

Citation for Ms Gabi Hollows AO, Founding Director, The Fred Hollows Foundation

The Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop Asialink Medal 2014

Citation for Gabi Hollows

We all know a bit about Fred Hollows. We can visualise the gruff ophthalmologist, peering through magnifying specs into the cataract-clouded eyes of an old Nepali man or woman, or the trachoma-inflamed eyes of a fearful Aboriginal child;

The factories he set up in Eritrea and Nepal that have brought down the cost of an intra-ocular lens from hundreds of dollars to just ten dollars;

The joy on patients' faces when the bandages are taken off, following micro-surgery by Fred and his colleagues.

By a stroke of fate, the former Gabrielle O'Sullivan came in touch with ophthalmology at an early age, three in fact, when she needed corrective surgery for cross eyes.

The professionalism of her carers stayed in her mind, and on finishing high school she trained at the Prince of Wales Hospital here as an orthoptist, a practitioner who works on eye movement and measures visual acuity.

One of her lecturers was Fred Hollows, and after graduating she joined him as an assistant on his trachoma work in Aboriginal communities.

She's said she sometimes went somewhere private and wept in frustration and anger at what she saw.

Fred had a different impression. He spoke of his growing appreciation of her calm skill at evaluating eye conditions, her empathy with patients beyond language barriers.

They married in 1980, and went on to have their five children, Cam, Emma, Anna-Louise and the twins Ruth and Rosa, who were all taken along at various times on field trips.

All too soon came the diagnosis of cancer for Fred, and in 1992, when it became apparent he hadn't long to live, they set up the Fred Hollows Foundation to continue their pioneering work.

After Fred's death the following year, aged only 63, their foundation has gone from strength to strength under Gabi's guidance, currently working in 20

countries across Asia, the Pacific and Africa.

Fourteen of those countries are in Asia, where the Fred Hollows Foundation restores sight to those previously out of reach of eye care because of remoteness and cost. One partnership can lead to another, so the foundation is working with Nepal's Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology to deliver cataract and other operations in North Korea and Myanmar, as well as helping train up local specialists.

A recent five-day eye camp in a remote commune in Cambodia, has restored sight to over 190 people. Mr Chhun Chat, the commune chief, said that every year The Fred Hollows Foundation's eye camp brings hope, smiles and laughter to his villages.

In the larger countries, the backlog remains huge. Indonesia for example has an estimated 3.6 million blind people, with about 120,000 added every year, and cataracts cause 70 per cent of cases.

China already accounts for approximately 17 per cent of the world's blind population; with an ever-increasing number of preventable diabetes related cases diagnosed in remote rural areas. In 2013, The Foundation performed nearly 100,000 sight-saving interventions in China.

Overall in 2013, the foundation and its local partners treated over 4.5 million people. When the figures are in for this year they will show a further big increase.

All of this came mostly from the large and small contributions of 123,000 donors, who provide 75 per cent of the foundation's income.

Fred and Gabi Hollows have restored sight to millions. But through their tireless and imaginative work you could say they've lessened a different kind of blindness among the rest of us.

There can be no more worthy candidate for this year's Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop medal than this wonderful Australian, Gabi Hollows.