

# Health

# World vision

A Leeds family so struck by the plight of people on the other side of the world are changing their whole lives to help. **Katie Baldwin** reports

**M**ILLIONS of the world's blind people could see again if they could have a simple cataract operation.

It seems inconceivable that something so routine in the Western world could leave those living in much more difficult circumstances with such a devastating disability. And that's the inspiration behind a new charity set up by a Leeds family. Joyce and Henri Samoutou are determined to use their medical expertise to help those facing a life without sight.



**USING THEIR EXPERTISE:** The Samoutou family - Joyce and Henri, with children Cherissa, Ezra and Karis - who have set up the charity New Sight



New Sight and they are aiming to raise £100,000 to enable them to move to Congo next year. "Four out of five people who are blind don't need to be," Joyce said. "Out of those four, for more than 80 per cent of them we would be able to sort something out with a simple cataract operation." Joyce will run the administration of the centre as well as educate their three young children Cherissa, six, Ezra, two, and Karis, one, and is hoping to work in a local charity hospital. Henri will treat patients and work towards the centre becoming self-sufficient. The couple will have to live in conditions very different to those in West Yorkshire, with electricity only available twice a week and water coming from rain collection tanks.

## Passionate

But Joyce said they were looking forward to being able to transform people's lives. "We feel very passionate about it," she said. So far the couple have collected £35,000 towards their £100,000 target. They hope that will increase even

Hong Kong-born Joyce, currently a GP in Seacroft, met husband Henri in Africa. Henri, originally from the African country of Gabon, is a

senior ophthalmic technician with surgical skills so he can carry out eye operations. He previously worked for a charitable eye project in Gabon and saw first hand the need for eye surgery and the difference it could make to people's lives, with patients travelling for days to receive life-transforming treatment. That project was so successful that it is now self-sustaining. Now the couple plan to set up a similar centre in the Republic of Congo, where Joyce said the need was even greater. "We have seen in Gabon an old man who had not seen his wife for 25 years," she said. "A boy of eight had never seen his mum, and for him to see her

for the first time, it was priceless. "In Congo, we know the need is even greater." She said that the country had never had an eye centre which could do surgery, so easily treatable eye conditions such as cataracts resulted in blindness. "Currently, it is estimated that four in five people who are blind in the Congo are blind as a result of cataract, which can be easily reversed by a simple operation costing around £50," she said. "When Henri spent four days there in April 2010, he was completely overwhelmed by desperate patients, many of whom waited for months, even years, and travelled for days to see him." The couple have set up their charity



**SUCCESSFUL CENTRE:** An operation is performed at the eye clinic set up by Henri Samoutou in Gabon, Africa and, *right*, a patient celebrates regaining his sight





**TRANSFORMING LIVES:** Patients recover from procedures at the eye clinic, while, right, locals queue for appointments

more as Leeds restaurant chain Casa Mia has adopted New Sight as its charity for the year.

A special New Sight pasta dish has been devised and £1 from each dish sold at Casa Mia Millennium in Leeds city centre and at Casa Mia in Chapel Allerton will go to the charity. Other fundraising plans include a charity dinner at Casa Mia Millennium on November 10. Francesco Mazzella, owner of the Casa Mia restaurants, said: "As a family man with three children I can empathise with the courage it must take to move your family to an unfamiliar country, and give up many of your home comforts. "Henri and Joyce are doing all this to help other people regain their sight and quality of life. My wife Marta and I cannot think of a worthier cause to support and we are excited at the prospect of helping them achieve their goal."



Joyce said: "It's wonderful and humbling to have the support of the Casa Mia restaurants. Having them as a charity partner will help to raise awareness for the desperate need in the Congo. "We are an ordinary family living in Leeds who felt that something must be done to help people in that country. For a relatively small outlay, peoples' sight can be restored and their world changed completely within a matter of days."

● **To support the charity, visit [www.samoutou.com](http://www.samoutou.com), search for New Sight on Facebook, follow @newsightcong on Twitter or email [info@samoutou.com](mailto:info@samoutou.com).**

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## Cataracts clinic comes to Leeds

PATIENTS in the UK are waiting longer for cataracts treatment, according to new research.

The survey of GPs found almost a third admitted that patients will now have to wait for their eyesight to deteriorate even further before they can be referred to the NHS as a fifth said they were changing the criteria for referrals. The average patient will be waiting an additional 15 weeks for NHS treatment.

Vision correction specialist Ultralase commissioned the report to tie in with National Cataracts Awareness Week.

Television doctor Dr Chris Steele, ambassador for the week, said: "A cataract is a very serious condition that will affect all of us as we get older, so it's concerning to see the referral process becoming even stricter in so many GP practices. It's estimated that over half of those over 65 will have some level of cataract, in one or both eyes, and as the deterioration is so gradual it can be hard to gauge just how badly your vision has become.

Ultralase is hosting a one-day Cataracts Clinic at Audley Clevedon Retirement Village in Ilkley tomorrow. The pop-up clinic will be open from noon until 5pm offering free screenings, advice and information.

## Bringing hope to the slums

DOCTORS from Yorkshire have changed the lives of people in India – including a man who had been walking on a fractured hip for two years.

The medics treated more than 8,000 sick people from the state of Punjab at a camp run by the Slum Doctor charity. Many have now received operations at a local hospital the charity has partnered with.

Leeds-based honorary consultant rheumatologist Prof Dennis McGonagle joined their mission after being brought on board by friend and Slum Doctor director Dr Vijay Bangar. Over three days he saw 130 people.

"In the 20 years I have been practising medicine I have never seen such advanced cases of arthritis," he said. "Many of the people I saw arrived on stretchers. One woman in her 30s was completely bent over and unable to sit upright. The only treatment she had received so far was with high doses of steroids which had created more health problems for her.

"Another man struggled into the clinic on a zimmer frame and looked like he had advanced hip arthritis. When I examined him it turned out he had been walking on a fractured hip for two years. We confirmed this on X-ray and arranged for surgery, both which were provided by the Slum Doctor project.

"The poverty is such that many patients with mild arthritis could not even afford simple painkillers. We were able to give them a month's supply of Ibuprofen. We also listed 20 cases for joint replacement therapy at the local hospital and the patients we saw with rheumatoid arthritis we put on a long-term treatment plan."

He is planning to join the charity's camp in India next March.

"It has been an amazing experience for me personally which has made me incredibly grateful for what I have, for the NHS, and the amazing facilities that we have here at Leeds Teaching Hospitals. I feel like I'm doing something useful and making a difference.

"I can also see Vijay's vision for Slum Doctor. As well as continuing with the medical camp, he is also setting up an orphanage and a school." During this year's three-day camp, the 30-strong team worked for up to 12 hours a day. They organised

300 eye operations, fitted 300 hearing aids and carried out 50 general and gynaecological operations, plus around 20 hip and knee operations.

Some patients had travelled for 100km or more, despite debilitating illnesses, to receive free healthcare in a country where many cannot afford treatment.

Dr Bangar, a consultant diabetologist, said: "We see people in very difficult situations and we see things which have gone wrong." He said there were good surgeons in India, but people needed money to see them. The charity gets these doctors to work at its camps and also passes on skills from UK doctors to Indian medics.

Dr Bangar said he was always struck by the situations patients were forced to live with.

"Anyone who has had a hip fracture will know how painful that is. Imagine being in that situation for three years where the bone has



**HEALTHCARE MISSION:** Professor Dennis McGonagle, Honorary Consultant Rheumatologist at Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, treating a woman in India as part of the Slum Doctor project

just dissolved away."

● **To support the project, visit [www.slumdoctor.co.uk](http://www.slumdoctor.co.uk), find "slumdoctor**

**project" on Facebook, call 07964 999747 or write to PO Box 769, Halifax, HX1 9PN.**

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