

Vision guardians

Becoming a trustee of Vision Aid Overseas can open up new opportunities for skill-sharing abroad and changing people's lives in the developing world. *Optician* talks to David Parkins about how his skills have made a difference



Tell us a bit more about Vision Aid Overseas (VAO)

VAO is an inspirational organisation that aims to transform access to eye care to people in developing countries. It consists of a (relatively) small number of people making a huge difference and UK optical professionals using their skills to change lives in our partner countries Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia. The charity has

a big job on its hands; it is estimated that 670 million people (10 per cent of the world's population) are disabled simply because they do not have glasses. But VAO is contributing to the international effort to make a difference to people's lives and is determined to do a lot more.

Who volunteers with VAO?

The organisation has an extraordinarily diverse membership and support network. We work with students, newly qualified dispensing opticians, optometrists, optical technicians and experienced volunteers. Many of them work abroad for us and many more support us in the UK through raising awareness and fundraising. I am always impressed by their commitment and I think it's the people that make the charity so different from other organisations. Since joining VAO, I've made many new friends, including meeting my wife on a volunteer programme.

How did you first get involved with the charity?

I started off as a volunteer. When I went to Sierra Leone in 1993, I was instantly caught up in the work of VAO and it changed the way I saw the world of optics. Firstly, it is difficult to believe that there are so many people who are disadvantaged because they don't have glasses. I'm a spectacle

wearer myself and never once have I thought of myself as having a disability. In Sierra Leone, children did not progress at school and parents were prevented from working because they didn't have glasses. I am constantly amazed at the difference we can make as a profession in these countries.

What is VAO looking for in a trustee?

Firstly, you will be an ambassador for the charity and will need to communicate the work of VAO to a large audience of people, so being passionate about our work is crucial. Secondly, you need to be a team player because you work closely with the other trustees. As an optical professional, I act as an adviser on clinical related matters.

What would you say to anyone interested in applying to be a trustee?

VAO is an extraordinary and dynamic organisation with tremendous opportunities for any trustees who work for it. You will work with the most inspiring people and a great board team. You will change people's lives and have the opportunity to travel to our partner countries and witness first-hand the difference we make to the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. ●

● Contact VAO on 01293 535016

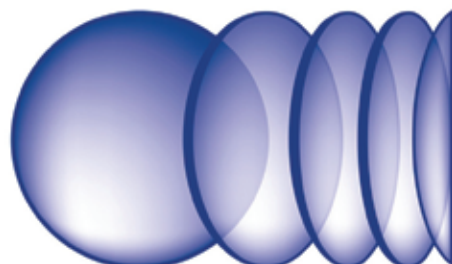


David Parkins with patient in Sierra Leone

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