

VISION HEALTH INTERNATIONAL
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For More Information

If you are an ophthalmologist, anesthesiologist, surgical nurse or technician, or a recovery room nurse and think you would like to volunteer for a VHI mission, please contact

Cindy Goodale at (707) 224-5956 or toll-free at (877) 689-2981.

If you know someone who would like to receive our newsletter or get more information about VHI, please let us know.

We'd like to spread the word.

Come visit us on the internet at www.visionhealth.org

Sometimes the Magic Works

He fishes on who catches one. French proverb

An outreach gynecology team working with the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS) found her during one of their scheduled programs to the more remote regions of eastern Costa Rica this past September. She was nineteen, six months pregnant, diabetic and essentially living on her own. And as though her list of medical and personal woes wasn't long enough, Norma was blind—had been for over a year—with bilateral cataracts, a consequence of her uncontrolled diabetes. Immediately referred to Ophthalmology, Norma was transported by helicopter to the Hospital Tony Facio in Limon, where VHI just so happened to be engaged in its always productive and up to that point relatively routine field program.

By all accounts and with reasonable justification, Norma was not altogether pleased with the course her young and trauma-filled life had taken. She was uncommunicative and not overly pleasant, in spite of the efforts being made on her behalf. She all but refused to take nourishment and exhibited any number of symptoms associated with a downward spiraling despondency. VHI's Dr. Paul Masi examined her on Wednesday. Cataract surgery was scheduled for Thursday.

“When can you do the other eye?”



Not overly fond of the camera, Norma displays her best Mona Lisa smile during her post-op exam with Dr. Paul Masi.

When seen during post-op rounds on Friday—as 21 VHI volunteers (who had performed 114 surgical procedures and dispensed nearly 300 pairs of eyeglasses) prepared to leave Limon—Norma's demeanor seemed little changed from the day before. When the patch and shield were removed she exhibited none of the more typical and joyful first responses to light. Even as she correctly counted Dr. Masi's fingers during his impromptu backward-pacing vision screening, Norma appeared unimpressed with, almost disbelieving, her restored vision. Until that is, the doctor thought to ask, “Norma, puede ver?”, (Norma, can you see?)

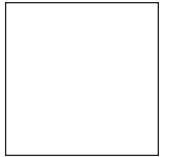
What was communicated then can only be translated by way of the heart, for in Dr. Masi's simple question something long missing was magically renewed and Norma smiled. It was a broad and beaming grin that immediately brought the room of doctors and nurses to tears. In the midst of all the laughing and crying, Norma, not quick to lose her matter of fact way, inquired, “When can you do the other eye?” And in offering further evidence her outlook on life may have inched ever so slightly toward the optimistic, she said, “Give me something to eat.” Norma was, after all, eating for two.

Norma's life (and the life of her newborn) was made not only brighter but more hopeful by way of her sight-restoring surgery, a reminder that the gift of sight restored means so much more than being able to see again. Dr. Masi summed up for all of us the magnitude of the special doctor-patient relationship when he said, “Since I have returned to the U.S. I often think about Norma, just to remind myself why I became an ophthalmologist.”

Paul O'Rourke with Sarah Felknor

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It's All In The Translation

There was little doubt the man—he appeared to be in his mid- to late-eighties—had vision problems. He could barely make out the large numbers on the wall chart from five feet away. When I asked, “que es su problema con su vista?” he explained in great detail and with much arm waving his various difficulties. I had no idea what he was saying. So then I tried, “que es la problema con su lentes?” His response was equally long-winded and similarly incomprehensible. I needed a translator, quick.

Alexandra, on her first (and hopefully not her last) trip with VHI, is energetic, very personable, and speaks great Spanish. At the moment, however, she was observing surgery and unavailable to assist the non-bilingual among the eyeglass crew.

My elderly patient, appearing to grow impatient with my inept command of his language, abruptly stood and headed toward the door. “Espera,” I called after him.

Thankfully he came right back, smiling, another man by his side.

“He says his distance vision is cloudy,” the other man, apparently in line waiting for his own pair of eyeglasses, said in perfect English. “His reading glasses are OK.” Both men seemed to take great delight in the relief evident on my face.

Costa Rica, especially along its eastern coastline, is much influenced by Caribbean culture. A good number of people formerly from Jamaica speak English and Spanish equally well. We had a translator, at least for the moment. Through conversation, translation, and a little help from a handy lens prescription reader, we determined our elderly gentleman’s vision correction needs. I offered a pair of lenses, that when set on the bridge of his nose, brought a wonderful smile to his face.

No translation required.

Paul O'Rourke



Wielding VHI's new auto-refractor with his typical flair for the insouciant, John Beard takes eyeglass prescription measurements for a patient in Costa Rica.