

# Ophthalmology community rallies to provide disaster relief efforts in Nepal

by Lauren Lipuma EyeWorld Staff Writer



Tilganga staff examine patients at a medical camp organized in response to the April 25 earthquake.

Source: Suman Thapa, MD, PhD

## Major ophthalmic societies are helping local organizations provide aid and eyecare services

**H**alfway across the world, in the tiny mountainous country of Nepal, the ophthalmology community has banded together to provide much-needed support and disaster relief for local communities that have been devastated by 2 recent earthquakes.

A 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck on April 25, killing more than 8,000 and displacing more than 450,000 individuals. The quake triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest, killing 19. On May 12, a 7.3-magnitude aftershock occurred close to the capital of Kathmandu, hindering relief efforts that were already underway and injuring 2,500 more people. It is the deadliest nat-

ural disaster to hit Nepal since 1934 and the deadliest disaster to ever have occurred on Mount Everest.

Rescue and relief efforts began almost immediately after the first quake, with international aid organizations such as Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross working to evacuate and treat victims. In addition, many local organizations working in Nepal stepped up to provide disaster relief for the thousands of injured and displaced people, including the Himalayan Cataract Project (HCP).

The HCP has been providing quality eyecare to rural areas of Nepal for more than 20 years. Established in 1994 by **Sanduk Ruit, MD**, and **Geoffrey Tabin, MD**, the HCP is based at Tilganga Eye Centre in Kathmandu, the first outpatient cataract surgery facility in the Himalayan region.

"Many ophthalmologists know of the work of Dr. Ruit and Dr. Tabin in not only eradicating cataract

blindness in Nepal, but in exporting their groundbreaking model of cost-effective, high-volume cataract surgery to other developing countries," said **David F. Chang, MD**, the ASCRS Foundation's co-chair of international initiatives. "Tilganga has become a key model and teaching center of excellence for self-sustaining eyecare delivery in the developing world."

After the earthquake, Tilganga staff, including Dr. Ruit, worked around the clock to treat injured patients and provide needed food, water, and medicine to the victims, according to the HCP website. Tilganga did sustain some damage during the quakes, but none of the staff were injured, although many lost their homes.

Most of the communities hit by the quake are remote and geographically difficult to access, so Tilganga's team of ophthalmologists and staff immediately organized their own relief efforts to reach the rural villag-

es that larger international agencies would not be familiar with. Tilganga's next phase will be to provide temporary shelter for those who have lost their homes to prepare for the upcoming monsoon season.

Under Dr. Ruit's leadership, the ASCRS Foundation has maintained a close relationship with HCP and the Tilganga Eye Centre. After communicating with Dr. Ruit and other Tilganga ophthalmologists, the ASCRS Foundation appealed to the ASCRS membership to support Tilganga's on-the-ground relief efforts.

"Right now, the priority is providing food and the most basic life support," Dr. Chang said. "I think that foreign aid is not only necessary for their survival, but also provides moral support to the Nepalese people—to know that the global community cares and shares their pain and sorrow."

ASCRS members can donate to HCP's efforts through the HCP website, [www.cureblindness.org](http://www.cureblindness.org). As added support, the ASCRS Foundation board will match all member donations up to \$50,000.

"Based on our knowledge of the capabilities of Dr. Ruit and the Tilganga organization, ASCRS members wishing to donate can be confident that 100% of their funds will be used in the most efficient and well-organized way," Dr. Chang said.

HCP will continue their mission of providing humanitarian eyecare in Africa and Southeast Asia despite this devastating tragedy.

"To see a devastating catastrophe befall this poor, hard-working, and tranquil society is gut-wrenching," Dr. Chang said. "So far, less than 15% of the humanitarian aid sought by the U.N. has been raised, and I hope that all of us in the international community can pitch in to help." **EW**

*Editors' note: Dr. Chang has no financial interests related to his comments.*

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