

Summary Report for VOSH Mission 2010- San Antonio, Yamasa, Dominican Republic

On April 10, 2010, nineteen optometry students and five optometrists departed Boston for a ten day mission trip to the Dominican Republic. As members of the VOSH program at the New England College of Optometry (NECO), these students volunteered countless hours fundraising and preparing for the long awaited trip abroad. Thousands of glasses were packed, eye medicines collected, and hand held equipment gathered as we prepared to travel to an area in desperate need of health services. San Antonio, Yamasa, is the third most impoverished area in the Dominican Republic. The population consists of former workers of a recently shut down sugarcane plantation that would otherwise not have access to healthcare. This particular population suffers from significant malnutrition, including anemia and deficiencies in vitamins A, B and C; these are all essential components in maintaining good ocular health.

The student VOSH program at NECO consists of over 150 active members ranging from first to third year optometry students. Each year, a group of third year students are selected based on prior service hours in fundraising, glasses organization, and community screenings. All members invited on the trip have dedicated numerous hours volunteering their time providing eye care to the greater Boston area. VOSH members participate in Lions club screenings, volunteer monthly at the Sharewood Free Clinic and educate the public about eye health at community health fairs. . Additionally, students spend much of their time raising money to pay for the annual trip abroad. Some of the major fundraising events this year included the VOSH Grad School Mixer, Alcon Night, CrossRoads mixer and 50/50 raffles, parking fundraisers, as well as bake sales.

The group worked under the direction of five optometrists: Dr. Bina Patel (faculty advisor), Dr. Michael Ruby, Dr. Andrew McLeod, Dr. Devina Patel (recent NECO grad, and former Student VOSH Council), and Dr. Anna-Maria Baglieri. The students that attended were Jake Gunn, Anna Luebbers, Mary Conroy (president-elect), Marion Hau, Michelle Nadeau, Allison Stickl (vice-president), Nicole Ross (president), Yin-Yin Aung, Andrew Bodwell, James Caruso, Jenna Walden, Brandy Johnson, Brittany Palazzolo, Rutvi Shah, Reecha Kampani, Michelle Straube, Johni Curts, Amanda Powers, and Thuy Nyugen.

The group collaborated with the Batey Relief Alliance (BRA) for our fourth mission to the Dominican Republic. The BRA is a non-profit organization which was established 10 years ago to help eliminate the longstanding disparities in healthcare & education present throughout the Bateys of the Dominican Republic. The country is comprised of more than 20 bateys, the majority of which are impoverished and have very limited access to medical attention. . Additionally, due to the lack of access to an education, and resources such as running water and electricity, these populations suffer a greater risk for developing morbidities that would otherwise be preventable.. The BRA played an integral role in organizing the clinic site, gathering the patient base, and providing accommodations for internal ground transportation. Student VOSH One was responsible for flight arrangements and organizing our own eyeglasses, medicines, supplies, and equipment. During our stay in the Dominican, Dr. Ana Celia Carrero, a medical doctor and project coordinator for the BRA, assisted us with obtaining case history, measuring blood pressure and coordinating appropriate referrals for patients that needed additional care.

On Sunday morning, we met in the lobby of the hotel and headed to the site to set up. The clinic site was a small church located a 2 hour bus ride away from the hotel. In this small church with one electricity line powered by a small car battery, we were able to create a functional clinic with four stations: an entrance-testing station, eight refracting lanes, an ocular disease station, and an optical dispensary. With the room arranged, and the patient flow discussed, we returned to the hotel to prepare ourselves for the busy week ahead.

The next five days proved to be very challenging yet very rewarding. We started on Monday, only to realize that we had no translator! Our Spanish skills quickly improved that day, and as a result of the quick thinking of Dr. Ruby and others, those in the area who spoke English came to the site to offer their help. By the next day we were operating with 3 fully fluent translators, including an English teacher from a nearby town who recruited the help of his students the following day. Other English-speaking people throughout the nearby villages came each day, offering assistance with clinical testing, crowd control, and directing patient flow. The level of volunteerism from the community was astounding. Over the course of the week, the group examined 1041 patients, ranging in age from less than 1 year old to 110 years old. People traveled from the surrounding villages to be seen and arrived as early as 6:30 am to in hopes of getting a ticket and exam form. Tents were set up outside as hundreds of people waited each day to be seen. Most days the group worked tirelessly from about 9:30 am to 7 pm.

All types of refractive error were encountered throughout the week and with our spectacle supply, we were able to provide prescription glasses in the form of single vision for almost everyone. There were about forty people with prescriptions that we could not provide on site. These glasses will be specially made in Boston and sent back to these individuals. In addition to prescription glasses, every person received a pair of sunglasses and artificial tears, as the incidence of significant pterygia was greater than 20% in this patient population.

Throughout the course of the week, students encountered many unique clinical cases including: advanced cataracts, keratoconus, end-stage glaucoma, initial stages of pthisis bulbi, congenital esotropia, and many suspicious conjunctival growths. Antibiotics, allergy medications, steroids, and artificial tears were given as needed. A one year supply of glaucoma drops was dispensed to every glaucoma patient. A portion of the group also volunteered to screen a group of 35 schoolchildren for pathology and refractive error that could potentially impede their ability to learn. Despite language barriers, intense heat, and adverse examination conditions, the group was able to overcome these barriers to provide the most appropriate care for each patient.

On our last day we received a warm reception at the end of the clinic day, as the village had organized a celebration to show their appreciation. The celebration included stories from the English class, which had volunteered the previous day, and traditional Dominican dancing. Each member of the group received a plaque and the Student VOSH group received a special plaque from the BRA to commemorate our long-standing working relationship.

The student VOSH mission to the Dominican Republic 2010 proved to be a great success. Through teamwork and dedication, the group was able to accomplish our mission of providing quality eye care to those that needed it the most. It was an unforgettable experience and the

clinical skills and knowledge gained in this setting will transcend into our professional careers. We experienced a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction, as we were able to provide the gift of sight for the first time with a simple pair of spectacles.