

## HOW TO SERVE OTHERS EVEN AFTER OUR DEATH

By Dr. B.P. Kirthisinghe

*Dr. F.G. Hudson Silva, the founder of Sri Lanka's International Eye Donation Society, belongs to that rare breed of humanitarian pioneers who have risen from humble beginnings and who work with total dedication for the cause of humanity. His mission in life, inspired by Buddhist teachings, is to restore eye-sight to the blind.*

*Today, Sri Lanka has become the foremost donor of human eyes in the world, largely through the determined efforts of this man, and almost every day donated eyes are despatched from Colombo to cities all over the world, including London, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi, Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo.*

*Malaysia is doing its bit in this drama of eye-sight restoration through the establishment of an Eye Bank and the Buddhist Temple at Jalan Berhala, Kuala Lumpur has been making strenuous efforts in the Eye Donation Campaign.*

*-- Ed.*

The Republic of Sri Lanka has become the foremost donor of human eyes to the world, having given 1894 eyes to 25 foreign cities for grafting purposes, due principally to the selfless work of Dr. Hudson Silva and his dedicated wife Irangani.

The greatest single factor that helps the Ceylon Eye Donation Society to collect so many eyes in excess of SRI LANKA'S needs is Buddhism, although followers of all other faiths in Ceylon rallied round Dr. Silva to donate their eyes.

It has been mentioned in Buddhist literature that the Buddha when he was still a Bodhisattva donated his eyes before death for the benefit of the blind.

The founder of the SRI LANKA'S International Eye Donation Society is Dr. Hudson Silva, who hails from a poor but noble Buddhist family. He is married to an equally dedicated and wonderful lady, and both are zealous to help the needy and sick. Both of them followed the path of Bodhisattvas; theirs is a selfless service to all humanity without being benefitted financially.

Entering the Medical Faculty of the University of Sri Lanka in 1952, he passed out as a doctor in 1958. While he was a final year medical student, he got interested in obtaining eyes for cornea grafting for the benefit of patients who had been on waiting lists for many years. Some of them in fact had been waiting for an unfortunate man to be executed so that they might regain their vision. Within three years of starting the Eye Donation campaign, there were signs that there would be an excess of eye donors, and therefore an effort was made to explore the possibility of sending eyes abroad. Dr. Silva was always under the impression that Sri Lanka was the only country with a shortage of eyes and that others, especially developed countries, were well off in this respect; but when he started sending eyes abroad, he was surprised to find there was a worldwide shortage of human eyes.

Although he did not have even the basic facilities to collect and process human eyes, he started working in a back room in my upstairs flat in Colombo which continued up to the present time as the International Eye Bank, which has so far gifted 6536 eyes to 93 foreign cities in 37 countries. With assistance initially from Japanese Lions Clubs and later from other countries, a modern Eye Bank is under construction, two floors of which have been completed. The Administration Section of the Eye Donation Society has been shifted to the new building, while the Eye Bank which needs his immediate presence day and night continues to operate in the original upstairs flat.

Dr. Silva obtained his Doctor of Ophthalmology degree from the Wayne University Medical College in the U.S.A, as a Fulbright scholar.

When a 19- year-old Japanese medical student who had been blind for 8 years was given the sight of his left eye after a cornea transplant from Ceylon, the town of Kamakushi acclaimed that this gift was not merely to a medical student, but to the whole Japanese nation, and the people of that town collected a sum of \$30,000 which has helped Dr. Silva to build 2 storeys of the 8-storey Eye Hospital which he hopes to establish in Colombo to serve all fellow beings.

The year 1979 has been the best on record with the receipt of 1884 eyes out of which the excess (1464), after Sri Lanka's needs were met, were gifted to foreign countries and a large number of them went to help children regain their vision, in the United Nations International Year of the Child.

Almost every day, donated eyes go out from Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital and home of the Sri Lanka International Eye Bank, to cities all over the world – London, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi, Tokyo and Hong Kong. Moreover, there is a steadily increasing flow of donated eyes from the island republic of 14 million people; 500,000 Sri Lankans have signed pledges so that their eyes can be collected after death and distributed to eye surgeons at home and abroad.

The story of Sri Lanka's International Eye Bank is very much the story of the 48-year-old Dr. Hudson Silva, its founder. With single-minded devotion, this noble, serene, smiling man has served the cause of the blind for the past 20 years, aided for 16 of them by his wife, Irangani. In 1964, the first year of the bank's operation, Dr. Silva sent six eyes by plane to Singapore in an ice-filled thermos. By 1977, his annual shipments abroad had reached 1120 eyes, packed in sophisticated containers. He expects that his bank will soon triple the number it exports each year.

**Creating an Eye Bank.** Hudson Silva was born into the family of a devout Buddhist furniture-maker in a small town outside Colombo. He wanted to be a doctor, but his father could not afford to send him to a medical school. A teacher, however, so admired Silva's character and ability that he persuaded the young man's father to help finance his medical education at the University of Ceylon. It was here, in 1957, that Silva thought of creating an eye bank. He was in the operating room when two patients were being prepared simultaneously for surgery. One had cancer behind an eye, and the eye had to be removed. The other patient, blinded by diseased corneas, was waiting to receive the still healthy cornea from the cancer patient's eye. "As I witnessed the procedure," Dr. Silva recalls, "I realized how rare the possibilities were for this kind of transplant of living tissue from one person to another."

As a medical student he knew that corneas did not have to come from living donors, and until 1956, when the Ceylon government suspended the death penalty on a trial basis (it was restored in 1959), surgeons in Silva's country had been able to meet part of the need for corneas by obtaining them from the eyes of executed prisoners. Where else could eyes come from? Suddenly, in the operating room, Silva has an idea: if enough people volunteered to give their eyes when they died, the needs of the cornea blind in Ceylon would be adequately served. Silva found that there were about 20 deaths every day at the Colombo General Hospital. A mere one percent of the eyes available from the dead in the hospital could supply the country's total needs.

To motivate potential donors, Silva wrote an article in Colombo's Sunday Lankapida' early in 1958. A few months later the first graft was made with a reader-donated cornea. Before long, more than 400 people had responded to the article. By 1961 Silva had his degree and was appointed a house surgeon at Colombo Eye Hospital. In June of that year, he organized the Ceylon Eye Donation Society. The first of the 40 founding members to sign the donation pledge was Dr. Silva's mother, who asked that her son remove her eyes when the time came. Two years later, he carried out her instructions. About the same time, Governor General William Gopallawa pledged his eyes. News of these two events prompted 17,000 people to join the Ceylon Eye Donation Society within one week. Dr. Silva wrote another newspaper article in which he

predicted that one day Ceylon would have a “rich harvest” of eyes to send abroad.

Outrageous exaggeration, said some of his colleagues. But the Colombo Lions Club gave the eye hospital a special refrigerator for the storage of donated eyes, and the refrigerator soon held more eyes than Dr. Silva’s colleagues could use. The young doctor then began writing letters addressed simply to “Senior Eye Surgeon” in hospitals in New Delhi, Singapore, Tokyo, London and New York. Colombo, he told them, could supply eyes for cornea grafting upon request.

A doctor in Singapore’s Government General Hospital was the first to respond. In May 1964, Dr. Silva despatched his first shipment, the eyes of three donors. The next year, Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake presided at the official opening of the Ceylon International Eye Bank and pledged his own eyes. By 1967, the Silvas had turned the top floor of their combination office and home into the eye bank headquarters.

Six years later, on the night of April 12, 1973, a messenger knocked on Silva’s door. The former prime minister was dead. There is nothing unusual about such a late-night summons. In such a case, Dr. Silva gives instructions that the eyes of the dead person be carefully and completely closed to keep the cornea tissue from drying out. He then races to the home or hospital and performs a 15-minute operation called enucleation. After deftly removing the eyes and placing them in a solution containing penicillin and streptomycin, he inserts cotton balls into the empty sockets and closes the eyelids with sutures so that the donor looks natural. Then he gives the family a special condolence flag which bears the Eye Donation Society’s crest – a message to friends that the last act of the deceased was a gift of sight to fellow human beings.

Back home, Dr. Silva places the eyes in a refrigerator, where they remain at four degrees Celsius until needed. When a request telegram arrives from abroad, he checks plane schedules. If there is no volunteer available, Dr. Silva himself drives the 20 miles to the airport. Almost all airlines carry his container free of charge. At the airport and in the country of destination, red tape has been eliminated, and the containers are rushed to hospitals without delay.

**Public Support.** Doctors in Sri Lanka and abroad can order the number of eyes they want for a specific date and be sure of getting them. It is not unusual for the eye bank to receive, and fill, three telegraphed requests in one day. To date, the Sri Lanka International Eye Bank has shipped eyes to 64 cities in 29 countries.

What are the reasons for such generosity – and success? There is widespread public support, for one thing. Leaders of the minority Catholic, Protestant and Hindu religions in Sri Lanka endorse the eye bank. Even more important is the

support of the majority of the population, adherents of the great humanistic Theravada branch of Buddhism, who value the concept of charitable giving. An equally basic reason for the success is the selfless labour and organizing skill of Dr. Silva and his wife.

**No Formal Training.** The eye bank is run from the Silvas' home in a room next to their bedroom. Since paid workers and volunteers are present for only nine of the bank's 24 hours, the void is largely filled by Irangani. When the doctor is absent, she takes donor calls and instructs undertakers to keep the eyelids closed and not to embalm the body until the eyes are removed. Although she has had no formal medical training, Irangani has watched hundreds of enucleations. On one occasion she gave step-by-step instructions to a young doctor who had never removed eyes before.

From the start, Irangani's domestic arrangements were inextricably interwoven with the eye bank. Once, when a visitor asked for a cold drink, Irangani explained that she did not like to open the refrigerator door because it might change the temperature required for the eyes she kept inside. The visitor subsequently collected money from her friends and donated a new refrigerator which is used to this day.

Sri Lanka's location is also important to the International Eye Bank's success: Dr. Silva can quickly supply the countries in Asia and Africa where cornea grafts are most needed. Many children in the developing countries suffer from malnutrition, which often leads to clouding of the cornea. As many as five million people, or one-fifth of the world's blind, are believed to be blind because of cornea defects.

Dr. Silva's energetic efforts have brought international response. The Lions Club of Numazu and Kurashiki, Japan, sent the eye bank its first automobile. Enucleating instruments have been contributed by England's Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind. The Hong Kong Eye Bank Society donated eye transport bottles. "When I stopped in Karachi recently", says Dr. Silva, "one hundred formerly blind Pakistanis came in a body, literally to see me".

**Apart** from a very small fee to cover minor expenses, eyes from the Sri Lanka bank are given free. This is possible because Dr. Silva and his wife contribute services as well as office space, and volunteers do most of the clerical work. Doctors in the outlying areas perform enucleations free of charge when a donor dies.

But in spite of such dedicated people, the eye bank refrigerator sometimes holds more eyes than Dr. Silva can deliver to hospitals within the three days during

which fresh corneas are usable; and Sri Lanka has more offers of eyes than the bank can use.

To facilitate collection and distribution, a new eye bank building is being constructed on land donated by the Sri Lankan government. (Construction financing is through donations, which are duty and tax free). When completed by the end of 1985, the eye bank will have Dr. Silva as medical director and three other doctors on its staff. Hospital and research facilities will be available not only to all doctors within the country, but also to those from developing nations for whom fellowships are projected. Once the building is completed and staffed, it will be possible to export 2000 eyes a year, after meeting Sri Lanka's needs. The bank will do this on a projected annual budget of only \$20,000 - \$25,000.

Realizing that Sri Lanka cannot supply all the eyes the world needs, Dr. Silva envisages the development of an interlocking system of five international eye banks, served by telex. "Any hospital in need of eyes could learn immediately where the nearest possible supply was located", he says, "and banks in New York, London, Tokyo, Sydney and Colombo could meet the demands of the entire world".

Thus a dream that began in the mind of a medical student 20 years ago moves toward its goal – the giving of sight to the five million of the world's blind who could see, if only they had new corneas.

(W.F.B. REVIEW)

