

GIVING BACK:

By René Luthe, Senior Associate Editor

Warning: Volunteering Is Addictive

Philanthropic work can quickly become a habit.

■ Robert P. Rivera, M.D., in practice at the Barnet Dulaney Perkins Eye Center in Phoenix, began eyecare missions in 1991 with Lions' Club International. The group's goal, of course, is to eradicate treatable blindness (primarily due to cataracts) in the Third World. Since that first trip to Nicaragua, he has participated in one mission per year, sometimes two, to countries including Mexico and the Philippines. The first lesson he learned, Dr. Rivera says, was "to be prepared."

"You have to be prepared to see anything," Dr. Rivera explains. "That oftentimes means the people who walk in the door will just be a surprise — you've never seen a condition like this before until it's right there in front of you." He and his fellow volunteers commonly encounter conditions they would never see in the United States, even in very poor regions, he says. "We will treat multiple cases of phacolytic uveitis and congenital cataracts and just the densest cataracts."

Missions typically run 1 to 2 weeks and involve a staff of up to 30 people. This includes anesthesiologists, the operating room crew and usually a couple of optometrists to perform the eyeglass screenings. "We always need translators and we're very fortunate that here in Phoenix, the anesthesiologists who help us arrange our trips to the Philippines are Filipinos themselves," Dr. Rivera says. "They have family back home and good connections with the local infrastructure, so we've been able to take advantage of their knowledge of the local culture and the way things work."

Another crucial key to the success of these missions, Dr. Rivera reports, is the generosity of the manufacturers who provide the supplies the staff will use — mainly IOLs and surgical packs. The group takes approximately \$1 million worth of donated supplies on their trips. Dr. Rivera says that all the IOL manufacturers contribute.



Dr. Rivera in the Philippines with a pediatric cataract patient and her mother.

"It's really phenomenal, the level of their participation," he says. Manufacturers also deliver the phaco machines the staff will use in their cataract surgeries, saving the mission significant shipping charges.

A network of local eyecare providers help with follow-up care once the mission staff leave. It is a job that has been made much easier, Dr. Rivera reports, by the Internet and e-mail. "We can communicate back and forth if there are any issues," he says.

The eyecare missions need all the technological help they can get to deal with profound blindness in the Third World, Dr. Rivera says. The level of the problem, even in northern Mexico, in areas so close to the U.S. border that one can see the American flag flying, is astounding to anyone who has never visited before, Dr. Rivera reports. It was in Mexico that he had a patient who was diabetic, with one leg amputated and blind in both eyes. A previous unsuccessful surgery somewhere else had left the patient irreversibly blind in one of his eyes. "In the other eye, he was light-perception vision from cataract, yet being an amputee, the only way he could get around was on crutches," Dr. Rivera explained. "If you're on crutches and blind, that's a double-whammy. People can't guide you comfortably when you're on crutches or an amputee. When we took his cataract out, the next day, his face was just on fire. All he could wait to do was walk outside under his own power and guidance just to see the world around him."

The ability to so powerfully affect someone's life and the gratitude they show in return, Dr. Rivera warns, can hook doctors. "It's so touching on a personal level," he says.

"It's very humbling to see how people will take food away from their children to give it to you as a gift in gratitude for what we've done for them. Once you see the effect this has on the poorer peoples of the world, get prepared to be addicted to doing this work. It re-establishes your faith in humanity."