

The gift of sight

By Kathryn Koch
kkoch@cnc.com

In Honduras, there were police with machine guns at every corner, ready to respond to the criminal activity that's part of everyday life.

Into this world walked Dr. Charles Post Jr. of Post, O'Connor & Kadrmas Eye Centers.

As an ophthalmologist, Post has a unique opportunity to make a difference in people's lives. For the last 10 years, he's been going on humanitarian missions to Third World countries to perform cataract surgery to prevent blindness. His most recent trip took him to Honduras for a week in February.

"I'm just so fortunate to have the particular skill that I have that enables me to do this," he said.

Post traveled to the city of Progreso in Honduras through an organization called Surgical Eye Expeditions International, based in Santa Barbara, Calif., a nonprofit humanitarian organization that provides medical, surgical and educational services by volunteer ophthalmic surgeons.

"A trip like this is satisfying and it's frustrating in ways, too, because the conditions are difficult and the amount of people we can help is really small," Post said.

It was also a unique, behind-



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Dr. Charles Post operates on a patient in India while on one of his humanitarian trips.

the-scenes look at life in a Central American country, one that no tourist would experience. Every time Post travels to a different country to perform cataract surgeries, it's a new experience. Two years ago he was in Benin in West Africa with the humanitarian organization Mercy Ships.

When the ship arrived in Africa, hundreds of people were waiting on the dock, despite their reservations about boarding. They waited amid heavy security, having heard that help was on board. Running on the docks one morning, Post was approached by a father who begged him to help his daughter. He had to follow protocol and was torn by his

inability to help. It's a frustrating feeling, he said, that he can't help everyone who asks for it.

Post believes that more people are going blind from cataracts than ever before. He wishes he could help them all but cannot. With all the travel, a jam-packed schedule to follow and hour-long cataract surgeries, it's also exhausting. A trip every year may not be possible for these and other reasons, Post said.

"The experience, even though it's utterly exhausting to work under these conditions, is interesting. What I like about the Third World is it's authentic," he said.

Post has been to the

Dominican Republic five times and to India, Africa and Honduras one time each. The clinics he visits are typically set up by nonprofit organizations. The facilities provide a stable source of electricity to allow for the use of an operating microscope during surgery.

His patients are blind people who have mature cataracts in both eyes. He can only perform surgery on one eye because there are so many people and so little time. But surgery on one eye enables them to see again. Before that, he said, all they could do was sense where the light was coming in the door. They were basically confined to their huts and unable to work.

"Cataract surgeries are a particularly useful operation because, number one, these people are totally disabled and, number two, the operation is highly successful. So, it has a big impact on their lives," he said.

Post said he feels a great desire to succeed or these people will lose faith in him and turn to alternative healers or witch doctors. Even where there are doctors, he said, the medical training isn't the same. And since so many people can't get medical care, they will die.

"It's a terrible situation," he said. "We take so much for granted in our country. It's an experience that makes you think."



Grateful patients in India say goodbye to local ophthalmologist Dr. Charles Post.



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Dr. Charles Post screens a patient in India to determine his eligibility for cataract surgery.