

# Opinion

RUTH D. WILLIAMS, MD

## Volunteerism: Culture and Community

How can I serve on an AAO committee?” was the most common question I was asked while President of the Academy. Recently, Dale Fajardo, the AAO Vice President for Education, made a comment that rings true: “The excellence, energy, and relevance of the Academy derives from its culture of physician volunteerism.”

The Academy staff is known for their stellar skills and commitment in putting a strategic vision into action. But that vision originates with and is driven by physician volunteers: the 941 ophthalmologists who serve on 151 Academy committees and editorial boards. Many also work with subspecialty and state societies, the AMA, the ABO, or hospital committees, to name just a few activities. Countless ophthalmologists are also involved with humanitarian projects close to home and internationally.

Volunteerism is a core value of our profession, and we carefully, sometimes unconsciously, pass it along. R.V. Paul Chan, who has an extra title as Vice Chair for Global Ophthalmology at University of Illinois, got his start in ophthalmic volunteering when Jim Tsai asked him to develop a Global Ophthalmology Guide. Since then, Paul has worked with several supranational societies through his Leadership Development Project. He credits nearly a dozen mentors for their great support and advice on global health work.

Some of the most important volunteerism happens quietly in our own backyard. During her residency, Susan Anderson-Nelson started volunteering at Lawndale Community Health Center in an underserved neighborhood in Chicago. At the time, the only ophthalmologist came once a month from Texas. Susan explained, “I felt strongly that Chicago people should take care of Chicago people.” Now, 30 years later, she still volunteers every month in Lawndale.

Ann Warn, an EyeCare America volunteer, noted that “we always think of a mission trip as leaving the country, but there is plenty to do right in your own community and your own county.” EyeCare America, a terrific program of nearly 6,000 ophthalmologist volunteers who provide care for qualified seniors, lets you do “Mission Work From the Comfort of Your Own Office,” according to a catchy headline on the website. John Taylor, a cataract surgeon in Las Vegas, said, “Don’t hesitate to sign up for EyeCare America. The Acad-

emy makes it about the easiest way to bring your volunteer efforts to the public.”

Why do we cheerfully give of our time, expertise, and energy? Susan Anderson-Nelson believes that it is important to model “giving back” to her children and now to her granddaughter. She also loves the work and finds the wide variety of pathology she encounters challenging. Natasha Hertz began serving on the YO Info Editorial Board about a year after fellowship, wanting to “stay connected to the big picture.” She also mentioned the camaraderie and inspiring friendships she has experienced through working with her peers. Paul Chan thinks that ophthalmologists volunteer for the same reasons that led many of us to become doctors in the first place: to make a positive difference in the quality of life for others.

“We are very lucky to do the work of preserving vision, and it is a privilege to share that with others.” He added, “I’ve found a passion in global ophthalmology—and I’m having a lot of fun.”

Practicing ophthalmology is joyful because there is intrinsic value to our work. Our culture of volunteerism flows naturally from that, whether we are working in neighborhood clinics, providing care in another country, developing a program for a subspecialty meeting, or editing PPPs.

One of my favorite authors, the poet-farmer Wendell Berry, wrote, “A viable community is made up of neighbors who cherish and protect what they have in common.”<sup>1</sup> In becoming volunteers, we become something bigger than ourselves—a fellowship that helps protect our profession by giving back to it. And, in turn, these experiences enrich us with learning, friendship, and even fun.



**Ruth D. Williams, MD**  
Chief Medical Editor, EyeNet

1 Berry W. *Citizenship Papers*. Counterpoint Press, 2003, p. 117.