



Nitin receiving the the Order of Timor Leste from Jose Ramos-Horta

Healing the blind in East Timor

East Timor will soon be ready to meet the eye-care needs of the population

Tasmanian ophthalmologist Dr Nitin Verma stood amidst men of global renown recently when he was honoured with the Order of Timor Leste for his work in establishing and co-ordinating the East Timor Eye Program. Presented at a ceremony on the evening before the country celebrated its eighth Independence Day on May 20, Dr Verma received the honour from President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr Jose Ramos-Horta.

Beside him on the podium at the Presidential Palace also receiving the Order was Mr Lech Walesa, the former Polish president and fellow Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

Mr Verma was chosen to receive the honour this year to mark the ten-year anniversary of the establishment of the Eye Program. Originally established to provide vital services

to the nation, but which has recently changed focus to help East Timor become self-sufficient in eye care by 2015 and to work towards eradicating preventable blindness by 2025.

Each year since its inception, the program has sent teams to East Timor to prescribe and distribute spectacles, perform consultations and conduct surgeries over a one to two-week visit, five to six times a year. The predominant procedure performed by the teams is cataract surgery.

So far, the program has conducted more than 30,000 patient consultations, performed more than 4,000 surgical procedures and dispensed over 28,000 spectacles.

Dr Verma, who has already visited East Timor three times this year alone, said he was delighted to have been honoured with the Order of Timor Leste.

A team effort

“This was a pleasure to receive because they don’t give out too many of these awards, but still it is less a personal honour than a tribute to the entire team involved. “We have ophthalmologists, optometrists, nurses, volunteers and co-ordinating staff and they have all been pivotal in making the program as successful as it has been,” he said.

“Now thanks to all their efforts we are in the process of handing it over to the East Timor health authorities which is the most rewarding aspect.”

Dr Verma said there were now five ophthalmologists working in East Timor from a variety of countries including China, Cuba, Australia and India. The most important one for the program long term, is Dr Marcellino Correia, the first and only East Timorese Ophthalmologist who was



The East Timor Eye Program has helped many people.

trained as part of the East Timor Eye Program. This means that the country was well-placed to meet the eye-care needs of the population.

He said receiving the honour allowed him to reflect on the changes made in East Timor in the ten years since he first visited to treat those who had become virtually blind from cataracts.

“It has been an extraordinary experience to help the people of East Timor not only in terms of providing medical care, but also in the rebuilding of services required after Independence. When we began going there in 2000 there were very few undamaged buildings, very little in the way of infrastructure, organisation and skills,” he said.

“Yet the health sector in particular has moved forward dramatically in recent years not only with the new hospital in Dili, but also with the construction and commissioning of

district hospitals across the country.

“There is a great joy in seeing this development as well as being able to provide services when and where they were needed. It is very rare to get a chance to do something like the Eye Care Program, to set up a service from scratch and to have the chance to determine how best to design, run and manage it and then to attract the funding and the personnel to do it.”

Difficulty of access

Mr Verma said that while East Timor would now become more autonomous in its provision of eye care services, the program would still continue to send teams to conduct more complex surgery. He said the remaining challenge for the delivery of eye care services was overcoming the difficulties of access to the more remote regions of East Timor.

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“Even though the construction of regional hospitals has made an enormous difference, there is still a need to penetrate deeper into the sub-districts and villages of East Timor,” he said.

“That presents problems with logistics and putting in place a system to let people know of the service and then to win their acceptance of it.”

Not content to sit back and watch as the program devolves to the East Timorese, Dr Verma and his colleagues have established a scholarship worth up to \$15,000 per year to allow a young ophthalmologist to work there. This is the Hobart Eye Surgeons Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists Eye Foundation scholarship.

“The plan is to give this funding to allow a young surgeon to learn the skills they will need in India and then work in East Timor for a few months,” he said.

“We need to be encouraging younger surgeons to take on such work because they don’t get the same opportunity as my generation did because the training regime and requirements now are quite different.”

Dr Verma paid tribute to all the surgeons, optometrists and nurses who had volunteered their time to the program and also thanked the College for its support.

In particular he also thanked Provision Eye care and Optometry Giving Sight, Foresight, St John’s Ambulance and the Eye Surgery Foundation for their support as well as that offered by companies such as Alcon, Zeiss, Ellex, Bausch and Lomb and Micromed.

Speaking at the award ceremony before the diplomatic corps and the Governor General of New Zealand, Dr Ramos-Horta thanked Dr Verma for his commitment to the people of East Timor.

Having almost lost his life in an assassination attempt in 2008, Dr Ramos-Horta used the occasion to reflect on the difficulties faced and overcome by the people of the fledgling nation as it worked to establish a strong and stable democracy.

“The restoration of Independence gives us responsibility. This anniversary makes us reflect on the crises that we have faced and which must serve as a lesson so that we don’t repeat them in the future, no matter how divergent our opinions may be,” he said.

With Karen Murphy