

AMERICAN EYE HEALTH GIVES FOUR SIGHT

BY HORACE HINES Observer West reporter
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MONTEGO BAY, St James - The American Eye Health Institute, a non-profit organization, this week completed corneal transplants for four patients who couldn't have afforded the expensive procedure otherwise.

"I am grateful. I mean it from the bottom of my heart for what these doctors have done for me. They don't know what they have done for me. It is like they have given me the light again," said 25-year-old Sandra Clarke, of Refuge, Trelawny, who was one of the four beneficiaries.



Dr Claudine Green Hemmings (left), head of the ophthalmology unit at the Cornwall Regional Hospital, and beneficiary Sandra Clarke (fourth left) pose with members of the American Eye Health Institute, who provided eye care including four cornea graft for a number of patients at the Cornwall Regional Hospital over the last three days. (Photo: Phillip Lemonte)

Dr Claudine Green Hemmings, head of the ophthalmology unit at the Cornwall Regional Hospital where the procedures were carried out, also expressed gratitude to the six-member team headed by Jamaican-born Dr Richard Cross.

"It is a very expensive venture, it is not done in any of the public hospitals

because remember these corneas are expensive. One cornea costs over US\$3000, then transportation, importation... everything," she said.

"I always think if someone leaves the comfort of their home to come to our country to help our people, it leaves a great feeling gratitude that we feel we cannot express," she added.

Clarke suffered sight loss in her right eye after her father struck her with a leather strap during the course of a whipping.

In the meantime, Dr. Hemmings is expressing the need for the establishment of an eye bank to improve the availability of widespread, affordable corneal grafting in Jamaica.

"We need an eye bank where people donate their eyes and we can keep them healthy until they are needed," she said.

Now the donor corneas that we have are cadaveric, meaning they come from people who die and donate body organs. The cornea is harvested, kept in a broth to keep it healthy and then we can use it for those people with hazy corneas.

Apart from corneal grafting, the Eye Health Institute has also been instrumental in carrying out 17 cataract and glaucoma surgeries at the Cornwall Regional Hospital.

With support from the ministry of health, the American mission which has been visiting Jamaica for the past 14 years and has been carrying out eye examination and providing eyeglasses; and eye drops for patients in western Jamaica.

"It has been a good mission. The patients are appreciative. It is always challenging to leave as there are more people who could use our help. We would love to have more of a presence here," Dr Cross told the Observer West.