

Medical Eye Mission, March 17 -31, 2010, Bujumbura, Burundi

Last year several Catholic missions within the territory of Burundi (Central Africa), reported a “strange disease” affecting the eyes among their students, for which they requested assistance.

The non profit organization “Senator Spagnolli” of the town of Rovereto where I live, responded to this request and gathered together the necessary equipment and supplies for an ophthalmic surgery. Before leaving for Burundi the ophthalmologist and myself collected eyedrops and other essential supplies kindly donated from the hospitals of Rovereto and Trento.

On arriving at Bujumbura we were welcomed by the missionary priests and were taken to the mission hospital in the poorest district of the city where our surgery was to take place and where until 5 years ago civil war was rife.

With help from an electrician and a carpenter who were also volunteers from Italy, we set up the ophthalmic surgery in one day.

From Monday to Saturday for two weeks, we worked every day from 9.00 am to 5.30pm supported by 2 resident, one nurse and one assistant of ophthalmology.

We examined 450 students of which the majority were orphans. The children came from Bujumbura and also from the interior. These children had never before been to the city and were very afraid and overwhelmed by the situation.

The two residents collected the medical history and checked their visual acuity. I performed the Cover Test and evaluated the convergence followed by objective and subjective refraction to prescribe glasses when necessary. The ophthalmologist performed funduscopy and when required checked the anterior segment. The majority of young patients presented asthenopic symptoms aggravated by lack of resources and life style, which excluded severe pathology of the eye itself.

The presence of an orthoptist was of fundamental importance due to the specific orthoptic problem of the eyes and the fact that I could explain how to perform convergence and postural exercises; moreover, I gave tips on how to release stress during reading and writing.

Our mission can be considered to be successful as we were able to visit and see all the patients that were booked into the clinic as well as seeing a number of people who arrived at the surgery unannounced. Last but not least we were able to allay the fears of the missionaries and children regarding the “strange disease”.

All the equipment has been left in place for the use of future volunteers. The Italian company of Luxottica is going to make and deliver the glasses that we have prescribed and has announced that they will be starting an optical laboratory to produce glasses on site. The two residents have shown a great interest not only in the improving of their personal skills within the field but also in helping future teams.

In conclusion I found this experience to be extremely fulfilling and worthwhile although I had to fund myself and take holidays to be able to take part in the mission.

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