer specialist for Care Medico. Afterward, he traveled to nearly 10 countries, visiting with local ophthalmologists, touring schools for the blind and university medical centers.

While at JSEI, Dr. Brown met attending surgeon George Primbs, M.D.'55 (RES'61) Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology. They remained in contact and when Dr. Brown returned to the United States, Dr. Primbs encouraged him to relocate to Santa Barbara.

In 1971, Dr. Brown began his private practice and soon after started SEE. Almost 40 years later, the organization has more than 650 volunteer ophthalmic surgeons, from 75 different countries, who travel internationally to perform sight-restoration procedures. Supplies are donated by the ophthalmic industry. Since SEE's inception, the organization has performed more than 400,000 sight-restoration procedures in more than 35 countries. In 2012, SEE International supported 10,208 sight-restoring surgeries around the world.

In 1993, SEE International recognized a need for a community program and created the Santa Barbara Vision



Left to right: Santa Barbara Vision Care Program patient is examined by George Primbs, M.D.'55 (RES '61). Photo courtesy of Valerie Walker, UCLA MAA

Care Program (SBVCP). The program, led by Dr. Primbs as program director, provides comprehensive eye exams, glaucoma screenings, eyeglasses, medications, and eye surgery at no cost to the patient. In 2012, it completed 22 sight-restoring procedures and provided eye care to 1,242 individuals in Santa Barbara County. SBVCP has been providing diabetic retinopathy screenings for its patients since 2005.

“I have dedicated my life to vision care,” Dr. Primbs said. “Restoring someone's sight is a life changing event. It is very gratifying to treat patients at SBVCP. Many of them have increased risk of suffering eye impairment, including blindness, and none of them have the resources to access private medical care. SBVCP is noble and necessary.”



Dorothy Khong, M.D. '02, (RES '06) poses with patients whose sight she helped restore while on a SEE International Expedition to Vietnam in 2010. Photo courtesy of Dr. Khong

Dorothy Khong, M.D.'02, (RES '06) who has a private practice in Oakland, Calif., participated on a 2010 SEE expedition to Vietnam after learning about the organization from a colleague.

"The patients are so very grateful to be able to see again, and many of them have waited a long time for this," Dr. Khong said. "SEE is a great organization for physicians to volunteer their time. You provide a service to people who need it the most, and, in return, you will have an unforgettable experience and meet wonderful people."

Richard Yook, M.D.'72, (RES'77) is another Bruin SEE volunteer ophthalmologist. He practices at Northridge Ophthalmology Associates in Northridge, Calif. During the last decade, he has been on several international expeditions with the organization.

"SEE has established relationships with local ophthalmologists in the countries where we are travelling," Dr. Yook said. "The national physicians assist with gaining access into the country and providing medical supplies. SEE also offers surgical-technique training for manual cataract surgical removal at their headquarters in Santa Barbara. The skills learned in this course are utilized by surgeons, like me, while on expeditions. Cataract surgery can be a life changing experience. People struggle to make a living when they can't see. Restored vision brings back the miracle of sight and makes a tremendous, positive impact on the quality of life for that individual, their family and their community. I am grateful for the training I received from UCLA, and I am grateful that I can use it to help others."



Richard Yook, M.D.'72, (RES'77) visits with a patient on his SEE International expedition to India. Photo courtesy of Dr. Yook

“Life expectancy for the blind in most developing countries is usually less than half that of someone with eyesight. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that a blind person is unable to contribute to his or her family income. Not only does blindness mean a father is unable to work, or a mother cannot care properly for her children, collect water, or go to market, but it requires that someone else must care for the afflicted. The probable consequence is that two incomes are lost, creating an overwhelming economic

strain on the family and the community. In many cases, the added responsibility falls on the children, who will then lose the ability to go to school and experience a carefree childhood,” stated Randal Avolio, President/CEO, SEE International.

For more information on becoming a volunteer eye surgeon with SEE and/or the Santa Barbara Vision Care Program, please visit www.seeintl.org or call (805) 963-3303.