

MEDICINE

The gift of sight is an annual ritual for Sarasota surgeons

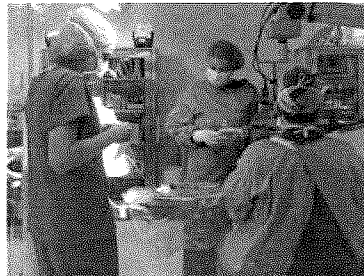
Doctors perform cataract surgeries for free

By [Barbara Peters Smith](#)
barbara.smith@heraldtribune.com

Published: Wednesday, July 13, 2016 at 1:59 p.m.

SARASOTA — Once a year for the last two decades, dozens of uninsured patients have converged on a Sarasota eye clinic to get their vision restored, within minutes, for free.

Four surgeons with the Center for Sight are doing it again, performing 100 cataract-replacement procedures worth about \$4,000 apiece, compressed into a two-day schedule this week and next. The donations — coordinated through Mission Cataract USA — go to patients not covered by Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance. The recipients are usually 40 to 55 years old, and many need their sight to be able to make a living.



A Center for Sight surgical team led by William J. Lahnert, seated, prepares to perform one of 100 free cataract surgeries as part of an annual service coordinated by Mission Cataract USA. The Sarasota clinic is the only location in Florida to participate.
 STAFF PHOTO / BARBARA PETERS SMITH

Not only are they younger than the typical cataract patient in Sarasota, but their problems are more advanced and often affect both eyes. David W. Shoemaker, the center's founder and director of cataract and lens replacement surgery, said Tuesday that these free procedures remind him of surgeries back in the 1960s, when ophthalmologists would wait until the cataract was “ripe” before intervening.

“It really meant the patient was blind before we would operate. That's where most of these people are — they can identify hand motions or the big 'E' on the chart,” Shoemaker explained. “Their eyes are not particularly healthy; the cataracts are severely advanced. It makes the surgery much more challenging, by a factor of 10. So we get psyched up for Mission Cataract days.”

With today's laser-guided technology, removing a cataract and replacing it with a tiny artificial lens generally takes five to eight minutes. But on Tuesday, Center for Sight surgeon William J. Lahnert worked diligently for just over 11 minutes to complete the task on a patient with a particularly thick and cloudy cataract in his right eye. Twice he deployed a microscopic vacuum device to make sure all fragments of the rubbery-looking nucleus were gone before he inserted and positioned a new, clear lens.

The Center for Sight is one of 21 clinics nationwide to offer the free surgeries, and the only one in Florida. While most patients are local, others come from all over the Southeast, including one from South Carolina this year. Shoemaker said the challenging logistics of coordinating the charitable work may keep other practices from joining the effort. He formed a separate Center for Sight Foundation in 2012 to

collect donations for the necessary supplies, and partners with the Virginia B. Andes Volunteer Community Clinic to obtain medications.

“There are constraints placed upon the device manufacturers and Big Pharma, in terms of what they can give to practices,” he said. “We actually have to go through the Gulf Coast Community Foundation to get this stuff done. So in order to do this, I think you need a good community foundation in your 'hood.”

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.