

A Hawkeye's Global Vision

This University of Iowa ophthalmologist brings compassion and surgical training to underserved communities abroad.

By Camille Murray
Ardmore, Pennsylvania

WHEN Dr. Kanwal Singh Matharu boards a plane from Iowa City, his suitcase isn't just filled with clothes and a passport.

It's full of surgical expertise, a philosophy of service and a deep love for the human eye.

In July 2025, the University of Iowa ophthalmologist traveled with Orbis International, the global eyesight-saving nonprofit organization, to Zambia. The country only has 38 ophthalmologists serving a population of 19.4 million people.

For Matharu, the trip was both a continuation of years of global health work and a fulfillment of a dream he's had since high school.

"I went to college with big aspirations and dreams of doing global health," Matharu says. "Orbis was founded at my alma mater, Baylor College of Medicine, so working with them feels like a true



COMBINING CLINICAL PRECISION with a philosophy of putting human connection at the center of care, Dr. Kanwal Singh Matharu evaluates a patient's eyes in a facility in Zambia.

coming-to-fruitation moment."

A Life Rooted in Service

Matharu's life spans several different continents. His father was born in Kenya, his mother in India, and they met in Canada before settling in New Orleans, where Matharu was born.

Growing up in New Orleans as a child of immigrants gave him early awareness

about his own place in the world. His Sikh faith, which emphasizes *sewa*, or selfless service, shaped his view of medicine.

"I try to understand the role Sikhism plays in my life, which is the emphasis on service as a means to demonstrate the shared dignity for every person," Matharu says with compassion.

"Even before I'm a doctor, then an ophthalmologist, I'm a person first. When a patient comes to me and tells me their

"Helping someone see better, that's transformative..."

mother just died, the medicine can wait. Let's talk about the mother. You meet them as a person first."

Choosing the field of ophthalmology was part head, part heart for Dr. Matharu.

"At the highest level, ophthalmology is about really increasing the quality of

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, Matharu balances academic medicine with a global perspective, shaping the way he cares for patients through his heritage, faith and love for science.

life in a way other specialists can't," he explains. "Helping someone see better, that's transformative."

Vision issues run in his own family, making his work even more meaningful. He also loved science in general, from physics to immunology, and the balance of outpatient care with the teamwork of the operating room.

Then there's the beauty of the profession itself.

"I just love looking at the eyes," he shares. "It's the most beautiful organ. What better way could I dedicate my life than to helping someone see?"

Teaching Skills to Equip Others

Matharu's connection to Zambia began through friendship. Years ago, he met Dr. Chimozie Tembo, a Zambian surgeon trained by Orbis, while working in India. Long conversations followed, often late into the night, about raising the standard of eye care in sub-Saharan Africa.

"When I was looking for a country to dedicate our efforts to for the next decade, Zambia was on the short list because of Chimozie," Matharu says. "You have to trust the people you work with."

Last summer's trip was his second visit to Zambia. He mentored two surgeons in phacoemulsification, a cataract surgery technique that uses ultrasound to break up the eye's lens, and visited a rural area where Orbis supports a rising young surgeon from Zimbabwe.

Unlike short-term medical missions, which focus on providing direct care, Orbis emphasizes sustainable change through transfer of skills. Matharu's role was entirely educational, coaching surgeons in simulation labs rather than



HANDS-ON GUIDANCE reflects Matharu's focus on mentorship, as he works alongside local physicians to refine techniques.



A SHARED COMMITMENT TO SIGHT brings together physicians and trainees globally, as Matharu strives to strengthen clinical skills and expand access to specialized eye care abroad.

performing surgeries himself.

"Simulation training works, we have tons of data," he states. "You don't want someone with no hand-eye coordination touching a patient. Just like pilots train on simulators, surgeons should too."

An Eye on a Bigger Picture

Beyond the operating room, Matharu hopes to integrate pediatric ophthalmology with broader health initiatives, including addressing vitamin deficiencies linked to eye disease.

"The big dream is to work across specialties to tackle malnutrition and its impact on vision," he explains.

The University of Iowa has a long history with Orbis, making Matharu's partnership a natural fit. "Iowa's strength is education, and that's exactly what sustainable eye care requires."

Life in Iowa City suits him, from playing basketball to strolling the riverfront and connecting with the local literary scene.

"It's peaceful here," he says, although he admits

the Midwestern winters can be harsh for someone raised in a warmer climate in New Orleans.

Admiration for His Peers

Matharu's global work has shown him the resilience of doctors working with far fewer resources than most Americans can imagine.

"These are the most inspiring human beings I've ever met," he says. "They make huge sacrifices to care for their countrymen and women. My problems feel very small in comparison."

For Matharu, the goal is to be a small

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part of a much bigger effort, one that leaves lasting skills in the hands of local professionals. "That's the Orbis model, and I believe it's the right model to embrace," he says.

In Zambia, that means when Matharu flies home, the work doesn't stop. Surgeons he's trained will keep operating, passing their skills to others and restoring sight to patients he'll never meet.

And that, for him, is exactly the point.

Side Note: "Give what you have. To someone, it may be better than you dare to think." —Henry W. Longfellow

Side Note: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.