

The beginning of an eye program in Samoa

Given the small population it is possible to set up an efficient and effective eye program

Tasmanian ophthalmologist Dr Nitin Verma, recently awarded an Order of Timor Leste and an Order of Australia for his work in establishing the East Timor Eye Program, has entered preliminary negotiations to establish a similar project in Western Samoa.

Dr Verma and a volunteer team of eye specialists including his optometrist daughter Miss Surabhi (Sib) Verma, worked in Samoa in June as part of the College's Pacific Islands Project, following a request from the National Health Service. While there the team saw more than 100 selected patients and conducted 83 operations to treat cataracts and pterygium, a growth over the surface of the cornea caused by exposure to sunlight and wind and the consequent drying of the eye. Dr Verma said all surgeries were successful and gave particular praise to the local eye care nurses who assisted the team at the Apia hospital, Mrs Line Auriese and Mr Sua Mailie.

"The eye Clinic at the General Hospital in Apia was very well organised and the level of pre-screening conducted by both Mrs Auriese and Mr Mailie was excellent. Their choice of patients for surgery was appropriate and the advice they gave to patients post-operatively as well as their plans for follow-up care for these patients was very satisfactory," he said.

"I have seen eye-care nurse practitioners in many countries and have found that those in Apia were perhaps the best and because of their efforts we had some spectacular results like those that we'd expect to achieve in Australia."

Dr Verma said that many of the patients who attended for treatment were suffering advanced disease with some people made completely blind from either cataracts or pterygia. Therefore, he said, the impact on the sight-restoring surgery upon their quality of life was considerable.

"One of the patients was a local general practitioner who was having problems carrying out minor surgery and he underwent phacoemulsification with insertion of a flexible intraocular lens with a very good result. He had been referred to New Zealand for surgery so we were pleased to be able to carry out his treatment in-country," he said.

"Cataract surgery is known to be one of the most effective interventions in medicine and



Pterygium causing blindness as it has grown over the cornea.

given the fact that most of the disease was advanced, with patients virtually or totally blind, it was greatly rewarding to do this work to help the people of Samoa."

Dr Verma said that plans were now underway in consultation with the Samoan Ministry of Health to establish a comprehensive eye program linked to the limited services which currently exist, possibly based on the model established to help the people of East Timor.

"The basic principles would be the same. We would offer training to assist with manpower, volunteers from Australia to provide a regular presence to make sure the backlog of patients does not become insurmountable, while advising the health authorities on the infrastructure required," he said.

"Western Samoa has a population of about 180,000 people. The prevalence of cataracts and pterygia as well as diabetic eye disease is high but given the small population and easy accessibility to health care facilities on both islands of Samoa, it is eminently possible to get rid of the backlog of cases and help set up an efficient and effective program.

"We would help set up the equipment needed and offer training in the use of it and then, as in East Timor, step back and allow them to provide the surgeries and eye care to their own people."

Other members of the team who participated in the June visit to Samoa included Dr Michael Haybittel, an ophthalmologist from

Burnie, Tasmania, Mrs Andrea Shuurmans, a nurse from the Royal Hobart Hospital and Dr Robert McDonald, an ophthalmologist from Sydney. The team was supported by Mrs Jane Haybittel and Mrs Anu Verma. Dr Verma said the team took over consumables generously provided by pharmaceutical companies Alcon, Bausch and Lomb and praised the international projects team at the College for the well organised visit.

Well-oiled machine

When asked what it was like to work alongside his daughter Dr Verma said: "We've done this many times now so it is no novelty for us. It simply means we work together like a well-oiled machine."

Sib Verma said she enjoyed working with her father on such outreach visits given that she now lived on the Australian mainland while her father worked in Hobart.

"I started going on dad's outreach trips when I was still in my teens and have participated as a team member for the past six years. His volunteer work has always been an inspiration to me so it was probably not surprising that I ended up deciding on optometry given that it combines my interest in public health and eye care," she said.

"It could be tricky working alongside a member of the family but we work well together and it's nice to have the chance to spend time with each other while helping other people."