

Appleton surgeon travels around world on mission to restore sight to the needy

If you connect the dots on the globe where Dr. Michael Vrabcic has traveled the past 15 years, you can see that this Appleton ophthalmologist has been around the world — several times over.

And these are no tourist destinations. These are third world and developing nations where modern health care is a luxury for the privileged few and the have-nots commonly suffer or die from diseases long-since treatable in the Western world.

Like preventable blindness, for instance.

"I get to help people who otherwise would never be able to see," said Vrabcic, who returned recently from a seven-day stint in Chittagong, Bangladesh, a city of roughly 4 million perched on the Bay of Bengal.

Vrabcic, of Valley Eye Associates in Appleton, is a volunteer physician with Orbis, an international humanitarian group committed to preserving and restoring sight in the developing world, where 90 percent of the world's blind live.

Vrabcic, a cornea and cataract specialist, traveled aboard the Orbis DC-10, the world's only jetliner that doubles as an ophthalmic surgical center and teaching facility. Among his luggage was an insulated lunch bag containing two cadaver corneas donated by the Lions Eye Bank of Wisconsin in Madison.

There are no golf outings on these trips. Instead, the Orbis team keeps a tight schedule of surgeries and teaching sessions to give the host doctors the skills they need to help their people.



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On this recent trip, Vrabcic performed two cornea transplants aboard the jetliner, while more than two dozen Bangladesh doctors looked on. Sitting in the plane's cabin, the student doctors watched Vrabcic on the plane's flat-screen monitor, while Vrabcic — outfitted with a microphone and video camera — performed the surgeries at the back of the plane.

Vrabcic then accompanied the doctor's back to their local hospital, to assist them as they undertook five cornea transplants of their own.

Vrabcic and the other Orbis surgeons must adapt their techniques based on the available technology and equipment in the countries they visit, which is often limited.

While Vrabcic and his Western colleagues have the luxury of using electrocautery — a specialized soldering gun, of sorts — to reshape the eye prior to a cornea transplant, the host doctors in Bangladesh typically have no such equipment.

"So they use this steel probe that they heat in an open flame until it turns red," said Vrabcic, pointing to an operating room photo from his recent trip, which shows a nurse holding what resembles a small tin of sterno with an orange flame.

The patients Vrabcic treated on the trip suffered from keratoconus, an eye condition marked by a protruding cornea that bulges outward like a cone, blurring and obscuring vision. Surgery to correct the problem involves first cauterizing the front of eye to reshape it, fol-



Submitted photo

DR. MICHAEL VRABCIC performs a post-surgery exam on a Bangladesh woman who received a cornea transplant.

lowed by the cornea transplant.

With each trip, Vrabcic is reminded of what a changing world it is. Especially since the advent of the Internet and cell phones. And ever since 9/11.

"Ten years ago I would go out and wander the streets but I don't do that anymore," said Vrabcic, who has also traveled to Armenia, Burma, China, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, India, Lithuania, Morocco, Nigeria, Paraguay, Syria, Thailand and Trinidad. "Now there are extremist groups all over the world blowing things up."

While Vrabcic was in Bangladesh, suicide bombers launched a series of attacks throughout the country, including the Nov. 29 bombing of a Chittagong courthouse. The bombing prompted a citywide "strike," where all city and government employees walked off their jobs, leaving the city volatile and unsecured.

Out of safety concerns, Vrabcic quickly exited the coun-

try.

"We had to get to their airport by 4 a.m. so we could get out of the country safely."

Vrabcic can now follow up with the Bangladesh doctors and patients with an Internet videophone, if need be.

"It used to cost \$250 for a 15-minute phone call to India ten years ago," recalled Vrabcic. "Before I'd have no idea how a patient was doing. Now I can find out that the equivalent of Mrs. Smith is doing great."

Despite the hair-raising incident in Chittagong, Vrabcic said he plans to stay on staff with Orbis and looks forward to future trips, wherever they may take him.

"I really enjoy meeting other doctors from around the world," Vrabcic said. "It's a chance to get away from the grind and interact with a great bunch of people in parts of the world that most people never get to see."

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