The background of the entire page is a photograph of the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, silhouetted against a bright, golden sunset sky. The sun is positioned directly behind the central dome of the mausoleum, creating a strong backlight effect. The sky is filled with horizontal streaks of light, and the water of the Yamuna River in the foreground reflects the warm colors of the sunset. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Witness

an online magazine

Blindness In India

Text & Photographs

by

Richard Falco

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India has the highest population of blind people in the world. Approximately one out of every four individuals who are blind, live in India. The figure of those afflicted approaches ten million. About 6.5 million suffer from cataracts, with one million new cases each year.

To confront this problem the Indian government has created mobile eye care centers known as Cataract Camps. The scope of the camp's activities has developed rapidly over the last twenty years. In addition to surgery and rehabilitation, they also prescribe and distribute eyeglasses; as well as, placing special emphasis on preventive eye care, education, and the importance of good nutrition. The camps are set up at locations where the need has been established. They stay at each location for 7-10 days. All of this is done for free.



Once the word goes out, people gather in the village to see the doctors. A good number have walked twenty or more kilometers. For some, this is the first time they have ever been examined. The health care team consists of 5-7 doctors, nurses & support staff. Despite their strides forward and honorable intentions, the on-site facilities remain quite crude.



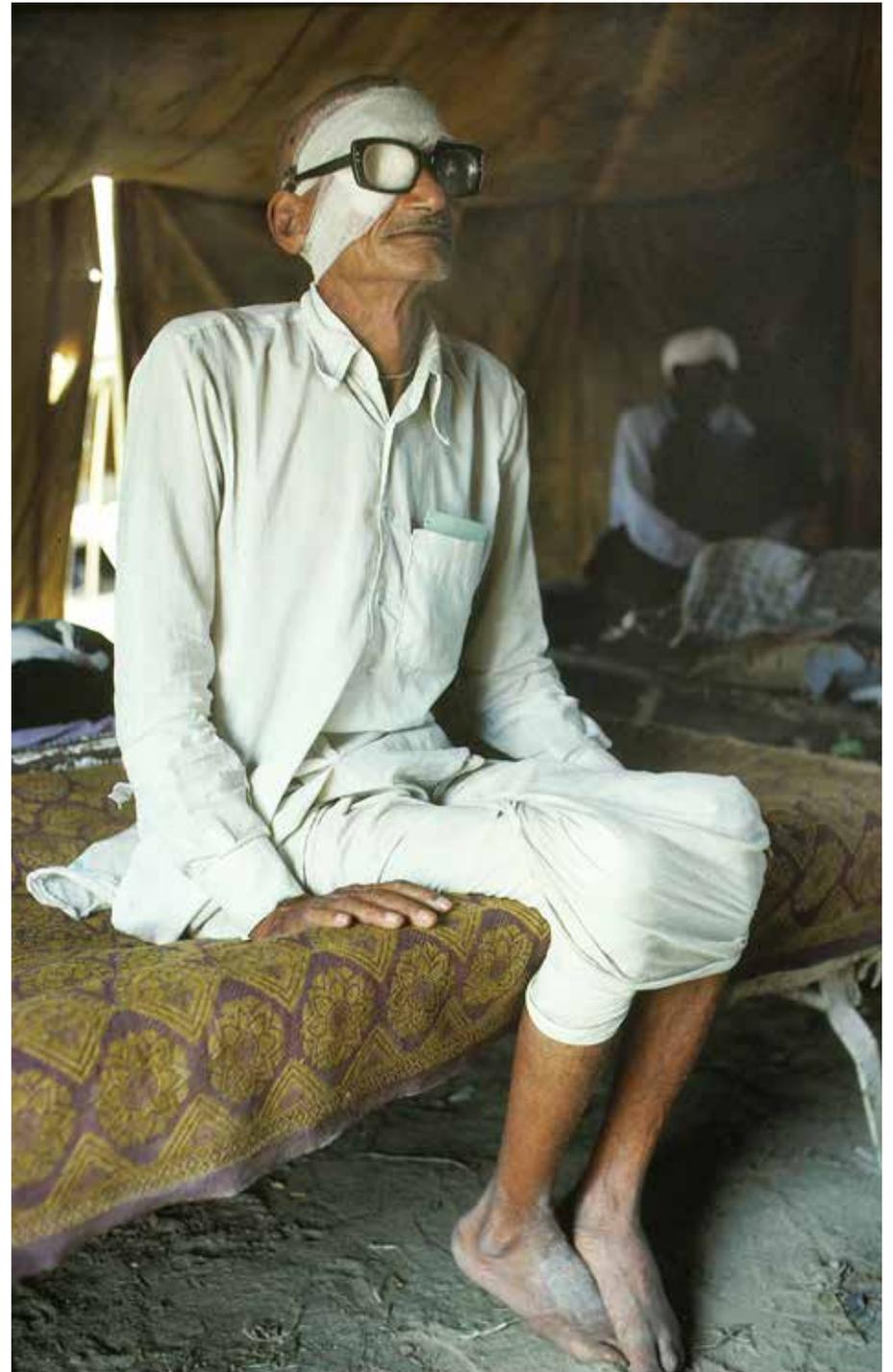


The doctors will conduct 50 to 250 cataract operations at each location. The reason so much energy is expended on the camps is that cataracts can be cured and blindness prevented. While Indian doctors perform about 1.2 million cataract operations a year, the growing need still outpaces their efforts.

This cataract operation was done in the village of Sultanpur. Working under the light of an overhead bulb, the surgeons operated in extremely primitive conditions. Though the operations are fairly simple, the doctors worry most about post-operative infection.



After surgery, the patients are brought to recovery areas that have been set up in tents. They will remain here until they are stable enough to be sent home.





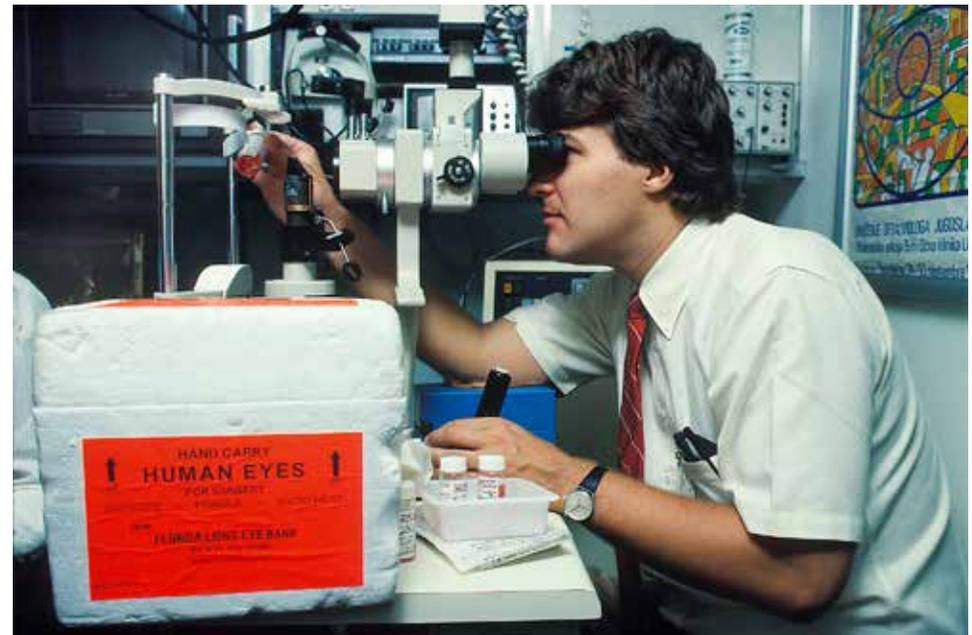
PROJECT ORBIS

One organization that is working to help resolve the problems of blindness worldwide is Project Orbis. Orbis is an international group of doctors, nurses, technicians & other professionals who travel the globe working to combat this situation. They have converted a jetliner into a flying teaching hospital. The group schedules two-week visits to countries in the developing world teaching the newest advances in surgery, treatment, prevention, and technology. Orbis has circled the globe many times.

Before their arrival in the designated country, Orbis has already established a reputation for expertise. The visited country's doctors, nurses, government officials, and others, who will be participating in the program, eagerly await the training and collaboration. The ultimate goal for Orbis is education. Teaching and sharing the knowledge they have is paramount. Orbis prides itself on introducing the newest surgical techniques, healthcare methods and information, equipment, and technology.



An Orbis staff member discusses the operation with an Indian doctor there to learn. As many as 25-40 Indian staff members will participate in the training.





People learning that Orbis will be conducting eye operations line up at a local hospital and wait for the chance to be selected as one of the people who will be treated. Some of these individuals have been waiting for days.

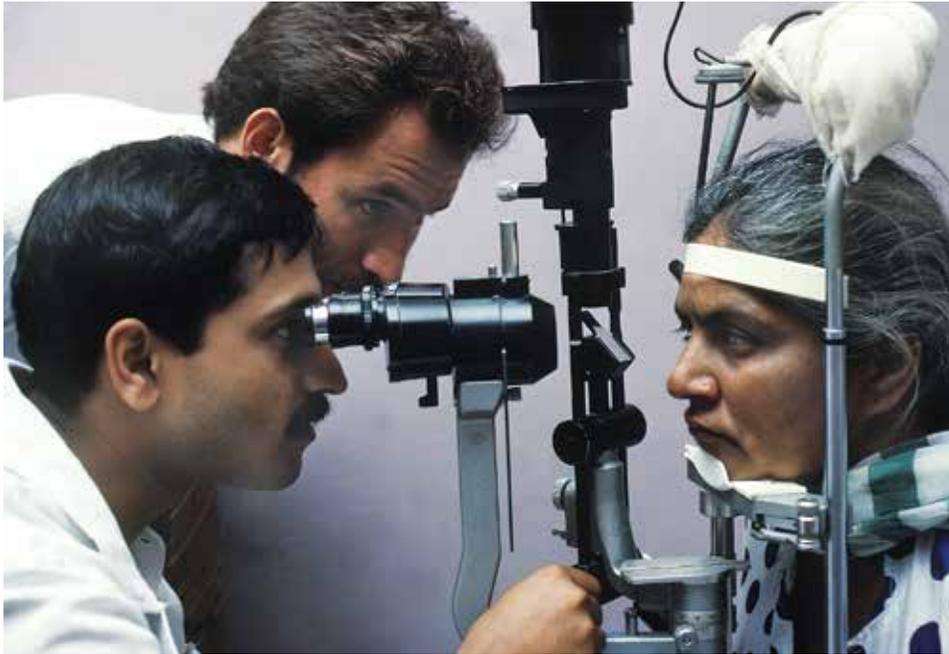
Orbis knows it cannot help everyone, but if it can teach the doctors and nurses the skills and knowledge they have brought with them, these professionals can carry on the work when Orbis is gone.



A child waits in a hospital ward in New Delhi hoping to be seen by an Orbis doctor. Only a few individuals will be chosen for an operation. Unfortunately, many will be turned away. The decision as to who gets an operation is determined by Orbis and the visited country's doctors. The selection is not necessarily made by a patient's need. Often the patients are chosen by who will best illustrate the techniques and procedures that most need to be learned.



Doctors from Orbis examine a child along with their colleagues from India.



Patients are prepared for their operation on the plane.

During the entire period of working together, surgeons teach surgeons, doctors teach doctors, nurses teach nurses, and so on down the line, so that everyone contributes their skills to their counterparts.

Once the selection process is completed at the hospital, the chosen patients will be brought out to Orbis's plane where the operations will take place. The operation phase will last a week or so. In that time, they will do 3-8 operations a day. This will be followed by post-operative care back at the hospital.

All operations are done on the plane. The plane is divided into three sections. The first contains the examination room, classroom, and television studio. The second section holds the operating theater and the third is the recovery area.





The well-equipped operating room on the plane becomes the center of the programs efforts.



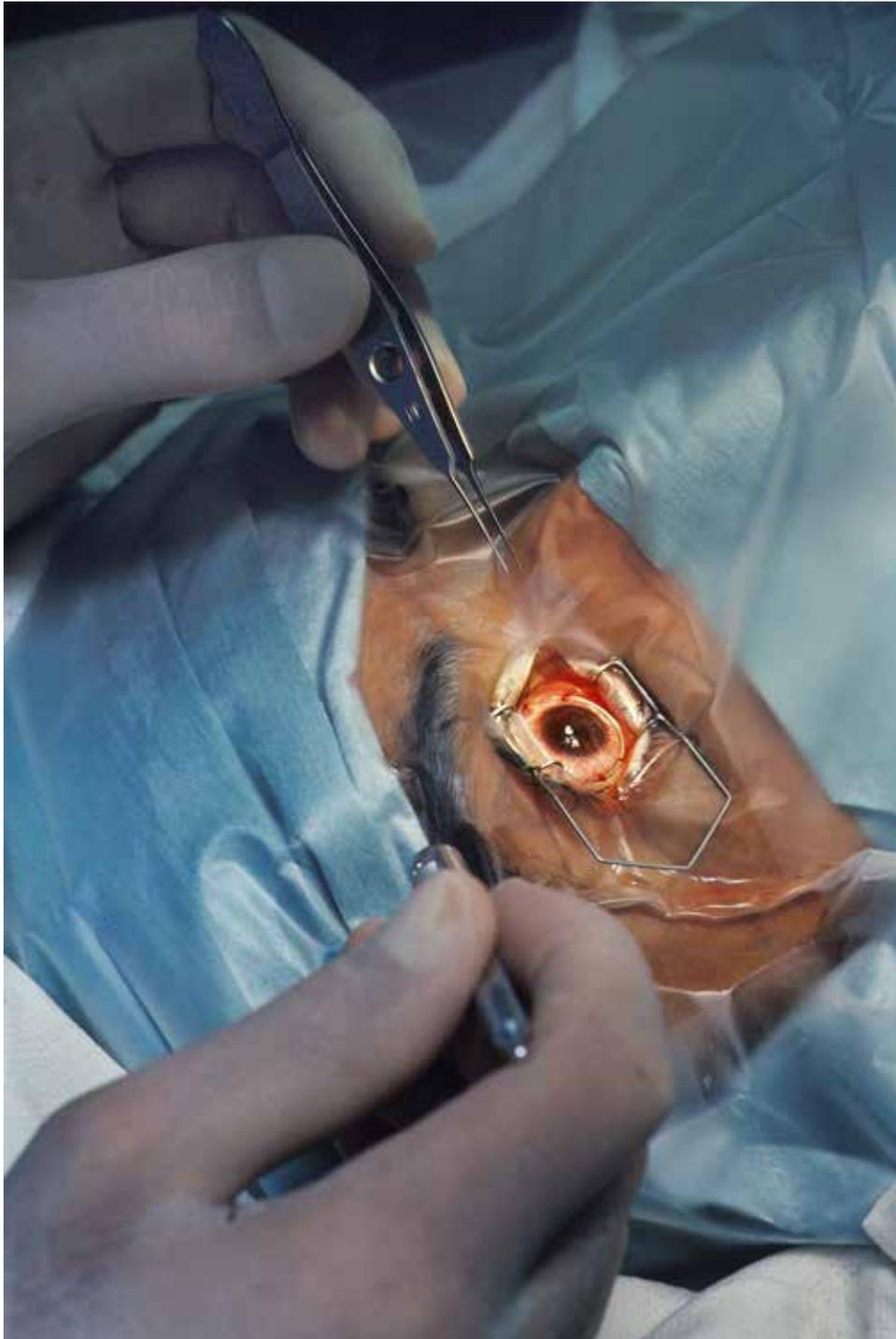
Orbis has developed an excellent teaching system. The plane is equipped with its own television studio. Almost all of the operations are microsurgery. What Orbis has done to facilitate the learning process is to install cameras inside the microscope used by the doctors. In this way, the observers see exactly what the surgeon sees. The doctors have microphones under their masks so that they can explain the procedures, as well as, answer questions during the operation. The studio also makes tapes of all the activities the teams are involved in. These tapes, plus other material, are then given to the attending doctors, nurses and technicians visited for future review and/or study.



A TV engineer watches the monitors of an ongoing operation. Multiple angles and close-ups of the operation can be seen on different screens simultaneously. These images are watched by the Indian staff member trying to learn the new procedures.

On the right, the lead surgeon operates on his patient, while explaining the procedure to the watching physicians and other observers seated in the forward area of the plane.



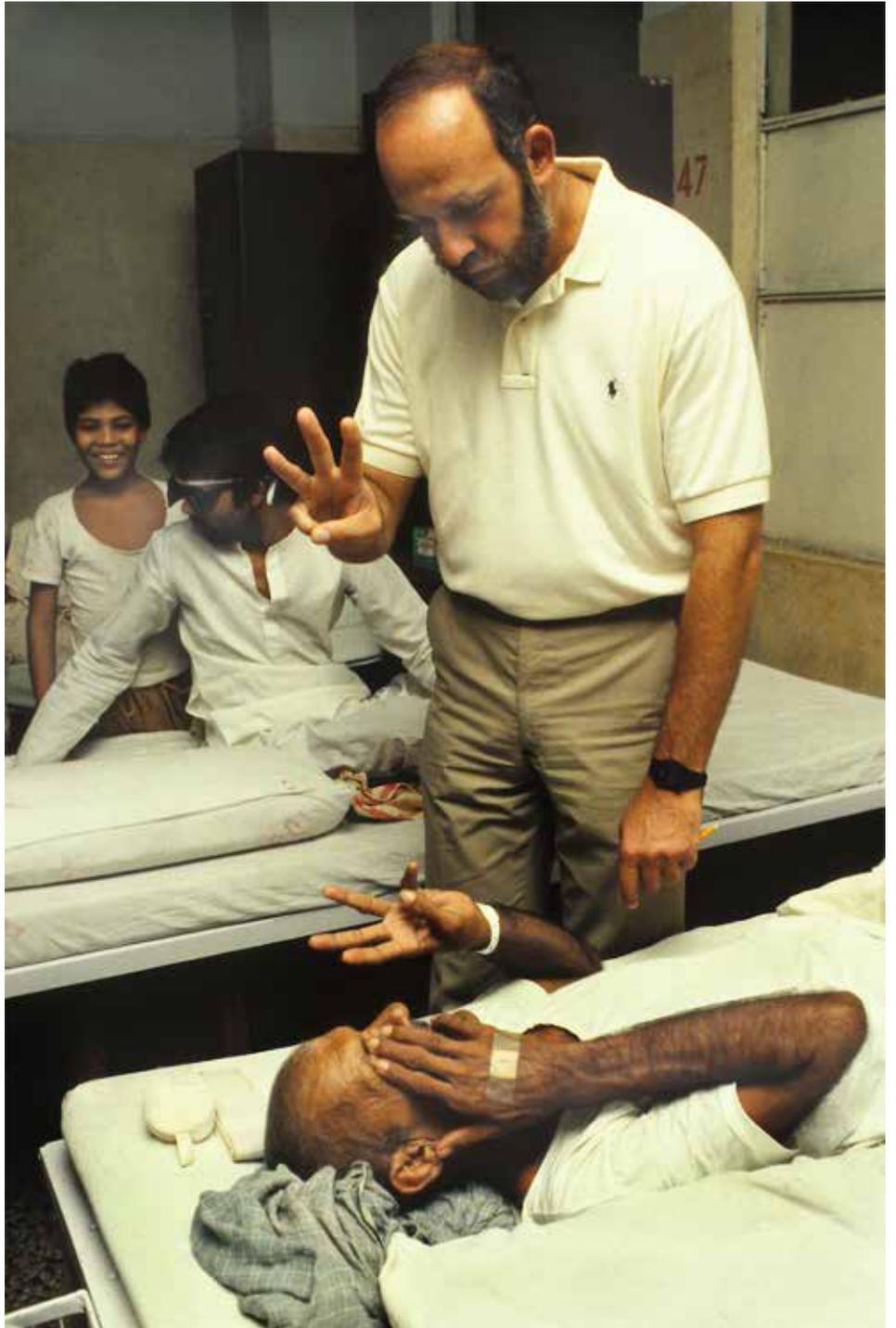


After an operation, the patient is moved to the recovery area at the back of the plane. They are kept here until they are stable and have regained consciousness. When a patient is strong enough to be moved, they are transferred back to the local hospital for all post-operative care. The doctors will monitor the patient's recovery at the hospital.





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This patient had been blind for several years. Orbis doctors restored his sight. As his recovery continued to progress, he was often found praying.

This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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