

HK charity set to eradicate cataract blindness in rural China

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Hainan province is all set to become the first one in mainland China to be free of cataract blindness, as a Hong Kong-based charity sets up two new eye centers offering free cataract surgeries to residents of non-urban areas where quality surgery is often unavailable or unaffordable.

The new Charity Eye Centers are established by Project Vision, a sustainable medical relief project initiated by medical professionals in Hong Kong. Located in Haikou and Sanya, these new centers follow the opening of the province's first Charity Eye Center in Danzhou in February.

"The Hainan centers are equipped to perform a high volume of vision-restoring surgery within a relatively short time. More than 5,000 surgeries have been performed to date," said Professor Dennis Lam of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Founder and Chairman of Project Vision. "When running at full capacity, the three Charity Eye Centers will be able to perform a total of up to 200 cataract surgeries per day, or 40,000 per year, thus clearing all backlog cases in the province by the end of February 2010."

As with Project Vision's other centers, intensive training is provided to local doctors through the Hainan centers. This, together with the donation of equipment and continuing medical training, will empower local doctors to carry out diagnosis and operations in an independent, sustainable manner.

"One reason why the Hainan centers are able to perform high-volume surgery is the use of a modified surgical technique that can produce equally good results without relying on expensive phacoemulsification machines," explained Lam. "This technique of sutureless, large-incision manual cataract extraction is also used at other Charity Eye Centers because it is suitable for various



Prof. Lam examines patients before surgery



A joyful smile as vision is restored by surgery

types of cases. Our studies showed that the outcomes are very good." [Arch Ophthalmol 2007;125:1546-1552; Arch Ophthalmol 2009, in press]

According to Lam, the modified technique is safer for patients who have more mature cataract with a very hard nucleus. "These cases are common in areas where rates of cataract surgeries are low. For these patients, the manual cataract extraction procedure is safer than phacoemulsification because the entire surgery is performed within a closed chamber."

As Lam pointed out, cataract surgery needs are currently unmet in China. "There are now 6.7 million backlog cases of cataract blindness in the mainland. The number of new cases, according to the WHO's estimate, is greater than 1 million per year," he said. "However, in 2008, only 887,000 cataract surgeries were performed in the mainland, whereas the figure for India was 5.3 million."

"The problem is further complicated by the aging population in China, as well as the mismatch between medical resources and patient needs," he continued. "Most of the medical resources are concentrated in cities, but not in the non-urban areas where most patients live."

The current Hainan project is sponsored by the Hong Kong YANAI Foundation. Since its inception in 2006, Project Vision has also established five Charity Eye Centers in Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi province, where cataract surgeries are provided at cost at RMB 700 to 800 for patients who can afford it, and free of charge for the poor and those with special needs.

"Our goal is to start from cataract surgery and move on to glaucoma treatment, retinal surgery and so on," said Lam. "We hope that each Charity Eye Center will be able to provide comprehensive eye services in 5 to 10 years."