



14 November 2008

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From left Debbie Thomson, Agnes, Michael Jones
| Photo courtesy Glen Howey

Dear Name,

Agnes lives in a small village on the northern coast of Efate, Vanuatu. A year ago I had the great privilege of being with Agnes when a Foundation-trained surgeon restored her sight following two years of complete blindness.

Last month I met up with Agnes again when I visited Vanuatu with Michael Jones, a Foundation ambassador, so that Michael could witness our sight restoring work first hand.

We drove an hour on a dusty, metal road to Agnes's home in her small village. I couldn't believe the changes in her life. A year ago she was withdrawn and quiet and spent her day sitting under a tree in her garden, unable to cook, clean or grow food. She couldn't walk without help. Her daughter lived with her to care for her.

Now she strode out to our approaching car, smiling and waving. She hugged and kissed me, thanking me over and over again, and proudly displayed how she could now pick mangoes from the huge tree in her garden, which she took to market three days a week in Port Vila, an hour away.

She was now completely independent, caring for herself and her husband and providing an income for her family. Her daughter had also returned to work and lived with her own family again.

It's quite amazing to think of the impact of a 20-minutes cataract operation on her life.

Michael Jones and I were in Vanuatu to see the work of a surgical team lead by Dr John Szetu, which included Dr Szetu's trainee surgeons from the Pacific Eye Institute in Fiji. Hundreds of patients received treatment during the two week outreach clinic. These were all people just like Agnes.



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And what was particularly exciting about this trip was that the entire surgical team were Pacific Islanders - four surgeons from the Solomon Islands and Fiji and eight eye nurses from provinces around Vanuatu, previously trained by Dr Szetu as part of our Vanuatu National Eye Program partnership.

As always, there was a huge crowd of people at the eye clinic on the first morning. Everyone had heard that the eye doctors were coming. There were queues all day.

The team worked 14 hour days, trying to see as many people as possible. They treated men, women and children. There was blindness from cataracts, eye injuries and infections.

In many cases people had travelled great distances, from most of Vanuatu's far flung islands. Many had been convinced to come to the clinic by the local eye nurses and these nurses were providing a friendly face to support them through what was a daunting, but life-changing, experience.



Jack Sirau (left) with Michael Jones after surgery to restore Jack's sight after years of blindness | Photo courtesy Glen Howey

The doctors operated on patient after patient with kindness and skill. The day after their surgery, people lined up outside the clinic to have their bandages removed. Joy and gratitude lit up face after face as people realised they could see again. The team then tested every patient's vision and recorded all results to monitor their work and maintain high standards. It was important to ensure that surgery brought about a life changing improvement for patients.

As we left on the last day, Michael and I met 63-year-old John Liu.

"Before surgery I could see shadows, but couldn't tell if I was looking at a person, an animal or a tree. Now I see like a 16-year-old. It really is a miracle to me!" he said.

Please help us continue providing this miracle to people around the Pacific.

Yours sincerely

Debbie Thomson

Debbie Thomson
General Manager
The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ

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