Strengthening collaboration, knowledge exchange and research capacities to serve patients of the Guna indigenous community in Panama

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The SVOSH chapters at the Inter American University of Puerto Rico School of Optometry (SVOSH-IAUPR) along with the Specialized University of Las Americas (UDELAS) SVOSH Chapter participated in a humanitarian clinic at the Guna Nega Indigenous Community at Ciudad de Panamá at the end of May.



Image 1 Overview of patients waiting for the clinic

The Gunas in Panama

Panamá has a 3.4 million population out of which close to 420,000 are indigenous. The Gunas are approximately 81,000 or 20% of the Indigenous population in this country. A group of them moved from their original lands to the City of Panamá to the Guna Nega area. They live very close to the city's garbage dump, and some recycle garbage as a livelihood.

There are around 49 communities of Guna people with its own political organizations. Guna families are matrilinear and matrilocal. Guna people have a high incidence rate of albinism. In Guna philosophy albinos are considered special.



Image 2 Eye examination of albino patients

The clinic

Over 700 patients received complete eye exams, eyeglasses, and referrals for treatment and ocular surgeries. Preliminary analysis indicates a high prevalence of corneal astigmatism and oculocutaneous albinism. The clinical data will be analyzed for publication in an international journal.

This clinic is part of a research project that will continue until the end of 2022 and will help identify the prevalence of refractive error and ocular conditions among this indigenous group. This study is important for Latin America as there is almost no research on the eye health of indigenous communities.

The teams of both universities had a combined total of 11 faculty and 34 students of optometry.

The project provided UDELAS with a donation of equipment including an autorefractor, a portable phoropter with a stand, visual acuity charts, prisms, and frames to continue the project until December 2022.



Image 3 The IAUPR and UDELAS teams carrying out eye examinations



Awareness raising and building support for the initiative

Educational materials were prepared and used during the clinic to raise awareness among the community on the prevention of blindness and ocular diseases.

This work requires support from the authorities to have long-term impact. The First Lady of Panamá, Mrs. Yazmín Colón de Cortizo, invited faculty and students from IAUPR to the Presidential Palace and expressed her gratitude for their work. The Mayor of the City of Panamá District, Mr. José L. Fábrega, attended the clinic and provided lunch for all the clinical personnel.



Image 4 One of banners used for awareness raising



Image 5 The IAUPR team meeting with the First Lady of Panama

Networks of collaboration

The leaders of this project built support from a number of key international and local partners namely VOSH/International, the Vision Impact Institute, Optometry Giving Sight, Vision for Life Foundation Essilor, and the local Panamanian Lions International Club of Penonomé.

The students of the schools involved in this project exchanged knowledge, built important research capacities and improved their cultural sensitivity.



Image 6 Students of IAUPR and UDELAS