

Evolving Eye Health Expertise in Vietnam



Welcoming new colleagues to the profession of optometry

Like most optometrists in Australia, Hanks Optometrists proudly supports Optometry Giving Sight (OGS) – partly because Optometry Giving Sight is “our” charity and especially because the world has a ridiculous problem of preventable blindness, as pointed out so effectively by the late Brien Holden.

We knew that this was a good charity to support and that refractive correction is simply what we do every day. It’s a natural fit.

After raising money and speaking passionately about Optometry Giving Sight for almost 10 years, my wife Vicki and I were keen to visit one of their projects – and what a wonderful experience it turned out to be.

WRITER **Dr. Tony Hanks**

Vietnam is a beautiful country with warm friendly people, but there are still areas of disadvantage simply because resources do not currently exist. Optometry and eyecare is one of these disadvantaged areas with just a handful of optometrists in the entire country of 90 million people.

There are an estimated 21 million Vietnamese people who require refractive error services, three million of these being children. Affordable spectacles are still out of reach for the vast majority of people, who live in rural and remote areas of the country. The lack of training available for refraction and optical shop personnel also means that the quality and accuracy of prescription spectacles are questionable.

In most developed countries the optometrist to population ratio is

approximately one to 10,000 people – so that would be 9,000 optometrists for Vietnam. As a short term goal the World Health Organisation has recommended a minimum of one optometrist per 50,000 people by 2020; meaning a target of 1,800 optometrists need to be trained.



“In 2014 there were just three optometrists for a population of 90 million; now there are nine”

THE START OF A SOLUTION

Vietnam has just one School of Optometry, founded by the Brien Holden Vision Institute and supported by Optometry Giving Sight. It is in Ho Chi Minh City at the University of Medicine Pham Ngoc Thac. It was interesting to learn that this was established with approvals by Vietnamese government ministries, so the course is official and recognised, with most students receiving government scholarships that enable them to attend.

The course is four years and covers all optometry subjects. Obviously refraction is included, but there is so much more – including learning disabilities and detection of pathology for example.

We visited the School of Optometry for the official start of the new academic year. It was quite emotional both because of the students’ enthusiasm and because we were mindful of the fact that just one year ago, at the same event, Brien Holden had inaugurated this course. There are now 16 second year students and 30 new first year students.

While the school is supported by many groups, including the governments of Vietnam and Australia, Brien Holden Vision Institute and Optometry Giving Sight, readers will be interested to know that the students have their own skin in this game too. Annual course fees are \$200 per

student (after the scholarship payments), which is approximately a month of average income for their families.

OUR FUTURE COLLEAGUES

To describe the students as inspiring is an understatement. We felt so proud that these enthusiastic young people are joining our profession as colleagues. They are not only “joining” it, but they will literally be helping to build the profession of optometry from scratch in Vietnam.

This is an awesome story of achievement. In 2014 there were just three optometrists for a population of 90 million; now there are nine – including some who have returned to teach in their country of birth. In a few years there will be over 100 and on it will go.

DEDICATED STAFF

As you would expect, the staff are outstanding people, with amazing commitment to the project. I was one of six speakers for the official start of the academic year. The others were Associate Professor Pham Dieu (Vice-Rector of the University), Huynh Ly (Country Representative for Brien Holden Vision Institute), Tran Long (Head of Optometry

Sub-department), Cat Tuong (Class Leader, Year 2) and Jessie Huang (Volunteer Lecturer from Australia).

THE REAL POWER OF TRAINING LOCAL PEOPLE

It’s worth highlighting that this Optometry Giving Sight project successfully empowers local people to train other local people, who will then go on to spending the rest of their lives correcting preventable blindness. That is a truly wonderful result; and, as I said to the students, “then you can also become a supporter of optometry’s own charity, Optometry Giving Sight”.

Vicki and I were so impressed with what is being achieved here. It was an uplifting experience, full of hope and goodwill.



Tran Hoai Long, Head of Optometry Sub-department



OPTOMETRY SCHOOLS IN VIETNAM

Population	90 million
City vs Rural	68% Rural
Blindness (<6/120)	3.0%
Vision impairment due to uncorrected refractive error (<6/12)	29.8%
Vision impairment in children	15 to 20%
Number needing refractive error services	21 million (3 million children)
Ophthalmologists	1 per 70,000 (Cities)
Ophthalmologist training on refraction	2 weeks
Optometrist numbers: needed	90,000 (if 1 per 10,000)
Optometrist numbers: current	9 in 2015 (3 in 2014)
Optometry schools	1 (first students started in 2014)
Optometry school course	4 years
Optometry school students	16 in 2nd Year 30 in 1st Year

It is one thing to believe in the work of Optometry Giving Sight, but it's a wonderful confirmation to see it working first hand. To the vision of Brien Holden and all of you who contribute in any way, well done!

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Dr. Anthony Hanks, OAM OD(Boston) BOptom(Hons) FAAO FCLSA owns Hanks Optometrists with his wife Vicki. Based in Port Macquarie, he is Director of Eyecare Plus and also works as an independent clinical and professional consultant. Dr. Hanks is an experienced lecturer, having spoken and published on a variety of vision-related topics in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia. He has authored articles and papers published internationally, and been a co-editor for some clinical optometry reference

The clinical teaching area for optometry at the Medical University

publications. His book for support staff – "The Optometry Team" – is now in its' fourth edition and his book for optometrists – "What Patients Want" – is in its' first edition. Dr. Hanks was the Foundation Chairman for the Global Advisory Board for the charity Optometry Giving Sight.

Tran Long, Huynh Ly, Tony Hanks, Vicki Hanks, Chau Van, Tran Ngan (optometrist trained in Malaysia), Nguyen Anh (optometrist trained in Malaysia) and ophthalmologist Dr Vo Chau



A Student Perspective

WRITER **Dr. Tony Hanks**

Cat Tuong is one of the first students to attend Vietnam's one and only School of Optometry, which was founded by the Brien Holden Vision Institute and is supported by Optometry Giving Sight. The school is located in Ho Chi Minh City at the University of Medicine Pham Ngoc Thac. Ms. Tuong is Class leader of year two. While visiting the school, I asked her what had inspired her to study optometry.

Q: How old are you?

A: I'm 19 years old.

Q: What age were you when you first had your eyes examined?

A: I first had my eyes examined when I was nine years old. That was the time I was informed that I had myopia.

Q: Do you wear spectacles?

A: Yes, I have been wearing glasses for nine years because my eyes are short-sighted.

Q: Why did you choose the optometry course?

A: I had always dreamt to be medical staff since I was a little kid to help sick people get better health. I was advised to choose the optometry course by not only my teachers but also my parents. I know that there are just a few optometrists in Vietnam and there are also a large number of people suffering from blindness just because of refractive errors. I want to be an optometrist to help those who have poor vision get better vision.

Q: What is your favourite subject?

A: My favourite subject is Applied Optics because in this subject I can learn about how to apply theory to practical situations. The teachers also show me how to use the machines for finding the correct degrees of

the glasses and the eyes, which makes me feel really interested in learning this subject.

Q: What do you hope to achieve after you graduate?

A: I really hope to gain a lot of useful knowledge of the refractive errors and the best ways to treat patients with those errors. I also want to know the latest treatment to some serious diseases as more and more people in my country are suffering from diseases that can cause blindness. Therefore, knowledge of refractive errors and diseases and the treatment for those problems are what I want to achieve after graduating so that I can help reduce the number of people in my community who are having eye problems.

Q: Do you have any other comments about Vietnam's first School of Optometry?

A: I want to show my sincere gratitude to the professors, doctors and teachers, as well as Brien Holden Vision Institute and Optometry Giving Sight in Australia who have done so much to give Vietnamese students this amazing program. Thank you for offering 16 students, one year ago the chance to become optometrists. We will help to reduce refractive errors and eye-related diseases for the people in our communities. [mi](#)