

President's Insights September 2021

This will be my last President's Insights as my two-year term as VOSH/International President is coming to an end. Two years is about right. It is enough time to make a difference and still maintain a high level of energy and concentration.

Obviously, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic was the biggest challenge. Thankfully, our Board of Directors and Executive Committee were in agreement on the strategies to manage risk in this evolving situation. We all agreed that protecting lives and well-being must be the top priority, especially with a novel coronavirus with a significant rate of serious illness and death. To my knowledge, neither VOSH/International nor any of our chapters have been implicated in spreading this coronavirus. This was due, in part, to halting clinics and travel in March 2020 while we assessed the situation, and then developed and shared our recommendations for holding safe clinics when we could hold clinics. Recently we consulted with chapters on this matter. We stuck to the science and evidence available looking at the situation not only in the US but in all countries where we work. I am so proud of our chapters and volunteers for being patient and careful.

The other challenge was how to support the struggling Haiti School of Optometry more effectively. Our involvement in Haiti is decades long with VOSH/International having played a significant role in the establishment of the school of optometry there, as a member of a partnership agreement with other organizations. Following a request to take responsibility for managing this project we spent a significant part of 2020 preparing for that likelihood. Then, for reasons outside our control, the decision was abruptly withdrawn. It was confusing and heartbreaking. However, the preparations we made showed us that we could help our Haitian colleagues more directly through what we do best: our clinics, hands-on clinical skills training and our extensive network of experts. While challenges remain, I believe that through our Haiti project we are on the right track in supporting the Haiti Optometry School, the administration and students there.

There have also been a few that have expressed concerns that VOSH/International is becoming too academic, too education-oriented. They want to concentrate solely on clinics. And to that I say, absolutely, our clinics are our strength. Every VOSH volunteer is grounded in service and practical skills including logistics, communication, and leadership and significant optometric expertise. While some nonprofits drift into intellectual endeavors, VOSH has remained grounded in eye care delivery including specialized areas such contact lenses, low vision, binocular vision, and clinical research. VOSH has an incredible wealth of dedicated, well-educated volunteers ready to share their knowledge and skills for the benefit of patients across the world.

The key is to include local optometry students and optometrists dedicated to high-quality eye care in both our domestic and international clinics. I am convinced that VOSH volunteers have a great appetite for learning and sharing knowledge. We must take the time to teach optometric skills such as retinoscopy and case analysis. We must discuss the evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment options and learn from the patients coming through our clinics. This might mean easing off on the push for ever increasing volumes. Seeing 2000 or even

5000 patients in a week is admirable. But what is really needed in the countries we serve is well-educated, credentialed optometrists in each town and city providing eye care week in and week out throughout the year. And every step we take toward this type of sustainable growth is a step in the right direction.

Another important aspect of what we do, whenever possible, is to collaborate with our colleagues in ophthalmology. After all, along with uncorrected refractive error, untreated cataracts are one of the most common causes of preventable blindness and visual impairment. When we leave a village or neighborhood, if available, an ophthalmologist will most likely be continuing treatment for glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, or another common eye disease. This is a natural partnership as we all work shoulder to shoulder to prevent and treat blindness and visual impairment.

Thank you all, all volunteers and staff for your continuing work in VOSH/International. I am confident we are on the right track with our strategic plan. I am excited to continue my service in the role of past-president, as we follow the lead of our new president, Dr. Michael Ciszek. I welcome his new energy to propel VOSH/International forward into a bright future.

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