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ASCRS•ASOA UPDATE

Richard Litwin, MD, selected for the 2019 ASCRS Foundation Chang Humanitarian Award

by Natalie Zundel ASCRS Foundation Director of Development

\$50,000 grant will benefit the work of Seva Foundation

Endowed by a generous gift from David and Victoria Chang, the ASCRS Foundation Chang Humanitarian Award was established to honor and recognize outstanding humanitarian work with a focus on cataract blindness and disability. Richard L. Litwin, MD, embodies this purpose with his extensive humanitarian work that has become a family affair. The award will be given to him at the 2019 ASCRS•ASOA Annual Meeting in San Diego.

Like many doctors providing humanitarian care, Dr. Litwin's work followed a familiar arc, beginning with hands-on work, followed by a shift toward educating others. He began with a high-volume cataract surgery mission trip in 1982 to a then little-known facility in south India, Aravind Eye Hospital. It was his wife, Judith, who said he needed to go to India and give back. Dr. Litwin initially responded that he gives back every day in the office. Nevertheless, he found himself on a plane to India a week later. The trip would be the beginning of a now four-decade length of service.

"Witnessing my first eye camp in Pondicherry, India, in a few days I saw a thousand patients cured of cataract," he said. "I saw the good that an ophthalmologist can do in an area devoid of doctors. I was hooked."

On this same trip, he demonstrated how IOLs worked to Aravind's founder, Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy, at a busy eye camp. This was one of the first times an IOL was used in such a setting. When Dr. Venkataswamy noted the patient—a carpenter—could return to gainful employment postop, Dr. Litwin committed himself to making an IOL available to every patient.

Today, standard practice for cataract surgery includes an IOL. However, when Dr. Litwin began his volunteer service with Seva Foundation, this option was limited to high-income countries. Dr. Litwin thought that it was possible to bring this level of care to developing countries.

With Dr. Litwin's advocacy and support from Seva Foundation, Aravind began manufacturing IOLs at its own facility, Aurolab, in 1992, which dramatically reduced the cost of this technology.

He soon realized he could be even more effective if he focused on instructing local doctors and teams on how to perform these vital procedures themselves. Dr. Litwin worked with the World Health Organization to design and launch what has become perhaps the most effective national ophthalmic training program in the world, located in Nepal.

After years of direct hands-on volunteering, he shifted his focus to diplomacy, advocating internationally on behalf of humanitarian eye care organizations. More recently, Dr. Litwin has concentrated on ensuring patient safety and quality of surgical services. For example, when he saw that corneal blindness was not addressed in West Bengal, India, Dr. Litwin used his network to establish an eye bank and ensure doctors received essential training for taking advantage of this new local resource. Those cornea services are now in high demand, restoring sight to hundreds who previously could not see.

Dr. and Mrs. Litwin continue to make annual month-long trips to Seva partners in Asia to renew their friendships and continue their work to improve care for all. Their children and grandchildren have even participated in some of the trips through the years.

Dr. Litwin has earmarked the \$50,000 grant to support Seva Foundation, whose mission is to work with local communities around the world to develop self-sustaining programs that preserve and restore sight.

The Seva Foundation board has agreed to match this prestigious award to help even more people see.

"Dr. Litwin travels to the most neglected places in the world," said Dr. Chundak Tenzing, medical director of Seva. "Dr. Litwin is a great role model for ophthalmologists from developing countries. He cultivates long-term friendships and mentorships. Beyond his role as an ophthalmologist and trainer, Dr. Litwin identifies partners who share the same mission as Seva Foundation to eliminate avoidable blindness."

"Dick personifies the unsung hero—someone who neither seeks nor receives recognition for a lifetime of great deeds," Dr. Chang said. "Indeed, very few will have heard of this ophthalmologist in solo private practice, who's had tremendous impact on the treatment of cataract blindness in the developing world."

About the award

For more than 15 years, the ASCRS Foundation has fostered programs to alleviate the worldwide backlog of cataract. The ASCRS Foundation's work is only possible because of the many individuals and partner organizations who volunteer their time, expertise, and financial support to treat cataract blindness around the world.

"David and Victoria's generosity and leadership is deeply appreciated because it allows us to highlight and perpetuate the noble volunteer efforts of our colleagues within ophthalmology who are trying to alleviate treatable global blindness," said Stephen Lane, MD, co-chair of the ASCRS Foundation.

Dr. Litwin was one of 33 nominees for this year's award. After nominators completed a detailed submission form, the ASCRS Foundation Nominating Committee spent hours reviewing the applications and supporting documents. The field of nominees was richly diverse and deserving of recognition. The Nominating Committee sent a handful of finalists to the ASCRS Foundation Board of Directors, who further reviewed the nominations and selected the ultimate winner.

The awardee will be honored annually at the ASCRS•ASOA Annual Meeting, and a \$50,000 prize will be granted in the recipient's honor to a charitable ophthalmology organization of his or her choice. Dr. and Mrs. Chang hope the \$50,000 grant will not only help fund the great work being done now but allow the honoree to publicly highlight a deserving charitable organization before ASCRS' vast international audience.

"As the world's population ages, the backlog of cataract blindness in developing countries will continue to climb," Dr. Chang said. "There are proven, cost-effective solutions that need to be scaled and many dedicated individuals and organizations that merit our collective support."

Contact information

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The Litwins at Aravind in 2018

Source: Seva Foundation