



A VISION OF FIJI

In July 1989, the tiny seaplane chugged up to Turtle Island Resort's sun-bleached, wooden dock where passengers Jerold Beeve MD and his wife, Dorothy, an RN, were greeted by singing, barefoot Fijians playing stringed instruments.

Patches of glimmering coral with schools of flopping fish, a maze of towering coconut palms, and 14 two-room, thatched-roofed bure suites fronting a glorious beach and a beckoning sea were dazzling, and the perfect place to celebrate a romantic 25th wedding anniversary.

Turtle Island, one of 300 or so Fijian

islands tucked away in the South Pacific, was love at first sight for Dr. Beeve, a noted eye physician and surgeon based in

Glendale. The couple was smitten by the barefoot, crime-free people who shared with neighbors and treated everyone as though they were family.

The Beeves quickly observed that not a single Fijian was wearing glasses. "I gave a man my glasses," Dr. Beeve says. "He saw things he had never seen before. A few days later he told me that he had given them to a friend with equally poor vision. I visited a nearby island and saw a lady blinded by cataracts sitting in a corner in her bure. I wondered

Jerold Beeve MD
and team bring free
eye care to thousands
in the South Pacific

By Richard Carroll

and an assistant who helped with pre- and post-op care, patient education, and vision testing, set up in Bure 2. The word quickly spread and Dr. Beeve's team found a long line of sight-impaired Fijians patiently standing in the hot sun.

"For a moment, we had feelings of fear and apprehension," explains Dr. Beeve. "We require more than 400 items, including portable laser equipment suitable for the tropics, and our

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anesthesiologist was worrying that he was missing something he might need, as we all were."

The first patient was the chief's wife, who was legally blind. She had dense cataracts accented by telltale white pupils and was seeing hand movement only. Dr. Beeve smiles, "Everything ran smoothly even though the sterilizer popped a seal on the last patient." Many Fijians could not remember when they had vision and were spellbound when, the day after surgery, they gazed at Dr. Beeve, with better than 20/40 vision. The team examined 250 patients and completed seven operations.

On the second mission, they brought 14 crates of equipment, performed 21 operations, examined more than 300 Fijians, and dispensed 500 pairs of glasses. During the third mission, in 1992, the team completed 31 surgeries including six pterygium

surgeries. Richard Evanson had also remodeled a concrete building into two sections: the operating room and the pre-op, post-op, and examination rooms.

The last mission, December 1993, working 12 to 14 hours a day, the team performed 46 surgeries. To date, the

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team has vision-tested 2,150 Fijians; dispensed 2,500 pairs of glasses; and performed a total of 128 surgeries, which includes 89 cataract surgeries with intra-ocular lens implant, 23 laser surgeries, 14 pterygium surgeries, and two eyelid plastic surgeries. In addition, the team has assisted Fijian medical practitioners with instruction and valuable educational materials.

The team has also learned tricks of the tropics. Dr. Beeve says, "We seal off the room to control the insects and put the legs of our tables in pots of water. Ants don't swim. We haven't had a single infection or complication."

The joy for the Beeves, who have been commended by the County and City of Los Angeles, President Reagan, and Governor Wilson, is to watch a young boy look out the window with a broad grin after experiencing clear sight for the first time, or a

grandmother with restored sight hugging her grandchild, or Fijians over age 50 who are again productive, thanks to their new glasses. "When we complete a cataract operation, it is like resurrecting someone from the dead," Dr. Beeve says. "It is an incredible feeling."

The next mission is being scheduled. The Beeves have now spent more than \$150,000 of their own money with no regrets or hindsight conjecture. Dr. Beeve says, "People and companies are helping us with donations. The average cost to provide a medical team of five for 10 days is \$48,000 in materials and transportation, most of which is donated. The actual outlay of cash is \$10,000. Sponsors have helped tremendously to reduce the cash figure for each trip. We are very proud that the Foundation has a minimal overhead — an outlay for stamps and a post office box.

"One of my patients donates \$5,000 a year, which is used for transportation and equipment not acquired by donation. We spend \$5,000 to \$6,000 on round-trip economy tickets for each trip." Chuckling, he says, "Sometimes I think it might be cheaper to fly the Fijians here."

There is also a sense of giving from Richard Evanson to the Fijians who, in return, bring shells and beads as grateful gifts for restored sight.

The Beeve Foundation can be reached at 2820 Honolulu Ave., Suite 189, Verdugo City, CA 91406-4601, 818/790-8101. **LP**

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