



OPHTHALMOLOGY IN MICRONESIA

Dr John Kearney OAM, FRACS & a RACS volunteer team have helped do themselves out of a job, and they couldn't be happier.

Most surgeons who undertake volunteer global health work aim to build up local capacity and capability so that they are no longer needed, yet reality often falls short of the dream.

Yet three Queenslanders have done just that.

Dr John Kearney OAM, an Ophthalmologist, Optometrist Michael Hare and theatre Nurse Pavla Jones set out to help establish a national ophthalmic service to the people of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). Today, the country's first ophthalmologist is performing world class surgery in a new National Eye Clinic.

Over numerous team visits and with considerable personal financial support from Dr Kearney and his family, Dr Kearney selected, mentored and funded local surgeon Dr Padwick Gallen to undertake specialist ophthalmic training.

Now all that effort and commitment has paid off.

In late 2015, Dr Gallen graduated from the Pacific Eye Institute in Fiji to become the national Ophthalmologist in FSM while the country's dedicated National Eye Clinic was unofficially opened in January.

The Clinic, located in the Pohnpei State Hospital, will allow Dr Gallen to conduct procedures such as cataract and intraocular lens surgery, a surgical service that until now has only been available through international team visits or through off-island referral. The Philippines Lions Club's was one of a number of donors contributing to the Clinic's establishment, donating an estimated US \$100,000 worth of equipment.

Dr Kearney and Mr Hare, members of a team of four dedicated volunteers which also includes clinic assistant Ms Elena Plotnitskaya, have been visiting FSM to provide eye care services since 2010. The regular one to two week trips were funded through the Australian Government supported Pacific Islands Program (PIP), managed by the RACS. During this time, the team has provided more than 1000 consultations and 150 operations for Micronesians with eye conditions.

In January, Dr Kearney visited Pohnpei to attend the unofficial opening of the National Eye Clinic and assist Dr Gallen in a number of surgeries, a moment he described as a

highlight of his career.

"This was a great trip and somewhat different to others in that Dr Gallen did most of the work," Dr Kearney said.

"He does beautiful surgery and his patients were ecstatic with the results and the looks on their faces when they regained their eyesight was a joy to behold.

"Dr Gallen's graduation as the national Ophthalmologist in FSM signifies a great step forward in health care for the local people and is a reflection of his skills, hard work and commitment.

"The support of the RACS and the FSM Government and the enthusiastic support of Dr Johnny Hedson, the Director of the Pohnpei Hospital, have also been pivotal."

Dr Kearney described his financial support of Dr Gallen's specialist training as "worth every cent" and said he expected him to make a dramatic difference to eye care and the cost of eye care in FSM, including for those from outlying islands who have previously had little access to such care.

He said Dr Gallen had garnered such broad local support through his commitment to his training, that he hoped that he would be given on-going support to establish outreach services to remote populations and to promote eye care education across all the islands of FSM.

"Sadly, almost 50 per cent of adults in FSM have diabetes Type 2, mainly caused by a western diet, and Dr Gallen is now in a position to spread the message of the dangers of the disease as well as promoting the use of sunglasses to avoid cataracts," Dr Kearney said.

"It sounds like Dr Gallen has a mountain to climb going forward but he is a wonderful surgeon although challenges remain because not only is he the new kid on the block, he's on a whole new block.

"I have been working across the Pacific region for many years now and sometimes it is difficult to create lasting change but I am very confident that this new Ophthalmic service will thrive in FSM not only because of Dr Gallen's skills but also because he has the political support which is often vital."

"There is a great need for such eye care in the Pacific region where severe vision loss is widely caused by cataracts caused by exposure to UV light and glare from the ocean waters."

Dr Kearney said that while the National Eye Clinic was reasonably well-equipped, Dr Gallen still needed cataract packs, a Vitrectomy machine, a computerized Visual Field machine and retinal imaging equipment and that he was in the process of seeking funds in Australia and the US to help pay for the equipment.

He also said he would continue to assist Dr Gallen's continuing professional development by organising and funding visits by specialists in ocular plastic, anterior segment, retinal and paediatric eye surgery.

Optometrist Michael Hare said it had been a hugely satisfying experience to help establish sustainable eye care services in FSM with a skilled local surgeon now in place to deliver the service for decades to come.

He said there was a great need for such eye care in the Pacific region where severe vision loss was widely caused by cataracts and pterygiums caused by exposure to UV light and glare from the ocean waters.

"Both of these are preventable conditions but there is a need for an education campaign about both the need of protection against the glare and about early detection so that patients do not present when it is too late to reverse the effects of pterygiums," Mr Hare said.

"In the past, the people from the outer islands have often suffered from severe visual loss because they have no access to eye care and they often travel vast distances when they hear of an international team visit.

"We would expect this situation to improve greatly now that FSM has its own ophthalmologist and a dedicated national eye care service.

"Dr Gallen is very highly regarded and liked within his community and is in a position, I believe, to change the entire population's approach to eye care, particularly in relation to the need for eye protection and the dangers of diabetic retinopathy.

"I feel very proud to be associated with this team of volunteers who have worked so hard for the past few years to support Dr Gallen and improve the health care provided to the people of FSM, particularly John Kearney whose generosity has been significant.

"We have worked our way out of a job over six years or more which is very satisfying and it is wonderful to be able to say mission accomplished!"

With Karen Murphy

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