



# FALL EYES on the MISSION



DR. MICHAEL VRABC (top) comes off the ORBIS airplane, which serves as a flying hospital, with Dr. Roberto Cavalieros, who is carrying Iman, a young patient. They are accompanied by Iman's father.

**AU-ALI AHAMO** (above left) holds her daughter, Fatima, while Dr. Michael Vrabc examines his work on her eye, damaged in play. Fatima, 6, got one of five corneas Vrabc brought with him to demonstrate to the local physicians in Morocco the technique and the value of an eye bank.

## ORBIS

International  
is on a mission  
to eradicate  
blindness

worldwide. Its  
flying hospital  
brings hope  
and skills to  
impoverished  
areas around  
the globe.

Post-Crescent  
reporter Maija  
Penikis tagged  
along on the  
group's latest  
mission

By Maija Penikis  
Post-Crescent staff writer

The sun had barely risen when they started to stream toward the gates of the hospital.

They came by the score, dressed in their ancient caftans, holding the arm of a grandson to keep from stumbling on the uneven ground, carrying canes and shepherd staffs, bringing their sightless children, carrying babies on their backs.

### ORBIS IN MOROCCO

For a closer look at the people who crossed paths with ORBIS, see **Life & Style on Monday**.

It is a scene right out of the Bible and just as in the Bible, they, too, have come seeking a miracle: sight.

"We heard the American doctors were coming to Casablanca. They have been here before. They are miracle workers who can restore sight," a man explains through a young translator.

"You can't let it affect you. You have to stick to the purpose," said Dr. Michael Vrabc, looking at the crowd beginning to swell in the courtyard of Hospital 20 August, a massive health center in the middle of Casablanca.

Still, he sighs. Vrabc knows from years of experience how many of the people standing with hope in their hearts will go away hopeless, how many will have to learn to accept, once again, to live in darkness.

Please see **MISSION**, G-7



### A BLIND GIRL,

among the scores of people who had come to the ORBIS plane in Casablanca in hopes of finding help, seeks solace in her mother's arms as she learns that little can be done. "You can't let it affect you. You have to stick to the purpose," Dr. Michael Vrabc says of the frustration that comes with not being able to help all those who seek aid.

### Challenge of a lifetime

By Maija Penikis  
Post-Crescent staff writer

They are modern gypsies, roaming the world in a DC-10, living out of suitcases and making "home" in hotel rooms.

They are young and enthusiastic or older and experienced. They are in their 20s and in their 30s, 40s, even 50s. They are a small variation of the United Nations, bringing with them the culture, attitudes and beliefs of various nationalities.

"It's not always easy being

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## MISSION: Local doctor part of efforts to reach world's impoverished areas

From G-1

He is no miracle worker and there is little help for many, even with Western knowledge.

Vrabc, who is with Valley Eye Associates in Appleton, is one of three visiting ophthalmologists from the West who has volunteered a week to work with ORBIS International, an organization that's fighting blindness worldwide.

Part of the program takes place in a fully-equipped DC-10 plane, which travels to Third World countries teaching local physicians the latest techniques and doing surgeries on a select few to show the host medical teams what is being done.

"I'm not a miracle worker, just someone who has some knowledge I can share," said Vrabc, who believes strongly in developing the technical skills of those who work in the medical field. But he's more than that, though he's reluctant to delve into that part of his psyche. He is a man with a missionary's heart.

"I grew up with a father who was an old-time physician who believed in helping those who needed help, regardless of their status. To this day he's my hero," Vrabc said, talking of his childhood in Beaver Dam.

"It's sort of living your Christian values, I guess," he adds.

Apparently, the message stuck. His siblings have done similar mission programs in developing countries, as well.

"The trick is to feel that you're making a difference," Vrabc said.

He must have done that in full measure in the dozen medical missions he has undertaken over the years. But that has taken another trick: the ability to keep the endgame in mind - difficult at best when you see the hope in the sightless eyes of those who've come seeking help.

"They may not understand it today, but because we are training their physicians, they will get better care in the future," Vrabc said. They don't understand. They have come here with the idea that perhaps Allah will look kindly upon their request and help them get selected for special attention by the "American doctors" who've arrived in the big plane.

"You see my mother. She is almost blind. My brothers are suffering. My eyes are bad," says a young man who speaks English. He is one of many to approach an American stranger in the hopes of getting extra support for his plight.

They know that there are too many here. Hundreds of them have been selected for further triage by local physicians who feel their patient can be helped or by the ORBIS team of physicians who screen people before the plane arrives.

The one rule ORBIS tries to adhere to is that those chosen and those chosen for further surgery have to be poor or at least good candidates for the surgeries used to demonstrate the latest techniques to the host physicians.

This time there is no question



DR. MICHAEL VRABC, an Appleton ophthalmologist with Valley Eye Associates, examines the eyes of a blind boy during triage as local physicians in Casablanca look on.

they fit the criteria, waiting in the hot sun to be called into the cooler corridors of the hospital. Besides Vrabc, whose main function is corneal transplants, there is Dr. Brad Black, pediatric ophthalmologist from Baton Rouge, La., another veteran of mission trips, and Dr. Chris Canning, Southampton, England, a retina specialist.

By the time this Sunday is over, the three men will have triaged close to 200 patients and selected about 27 for surgeries. None is bothered by the fact that the hospital walls have peeling paint or broken blinds, even broken glass. They've all been in situations worse than this.

"I remember the water in the hospital froze when I was in China," Black, the laidback Southerner, said, chuckling at the memory. "This is nothing. This hospital is fine in comparison."

"You have to forget all that and struggle on," Canning said.

Struggle they do. All the afternoon they do triage, examining eye after eye, making diagnoses, selecting the patients for surgery.

With amazing skill and comprehension, Vrabc examines the eyes of a teen in the split scope, makes a diagnosis and then draws on the blackboard what needs to be done for the host physicians who've gathered to learn.

"This is a result of trachoma," Vrabc says, ticking off the three-step procedure that would help reverse the boy's blindness. As with many that day, it will be a hopeless case because the teen would need a cornea transplant, almost an impossibility in this Muslim country where religion often restricts organ transplantation.

"This is a 9-year-old girl with cataracts ... this is a child with glaucoma ... astigmatism" ... and so on and so on, throughout the sweltering day. Yet, Vrabc neither loses his temper or his cool. Case after case he stands steadfast. Diagnosis and cure, diagnosis and cure.

Vrabc is lucky this trip. His translator happens to be a Venezuelan ophthalmologist, Dr. Roberto Cavalieros, who has perfect knowledge of French.

"Unfortunately, of the 75 or 80 patients I saw today, 40 will need corneal transplants," he says at the end of the day. Others can be helped and he passes on the method he would use to treat those patients.

But not all can. "There's nothing we can do for her blindness," he tells the host physicians as a young woman lifts her hands to her face and cries, then seeks solace from her distraught mother. "But she's in pain and that can be changed," he adds, listing things to be done.

He stands a little straighter, an indication that this has been a tough moment. Years of practice lets him keep his cool, unlike the young Cavalieros, who is dismayed that something could have been done for the young woman a long time ago. "What were they thinking," he whispers in frustration, knowing the situation in a country which, despite its Western influence, is still battling poverty and cultural attitudes.

Vrabc, too, has to silently steel himself for the next case - a 2-month old baby blind in one eye, with a large cataract blocking the sight in the other eye, held by a mother no more than a child herself.

"We can help that eye," Vrabc says, and by the end of his tour, he's as good as his word. "She'll have normal vision in that eye," he predicts. But short of a fluke, he'll never know. He never does. They pass through his life, blessed but unknown.

"It's times like those, though, that I realize how blessed we are to have the health care we have in the United States," he says later, when he can look back at the day's work and realize it's been good.

"Sight is so big. It's a difference between night and day, between having a life of some type or living in eternal darkness," Vrabc said.