Educator's Podium

VOSH/International and the Development of Optometry in the Latin American Region

Emiliano Teran, PhD



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Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH)/International is an organization devoted to providing vision care around the world through humanitarian clinics.[1] For its commitment to providing access to quality eye care in underserved communities, VOSH/International received the 2022 Jenny Pomeroy Award for Excellence in Vision and Public Health from Prevent Blindness.[2]

Volunteers, who include optometrists, ophthalmologists and lay people, organize and work in the clinics. Their efforts allow thousands of people, as many as 5,000 per week, to be evaluated and receive treatment for vision impairments. Optometry students who are members of Student Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (SVOSH) chapters at their optometry schools in the United States and many other countries are also among the clinic volunteers who help to provide care. (The process for opening a student chapter at your school is not difficult. Email VOSH/International Executive Director Maria Arce Moreira for more information.) In addition to their philanthropic aspect, the clinics are great opportunities for students to improve their clinical skills, gain exposure to diverse patient populations and observe vision conditions they may not see in their home settings.

Partner organizations may also be part of VOSH/International clinics. In my experience as an academic advisor to the SVOSH Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS) chapter in Mexico[3] and a member of the VOSH/International Latin American Advisory Committee, strategic alliances with local optometry schools and other organizations increase the success of the clinics. For instance, in our most recent local humanitarian clinics we worked with the local Lions Club, who helped us to bring food bags to the participating families.[4]

Latin American communities have received strong support from VOSH/International through the humanitarian clinics. Here, I highlight other VOSH initiatives that have benefited this region as well as more the organization is developing. These include efforts to enhance the optometric profession's level of education and increase the number and quality of vision science research opportunities. Also, I suggest how optometry students in the United States could further help people around the world while improving their own skills.

Many Avenues of Support

Strategic alliances

VOSH/International continues to establish strategic alliances with organizations in Latin America to enhance its support. One of the most fruitful has been with the Latin American Association of Optometry and Optics (ALDOO in Spanish), where students and optometric faculty are comitted to improving optometry in the region.

International student chapters

A VOSH/International pilot program aims to support international SVOSH chapters by providing scholarships of $1,500 as a resource for enhancing their activities. Although this may not seem like a large amount, it is a huge help. For example, our UAS student chapter received this aid in 2019 and 2022. It helped us to publish the results of our research in 2020 and to move forward with our programs in 2022.[5,6] I hope this pilot program can be replicated to help more chapters around the world.

Regionally focused committee

To address the specific needs of the region, VOSH/International created the Latin American Advisory Committee. I am an active member of the committee along with Beatriz Serna, OD, from Mexico, Jairo Mercado, OD, from Nicaragua, and Severo Sanchez, MSc, from Peru. We promote ideas for enhancing regional development in the profession of optometry and eye care and are working hard to promote ideas for elevating optometry in Latin America. We believe expanding alliances with other organizations, such as ALDOO and the World Council of Optometry (WCO) would help us to achieve our goals.

Research

In 2019, VOSH/International obtained a grant from the One Sight Essilor Luxottica Foundation to study refractive error in children in Latin America. This assistance has had a positive effect on research by improving optometry students' skills and informing governments on the prevalence of refractive error. Moreover, it enabled children from vulnerable zones of the city to receive vision care.

To further promote optometric research in the Latin American region, VOSH/International created a scientific committee. Sandra Block, OD, MEd, MPH, FAAO, FCOVD, FNAP, President of the WCO, Bruce Moore, OD, Professor Emeritus from New England College of Optometry, and Hector Santiago, OD, PhD, Vice President of VOSH/International are the committee members. This committee is helping to develop research in the region. Currently they are helping to develop a project in hyperopia and learning performance. In addition, they helped to improve the implementation of the project that evaluated the prevalence of refractive errors in children in the Latin American region. Our UAS SVOSH chapter learns from them to develop our research projects. The goal of the scientific committee is to create more advisor groups to other faculties and students from Latin America.

The creation of this research-focused committee is a good opportunity for optometry faculty and students from the United States and researchers from Latin America to work together for mutual benefit. For instance, U.S. faculty and researchers in vision science can help researchers and optometry students in Latin America with study design, results analyses and manuscript writing, while the Latin American teams collect data.

Education

For many years VOSH/International has been supporting optometry in the Latin American region with lectures on optometry and vision care. VOSH has a short-term mentorship program called the

Ambassador Program in which an optometrist from the United States visits schools in Latin America to teach. Another VOSH program, VOSH Corps, provides a longer-term teacher and mentor. One of the beneficiaries of VOSH Corps was the optometry program in Nicaragua, where they used help from VOSH to establish a successful optometry school in the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua. Also, VOSH/International Immediate Past President J. Dan Twelker, OD, PhD, FVI, visited Puerto Principe, Haiti, to provide lectures at the brand new optometry school.[7] These are only two of the many lecture programs presented at schools and events in Latin America.

VOSH/International also shares the expertise of its members through talks to the student chapters. Recently, President Michael Ciszek, OD, diplomate ABO, FVI, presented a talk to the annual meeting of the Mexican Association of Faculty, Schools, Colleges and Councils of Optometry in Torreon, Coahuila, Mexico.[8] In this meeting Dr. Ciszek outlined the benefits of being a member of VOSH/International and reported the achievements of its chapters and student chapters.

Many workshops to improve the skills of optometrists in the region have been carried out as well. For instance, in 2018 the UAS SVOSH chapter organized a workshop focused on research. In this workshop, Dr. Twelker shared his expertise in writing manuscripts. Likewise, he presented a workshop about improving refraction procedures for the students of the optometry program. Last year, VOSH/International and the UAS SVOSH chapter presented a workshop about writing scientific manuscripts in English, which was co-organized by Alcanza Language Consultants.[9] This workshop was a great experience for the optometry students and graduated optometrists interested in research who attended from many countries in Latin America.

Strengthening Student Collaboration

I believe SVOSH members in the United States and Latin America have much they can share with each other, too. U.S. students could make a significant difference by sharing their knowledge and experience with their peers in Latin America. One opportunity might be for students from U.S. SVOSH chapters to give talks for international chapters via a video conferencing platform. It would be interesting to build more solid bridges between students from the United States and Latin America, where the purpose to provide primary vision health to people is the same, but the scenarios are very different.

Forging Ahead

As it has for many organizations, the COVID-19 pandemic reduced VOSH/International's resources. However, the group is well-organized, has a strong commitment to assisting others, and is developing smart strategies to maximize resources in Latin America. It has been a great start, and potential for the future is even greater.

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