

Vision for Tonga

The Pacific Islands is known for clear skies and stunning beaches, but for many locals, the forecast remains cloudy. However, with the help of a Kiwi eye team, including an Ormiston Hospital eye specialist, the clouds are starting to clear as NATALIE BRITTAN discovered.

In Auckland, there is at least one optometrist in every main street or shopping mall. Hospitals, clinics and private practices, too, have no shortage of eye specialists and medical experts.

But in Tonga, those rose-tinted glasses have to come off. Dr Andrew Riley of Eye Doctors at Ormiston Hospital says there are no surgical services there for eye health.

"We have someone under training there at the moment and four nurses, but that's it."

The respected eye surgeon has just returned from a trip to the island with a team of two optometrists and another ophthalmologist as part of their work with the Volunteer Ophthalmic Services Overseas (VOSO) medical aid organisation.

Andrew volunteers his services to VOSO each year, travelling to countries such as Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. It was his sixth visit to Tonga, and 11th trip with the organisation which has operated for more than 30 years.

This time the team took with them 4000 pairs of glasses donated by New Zealanders, collected by the Lions Club and sorted in East Tamaki.

"Many eye problems in Tonga begin with refractive error in children," Andrew explains. "If they're given glasses they can learn and do better."

Young children all over the Pacific are

also at risk of ocular trauma which often leads to surgical intervention, he says.

"They all play with sharp sticks and knives from an early age, having to cut coconuts and other things."

While there, the optometrists set up outreach clinics around the island where they saw more than 800 patients, dispensed glasses and referred more serious cases to the surgical team.

The schedule for Andrew and his colleague was equally hectic. They performed 41 cataract surgeries over three days and consulted with more than 200 patients.

Cataracts and diabetes-related eye diseases were the most common, says Andrew. "Obesity is a constant problem and there is a big ageing population which has resulted in a lot of age-related conditions."

Cataracts can have a huge impact on families, he adds. "If one elderly person suffers from cataracts the whole family has to look after him or her, moving them around and helping them but if you cure that one person, the whole family is better off."

While treatment is important, the team is also keen to build capacity, assist local development and to offer advice and collegial support.

There's still a long way to go, but things are improving thanks to international aid, Andrew says.



Andrew Riley with a nurse and patient who was blind and lost a leg due to diabetes. He can now see again.

Photos supplied

"Every year it gets better. The clinic is amazing; it was donated by the Japanese. There's also a huge Chinese hospital ship equipped with scanners."

Many supplies and equipment are by donation too. "A lot of big international companies donate supplies if we ask for them. We took six months worth of drops donated by large corporations. There's a lot of goodwill out there."

Naturally, there are challenges, with "island time" being one of them. "Often if you arrange something it'll end up being late and it can be a bit frustrating. Power and water can be erratic, supplies are short and you don't have the most modern equipment – you're going back about 20 years using techniques learnt a long time ago."

But Andrew admits it's a learning curve that benefits him personally too. "It makes one a better surgeon

because you adapt to different situations. We saw some amazing eye conditions that were very advanced; the kind I don't really see here, and we had to diagnose and come up with solutions that worked despite having very little equipment."

Importantly, it was all about teamwork and people. "It was an optometry-ophthalmology collaboration and we were so thankful to the local community in New Zealand for donating the glasses," says Andrew.

"There was a lot of job satisfaction and it was a real buzz to be able to make people see again. It's a real privilege to have the skills to do it."

And the rewards are pretty satisfying too, he adds, gesturing at a picture of a roasted whole sucking pig.

"They're such lovely people; very hospitable and so grateful. As always, we were well fed – there's no such thing as a small helping!"

