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## Helping Hand

15 international and domestic expeditions giving medical care to the less fortunate  
BY CHERYL BENTLEY SUNCOAST NEWS STAFF

The 42-year-old man had come to the clinic in New Orleans to get reading glasses for the increasingly poor eyesight in his one eye. He had already lost sight in his other eye from a sling-shot wound.

But M.B. Kayani, M.D., ophthalmologist with St. Luke's Cataract and Laser Institute in Bayonet Point in Pasco County, discovered the patient had a far worse problem than needing reading glasses.

Tests showed the man was close to going blind from glaucoma, an eye disease that results in the loss of sight if untreated.

But because glaucoma - a buildup of pressure within the eye that causes nerve damage - has no symptoms until vision loss begins, he had no idea he was in danger. Had he not seen Kayani, the man probably would have lost his sight.

Kayani saw the patient in New Orleans in February as part of a team of doctors and dentists who ministered to the poorest victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps, a Knoxville, Tenn.-based nonprofit organization, organized the medical mission.

### Faraway places

Kayani joined RAM in 1997 and has been on 15 international and domestic expeditions for the organization, going to such places as Indonesia, Honduras and Appalachia.

RAM volunteer doctors, nurses, technicians and veterinarians travel to remote areas both in this country and abroad at their own expense.

He chose RAM, Kayani said, because about 95 percent of the money contributed to it gets to the people the organization is trying to help.

The other 5 percent goes for heating and air conditioning of the large building that was donated to the organization to serve as headquarters and for a large phone bill that is run up to connect with volunteers who are working abroad, he said.

The organization does not contribute to government efforts or infrastructure, Kayani said but, instead, chooses its form of aid by listening to victims' requests.

After the Dec. 26, 2004 tsunami, for example, Kayani noted Indonesian villagers asked for cooking stoves and sewing machines instead of money. In New Orleans, winter temperatures dipping to 38 degrees could not stop people lining up at 4 a.m.

### 5,000 patients

In coordination with the local health department, general medical, dental and eye doctors provided about 14,000 services to more than 5,000 patients from Feb. 6 -12. About 1,100 volunteers participated in the operation.

According to the RAM Web site, [www.ramusa.org](http://www.ramusa.org), its work in New Orleans was one of the largest free medical clinics ever held in this country.

Kayani was part of a team made up of one other ophthalmologist, physicians or surgeons who treat disorders of the eye, and 10 optometrists, professionals trained in correcting vision problems.

The New Orleans effort was especially important to him because his son Imran, who is doing his third-year residency in family practice at St. Vincent Hospital in Jacksonville, also participated.

The clinic was held at the Audubon Zoo in the Garden District of New Orleans. The doctors slept on air mattresses in tents or one of the zoo's buildings in what Kayani called "rudimentary conditions." They worked from 6:30 a.m. until 7 in the evening.

Post-Katrina New Orleans sorely needed RAM's help, Kayani said, because hospitals serving indigent patients had been damaged by the hurricane.

### **Records destroyed**

Moreover, he noted, many medical doctors there have either closed their practices or had their offices - and the patient medical records they contained - destroyed.

"They were so appreciative," he said of his patients. Doctors sent them home with as much as a year's supply of medications because they were not sure when they would be able to get medical care again.

About 90 percent of the patients were African American, an important statistic for the eye doctors.

In the population as a whole, one in 100 people gets glaucoma. In blacks, however, that figure increases to 5 in 100, Kayani said.

Four months prior to the mission in New Orleans, Kayani had been in Pakistan helping to set up medical supplies for the victims of the October 2005 South Asia earthquake disaster.

The temblor measured 7.6 on the Richter scale. More than 73,000 people died, 135,000 people were injured and 400,000 homes were destroyed.

### **Many trapped**

The quake was especially devastating to children. Some 35,000 died, many trapped in their schools. In Pakistan, school starts at 8:30 a.m., Kayani noted. The quake was at 8:50 a.m.

Kayani was in Pakistan representing RAM on Oct. 10, just two days after the earthquake. He stayed for a month.

Kayani was born in Lahore, Pakistan, but has lived in the United States for 35 years. He is an American citizen.

"New Orleans was very devastating," he said, "but there is no comparison with Pakistan."

In Muzaffarabad, in the portion of the disputed Kashmir region under Pakistani control, the epicenter of the quake, Kayani said 90 percent of all buildings collapsed. All schools and hospitals and clinics were destroyed, he said.

"It would be like maybe, say, in Hudson all of a sudden all the schools - elementary, high schools and colleges — and all the hospitals collapsed," he explained.

### **Burying the dead**

He first worked on getting victims money to buy cloth and shovels to bury their dead. Muslims do not use caskets, he said, but wrap their dead in cloth.

Later he served as the liaison between the Pakistanis and RAM.

RAM sent 30,000 pounds of medical supplies, wheel-chairs, tents and blankets. Pakistan International Airlines transported it free.

Most of the homeless still are in their remote villages, enduring the mountainous region's freezing winter in tents. They are afraid to leave lest they lose their land, Kayani noted.

Kayani sees more RAM expeditions in his future. "Here, this wonderful America has given us everything." He wants to give back, he said.

Kayani encourages people to volunteer either time or material for causes touching their hearts.

Many people, he said, don't know that Lions Clubs collect used eyeglasses. On RAM missions, the doctor has often used these glasses for people who could not afford them.

Kayani also wants to encourage young people to volunteer. He noted many young people helping out in New Orleans had found the work moving.

"They realized we're all human beings who need to share," he said.

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Photo caption –

DR. M.B. KAYANI, an ophthalmologist with St. Luke's Cataract and Laser Institute in Bayonet Point, top, has been on 15 domestic and international expeditions for Remote Area Medical Volunteer Corps. On a mission in February in New Orleans to help victims of Hurricane Katrina, above, Kayani and other RAM volunteers gave free medical care to more than 5,000 people, who braved winter temperatures to begin lining up as early as 4 a.m.