



THE FIRST GENERATION

Training Ophthalmologists in Timor-Leste

The Post Graduate Diploma of Ophthalmology (PGDO), delivered at the National Eye Centre (NEC) on the grounds of the national hospital in Dili, Timor-Leste, has been training the next generation of Timorese ophthalmologists since 2014.

The PGDO is a primary focus of the East Timor Eye Program (ETEP), which is managed by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS). The PGDO is led by expatriate ophthalmologist Dr Manoj Sharma and Timor-Leste's only national ophthalmologist Dr Marcelino Correia, with a visiting teaching faculty of experienced international ophthalmologists. The PGDO has been approved as an official training program at the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) and is currently awaiting final endorsement from the Vice Chancellor.

It is expected that seven Timorese doctors will complete the PGDO and graduate as medical ophthalmologists by 2018, contributing to the Ministry of Health's (MoH) plan for an increased number of doctors with ophthalmology skills to deliver essential eye health services in the country. In December 2015, the MoH, through the national hospital, took over the management of the NEC, which further demonstrates the importance of training national eye

care workers to effectively diagnose, treat and manage eye health conditions.

The PGDO is delivered as an 18 month training program. The PGDO trainees undertake pre-training in English language and basic medicine prior to the formal commencement of the PGDO training. The training program is made up of weekly theoretical lectures as well practical work and problem based learning in the clinic alongside the national and expatriate ophthalmologists, including assisting in surgery. Another requirement for all PGDO trainees is participation in weekly general Grand Rounds at the national hospital, with participation in presentation of topics in eye health according to the schedule.

As part of the PGDO training program, trainees also undertake a two to three month intensive training attachment in Nepal, where they are taught Small Incision Cataract Surgery (SICS) in addition to other ocular surface surgeries and oculoplastic surgeries. SICS is a crucial skill to learn in the PGDO trainees' development, especially in a context such as Timor-Leste where there is still a backlog of cataract cases to be treated.

In a significant milestone for the program, PGDO trainees Dr Bernadete

Pereira, Dr Julia Magno and Dr Valerio Andrade sat and passed their final exams in November 2015 and will graduate in 2016. They are now working as senior registrars at the NEC.

Dr Bernadete, Dr Julia and Dr Valerio were the first PGDO trainees

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to undertake the SICS training attachment at the Mechi Eye Hospital (MEH) in Nepal in 2015. They all felt that the training attachment was a valuable learning experience as part of their ongoing training, where they were able to perform SICS and other minor surgeries as well as observe

operations and techniques that are not performed in Timor-Leste such as retinal detachment surgery, intravitreal avastin injection, intrastomal voriconazole injection for fungal ulcer and penetrating keratoplasty.

MEH was selected for the training attachment as it is renowned for its high volume of cataract cases and calibre of teaching staff and facilities. All three doctors spoke very highly of MEH, explaining that it was inspiring to see a well-functioning, well equipped, high volume hospital. Dr Bernadete said “Nepal is also a developing country, but they have a very good hospital, and system, and everyone enjoys working there. Timor is a developing country also; maybe we can use some of their systems here.” Similarly, Dr Valerio explained that he “...learnt how efficiently they work in OT and how the system is working very well. The training attachment was not only a great opportunity for the trainees to enhance their SICS skills, but also to gain a greater understanding of how other hospitals are run and managed.

Typically, the trainees saw post-op patients and observed clinic in the mornings, and operated in the afternoons. Over the course of the training attachment, the trainees’ confidence in their SICS skills increased and by the end of the attachment they were able to undertake surgery independently. Dr Bernadete said “Before we left for Nepal I could do some steps in the surgery, but after Nepal I can do it independently, and with more confidence.”

Feedback from senior ophthalmologists at MEH also demonstrates the increase in the trainees’ skills and confidence as a result of the attachment. The Medical Director of the MEH, Dr Prabha Subedi, commented on Dr Valerio’s performance following his attachment;

“Dr Valerio Andrade do Esperito Santo has good surgical skill, clinical ability and OPD management. His

behaviour with the patient is polite and friendly. He is very sincere, hardworking and dedicated to his profession. Dr Valerio can now independently perform Manual Small Incision cataract surgery.”

Dr Valerio felt that the training attachment was very valuable, stating “The visit was very valuable and useful, because now I can do SICS and other surgeries independently. I am confident that I can handle SICS and other eye injury cases better than before.”

Associate Professor Nitin Verma, founder and Project Director of the ETEP in Timor-Leste has seen the eye health system develop over the last 14 years and was instrumental

in establishing the PGDO. He says “Timor-Leste has had a long and hard road to independence. The graduation of these young ophthalmologists will take Timor-Leste one step closer to being self-sufficient in providing eye care to their people.”

The PGDO has been funded through the Australian Government through the Vision 2020 East Asia Vision Program, Lions SightFirst Timor-Leste Eye Care Project, the Eye Surgery Foundation Western Australia, St John Ambulance Western Australia and the many generous individuals and businesses who have supported the ETEP.

With Karen Murphy



Dr Bernadete and Dr Julia outside the National Eye Centre, Dili