

GIVING MORE THAN MEDICINE

A local medic who has volunteered his time in Vanuatu for 20 years is astounded by how happy the people are. Words: Leigh Robshaw

Sippy Downs optometrist and doctor, Professor Leo Hartley has been visiting Vanuatu regularly for the past 20 years with a group of medical volunteers as part of the Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness project.

Hartley returned from his latest trip in early June and spoke to *My Weekly Preview* about the work he does treating and educating the Ni-Vanuatu men, women and children about health.

"We take a team to really remote areas which we do in consultation with the local Ni-Vanuatu health department," says Hartley. "We treat an enormous amount of tropical ulcers caused by yaws, a disease that's similar to syphilis but not transmitted sexually; it's transmitted by touch or flies. Flies come off a tropical ulcer and go onto someone else with a cut. Whole villages of children lose their eardrums.

"When the children get into their upper teens and early adulthood, they have lots of pterygia, the fleshy growth that grows across the cornea. Over there they tend to grow right across because no one has seen them or knows how to



Professor Leo Hartley with a local patient and Dr Ann Miller from Victoria

manage them. In the older folk we see terribly dense cataracts. In some of these really remote areas the teachers, when they hit 40, they can't read anymore, just for want of a pair of reading glasses and so they retire. It's really devastating. From an optometry point of view, the biggest thing is just giving them glasses."

On his most recent trip, Hartley said he treated a lot of hypertension caused by a high salt diet of root vegetables cooked in sea water.

"They have massively high blood pressures. If you go into an average remote village there, you say where's all the old people? They're all dead; they've had strokes from high blood pressure."

Hartley says type 2 diabetes is also a big problem due to a diet high in sugar and rice.

"The thing is, people over there don't complain," Hartley says. "It is what it is. They line up for a clinic and it's actually a bit terrifying as a doctor. The line

stretches out and you think, I can only see one patient at a time. They line up and they're just calm and talking, they don't get uptight. In Australia if that was the case you'd have people whingeing and moaning. These people are so happy – that's what gets me."

Hartley, an associate professor at the University of Melbourne, balances his humanitarian work with running his business H2 Vision at Sippy Downs, and conducting research into a cure for retinopathy in premature babies with a colleague from Townsville. But it's the work in Vanuatu that makes him feel the most like "a true health professional".

"People say: why do you do it? It's good medicine. You feel crazy, there's times you think, if only I could order some bloods and imaging, but you can't. All you have is your hands and your mind and you have to think."

Professor Hartley and his colleagues pay for their own flights and donate their time. The group is seeking a volunteer to develop a website to cater for Australian optometrists and their Ni-Vanuatu students. To help, contact Hartley at H2 Vision Centres, Sippy Downs.



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