

Opinion

Volunteerism: Are You Giving Back?

Every year at the Academy meeting, I sit in awe as the recipients of the Outstanding Humanitarian Service Award are announced and their accomplishments are summarized. That they have contributed so much in resources of time and money, often enduring personal hardship, to “give back” to a world that enabled them to become ophthalmologists, is noble stuff, indeed. Yet they are not the exceptions among us, though they may be our paragons. Most of us give generously of our professional expertise. Some of us travel with ORBIS, SEE and other nongovernmental organizations that provide medical care to the needy. Almost all of us waive fees for patients in the office who need care but have no way to pay for it. These activities are all performed with no fanfare. We don’t seek publicity because our reward is in the doing, and the knowing we have done it.

Nearly 7,500 U.S. ophthalmologists volunteer for the EyeCare America public service programs of the Academy Foundation. This started with the Seniors EyeCare Program (formerly called the National Eye Care Project), followed by the Glaucoma, Diabetes and Children’s EyeCare Programs—and now one for macular degeneration is under development. These volunteers tell us they feel good about their public service, and their collective activity allows the Academy to publicize ophthalmology’s good deeds.

Having served more than 760,000 people, EyeCare America has been

praised in the press, and its success earned the father of the Academy’s public service efforts, B. Thomas Hutchinson, MD, the Presidential Volunteer Service Award from George W. Bush in 2005. But even more important, through public service we have garnered the support of state and national legislators—those folks whose respect we depend on for helping us oppose scope of practice expansion legislation and avoiding draconian reimbursement cuts. EyeCare America is proof to them that we care about much more than our own bottom lines.

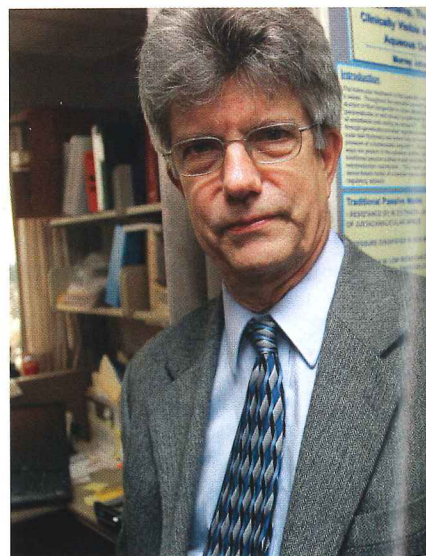
The Seniors EyeCare Program, which I serve as current chairman, is the longest running (20 years) and largest public service program in the history of American medicine. It has such a sterling reputation that we have attracted the long-term support of our partners, the Knights Templar Eye Foundation and, most recently, Alcon. The Glaucoma EyeCare Program receives support from Pfizer Ophthalmics. This support allows us to publicize the programs to those in need and defray costs of the helpline.

The program enjoys a unique waiver from the U.S. Inspector General, allowing our volunteers to offer no-out-of-pocket-cost eye care through waiver of copays and deductibles to a maximum of 15 qualified patients annually, if they are referred through the Seniors EyeCare Program.

But there are clouds on the horizon. As EyeCare America volunteer ophthalmologists retire, it shrinks our available

pool. Meanwhile, the elderly population continues to increase. And shamefully some institutions have refused to let their doctors participate because they do not allow any charges to be discounted or waived, and the doctors have no say in the matter. So if you are in active practice (and don’t have Scrooge as your Chief Financial Officer) and would like to volunteer for any of the EyeCare America programs, we’d like to welcome you aboard.¹ It’s good for your self-image, it’s good for the profession’s image, and it’s giving back big time. You’ll be glad you did.

¹ Call 1-877-887-6327, or visit www.eyecareamerica.org and click “How to Volunteer.”



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