

AN EYE FOR AN EYE



Book an appointment with Dr Claudine Pang's new mobile eye clinic, and you fund free eye care for the underprivileged.

BY LAUREN TAN

Last year, ophthalmologist Dr Claudine Pang and her team travelled to rural Phnom Penh, where they provided free eye care to some 1,000 villagers. The most common eye problems: cataract, pterygium, allergic conjunctivitis and presbyopia. By screening for ailments and dispensing eye drops and prescription glasses, many of the resident farmers, seamstresses and school teachers were able to return to work with improved vision.

To ensure the sustainability of such medical missions and to widen community efforts, the cataract and retinal specialist — she was the first female to receive the William H. Ross Surgical Vitreoretinal Fellowship at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada — and founder of Asia Retina Eye Surgery Centre recently added a social enterprise to her extensive CV.

Named Eye Quotient, the eye care consultancy operates as a mobile clinic, bringing a team of optometrists to clients' organisations. By doing



Dr Claudine Pang

so, it seeks to make eye screenings and spectacle prescription for their staff as hassle-free as a 15-minute coffee break. Staff receive good eye care, companies experience better productivity. More importantly, revenue generated by the mobile clinic allows Dr Pang and the Eye Quotient team to extend the same quality eye care services to the underprivileged, for free.

The good doctor tells us about eye health intelligence.

Do Singaporeans take our eye health for granted?

Definitely. We spend an average of 13 hours per day on digital devices; 70 percent of computer users have digital eye strain without knowing it and 40 percent of Singaporeans over age 40 have visual impairment in at least one eye! Yet, few know that they should get their eyes checked once a year. Many eye problems can exist without symptoms, for example, glaucoma, macular degeneration and retinal tears. And it's true that early treatment can prevent irreversible vision loss.



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Why did you decide to provide primary eye care through Eye Quotient?

I've seen so many patients with undetected eye problems who, unfortunately, see me only when it's too late to reverse the visual damage. How I wished they had sought good treatment earlier. As the saying goes, "Prevention is better than cure". To raise awareness of the need for regular eye checks, I first launched a free mobile app that enables users to perform self-assessment eye tests. Then I wanted to find a way to deliver proper eye care and health tips to those who thought they were healthy and have not gone for a proper eye check. It is surprising how many silent illnesses we pick up in people who did not know they had problems prior to screening.

But why make this service mobile?

There is a certain inertia that prevents "well" people from going to get their eyes checked. So I wanted to make eye care convenient for people, by bringing it to their offices. By cutting down the barriers that keep them from going for an eye screening, I hope to prevent more eye disease.

Besides that, I've always had a passion for providing eye care to the underprivileged. By creating a mobile eye care service, I can reach out to immobile, disabled communities and other poorer communities who have no access to good eye care.

Besides correcting refractive error, what do you screen for?

We screen for the leading causes of blindness, such as cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. This is important because such eye diseases are very easily treated when detected early but are potentially blinding if detected too late. We also screen for more common eye ailments such as digital eye strain, dry eye disease and allergic conjunctivitis, which can often be easily managed with better lifestyle habits.

Revenue from Eye Quotient helps fund your charitable work. Who are some of the beneficiaries?

This year, my team will be going to a rural village in Indonesia to reach out to orphaned children. We will check their eyes and provide

free spectacles and sunglasses. It is especially important for children to undergo eye screening as we can prevent lazy eye before it is irreversible.

In Singapore, we provide free eye screening for the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Singapore (MDAS). Their members suffer from muscular weakness and many are wheelchair- or bed-bound. Some are unable to fit into the constraints of a normal eye examination room. By bringing our mobile services to them, we are able to give them the eye care they need. For instance, one member we treated had not had his eyes and glasses checked for the last 20 years. He was so thankful to be able to read properly again.

We are also working with Beyond Social Services and Compassion Fund to provide free eye care and spectacles to children and youth from less privileged backgrounds.

I understand your children are also involved in community work.

When I go for mission trips, I am always enriched by the experience, perhaps through the humbling awareness that we live such privileged lives in Singapore. I want to share these meaningful and eye-opening experiences with my family. I hope that my kids will grow up to be aware and sensitive to real world issues and develop the spirit of volunteerism and be called upon to give back in their own ways. **A**