

Vision and hope in Burma

Dr Phillip Ambler, St Thomas', Medicine, 1975

A cautious sense of optimism is spreading across Myanmar, better known as Burma. There have been peaceful, open elections in recent months, and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi has travelled abroad to meet with world leaders.

Thanks in part to Dr Phillip Ambler, several thousand Burmese are seeing this quiet revolution with their own eyes.

For more than two decades, Dr Ambler has travelled to Burma at least twice annually to perform sight-restoring surgery for impoverished Burmese suffering from cataracts or glaucoma. A GP for most of his career and now semi-retired, his first house job was in St Thomas' Eye

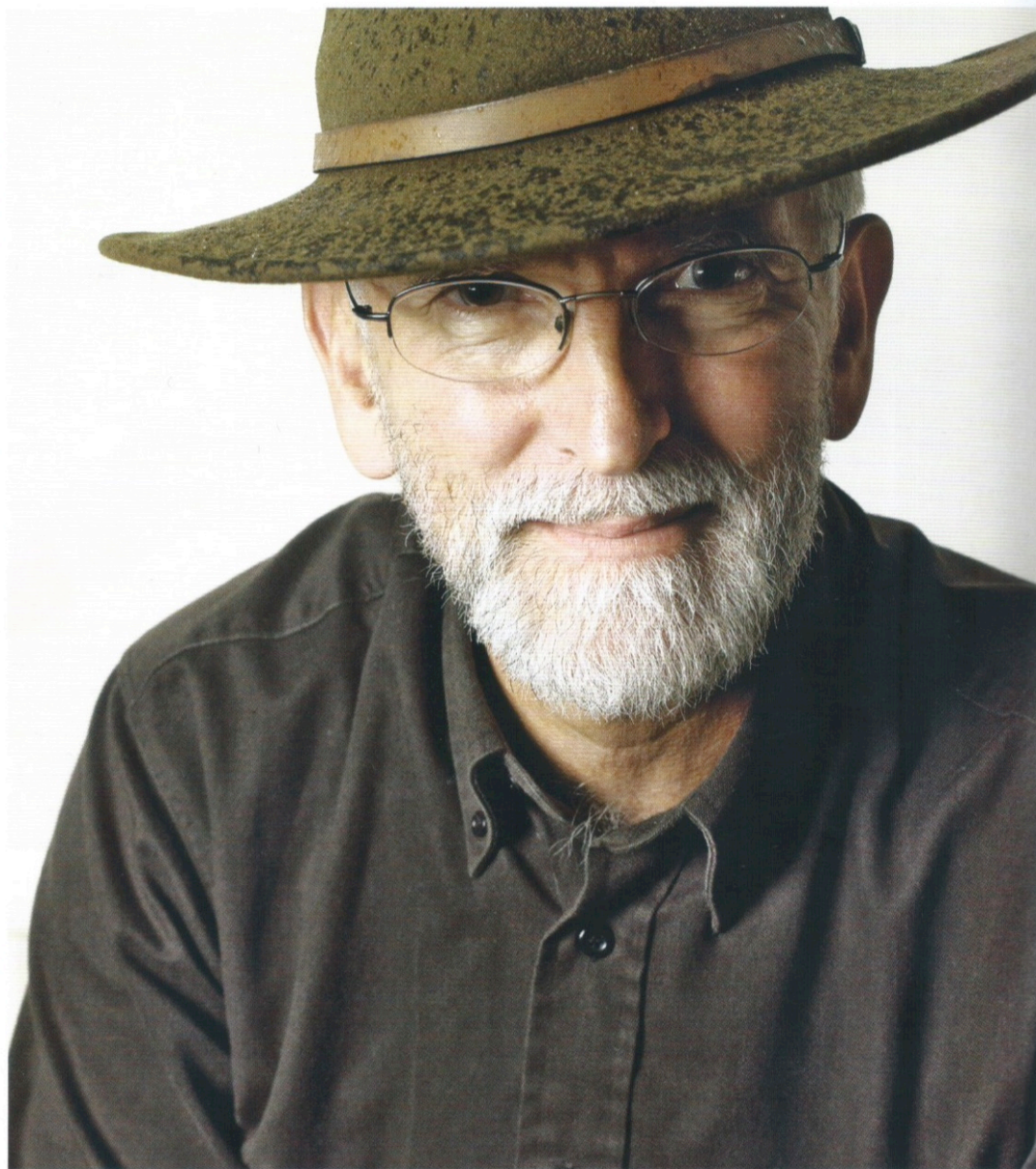
Department and he has remained active in ophthalmology.

In 1990, Dr Ambler saw a Christian Medical Fellowship advert seeking physicians to provide medical care for Burmese refugees. He signed up with Consultant Eye Surgeon Frank

“The people themselves are so inspiring”

Green, and the two of them have been a team ever since. They first worked in a portion of Burma held by pro-democracy forces, but the ruling military junta took control of that territory in 1995. Since then they've operated in clinics along the Burmese-Thai border, usually for two weeks at a time.

Small incision cataract surgery – inserting a plastic lens into the eye – is the most common procedure. While Dr Ambler is trained to lead on several types of eye operations, this is not one of them, so he assists Dr Green. They



perform the operation quickly and with minimal equipment, up to 30 times in a day.

'Eye surgery lends itself to this type of work. You can go in for two weeks and accomplish quite a lot,' he says.

The Burmese government has been aware of the clinics for many years but hasn't hassled Dr Ambler and his colleagues. 'They probably respect that we're not a political organisation.' In fact, he and Dr Green aren't really part of any organisation. Although they

formed a small charity called Karenaid – named in honour of Burma's Karen ethnic minority – they prefer to link up with on-the-ground organisations such as the International Rescue Committee, Malteser International and Médecins sans Frontières.

Expressions of gratitude come in the form of modest, heartfelt gifts, such as a jar of honey or a woven shirt.

'The people themselves are so inspiring. They possess a remarkable gentleness and fortitude. We're lifted up by them.'

