

Headline: Mountain View Optometry sharing skills with Malawi's future

Outlet: Cochrane Times

Date: Feb. 22, 2018

Byline: David Feil

Link: <http://www.cochranetimes.com/2018/02/22/mountain-view-optometry-sharing-skills-with-malawis-future-optometrists>

After a successful first year providing basic eye care in Costa Rica, the team at Mountain View Optometry is switching things up with their upcoming mission to Africa where they will focus on imparting their skills to optometry students in Malawi.

“The ones we’ve done in the past have all been hands on work, [which] obviously fills a need but very temporarily,” said Dr. Tom Wilk, the owner of Mountain View Optometry, noting that as important as it is to provide prescriptions and identify diseases that affect one’s eyesight, it is integral that developing nations build upon their own medical systems so they can provide this kind of care.

This follows the ‘teach a man to fish’ philosophy that is so important to helping developing countries build up their infrastructure to modern standards. Not every country is able to do that of course, and Mountain View Optometry’s visit to Costa Rica helped over 200 people improve their eyesight is life changing for those people, but where a country is making the leap to add a new service it is more important to share expertise with them.

As such, Wilk and some of his staff will be flying out to Mzuzu, Malawi in April to teach at the School of Optometry established in 2011. Despite nearly eight years in operation though, optometry in Malawi still has a long way to go before it can be considered accessible to all citizens.

“There’s not nearly enough eye care specialists to serve the ten million people there,” said Wilk, noting that the School of Optometry’s first graduating class was in 2015 and a dozen international teams have made similar visits but the resources available are spotty, especially when it comes to having professionals provide them clinical experience.

So while Wilk and his team will be holding classes on disease detection, preventative care and how to do repairs and adjustments on glasses, as well as the lens edging machine since you will not be getting a sales rep to do it in good time, their two week stay will focus on how to efficiently apply their skills through a series of rural outreach clinics. Given that there are so few optometrists and so many people, it will be important for them to develop the skills necessary to properly diagnose hundreds of people in a rural setting through techniques that overcome challenges like language barriers.

Feb 15 - Mar 9, 2018 !3

“A steady stream of eye care practitioners that can serve the massive population is a huge benefit,” said Wilk, as good eyesight is a key factor in economic development, something many people forget.

“A child who can’t see and doesn’t have access to educational opportunities won’t have the same opportunities as others,” said Wilk, with children who would otherwise be legally blind often limited to what they can do at home as they will be unlikely to advance far in school without being able to read.

Furthermore, adults with poor eyesight will usually be passed over and unable to get good jobs or could lose their career from eye problems resulting from things like UV exposure or trachoma, which is transmitted by flies landing on your eye and leads to your eyelids becoming distorted.

As such, a key factor in developing a strong economy is based around having a work force with good eyesight and that begins with trained and dedicated optometrists with the support needed to do their jobs, something else Wilk and company will be looking at as Rotarians.

“Part of what we’d like to do is identify folks who’d like to run their own business and would be

receptive to a Rotary micro credit financing project,” said Wilk, explaining that the program is essentially low interest loans for aspiring entrepreneurs in developing countries and setting the foundation for future investment in those communities. And with a 98 per cent return rate, the program tends to be fairly successful and Wilk believes it could help to expand optometry beyond what the Malawi government can provide.

“It’s going to be a very important service that we’re doing,” said Wilk, adding that the trip is being made possible thanks to Canadian Vision Care, who will cover accommodations and send over some equipment, and Cochrane Rotary, who will be covering much of the flight costs through their Vocational Training Team program.

Although donations to help them along would be appreciated, and can be done at myevent.com/mvomalawi, Wilk believes that this vocational training mission is well in hand and instead encouraged anyone with professional skills to get involved in Rotary and their Vocational Training Team program so they can share their talents with developing nations in need of their skills.

“If anybody has skills they feel would help communities reach their potential, I encourage them to get in touch with Rotary,” said Wilk, which can be done by getting in touch with the local club either through email at info@rotarycochrane.ca or by coming to their Tuesday meetings held at the Cochrane Legion at noon.