

International Eye Institute 2023 Newsletter

2023 has been an exciting year for the International Eye Institute with significant progress on multiple fronts.

Fellowship Program

We have increased our support for our fellowship program and are excited to report that our first fellow (Dr. Eduardo Ventura) will graduate in March 2024. When Dr. Ventura started with Dr. De Leon in March of 2022 he could not yet safely perform modern cataract surgery. He has since performed over 240 cataract surgeries in our program. Fellows in similar programs around the country are reporting only 50 surgeries completed. During our most recent mission trip, Dr Ventura operated independently alongside our volunteer surgeons on some of the most difficult cataracts any surgeon will encounter in the world, and did so safely and proficiently. When Dr. Ventura returns to his home in El Salvador, he will be one of only 2 surgeons trained in modern eye surgery in the 2nd largest city in his country. In addition to supporting the salary of the fellow, IEI has purchased a new phaco machine for Dr Ventura (a \$38,000 investment). Dr. Ventura will pay-forward this gift by providing 100 cataract surgeries to indigent patients in the next 4 years. He is excited to continue to engage in the social outreach he has seen modeled by IEI and his mentor Dr. De Leon. We are so proud to have invested in the development of an expert eye surgeon who will be such a gift to El Salvador.



New Fellow from Honduras for 2024

We are excited to announce the selection of next year's fellow: Dr. Rosario Anali Vasquez Martinez who is from Honduras. She has likewise been incentivized to participate in this two-year program with the offer of a phaco machine that she will train on and take with her at the end of her fellowship. We will be purchasing this machine in the next few months.

Successful Guatemala and Honduras Surgical Teams in 2023

In 2023 we organized and executed 2 surgical mission trips providing world class cataract surgery to blind and visually impaired patients. Dr. Shah led the May 2023 trip, and Dr. Dance led the November 2023 trip. Together, these two teams performed 130 surgeries including 6 corneal transplants. In addition, Dr. De Leon and Dr. Ventura perform 10-15 surgeries per week that are supported by our program. Partnering with Dr. DeLeon and his fellow has allowed us to greatly expand the quality and reach of our surgical mission trips.

We also partnered with **Health in Sight Missions in August 2023** to serve on a cataract and pterygium surgical team, which included 8 youth volunteers. In addition to clinic and surgery in Roatan, Honduras, we served food and handed out donated athletic gear to needy children in the area.

Grateful Patients

While each of our patients comes with a story, we want to share a few that captured our hearts this year.

Samuel lost his vision in one eye at age 10 when he was learning how to cut corn with his older brother. His brother accidentally hit him in the eye with his machete causing a rare form of traumatic cataract (leakage of crystalline lens, fusion/fibrosis of anterior and posterior capsule). He has been blind in that eye for 9 years until at age 19 he traveled 4 hours to see us. We were able to remove the scar tissue, implant a new lens and give him his sight back.

Dolmar and Kilver—two brothers whose dad left for the US, live in poverty at the bottom of a steep ravine next to a river of “agua negra” (sewage). When one of our surgeons handed them a bag of homemade granola for breakfast we joked that we were making up for the meal they missed the morning of surgery, and then realized that missing a meal may not be an uncommon occurrence for them. They were born with congenital cataracts.

Dr Shah met them during last year's mission trip and performed cataract surgery on one eye each. Vicenta (social worker at Hospitalito) tracked these brothers down by making a personal visit to their home and they were super excited when they heard they might be able to get their other eye fixed. In November, we were able to finish the work Dr Shah started and they both left excited to have clear vision in both eyes.



For more about the amazing work of the hospital to help find these brothers, read past the end of this letter.





Blanca is a 40 year old mother of 9 children, the youngest of which she is still nursing. Blanca has not been able to see her baby's face for over a year. Her exam revealed a history of inflammation that resulted in untreatable blindness in one eye. Her other eye had scar tissue closing her pupil, but she could distinguish light and darkness, giving us a glimmer of hope that removing the scar tissue and cataract might restore sight. Dr. Jessen

performed her surgery, patiently freeing up the iris, removing the scar tissue, taking out the cataract and putting in a new lens. She was over-the-moon excited to be able to see again when her patch was removed. We just wish we could have seen her get reacquainted with her baby's face.



Our youngest patient was Guillermo at age 7 with bilateral congenital cataracts and 20/100 vision. His dad works in the mountains in agriculture. When we entered the operating room he jumped up on the table and then held the anesthesia mask in place while he was put to sleep. We ended up operating on both of his eyes. It was fun to hear him talk about how well he was seeing the next morning, but we're pretty sure he was even more excited about the bag of candy one of our volunteers gifted him.

Thank you!

There is great joy in seeing a blind person regain their sight. This is made possible by our volunteers, support from our industry partners (Americares, Alcon, Oertli, Imprimis, Glaukos amongst others), corporations and foundations (North Idaho Eye Institute, Greater New Orleans Foundation's Southern Eye Bank Foundation), and our many kindhearted donors. When the patch is removed and our patients re-experience sight, they always express genuine and unrestrained gratitude, which we wish to pass on to you!

Sincerely, Board of the International Eye Institute

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Providing Healthcare and Hope to Maya Families

Hospitalito Atitlán

December 27th, 2023

**We Wish Our Donors, Volunteers,
Visitors, Friends & Family the
Happiest of Holidays, Good Health
and Peace in 2024.**



Hospitalito social worker Vicenta Chavajay during a home visit.

Locating patients listed for surgery is often a challenge. Families lose cellphone or cannot keep them charged. Last month, Vicenta and the HA ambulance driver searched for the family of two brothers who were awaiting a second eye surgeries for congenital cataracts. They knew the area, but had no idea where the family lived. They looked for the teachers and then a neighbor led them down 100 steep stairs into a ravine. The humble home was adjacent to a river of sewage.

Vicenta also visits post operative patients and women with high risk pregnancies who have missed a prenatal exam.

I am glad we made the effort to find the boys. It was a reminder of the challenging living conditions of many of the patients we help. It is very satisfying to know that after their eye surgeries, both boys are better prepared for successful studies and lives.

Vicenta Chavajay
Hospitalito Atitlán Social Worker