



Media Statement

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LEI in key Indonesian collaborations to save sight

The Lions Eye Institute (LEI) and two leading Indonesian universities have formed Memorandums of Understanding to facilitate joint eye research and the teaching and exchange of clinicians and researchers.

An MOU with Universitas Indonesia (UI) was signed in Jakarta on 5 November, and comes after the June launch of the revolutionary Virna Glaucoma Drainage Device (Virna), which is being used to save the sight of thousands of Indonesians. The formalisation of an MOU with Udayana University in Bali occurred on 7 November.

The Lions Eye Institute has a long history of teaching surgical and other skills in Indonesia, and the new MOUs will strengthen ties and foster more innovations and training opportunities in the future.

The 'Virna' was developed by young Indonesian ophthalmologist Dr Virna Oktariana and Professor Bill Morgan, the Managing Director of the LEI.

They saw the critical need for an affordable drainage device to tackle the glaucoma crisis in Indonesia. Glaucoma is the second most common cause of blindness in Indonesia after cataract, blinding more than 0.2 per cent of the population (this compares to less than 0.07 per cent in Australia). Glaucoma affects almost two per cent of the Indonesian population over the age of 40.

The Virna, a tube implanted in the eye that drains away fluid and relieves intraocular pressure – a frequent cause of glaucoma and the result of a blockage in the eye's drainage system – can be manufactured in Indonesia for USD100. This is substantially cheaper than conventional treatments which cost around USD1000.

Professor Morgan said the signing of the MOU signalled a milestone in Australian-Indonesian health and medical research relationships.

"At the Lions Eye Institute, we are very proud of the ties we have formed with Indonesian universities and the health care system over many decades. We have developed relationships with Indonesian ophthalmologists that have benefited patients in both countries," he said.

Professor Morgan first went to Indonesia as a young ophthalmologist more than two decades ago, accompanying the LEI's founding Managing Director Professor Ian Constable to Surabaya to do teaching and demonstration surgery. Since then, the LEI and Royal Perth Hospital have organized for many Indonesian ophthalmologists to undertake exchange programs.

Professor Morgan recognised that not only was glaucoma up to 10 times more common in Indonesia than in Australia, but that it was often more severe. "Indonesian patients usually present very late in the course of the disease, often with a blind eye and relatively poor vision in the remaining eye," he said.

Professor Morgan met Dr Oktariana in 2011, and both were keen to work on a project that would make a significant difference in saving people's sight. They started collaborating on the Virna that year, and the device was launched earlier this year and has since been successfully inserted in hundreds of patients.

Professor Morgan is also visiting professor at Udayana University in Denpasar, where he teaches clinics and surgeries, with the result being a dramatic improvement in clinical skills.

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Image: The LEI's Managing Director Professor Bill Morgan (third from left) and the UI's Dr. Ari Fahrial Syam, Dean of Medicine (third from right)

