

## PRACTICING AND DOING GOOD AT THE SAME TIME



**Dr. Peter Kong**

*Consultant Ophthalmologist  
Sabah Medical Centre*

We interviewed Dr. Peter Kong from the Eye Centre of Sabah Medical Centre recently to learn more about the charity project in Myanmar that he has been involved in since 2006. Every year, he goes to Myanmar twice to treat local patients with eye conditions. Here's all about it.

The Sitagu Ayudana Hospital in Sagaing Hills near Mandalay in Myanmar is a charity hospital started by the venerable Dr. Ashin Nyanissara (Sitagu Sayadaw), the Buddhist abbot in 1985. The eye services which started in 1993 initially only offered cataract operations to local patients.

The first vitreoretinal services were started in 2004 by Dr. Sal Rassam, a consultant vitreoretinal surgeon from the United Kingdom (UK), who was Dr. Peter's mentor during his fellowship in the UK back in 2002.

In 2006, Dr. Peter was invited to contribute his services and he has been doing so annually, ever since. In 2012, Dr. Peter decided to visit the hospital twice a year, considering the

vitreoretinal load was getting heavier. Usually, each visit would last approximately 7 to 10 days.

Dr. Peter shared that the main objective of this project is to reduce the incidence of blindness by providing tertiary eye care services, especially in the vitreoretinal field. Not just that, it is also to share knowledge and skills with local ophthalmologists in Myanmar.

As the team leader, Dr. Peter usually has two other ophthalmologists to join him. Dr. Loh Swee Seng, a consultant ophthalmologist based in Johor Bahru has joined him on this project for the past 7 years. Usually, they will have a nurse on the team to provide support.

Dr. Peter shared that the hospital usually will announce their impending trip over the radio and start offering initial screening that will be done by the local team 3 months before their arrival. Cases that are deemed needing their services will be scheduled and patients who come from afar will be lodged in the hospital one or two days prior to their arrival.

Among the services that are offered by Dr. Peter and team are comprehensive ophthalmology services, including consultation for complicated cases and treatment intervention including, laser and surgery. Surgeries that are usually carried out include cataract operation (both complicated and paediatric cataract), trabeculectomy, and the full



range of vitreoretinal procedures. He also shared that the VR unit is rather well equipped with fundus fluorescein angiography, OCT, wide field operating microscope and constellation vitrectomy machines. These allow high quality surgeries to be performed.

On a typical trip, the team will usually fly from Kuala Lumpur to Mandalay and make a transit in Yangon. From there, it takes a short drive to Sitagu Ayudana Hospital. It would be late afternoon by the time they arrive at the hospital. Work will usually start on the same night, where they start seeing outpatients and the next few days will be mainly surgeries. Dr. Peter shared that surgeries can sometimes run late into the night.

After being part of this charity project for 11 years, one thing that Dr. Peter has learnt is *“one must adapt to practice according to local needs and available facilities, usually under a less ideal circumstances”*. He has also learnt to become more resilient and resourceful when it comes to problem solving.

What Dr. Peter enjoys the most when in Myanmar is the people. He shared that local people are warm, gentle and hospitable. He emphasized that the people are willing to give, even when they have little.

When asked about the difference between local patients and those back home, Dr. Peter shared that most cases in Myanmar have progressed to advanced stage, due to late presentation. Other than that, there is not much difference between

local and Malaysian patients. The common cases in Myanmar for vitrectomy are diabetic tractional retinal detachment, chronic retinal detachment, and vitreous hemorrhage from retinal vaso-occlusive diseases.

The main challenge that Dr. Peter and team face is time constraint. It's always too many patients with very little time. Language barrier is surprisingly not a challenge to the team. It doesn't stop the team from practicing and treating patients. He shared that surgeries can be performed under local anesthesia as most patients are very cooperative. The local staff will assist in translating the pre-operative counselling and intraoperative instruction. He is proud to have learnt some Burmese words that would help facilitate his job.

Volunteers are always welcomed. For those who are interested to be part of this charity project, submit CV with the Letter of Good Standing from the Malaysian Medical Council to Dr. Peter, which he will then send to Sitagu Ayudana Hospital. The person in charge will then help applying for a temporary registration from the Myanmar Medical Council.

***“One can always make a change in somebody's life. All of us are bogged down by our busy practice. Hence, we cherish work-life balance. But charity work is a different type of work. They are fulfilling on its own way.”***

Dr. Peter is looking forward to his next trip which will probably be in July or August.