

# Ophthalmologist performs sight-saving surgeries in Congo

During 10-day trip, about 107 cataract surgeries were done

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By Jan Biles

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LAWRENCE — When it comes to humanitarian work, Lawrence ophthalmologist Scott Hickman points to the Sermon on the Mount as his inspiration. The biblical sermon, in part, talks about caring for the less fortunate.

On July 10, Hickman returned from a 10-day trip to Kinshasa, a city in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he and Helena Ndume, an eye surgeon in Namibia, headed a team of medical professionals who screened patients with eye problems, distributed glasses and performed cataract-removal surgery successfully on 107 people who were blind or partially blind.

“It’s not fun, it’s expensive to leave my practice and it’s a lot of work, but it makes me feel good,” he said.

Hickman and Ndume, the 2015 United Nations Nelson Mandela Prize recipient, were volunteering with Surgical Eye Expeditions International, a California-based vision care nonprofit organization that has teamed up with the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation to start a sustainable eye care program in Kinshasa.

The foundation — established by Dikembe Mutombo, the eight-time NBA All-Star who played for the Houston Rockets and Denver Nuggets — built a hospital outside of Kinshasa in 2007. The hospital, where the SEE International team was working, is named the Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital after his mother.

In addition to seeing patients, Hickman and Ndume were teaching about a dozen Congolese doctors, nurses and technicians how to perform cataract surgery.

“The first day we screened patients, and then every other day we did surgeries,” Hickman said, explaining the first day of surgery was difficult because the operating room was disorganized and equipment wasn’t working properly. “The first day was hard, and we did only three surgeries. At the end, we did 31 (a day). They learned very quickly.”

The team saw patients with severe cataracts ranging in age from 4 years to 80 years, he said. Some patients traveled a day to seek treatment.

“About 39 million people (in the world) are blind. One-third of them have cataracts,” he said, adding the 15-minute cataract-removal surgery the team performed in the Kinshasa hospital costs from \$50 to \$100.

Recovery time for the surgery is about a month, with patients receiving follow-up examinations at one-week and one-month intervals.

Hickman, a Lawrence native, completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Kansas; his medical degree at the University of Hawaii; an internship in internal medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine at New York City-Montefiore Medical Center; and a residency in ophthalmology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

He returned to Lawrence in 2008 to join the staff at Lawrence Eye Care Associates, where he now serves as executive vice president.

Hickman’s trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo wasn’t his first humanitarian trip overseas.

When he was in his 20s, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer. While at UMKC, he traveled to

Haiti twice with the Northwest Haiti Christian Medical Mission. He also volunteered for two other SEE International trips: Ghana, where the team did about 40 eyelid, cataract and other surgeries a week, and Calcutta, India, where they completed about 55 cataract surgeries a week. He is planning another SEE International trip to Calcutta next spring.

“Congo was the most challenging trip by far, but it also was the most satisfying,” he said.

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