A memorable trip to Vietnam

Seven years ago, Dr. Ann Edmonds began considering organising a humanitarian clinic in Vietnam. One of her Vietnamese friends mentioned that his niece had gone to Vietnam on a humanitarian medical mission, triggering her interest.

Dr Edmonds contacted the adventurous niece to get more details about the visit. She found out that the trip was led by an organization of Vietnamese people residents in the USA. This seemed like an ideal opportunity for Pacific University optometry students, many of whom are of Vietnamese descent.

Oregon was one of the first states in the US to welcome Vietnamese refugees, with Portland having a significant Vietnamese community. A visit to Vietnam could be an excellent cultural exchange opportunity for students with Vietnamese roots, besides a worthy destination for humanitarian service.

As a Board member of the SVOSH-AMIGOS chapter at the Pacific University College of Optometry (PUCO), Dr Edmonds floated the idea of going to Vietnam. Although there was interest, external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic pushed many plans, including this, for almost three years.

When Dr. Edmonds reached out to her contact again, she was informed that, sadly, the organization she went to Vietnam with was no longer operating. Despite this, Dr. Edmonds persevered and contacted several people knowledgeable about or interested in going to Vietnam.



SVOSH-AMIGOS-PUCO students and Hanoi Medical University Optometry students

In 2023, an SVOSH chapter at the optometry program of the Hanoi Medical University was affiliated with VOSH/International. Dr Edmonds contacted Minh Ahn Tran, lead of the optometry program and faculty adviser of the SVOSH-HMU-Vietnam. Getting in touch with our Vietnamese SVOSH chapter was the turning point.

The experience of working in Vietnam

The trip was efficiently organised online. The US team comprised several SVOSH-AMIGOS-PUCO students with Vietnamese roots: Ruth Ma, Brittney Phung, Khanh Le, Amber Bui, Claudia Solomon, Troy Neilson, Kylee Yamashita and Kallista Ashton. Drs. Susan Littlefield and Jessica Lynch, and Edie Miller, a lay volunteer who had been in Vietnam for about two years and knew how to get around locally. The Vietnamese school team was involved in the local preparations, identifying the clinic sites and providing clear advice on the paperwork needed to enter the country. As Vietnam was a new country for SVOSH-PUCO, the team went there with an open mind and certainty that any challenge could be surmounted.



SVOSH-AMIGOS and SVOSH-HMU students working side by side

During the spring break, the team of 3 doctors and 8 students began their journey to Hanoi. After a smooth arrival, the team started seeing patients.

Despite this period being a school break in Vietnam, thirteen SVOSH-HMU-Vietnam students participated in the clinic. Nguyen Thi Thu Hien supported the organization of the clinic from the Vietnamese side and identified two sites for the clinic: the PTCS Deaf Mute School for Children of Hanoi, and the Phuong Mai Primary School. Hien was a lovely behind-the-scenes resource, ensuring that everything was implemented as planned.

The American and Vietnamese students enjoyed working together. As the first day progressed, it was great to see both groups of students working together. Dr. Edmonds' goal from the onset was to have SVOSH-PUCO students with Vietnamese roots interact with Vietnamese students by directly seeing patients, comparing their studies and developing connections. After initial hesitation about speaking Vietnamese, the US students soon found they knew more than they thought. It was truly amazing to watch.

As Khanh Le, Class of 2026 PUCO student, put it "*My trip to Vietnam provided an invaluable opportunity for both personal and professional growth. It showcased the potential advancements in the field of optometry, and I was able to gain new skills that enhanced my training and applied those skills while working with pediatric patients*".



Drs Minh Anh Tran and Ann Edmonds with equipment donated by VOSH-Oregon

The SVOSH-AMIGOS team brought equipment donated by VOSH-Oregon with them. Dr. Edmonds took great care to ensure that the voltage and plugs of the retinoscopes and ophthalmoscopes were the right ones, as the intention was to donate the equipment to the Vietnamese schools after the clinic.

On the last day, the US team visited the Hanoi Medical University School of Optometry, their vision clinics, and witnessed a laser surgery.

The clinic in Hanoi took place between March 24 and 26. The team saw 1300 students aged 5 to 12 years old. Over 870 children needed new glasses which were provided by a local charity.

After the students returned to the US, Drs. Edmonds and Littlefield travelled south to Ho Chi Minh City to visit the Optometry School at the University of Medicine Pham Ngoc Thach. There, they met with Drs. Bob and Kim Molter and Dr. Copilevitz, all of whom had taught at the school for several years.



Ho Chi Minh City optometry students were fascinated by Dr Littlefield's lecture on dry eye and eyelashes mites

Dr. Littlefield lectured on dry eye and mites on the eyelashes to approximately 60 students. Spending time with Drs. Kim and Bob Molter was meaningful, as both had devoted years of dedicated work and passion to this program.

Both schools benefited from the donated equipment. These included eight hand-held scopes for each optometry school, a BIO, condensing lenses, vision therapy equipment, a gonio lens, 40 occluders, pin holes, and eye charts. The electric chargers and convertors plus batteries and light bulb replacements, were included. It felt a bit like Christmas!

The fruitful day in Ho Chi Minh City was closed with a tour of the school.

The future



Dr. Jessica Lynch showing HMU optometry students how to use a monocular direct ophthalmoscope

US students were enthusiastic about future visits, and a couple were interested in returning to lecture once they graduate. This visit offered a valuable opportunity to engage with Vietnamese students and reflect on the potential to support the evolution of optometry in Vietnam. For the visiting students of Vietnamese heritage, the experience held special significance and left a lasting personal impression.

Besides the clinical practice and shared impact, the cultural exchange component was a unique feature of this clinic. It is not always possible to identify a relevant number of students with a shared heritage to visit the country their families come from. Dr Edmonds had a vision, and this may be the first step on a long and interesting road.

Optometry in Vietnam

Vietnam is a highly populated Southeast Asian country of over 100 million inhabitants. There are two schools of optometry established in 2014/2015. Optometry is a relatively new profession in a country with a significant need for primary eye care. In 2019, the first cohort of 43 optometry graduates from Hanoi Medical University and 12 from the University of Medicine Pham Ngoc Thach, marked the start of the development of the locally trained optometric workforce.

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