

Edinburgh optician inspired by Indian charity trip



Morningside optician Catriona Hastie has only just returned from India on a charity trip to help with an outreach programme to help those needing eye care, but she is already fundraising for the next time. She has described the recent journey as “awe-inspiring and emotional”.

The 23-year-old, who works at Specsavers in Morningside, went to the Indian city of Chennai earlier this year to help eyecare practitioners in district hospitals. The trip was organised by Unite for Sight, a charity which supports eye clinics worldwide.

The majority of Catriona’s travel was funded by the store, while kind-hearted customers, friends and family donated funds towards life-saving cataract surgery which was performed during Catriona’s mission.

The optometrist, who lives in Murrayfield, said: ‘My trip was amazing and I had a chance to see first-hand the huge differences between the eyecare we have here at home and the limited facilities available to those in Chennai.

‘A typical day involved three hours of observing cataract surgeries between 6am and 9am – the charity likes to have independent observers who can confirm the money is being put to its intended use.

‘Then I’d go out as part of the outreach programme which sometimes meant driving for three hours into the suburbs to do eye checks, setting up our equipment anywhere we could be accommodated, from disused dentists’ waiting rooms to school classrooms.

'The number of people who came out to see us was unbelievable and some had walked for half a day just to get to see us for two or three minutes. On one occasion the people were so grateful for our help that they crowded around us until we couldn't move, and were trying to thank us and touch us – it really was overwhelming and one of the most memorable moments.'

The conditions which Catriona came across most were cataracts (an opacity/haziness in the lens of the eye), diabetes-related eye problems and even a surprisingly high number of unusual 'eye trauma' conditions which had never been treated.







When cataracts begin to affect vision, surgery is often needed to replace the eye's lens – however most of the people Catriona met either did not have access to doctors who could perform the surgery, or were wary of getting help.

Catriona explained: 'At home cataract surgery is often regarded as relatively routine but this wasn't the case on my trip. For a start people just don't have the luxury of the type of eyecare that we take for granted.

'There were also huge cultural differences which really surprised me – I saw a lot of people who were convinced their deteriorating vision was some kind of divine punishment. The on-site ophthalmologist had to spend a lot of time convincing them that they could be helped and poor vision wasn't simply something they had to accept.

'I saw a lot of people who were only in their 40s or 50s and had cataracts that, without treatment, would ultimately render them blind and leave them struggling to work and provide for their families.

'When people were eventually treated their gratitude was unbelievable. People were bowing to the doctors and crying on the floor because they were so grateful which was extremely emotional.'

During her outreach clinics, some of which she set up and operated on her own, she would see as many as 100 people.

Catriona was shocked by living conditions in the slums which were polluted, over populated and badly affected by poverty.

She said: 'Elderly people were living in the streets with no pension and nobody to take care of them. I gave one man a pink beach towel that I'd planned to leave behind, because he seemed to like it, and he was just so happy. He had such little money that this was a huge gesture to him. Small things like that were incredibly humbling.'

Catriona reiterated her thanks to the Specsavers Morningside store which helped to cover her travel costs, and to Morningside customers and friends and family from Edinburgh and beyond who generously contributed to make the charity trip possible.

She is now continuing her fundraising with a view to doing another mission with the same charity in future, with her sights set on Honduras next time.