

# Now I See

**An experience working in an East African mobile medical eye camp turned out to be far more revealing than expected.**

BY ALY SHERALY '09

Standing at his bedside, taking his blood pressure, I asked my patient, “What are you looking forward to if you regain your sight?”

The old man’s solemn face lit up, smiling from ear to ear to reveal his 10 remaining teeth. Casually, he said, “I’m looking forward to seeing the young chicks!”

Immediately, the entire ward began laughing—one of many precious moments I experienced volunteering in a mobile medical eye camp on the serene paradise island of Zanzibar over the summer after my first year of medical school.

The old man was 78 and had cataracts in both eyes, preventing him from seeing. He arrived clinging to the arm of his son, shuffling his feet warily as he advanced. He had come to the medical eye camp with the hope of regaining his sight. The medical camp I had joined specialized in removing cataracts from patients suffering from this form of preventable and reversible blindness.

While cataract surgery is routinely performed in the West, in East Africa, the lack of trained professionals and limited access to the healthcare system prevents many from getting this simple procedure completed. Thus, many patients, like the old man I met, struggle for years with preventable blindness.

These medical eye camps are a regular service offered in Tanzania, East Africa, as they bring all the necessary staff, equipment, and resources to an isolated, rural site that has no access to medical care. Members from the camp staff identify a rural area in need of their services. The



The services of these eye camps were in such demand that there were not enough beds to accommodate all the admitted patients and some had to sleep on the floor. Inset: to prevent swelling post-operatively, a tennis ball is strapped over the bandage to apply pressure—a low-cost but effective technique.



camp is then mobilized to that region and is run out of a local hospital or clinic. Patients are enrolled in the camp, have their surgery performed, and return to their home or nearby village, while the camp packs up and moves on to another site, winding its way through the coconut, mango and baobab trees, leaving behind a trail of dust.

I had been with the camp for six weeks, living through daily power outages, water shortages, and an onslaught of mosquitoes. I was bitten so much that

I thought the mosquitoes would at least leave me a thank you note for all the good meals they had enjoyed. I would listen to stories the staff told of patients who walked for miles to the camp by foot. The patients would tell of the hardship of being blind—how it crippled their ability to put food on the table and how they lost their independence, relying entirely on their families to help them get through the daily chores.

Despite these hardships, the people were not depressed or despondent; instead



A dhow coasting along the shore of Zanzibar island as sunset approaches. Below: medical student Aly Sheraly takes a patient’s blood pressure before she is assigned for surgery.

they had hope for a better future, the desire to see their children succeed where they could not. I saw this in the old man. Despite his blindness, he would smile, laugh, and tell jokes to the other patients and staff. I believe he also proposed to every nurse in the camp.

Shortly after his first eye was operated on, I saw him standing on the balcony. He was peering out towards the street in front of the hospital. It wasn’t a particularly scenic view—a two-lane street with the occasional car speeding by, two rundown apartment buildings across the street and a small restaurant under a palm-leaf roof—a mundane scene hardly worth a second glimpse. The old man was smiling, just as he had been since he arrived. But as I got closer, I saw this smile was very different.



I asked him why he was smiling. Without breaking his gaze he said, “Look! I can see those people walking on the street earning their livelihood. See those birds soaring in the sky freely. It has been so many years since I saw such a beautiful sight. I never thought I would ever see such things again. This is only after one eye is done. Imagine what else I will be able to see after the other is done.”

I looked back out at the street and realized how much I had taken my sight for granted. Just a few moments ago, I had judged this view to be unworthy of my attention. I leaned on the balcony and stood there with him silently watching the cars go by. We saw some school children walking down the street returning from school.

I realized at that moment why my parents had left this beautiful island to live in the West. They struggled against

A patient is examined the day after surgery. Her smile is the best clinical indicator as to the success of the surgery.



The "old man" smiles for the camera before surgery on his second eye.



The surgeon, Dr. Dilawer Padhani, and his nursing assistant perform a cataract surgery. The camp has the capacity to operate in a sterile field to avoid infection.

Dr. Sheriff, who has a practice in Arusha, Tanzania, checks patients before they are admitted to the camp for cataract removal surgery.

discrimination, financial difficulty, cultural and family isolation. My father, in particular, would lament about how the warm whisper of winds from the Indian Ocean had been replaced by the frosty shouts of the Arctic draft. They had always told me and my brothers that they had left this paradise island so that their children could have the best opportunity to seek higher education and to excel at our professions.

I thought by going to university and pursuing a degree in medicine I was honoring their desire for me to obtain higher learning. But standing here beside this old

man, I saw what they really meant. My parents wanted me to get the best education, not only for acquiring knowledge but also to use that knowledge to help those who didn't have the opportunity or means to help themselves. Earning my medical degree wasn't about adding letters to my name or putting a piece of paper in a frame. It was about learning and transforming that knowledge into practice to improve the condition of my fellow brothers and sisters in humanity.

The old man put his hand on my shoulder and said "May Allah (God) bless you for helping me restore my sight."

I replied, "May Allah bless you for helping me gain my vision."