

Sight savers jet to the rescue

Up the stairs to the entrance of the plane they climb: small children with cloudy eyes, teens with thick glasses and practiced squints, adults with dark shades.

By [Edie Evans](#) | Apr 08, 2014

All of them blind or nearly blind, they've journeyed by foot, by train and by bus from far-flung Indian villages to Kolkata for a chance to have their eyesight restored aboard Orbis' legendary Flying Eye Hospital.

The eye surgeries and laser treatments they receive while the plane is parked at Kolkata's bustling international airport will be nothing short of life-changing for them. But the work aboard the Flying Eye has the potential to help thousands of other patients as well.

Orbis caregivers—a mix of staff and volunteers from around the world who are experts in their fields—will heal dozens of patients in this two-week visit, thanks to support from Alcon, a Novartis company, FedEx and other organizations.

Fighting blindness

But Orbis fights blindness most effectively by teaching local eye care professionals how to heal patients themselves.

To that end, every surgeon, anesthesiologist and nurse in the Orbis aircraft's operating room is assisted by at least two hands-on trainees from the local community. Another 30 to 40 watch each procedure on a large screen in the classroom at the front of the plane, where they can ask questions of the doctors, who are outfitted with cameras and microphones. In this way, and through partnerships with community hospitals, Orbis has trained more than 325,000 doctors, nurses and other medical staff in over 90 countries during the last three decades, making roughly seven to eight trips each year.

Alcon and Orbis

Alcon's relationship with Orbis began in 1979, three years before Orbis's first flight. Over the years, Alcon has donated state-of-the-art ophthalmic equipment, pharmaceuticals and supplies for the Flying Eye Hospital and its partner hospitals around the world, making it possible for Orbis volunteer ophthalmologists to teach advanced surgical techniques to doctors in the developing world.

In Kolkata, Dr. Roberto Pineda conducts a corneal transplant on a 13-year-old boy while trainees in the plane's classroom, watching his every move via a live feed, pepper him with questions. The Harvard Medical School ophthalmology professor explains that the surgery, called deep anterior lamellar keratoplasty or DALK, will preserve the bottom two layers of the boy's cornea, meaning he'll recover faster and be less likely to have blurred vision down the road.

"Proper patience is key to DALK surgery," Pineda says, slowly peeling away the top layers of the boy's right cornea. "If you try to move too fast, it's going to cost you."

Training eyecare professionals

In between removing cataracts and repairing detached retinas, the volunteer faculty give lectures about techniques and how best to diagnose problems. Dr. Pravin Dugel, a retina specialist from Arizona, ticks off a series of symptoms and urges the group to think like detectives, following the clues to an accurate diagnosis. They're not just saving eyes, he says. Retinal lesions or blurred vision could be symptomatic of something more serious.

Orbis' contributions are more than just medical. If there's anything we need in this day and age, it's cultural and global understanding of each other.

Dr. Pravin Dugel, a retina specialist with Orbis

"It'll be the opportunity to make diagnoses that actually save someone's life," said Dugel, who has volunteered on three Orbis trips so far.

With its educational mission and a willingness to serve a diverse population, Orbis' contributions are more than just medical, said Dugel, a native of Nepal who became an ophthalmologist after watching his grandparents struggle with vision loss.

"If there's anything we need in this day and age," he said. "It's cultural and global understanding of each other."

Crying tears of happiness as her 10-year-old son is wheeled into the plane's operating room, Ektara Bibi, dabs at her eyes with the edge of her orange sari. Once he can see, she says in Bengali through a translator, he'll be able to go to school and to swim in the neighborhood pond with his friends—something she'd been afraid to let him do for fear he'd drown.

"I never imagined coming to this plane to have surgery. Luck, luck," she said, thumping her chest gently with her fist. "That's why he's here."

Resources:

[Learn more about how ORBIS transforms lives through access to quality eye health](#)

[Take a look at the other sight-saving organizations Alcon works with](#)

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