



# AUSSIE OPTOMETRISTS SEE DISASTER THROUGH NEW EYES

For many of us it's impossible to imagine the kind of losses experienced by tsunami survivors. They lost loved ones, their homes, and their belongings.

On top of all this, many had their glasses swept away or destroyed – losing their access to sight.

Volunteers with the Australian Optometrists Association recently returning from tsunami-affected regions of Sri Lanka tell stories that remind us of why Australia gave so generously after the Boxing Day tragedy. One of the volunteers spoke of the delight that swept over the face of a 50 year old woman when fitted with a pair of +3 reading spectacles, and the disbelief of the young man who looked through his spectacles for the first time.

One person they examined lost a glass prosthetic eye in the tsunami; and another who lost his spectacles was an electrician who would be unable to resume work until they were replaced. Another was a very elderly lady who when rescued was clutching her glasses in hand – her only possession.

"Because the force of the tsunami waves was so strong, most survivors had clothes torn from their bodies, and even (pierced) earrings were torn off by the force of the water. With close to a million homeless people in Sri Lanka this meant if they lost a house then they've probably lost glasses", says Professor Brian Layland, Head of the Tsunami Project for the **International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE)**.

Having poor vision makes doing simple acts for recovery after such a disaster, almost impossible. ICEE realised when we were there that most people have never even had the opportunity to have their eyes checked. It is estimated that up to 25% of the population in the areas affected need vision correction and of the nearly 7,000 people already seen by our teams, 5,851 needed spectacles.

By helping these people now, ICEE has an opportunity to make a lasting difference to the visual and general health of all the people in these areas. Monthly trips undertaken by teams of Australian volunteer optometrists to Sri Lanka will continue to address the immediate need for glasses in the affected areas. 'As a small contributor to a greater solution, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to share my time and skills with those in such need,' said Jane Kierath

At the same time, the teams have started to focus on the development of local resources to provide ongoing care. ICEE, in collaboration with key Australian and local organisations and funded by Optometry Giving Sight in Australia (the optometry profession's charity), has conducted 34 eye clinics in the Ampara and Batticaloa districts on the north-eastern coast of Sri Lanka. These two districts were some of the hardest hit by the Tsunami. They are also working with Vision 2020 Australia, Australian Medical Aid Foundation, the Centre for Community Health, and volunteer optometrists, eyecare personnel and educators. They will recruit locals to train as eyecare personnel so the centres can continue to run in the future.

“There are millions of people in need, and there is a lot to be done. But the creation of vision care resources in the tsunami-affected regions of Sri Lanka will be a lasting legacy helping many in need”, says Professor Layland.

Photographs of the Sri Lanka work are available.

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