



Did you hear the one about the surgeon, the optometrist, the podiatrist, the vet and the engineer?

THE SUN RISES, GIVING THE THATCHED ROOF OF A Balinese hut a golden glow, and already hundreds have gathered to meet Tony Moore. You could be mistaken for thinking he's a celebrity, and in many ways he is, as the locals arrive with gifts in the hope that the Adelaide plastic surgeon can rid them of their scars. For 22 years Tony has been greeted by such scenes as one of an ever growing number of South Australians providing volunteer aid overseas.

For Tony, a mother's smile makes it all worthwhile. "That's all you really need as far as gratitude is concerned – to see the smile on a mother's face when you hand back her child with a closed lip or palate." During an aid trip earlier this year Tony saw 36 patients and 16 had operations through the John Fawcett Foundation's Children's Corrective Surgery programme.

It is the challenge and change of scenery that has podiatric surgeon Andrew Van Essen travelling to Vietnam at least twice a year. "Aid work was not something I had a desire to do but once the opportunity arose it was certainly something I went with," says Andrew, who was coaxed by American colleagues on his first aid trip to the Philippines in 1995. Volunteer aid work gives Andrew a break away from the routine of everyday practice and being thrust from his comfort zone gives him perspective and balance. Since 1996, Andrew has volunteered with the Feet for Walking programme of the Australian College of Podiatric Surgeons and initiated the Clubfoot Project in Central Vietnam in 2004 to treat the congenital deformity that, left untreated, can lead to severe disability.

The opportunity for overseas aid fell into Andrew's lap, but it was something that veterinarian Ian Douglas went looking for. In 2003, frustrated by increasing commercial pressures on modern vet

practices, Ian sold his share of the Adelaide Veterinary Specialist and Referral Centre and set about establishing Vets Beyond Borders. "I felt the time had come to get back down to the nitty gritty again, and you can't get more nitty gritty than picking up a dog off the street with mange and fleas and disease." Five years later, Vets Beyond Borders has a register of more than 450 volunteer veterinary aides, doctors and nurses from across the world and has sterilised more than 15,000 Indian street dogs and vaccinated more than 26,000 animals against rabies. *Keeping optimism in the face of statistical failure* is Ian's mantra and he finds glimmers of positivity in his daily work, despite the lingering threats of disease. Whether it is a street dog that despite remarkable odds has pulled through surgery to be released healthy and happy back into the community or a local vet who learns a new skill, Ian is fuelled by results.

Optometrist Aimee Kong is constantly surprised by the resilience of the children she assesses in schools for the blind around the world. Travelling to Sri Lanka, Myanmar and, most recently, Cambodia, she is part of a team of six carrying out surveys for the World Health Organisation. Given furry koalas to pin on their lapels, the children delight in the attention and opportunity to make new friends. "They never want to say 'no', which can be really hard when we're trying to figure out which low vision aid is better ... they just want to please you."

Most aid workers agree that the children they assist have incredible optimism despite their situation. Regardless of the extent of their birth defects or scars, Tony Moore sees children in Bali who still smile, even if they cannot be healed. "Sometimes you have to almost play God and make a decision as to what you can and can't do ... sometimes you've just got to say, 'I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do', and they will smile at you and thank you very much and off they go."



This page: Top: Engineer Nick Harley helps Cambodian villagers construct ceramic water filters for access to clean drinking water; (above and right) Aimee Kong travels to schools for the blind around the world carrying out World Health Organisation surveys and assessments; (below right) Andrew Van Essen with a patient of the Clubfoot Project in Vietnam; (bottom) and Ian Douglas provides clinical training to local Indian vet nurses and surgeons in New Delhi. Opposite page: Tony Moore assesses a local Balinese boy for corrective surgery.

As Nick Harley drove through poverty stricken Cambodia in December 2006 on his first aid trip with Engineers Without Borders, he realised how unprepared he was. "You drive past these poor people who just have these terrible looking, shoddy houses on stilts without any decent toilets or water supply. No matter how much you try to prepare to see that, it is always shocking to see." Even stalwarts like Tony have the occasional overwhelming moment. "Until you get there, you don't quite realise the enormity of what is involved," he says.

All of these professionals feel they live a life of privilege, and with that privilege comes a feeling of responsibility to share their skills and knowledge with the less fortunate. Tony and Andrew, as fathers, believe it is an important lesson for the younger generation, and each has taken family members abroad with them to give a glimpse of a life less fortunate. "Our now 18-year-old Lucy was a bit confronted when I first brought her along, but we gave her a camera and soon enough she was taking reels of photos and really getting involved," says Tony. Andrew's daughter, Alexandra, joined him in Vietnam, also with a camera, for her Year 12 photography studies.

As much as aid workers and their families benefit from the experience of aid work, training local medical teams is the ultimate aim. Feet for Walking is teaching local surgeons to treat clubfoot, while Ian Douglas leads Project Vet-Train, a programme based in New Delhi providing clinical training in anesthesia and surgery. The project aims to be self sufficient in five years, as the first graduates return to teach. Aimee is joined by local optometrists and ophthalmologists on every trip, and Nick left his mark on Cambodia by compiling a handbook to assist both locals and future aid workers. "Aid work is a great opportunity to do a lot more than just go there, do some surgery and leave," Tony says.

