

Service trip reflection: Pure White Wang Huishan Catherine

They are pure white. Opacity. Not transparent.

Cataract, deriving from the Latin “catarractes”, is defined by an opacity of lens of the eye which causes partial or total blindness. “Catarractes” meaning “waterfall” in Latin, is such a lyrical and poetic way to delineate the foamy white opacity of an advanced mature cataract, resembling the turbulence of water in a waterfall, as a curtain covering vision of the patients.

Around the world, there are approximately 30 million blind people in which 50 percent of whom are blind due to cataracts. The good news is a simple 30 minutes’ microsurgical implantation of intraocular lens (IOL) can by and large restore normal visions. However, for those mountainous villagers who need to take minimally 4 hours for a single trip to downtown, a “major surgery” which requires them a one-day trip to go to a properly equipped nearby hospital seems far beyond plausibility.

Pathetically, it is a perfect illustration of “inverse care law” --- the availability of good medical or social care tends to vary inversely with the need of the population served. Due to more frequent exposure to sunlight during cultivation, poor and unhygienic lifestyle habits, heavy smoking, people in a less well off rural region tend to have increased risks of cataracts in younger ages.

Dr. Wu, our ophthalmologist, kindly reminds us that one can hardly encounter fully mature cataract cases in developed regions like Hong Kong. Under the slit lamp, pure white lens instead of translucency were observed.

“Pure white lens. No transparency.” Dr. Wu often described to us the typical and saddening mature cataract. He would then note down four pluses as an indication of the maturity of the cataract. The greater the number of pluses, the higher the maturity and greater indication of surgery for the patients. Many of our patients are marked as “+++” and “++++”.

They came in with walking sticks and no assistants from relatives.

“They are completely blind.” Stephanie offers, “We will consider them as high priority for surgery.”



During the 3 days, we have visited 5 villages, examined 1428 villagers and indicated 234 suitable surgical patients for the coming month. Screening villagers came in various forms, from all walks of life. Their average ages seem to be ranging from 65 to 70. They are shaking, skinny and partially deaf. Many of them are suffering from chronic diseases such as hypertension and Diabetes Mellitus. Startlingly, the majority of them are not aware of their conditions. We have encountered a handful patients with mature cataract and yet systolic blood pressure of 225 mm of mercury and 20.1mmol/L for blood glucose level. With such astonishing and grieving results, no matter how mature the cataracts have grown to be, the patient is contraindicative for surgery at this stage. He must control his blood pressure and glucose within the normal and stable range before surgery. Case like this is not occasional, however, whenever we try to explain to the patients that they cannot be scheduled for the immediate surgery their disappointments, upsets, and unacceptance to the current medical conditions often make us enjoying a better living and life conditions ashamed and abashed.

This volunteering visit with “Green Action Charity Foundation” does not only offer the local people unaffordable screening for free, but also changed my perspectives to my living environment, the “privileges” I have taken for granted. Their pureness, sheer happiness and enjoyments by just an acknowledgment that they are healthy or they are offered for a surgery make us, the so-called “better” well-off, ashamed of our wasteful lifestyles and rethink and contemplate our life philosophies.

