

The volunteer technician

When Sinead Cosgrave arrived in Mongu in Zambia's Western Province to help install glazing equipment for a new Vision Centre, she faced a major hurdle: no electricity. Not a problem she encounters as lab manager at Specsavers in Galway, on the west coast of Ireland.

But for Cosgrave and her fellow Vision Aid Overseas volunteers the solution was simple. The team ran a 300m extension lead from the main building of the Lewanika General Hospital to the centre's new premises and the lab was soon up and running.

Vision Centres like Mongu allow patients to have a walk-in eye test, buy an affordable pair of glasses and be referred for specialist care if needed. To operate effectively, the centres must have trained personnel and an optical laboratory where glasses can be glazed, as well as facilities for eye examinations.

Cosgrave was one of a small group of volunteers who first set up the Mongu Vision Centre along with the charity's in-country personnel. Led by optometrist Noel Meehan, her boss back home in Galway, the team also trained local staff in workshop skills, refraction and dispensing.

Team of one

The project was the second Cosgrave had joined in Zambia since first volunteering three years ago. She has also paid two visits to Hawassa in Ethiopia, first under the leadership of programme director Michele de Vaal and most recently on her own.

'When you arrive at a new centre you may be faced with just a square room and a couple of tables. You unpack all the equipment and assemble it then just start teaching. That's the easy part – all the students want is knowledge and they're very willing to learn,' she says.

Teaching is in small groups of three or four students to one technician and is very practical. 'It's nearly all hands-on experience and I don't mess around. The first thing they do is cut a lens. Hopefully they do it wrong then they can learn from their mistakes.'

Planning for each project begins well in advance. 'Before we go out we do a lot of begging for out-of-range lenses and small items of equipment.

Vision Aid Overseas is offering optical technicians the chance to use their skills to help set up its Vision Centres overseas.

Alison Ewbank talks to one volunteer to find out what's involved



Siobhan Cosgrave and local technician Brighton working at the University Teaching Hospital in the Zambian capital Lusaka

But the range of frames available in Vision Centres is really very good – in fact I bought a pair for myself when I was in Ethiopia!

From kitchen to lab

So how did Cosgrave come to volunteer for Vision Aid Overseas and how has she found the experience?

Having started her working life as a chef, she spent eight years in manufacturing at Essilor's Limerick plant before joining Specsavers in 2003. When practice director Meehan discovered Cosgrave had travelled in Africa for a year between jobs, he suggested she join him in volunteering for Vision Aid Overseas.

To fund her first trip to Zambia she ran the Manchester marathon and has since raised money for the charity through quiz nights and an annual Christmas Day swim. 'I have an amazing group of friends, family and partner,' she says. Work has also been supportive: 'Noel pays my wages while I'm away and I don't have to take it out of my holidays.'

On a typical project volunteers will spend two weeks away with a weekend break in the middle. All make a voluntary donation to support the charity's work and for technicians

the minimum amount is £300. This specially reduced contribution also applies to practitioners with technical and glazing skills.

Volunteers first attend a training weekend to learn what they can expect to experience, from the technical challenges involved to how to stay healthy. Sessions are tailored to the skills and knowledge that technicians would need on a project, such as how to use the machinery at Vision Centres which is often quite different to that used in optical practices.

Once assigned to a specific project, volunteers are normally invited to the charity's headquarters in Crawley, West Sussex, for further training by Vision Centre supply manager Giulio Venturi, himself a technician.

Highly recommended

So far 24 technicians have volunteered and another 10-15 have expressed interest but still more are needed. 'I highly recommend any technician or DO with technical experience to take part,' says Cosgrave. 'It's well within their capabilities.'

Volunteering is rewarding from a personal point of view too. 'There's no better feeling in the world than giving to someone who needs it badly. It's hard work but it hits you right in your soul. When you come back you're tired and you're smelly but you've had such a good time. I'm still in contact with most of the students I've taught and I've made good friends.'

For all the benefits, Cosgrave admits the work can sometimes be frustrating and tempers can become frayed. But she describes herself as a 'very determined' person who always finishes what she starts out to do. 'Sometimes things run more slowly than you'd like and you have to roar. In fact my colleagues say I run the lab like Gordon Ramsay runs his kitchen!'

● Visit www.visionaidoverseas.org or call Fiona Lamont on 01239 535016 for more information on volunteering. The next Volunteer Development Day is scheduled for March 23-24 2014