

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SATURDAY, DEC. 1, 2007

VALUABLE LESSONS

O.C. eye doctor teaches surgical techniques to Vietnamese counterparts.

BY DOUG IRVING
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The man was old and bent from a lifetime of working the fields, but it was his eyes that told Dr. Gregg Feinerman a story of hardship and poverty.

They had gone white as paper with cataracts so dense that the man could barely tell the difference between night and day. He had lost his sight, little by little, with no real hope of ever seeing the places he knew or the faces he loved again.

This was why Feinerman had traveled halfway around the world, from his Newport Beach vision center to a sprawling government hospital in rural Vietnam. He wanted to help people, and he had chosen the outskirts of Hanoi as one place where the need was great.

Feinerman is an eye surgeon, with the steady hands and confidence to work on diseased eyes and make them see again. He specializes in a kind of cataract surgery that requires such fine movements that it's hard to detect any motion at all.

The Orange County Register profiled Feinerman just before he left on his medical mission to Vietnam. He returned earlier this month, having fixed a few eyes and taught surgeons at the hospital near Hanoi to fix many more.

"The bottom line is, I went into this field to help other people," he said. "And that's what I did."

Feinerman compares the lens of an eye to a peanut M&M. People with cataracts have a bad peanut, and it's his job to peel back the candy coating and replace the peanut,



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DR. GREGG FEINERMAN

GRATEFUL: Gregg Feinerman of Newport Beach poses with a few of the patients he saw during a medical mission to a hospital in Vietnam.

then smooth the candy coating back into place as if nothing had happened.

The surgeons at the hospital where Feinerman stayed knew how to remove and replace eye lenses damaged by the milky haze of cataracts. But he said they were

using older techniques that required bigger incisions and longer recoveries.

The government had purchased top-quality surgical machines, Feinerman said, but hadn't trained the hospital's eye surgeons to use them. As he worked on patients such as

O.C. eye doctor teaches surgical techniques to Vietnamese counterparts.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DR. GREGG FEINERMAN

THROUGH THE LENS: Feinerman works on a patient's eyes at a government hospital in rural Vietnam. Feinerman offered training to surgeons there.



GAINING KNOW-HOW: To train the doctors, Feinerman had them practice on grapes to get a feel for various techniques.

the 92-year-old farmer, Feinerman showed the other surgeons how they could use the machines to make incisions so tiny they wouldn't require a single stitch.

He gave them grapes, and had them peel the skin off with tweezers to get a feel for the operation. Before long, he was just watching and offering an occasional

word of advice as they did the surgeries themselves.

On his first day in Vietnam, Feinerman came into the hospital's waiting room and found it so packed with people that their collective body heat had turned the morning air stuffy and hot. He knew there was no way to get to everybody who had come to

the hospital and taken a place in line.

And he didn't. But he figures that, in time and using the techniques he showed them, the five doctors with whom he worked at the hospital might.

"I've never felt so appreciated," he said. "It was just so amazing."