

Perceptions

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Pearl and Her Hat

The genesis of the World Eye Mission.

A few years ago, I was working in a clinic in Trinidad. Far from elaborate, it consisted of two rooms and a small waiting room.

One day, an elderly lady came in sporting an old straw hat. "Hello," she said. "My name's Pearl."

She was suffering from severe varicose veins, a chronic leg ulcer and a complete ptosis of her right, upper eyelid. The ptosis worried and hobbled her the most. It had resulted from a cataract operation; the operating surgeon hadn't known how to repair it. She consulted another surgeon, who was also unable to help.

I told Pearl the ptosis would require surgery, but that I didn't know how to repair it either! You see, in the United States, I stay away from plastic procedures and refer them to subspecialists.

It had been many years since my residency, and I hadn't done any levator-tightening procedures since.

So I told Pearl I would learn how to do the procedure and during my next visit — some months later — would contact her.

◆ Back in Ann Arbor, Mich., I called Christine Nelson, M.D., at the Kellogg Eye Center (University of Michigan) and explained my predicament. She sort of laughed at me, as if to say, "You poor sod. You don't even know how to fix a droopy lid!" But Christine is a wonderful lady and she invited me to sit in on a few levator cases. I observed three scheduled procedures, and I must say it was an absolute delight to see an expert work with the delicate and beautiful anatomy of the upper lid.

So, a few months later when I was back in Trinidad, I called Pearl as promised. She came over. I told her that I had observed the procedure. She said, "But, doctor, you haven't performed the operation."

"No, Pearl," I said, "I have not."

"So, doc, you want me to be your guinea pig?"

"Yes, Pearl!"

"Well doc," she said, "what do I have to lose?"

"Not much."

So we did it. And it worked. Pearl was doing cartwheels, and I strutted about with self-glory.

Afterwards, we sat about and chatted. Pearl wanted to send a gift to Dr. Nelson and asked what she would like. I told her she might settle for a Mercedes or a BMW. Pearl rocked with laughter at that thought.



"Doc," she said, "I'm a poor lady. If I could afford a Mercedes or BMW I'd give it to Dr. Nelson. ~~Doc,~~ she ducked into her old rattered, canvas shopping bag.

"I have a packet of Hong Wing (a type of Trinidadian coffee). Do you think Dr. Nelson would like some Hong Wing?"

"Yes, Pearl," I said, "Dr. Nelson will just love it."

And sure enough, she did.

◆ Soon, my talk with Pearl came around to a charity I was trying to cobble. I told her it would be called the World Eye Mission (WEM). She said that was wonderful but would cost a lot of money. How did I plan on raising support? I told her I really had no idea: "I'll probably have to go around with my hat in my hand, begging for help."

Pearl looked over at me. She took note of my balding head and asked if I had a hat. I said, "No, but I'll buy one."

"Doc, don't bother to buy a hat. When you go begging, please go with my hat in your hand." As she spoke, she unclipped the straw hat she was wearing and gave it to me.

Pearl was the first to make a donation to WEM. She gave

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Pearl and Her Hat (continued)

me a \$20 Trinidad bill. I have kept that bill and I deposited the U.S. equivalent (\$3.00) into the WEM account.

WEM is 100% nonprofit. We offer help to underserved areas. Right now, we have three projects under way: Haiti, Trinidad and Saint Lucia.

Our primary thrust is in Haiti. The Haitian Ophthalmologic Society has requested help with continuing education for all Haitian ophthalmologists. It is difficult and expensive for Haitians to visit the United States; even if they do come, they don't receive "hands-on training." It's far more efficient and cost-effective for American ophthalmologists to travel down there.

That's why WEM is sponsoring short but intense training visits to Haiti for some of America's finest academic, university-based ophthalmologists. Christine Nelson was the first to go this past December. Dr. Kaz Soong — also from the Kellogg Eye Center — went in January. Others are being scheduled. The hospitality down there is great. Our doctors are really looked after. Both Christine and Dr. Soong are eager to go back. They were greatly touched.

For WEM's second project, Saint Lucia, we work out of Saint Jude Hospital. This hospital is a remarkable institution. Approximately 80% of its medical staff, in all specialties, consists of volunteers from the United States on short- to medium-term visits. WEM is looking for general ophthalmologists to volunteer there, too. WEM doesn't pay transportation costs to Saint Lucia, but expenses are tax-deductible. Saint Jude Hospital provides room and board. The hospital has a well-equipped eye clinic and an operating room with an excellent Zeiss microscope.

WEM's third project is in Trinidad, where we run vision screening programs for underprivileged children. Our organization provides glasses at little or no cost. Ophthalmologists examine children who fail the screenings. Arrangements are made to treat those patients who are suffering from more severe ocular conditions.

As you can see, at WEM we are committed to excellence. WEM pays no rent or salaries, and expenses are parried to the bone. All work is done by volunteers. We believe the world's poor deserve the gracing touch of the finest physicians and teachers. This philosophy is not new or unique, for it is shared by similar organizations.



The start of Dr. Lal's World Eye Mission was somewhat unusual. It centered around Pearl and her hat.

◆ For two years now I have been reduced to being a beggar. When I plead for help, it is with Pearl's hat in my hand. I've held it while meeting a president, a prime minister, corporate executives and while addressing colleagues.

In the process, I've developed a profound sympathy for beggars. It's an exhausting existence. Many doors have been closed, and innumerable telephone pleas remain unanswered. But there have been several moments of great joy, when kindred spirits lend a helping hand.

And I owe it in part to that elderly lady who one day walked into that Trinidad clinic with her straw hat.

Thanks, Pearl. **OM**

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Want to tell your story? CALL John Osborn (215) 643-8055, E-MAIL to osbornjs@boucher1.com, FAX to 215-643-3902, or WRITE to 1300 Virginia Drive, Suite 400, Ft. Washington, Pa. 19034. Offer a few thoughts, and we'll take care of the rest.