**VOSO TONGA 2016**

**August 8-13**

Mālō e lelei from the Kingdom of Tonga! The 2016 VOSO (Voluntary Ophthalmic Services Overseas) trip to Nuku ‘Alofa, Tonga this August included a Kiwi team of two ophthalmologists (Dr Andrew Riley from Auckland and Dr Jean-Paul Blanc now based in Hervey Bay, Queensland) and two optometrists (Richard Johnson and I, also from Auckland).

Our working week was spent at Vaiola Hospital, in the Japanese government-built eye clinic. This involved a walk-in clinic service for patients requiring an eye exam or glasses, recalls for diabetic screening, as well as lists of mostly pre-booked cataract surgeries. In total we saw 225 patients who were refracted and screened for diabetes and general ocular health. There was a 64% female to 36% male split. We did not keep a count of the number of glasses dispensed, however these were mostly single vision, with the occasional bifocal, and a handful of prescriptions given out to the patients. The breakdown is shown below, which also shows the number of presbyopic prescriptions as a separate entity to myopic/hyperopic refractions:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Diagnosis** | **Gender** | Female | Male |  |
| Presbyopia |  | 56 | 45 |  |
| Myopia/Hyperopia |  | 87 | 37 |  |
|  | Total |  |  |  |
| **Age Group** | | | | |
| 0 – 20 years | 17 (7.6%) | | | |
| 21 – 40 years | 39 (17.3%) | | | |
| 41 – 60 years | 80 (35.6%) | | | |
| 60+ | 88 (39.1%) | | | |

Most days we had finished with patients around 4pm, so with my spare time I spent some entertaining time in theatre watching Dr Riley complete a series of complex cataract extractions - the majority of which were SICS (Small-Incision Cataract Surgery). Some interesting cases we came across included a child with a possible rhabdomyosarcoma, a sebaceous cell carcinoma, a dislocated crystalline lens in the vitreous, and as expected, keratoconus, diabetic retinopathy, and dense cataracts. We did not keep a tally of the pathology seen, but I felt we did not see as much pathology as I had initially expected. In particular, there were many patients in whom there was no diabetic retinopathy, which was also evident from their previous visits. Perhaps they’re all great at controlling their blood glucose levels! The local nurses are well trained and are now very experienced and VOSO is now moving into a supportive role where we supplement their training and assist in cases where needed. Toward the end of our visit the clinic staff treated us to a night of entertainment, including a traditional Tongan dancing and a local feast.

Initially the weather was not in our favour; very wet yet a comfortable 24 degrees with low humidity. Through the week the weather improved however, and the combination of fresh papaya and coconuts, fresh fish, and after-work wharf-jumping and snorkelling left us with a sense that we were actually on holiday. I’ve learnt that diving masks and beards do not go well together, so I guess that means I won’t be snorkelling again! The coastline of the main island of Tongatapu is stunning, and is only one of a few places in the world where Humpback whales migrate to breed in the warm Tongan waters. Their journey from Antarctica is over 8,500km and takes around 7-8 weeks to reach Tonga.

The assistance from foreign governments is evident however the basic healthcare in Tonga has a long way to go. Thankfully, there are numerous medical teams from Australasia helping out our sunny neighbours in need. Within our team, this was my first VOSO trip. I couldn’t have asked for a better team to go with. It was truly a rewarding experience and the locals’ grateful smiles made it all the more better - I look forward to returning!

Jason Dhana

Optometrist