

Mission: Cataract USA



Clint McClanahan, MD

A truck driver who had been out of work for months is back on the road. A retired man resumes his favorite hobby, building model railroads. And an unemployed carpenter returns to his job.

These three patients are among the recipients of free cataract surgery provided by a dedicated group of Kaiser Permanente (KP) physicians, nurses, and other clinical staff in Sacramento, California. Since 1996, the staff have provided cataract surgery to people who do not have health insurance and thus cannot pay for the procedure (which has a market value of \$5000).

"Our volunteers have really committed to this. It makes us feel good to be involved in something that is helping to change lives," said Clint McClanahan, MD, of the Ophthalmology Department at KP-Sacramento.

Dr McClanahan serves as coordinator of the program, known as Mission Cataract USA. The Sacramento event is part of a nationwide program begun in 1991 by a Fresno ophthalmologist who, in 1991, began providing free surgery to those in need. Dr McClanahan learned of Mission Cataract USA in 1995, when he read a medical journal article about the program. The idea immediately caught his interest because he has a long-standing interest in helping the underserved. For the past six years, he has made annual trips to Mexico to provide eye examinations and eyeglasses to needy people as part of a charity effort arranged by his church.

"I thought it would be a great opportunity for us to provide a community service. There are so

many people who fall through the safety net," said Dr McClanahan, whose father is a retired KP ophthalmologist and whose grandfather also practiced the specialty.

Since 1996, 50 free cataract operations have been provided by the volunteer team at a dedicated eye surgery center in the KP Medical Offices in Rancho Cordova, a suburb of Sacramento. More than 50 ophthalmologists, optometrists, nurse anesthetists, ophthalmic technicians, operating room technicians, receptionists, and surgery scheduling coordinators have volunteered their time. In addition to providing the medical staff, KP provides supplies, medications, and operating rooms. Intraocular lenses and other materials are donated by vendors.

Before the surgery day, an awareness campaign is conducted to notify the community of the free service. Public service announcements on the radio, newspaper articles, and printed fliers help attract candidates. Screenings are held to determine patients' financial and medical eligibility for the free surgery.

"I wondered when we started if there would be anybody who needed this service. It turns out there has been no problem finding people," said Dr McClanahan, who coordinates the program jointly with Steve Metzger, Eye Services Manager, and Jackie Ansley, RN.

In recognition of their efforts, the medical staff recently was presented a 1999 People Helping People Business Award from the Community Services Planning Council in Sacramento. The Council is a nonprofit organization that

works to build coalitions for solving community problems such as hunger, homelessness, violence, substance abuse, and inadequate access to health care.

The award was given for Exceptional Community Support. In accepting the honor on behalf of the medical team, Dr McClanahan said, "The support of physicians and staff, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, Kaiser Foundation Hospitals, and The Permanente Medical Group all contributed to the success of this program. It's very gratifying to work with such a dedicated group to restore the precious gift of sight."

Said Ed Glavis, Senior Vice President and Area Manager of the Valley Service Area, Sacramento, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan and Kaiser Foundation Hospitals: "This program exemplifies Kaiser Permanente's commitment to community health. The volunteers who gave so much of their time to make this effort possible should be applauded."

The medical team has received many letters of thanks from patients who benefited from the free surgery. One patient wrote, "Everything before [the surgery] was a cotton-ball blur. You gave me back the sight of the hairs in my bunny's fur. You gave me back the bark on the trees."

Another patient, who was able to return to work as a security guard after the surgery, wrote: "I can't thank the doctor and staff enough. This operation truly gave me back my life."

Said Dr McClanahan: "Some people say this is just a drop in the bucket. Well, a drop is better than nothing." ❖