

## June Lianshan Cataract Service Trip (2<sup>nd</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2019)

Our team comprised of experienced volunteers from Hong Kong and Lianshan, a medical outreach team from Lianshan People's Hospital (連山縣人民醫院) and a surgical team from Qingyuan People's Hospital (清遠市人民醫院). During the first half of the trip, we travelled to several small towns where we screened for those who were eligible to undergo cataract surgery. The villagers would first perform visual acuity (VA) testing, followed by slit lamp examination by the local ophthalmologist to see whether their cataracts were mature enough to be operated on, and/or whether they had other eye pathologies. Afterwards, those who were deemed operable would proceed to have a simple cardiovascular assessment to evaluate their fitness for operation.



Every time we reached the screening stations at the town health centers (衛生院), a large crowd of villagers would already have gathered, eagerly waiting for us to start our screening. Even the very old, the crippled and the wheelchair-bound would come. Some of them travelled a long way from their home (several hours' walk) just to get there. It struck me that this was probably one of the scarce opportunities for them to undergo a proper eye examination, and many, especially the visually impaired, had been pinning their hopes onto this chance to see clearly again. No wonder, as I learnt later on that cataract surgeries in regional hospitals cost as much as several thousand RMB, a price far from affordable for the more underprivileged villagers.



As we carried out our screening, I realized the importance of proper eye care education. Many were farmers who worked long hours under the sun but did not have the habit of wearing sunglasses to protect their eyes. Prolonged UV exposure increases the risk of cataracts and macular degeneration - both potentially blinding. Some patients were found to have other serious eye conditions upon slit lamp examination, such as glaucoma and uveitis. Even though their eyesight were deteriorating, they did not see a doctor because it hadn't occurred to them that it could be anything other than cataract or a minor degenerative condition.

During the second half of the trip, the recruited patients came to Lianshan People's Hospital (連山縣人民醫院) for their cataract surgeries. Before the operation, they had to undergo a series of screening tests including blood tests, chest X-ray, electrocardiogram, syringing for patency of tear duct and AB scan. Each and every test was essential to ensure a safe and successful operation, nevertheless it was still heartbreaking to witness the disappointment of patients who did not pass the tests (e.g. high blood glucose, obstructed tear ducts) and were denied the surgery after coming such a long way.



As a medical student, I very much looked forward to observing cataract surgeries in this service trip. The surgeons were really kind to explain the procedures to me step-by-step, and even offered to let me view the surgery through the assistant's microscope. I also had the chance to see a few interesting pathologies through the slit lamp microscope – hypermature cataract, corneal foreign body, rubeosis iridis, just to name a few. It was a truly eye-opening learning experience.





As a medical student, my contribution towards the trip could never be compared to that of others in the team. Volunteers from Green Action and Lianshan made sure that every small detail was taken care of, so that every screening and operation could take place smoothly. And of course, the surgical team who almost never took a break in the operating theatre as they performed cataract surgery one patient after another. In the end, all of our hard work paid off when we shared the joy of patients being discharged from hospital with their vision restored once more.



Finally, I would like to thank Green Action and Medical Outreachers for the wonderful opportunity to join the Lianshan service trip this year. It is an experience I will never forget, and I hope to have the chance to serve the Lianshan community again in the near future.

Ho Yik To  
HKU MBBS Year 4  
23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2019