

A Mini-Mission to India

A year teaching eye surgery





by Dr. George F. Hilton
as told to Mark Brown



“Would you like to spend a year in India teaching doctors what you know about retinal surgery?” the voice on the phone asked Dr. George F. Hilton. “Of course, we would like your wife to go with you.”

That voice was from the office of Latter Day Saint Charities, formerly called the Humanitarian Services of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Soon there after the Hiltons received their mission call letter from President Howard W. Hunter.

There was a great need in hospitals all over the country of India for someone to teach up to date eye surgery skills—particularly of the retina and vitreous.

“We felt in our hearts that it was the right thing,” said Dr. Hilton, who specializes in retinal surgery and is Co-director of the Retina Service at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. It was to be the third mission for Doctor and his wife, Sister Hilton, who is an ophthalmology technician. The Hiltons previously served together in Tahiti where Brother Hilton was called to be mission president and where he had served a mission as a young man. Brother and Sister Hilton also have served a short term humanitarian mission in Bulgaria.

training of small groups of the faculty in current methods of diagnosis and treatment.”

Sister Hilton also played a vital role in teaching the Indian physicians. She prepared a patient information booklet, a manual for ophthalmic medical technicians, did a research project on intraocular pressure, wrote the history of C.M.C.-Ludhiana Department of Ophthalmology, and prepared an index for a new anatomical-pathological classification of ophthalmology. She was asked to teach the ophthalmic technicians as well as teaching perimetry to the ophthalmology residents.

In general, India was found to be about 15 years behind the United States in their treatment and care of the eyes. “Even though they are behind us, they are very bright and work very hard,” Dr. Hilton said. “They are professionals that work six days per week. And so did we.”

The major focus of the mission was to do clinical teaching. Dr. Hilton taught the technique of ocular ultrasonography, laser surgery of the retina by using the triple-observer biomicroscope, surgical management of retinal detachment, and microsurgery of the retina and vitreous by using the triple-observer microscope along with a mini video camera and monitor. More than 30 surgical supply

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One year before the mission, Dr. Hilton made a two-week tour of several major eye hospitals in India. From this survey, he recommended working with five teaching hospitals: The L.V. Prasad Eye Institute (Hyderabad); The Aravind Eye Hospital (Madurai); The Minto Ophthalmic Hospital (Bangalore); The Christian Medical College (Ludhiana) and The Christian Medical College (Vellore). As has become quite evident in church related and other programs, it was felt that more good could be accomplished by teaching, in this case the Indian professors of ophthalmology, rather than doing a high volume of direct patient care.

“The mission was for the prevention and curing of blindness by the training of the faculty at each of the five medical school hospitals in state-of-the-art surgery of the retina and vitreous. This was accomplished in the lecture hall (over 300 lectures), the operating room (over 500 operations), the ultrasonography laboratory, the laser room, clinics and wards,” Dr. Hilton said. “There was some large group teaching, but the major focus was the

companies kindly donated instruments and supplies that facilitated the Hiltons’ teaching.

In addition to the work done in operating rooms and other clinics, the Hiltons were able to lecture at ophthalmology symposia, conferences, and conventions. They accepted 15 invitations to lecture, averaging five lectures per meeting in several prominent Indian cities such as Bombay, Delhi and Madras.

Although the Hiltons were instructed to do no proselyting, they were able to communicate gospel principles by the way they lived which prompted many questions. “The Indian people tend to be very religious,” Dr. Hilton said. “About 80 percent of them are Hindus. Because of this, they were very open to our beliefs. They have a belief in God and are a kind, faithful people.” The Hiltons were able to distribute dozens of copies of the Book of Mormon during their period of service.

Work wasn’t all related to the medical field. They were invited to present a workshop for the All-India LDS Youth Conference. They were also invited to address the

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All-India Church Education System Conference and to make health-related presentations at the mission couples conference.

Although the Hiltons and the other couples there (teaching audiology, dentistry, occupational training and recreational programs) didn't proselyte, they were able to provide great help to regular proselyting missionaries, some from India as well as from abroad, who are teaching the gospel and working with almost 2,000 members in the country.

While the elders proselyted, the Hiltons worked 10-hour days, often doing some evening work. Missionary preparation days were few and far between. "We worked every day but Sunday, just like they do. Sunday is their day off — not necessarily because of religion — but it was our religious day off," Dr. Hilton said. They were able to visit the grand Taj Mahal on one of their rare P-days.

The Hiltons walked away from this land rich in heritage and tradition with a feeling that they had accomplished their goals and that they were well received. "The best part was the immediate emotional gratitude we received from all those we worked with," Dr. Hilton said. "It's pretty tough for many of them to be Latter-day Saints. We learned patience and serenity despite adversity from these lovely people.

"A call to serve commands our attention, but we don't need to wait to be called. Members of the Church need to step forward — there is work to be done."

George F. Hilton, M.D., is co-director of the Retina Service at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine.