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IN VIETNAM, DOCTOR SEES A NEED

Health Care: Local Surgeon Proposes South Asian Clinic

Sonny Higginbotham wants to treat eye disorders in residents

who are too poor to pay for the care

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When a cataract clouds the eye, surgeons in America typically remove it so the patient can continue reading, driving and doing other normal activities.

For the poor in Vietnam, the cataract may have made the person nearly blind before it is removed. That, according to Vietnamese eye doctor Cam Duong, is why a clinic proposed by San Luis Obispo County eye surgeon Sonny Higginbotham is so needed.

“If they are poor and blindness is a potential fate, we should do something in our capacity,” Duong wrote in an e-mail to The Tribune. “Blindness will result in more poverty, illiteracy, and the burden for the patient's relative and for the society.”

Higginbotham went to Vietnam in June for the first time since serving in the war. While he visited some of the places he remembered from the war, his goal was to scout locations and opportunities to open a free eye clinic.

“Here (in America), we take a cataract out because it's bothering the patient, either for driving or reading or whatever,” Higginbotham said. “Over there, the rich people do the same as they do here. But over there, the vast majority have to wait until the cataracts are fairly severe.”

Those who can't pay for medical care in Vietnam, Higginbotham said, have to wait for the government hospitals to have an opening.

“If you're in line to get an eye surgery, it could take months or years,” Higginbotham said. “In the meantime, you're going blind.”

The eye clinic Higginbotham wants to start would be in Can Tho, where he was stationed as an Army medic from 1971 to 1972.

The Can Tho region is the center of the Mekong Delta. The region is considered the “rice basket” of Vietnam, and Higginbotham said some of the poorer farmers in the region cannot work if they go blind -- leading to Duong's reasoning that a free eye clinic will help alleviate problems on society.

Higginbotham met Duong, who teaches at the university in Can Tho, through a doctor and a medical equipment supplier he met in Saigon.

Duong said she was “quite impressed” with Higginbotham's desire to open an eye clinic in Can Tho.

Such an eye clinic would be the only choice for people in more than 10 provinces, Duong said. Currently, eye care for the poor in the region is based mostly on the donations of individuals and organizations.

The clinic, she said, could also be a place to help train students who are studying to be eye doctors.

It's still early to tell exactly how the clinic would operate, Higginbotham said, but he's not worried about a shortage of patients.

It's been estimated that with the right equipment and help, two to three surgeons could perform hundreds of eye operations in one week.

Higginbotham is now working to set up a nonprofit organization so he can apply for grants that would help pay for the clinic. Donations and grants, he said, are what would help get the clinic operational.

The orphanage

Before Higginbotham went on the trip, some of his most vivid memories involved an orphanage where he had volunteered during the war.

Babies died in his arms, he said, because there wasn't basic medical treatment to help them.

In June, Higginbotham returned to the orphanage.

“It hadn't changed,” he said. “It was the same beds, you know what I mean? The same beds. It had the same smell.”

Higginbotham said that during his trip he was looking specifically for eye disorders in the children. He saw children with crossed eyes, congenital glaucoma and enlarged eyes.

All are treatable, he said, with surgery.

Future possibilities

After the trip, Higginbotham said setting up a clinic there is possible -- but it may take longer than he expected.

“There's a lot more red tape than I expected because I'm dealing with the communist

government,” he said. “In medicine we never say anything's 100 percent, but I feel 99 percent certain we'll get this done.”

Duong said it could take at least a year to open such a clinic, depending on factors such as money, paperwork, staff preparation, equipment, logistics for the initial operation and finding a site.

There's no shortage of people willing to help make the clinic a reality.

All four of Higginbotham's partners at Pacific Eye Surgery agreed to volunteer at least one week a year in Vietnam. One of his partners specializes in pediatric ophthalmology, and could help treat children at the orphanage.

Duong has even offered to move out of her house so it can be remodeled into a clinic, if no other site is found.

“I think we have to share something for the poor patients,” Duong wrote. “What is the value of keeping everything for us and then one day we will be dust in the grave?”

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