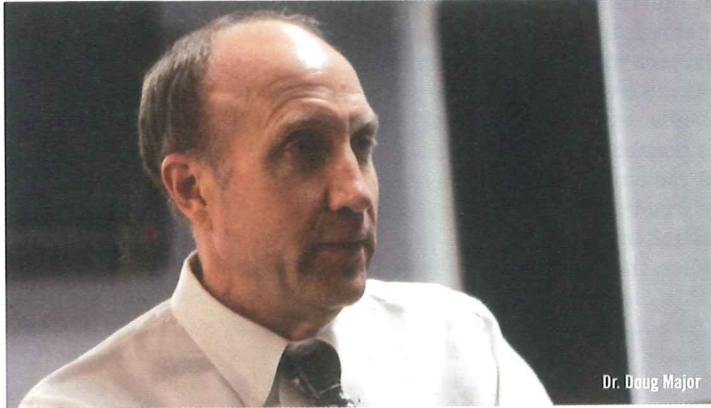


DR. MAJOR AND THE LIONS CLUB

THE "DINOSAUR" AT THE LIONS' DEN:

LOCAL PROGRAM IS THE ENVY OF THE NATION

By Natasha Dalton



Dr. Doug Major

I'LL GO OUT ON A LIMB AND SUGGEST THAT—WHEN *counting the advantages of living in this county—most people don't put the Lions Club in their Top Ten list. But that might be because not everyone knows that for decades the Lions Club has been doing something quite extraordinary: it's been taking care of all of the county kids' eyes.*

Generally, when a child gets a regular physical (and many don't), her vision isn't checked by a doctor, and definitely not by an optometrist. Our county is exceptional in that regard because our Lions Club brings eye doctors to all the schools in the area.

This initiative, which has no equivalent in the nation, was launched in the 1960s by two doctors. They started it when one of them, Doctor McDonald, served as the mayor of Pismo Beach, and the other one, Doctor Pence, was the mayor of Arroyo Grande. Both of them cared deeply about their community, and both recognized the value of early intervention in the case of vision problems. The program began at the time when each town had its own independent pharmacies, all professionals belonged to service clubs, and medical advertising was considered improper. It was personal standing in the community that attracted new clients to a business, including doctors' offices. For that reason, doctors who participated in vision

screenings didn't do them in their own towns: they wanted to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest.

Since then the trend has reversed, and optometrists—for the sake of convenience—now opt for screenings in their hometowns. Thus, Doctor Major, an optometrist from Paso Robles and the program's current coordinator, visits all six schools in Paso Robles; he also serves as a fill-in doctor in the case of emergencies. Doctor Hider sees the kids in Atascadero, and, Doctor Major's partner, Doctor Hile does all the work at the preschools and Head Starts, from Shandon to Oceano. He covers 30 schools!

They, and fifteen other optometrists who currently work with the Lions, see firsthand the impact of the screenings. They also know that if the program lapses, it would be practically impossible to restart: where would you find a dozen doctors willing to disrupt their own practice on short notice?

Right next-door to us, in Santa Maria, people have been trying to start similar screenings for years—with no luck: they simply cannot convince enough doctors to commit their time.

Today's pharmacies, as well as many optometric services, are corporate. Medical billboards are everywhere, and doctors in commercial settings, like Wal-Mart, aren't into developing community ties; they work for a paycheck. Even in small towns, the small-town traditions are being replaced by new business models.

But in San Luis Obispo County, the old-fashioned program, based on the idea of community service, is thriving. "I've calculated that since I've started, we've seen close to 1,000,000 eyes!" Doctor Major says. A million eyes means half a million screens. That's a lot of kids! Perhaps, the satisfaction of doing something that important is what motivates everyone involved.

"It's almost surprising to see someone enjoying his work as much as Doctor Major does," Mike Milby of the Paso Robles Lions Club says. But this seems to be true for everyone who volunteers for this program.

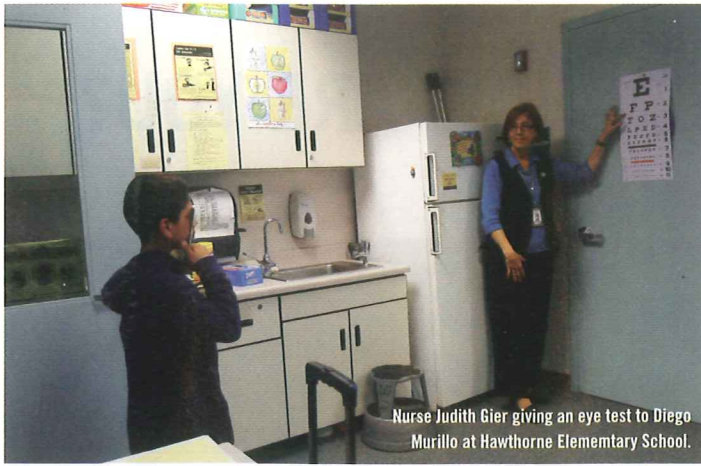
From the very beginning, true to the Lions International's commitment to meet a challenge from Helen Keller to be the "Knights of Vision," the local Lions have been providing "a field office" every time doctors come to town for the screening. The "office" is built into a trailer, which at the end of the day moves to the next campus.



Lions Vision Screening



Lions Vision Screening Van



Nurse Judith Gier giving an eye test to Diego Murillo at Hawthorne Elementary School.

How big of a deal is this set-up for the county?—"It's a very big deal," Doctor Major says. Annually, the screening finds that about 9% of the kids have vision problems. Without the screening, these problems could be missed. In fact, the screenings have been so effective that meeting a third-grader with a high first-time prescription most likely means that her family is new to the area, because our kids' vision is being corrected from the time they enter preschool! (Extension of the screenings to the very young became possible after the passing of Prop. 10, known as the First Five.)

And that's the whole point. "The first years of life are when it's particularly important," Doctor Major says. Lazy eye, for example, is highly treatable at that age. "You don't want to see a fourth-grader who cannot read only because she cannot see well," Doctor Major reasons.

"Many young kids are thought to be autistic when their only problem is that they're far-sighted," he explains. "When kids cannot see well, they go around touching things, and they don't look at people. But then a child gets glasses, and the next day he isn't autistic anymore!"

There're several zip codes around the country where schools invite doctors for check-ups. In our county only Lucia Mar School District could possibly afford to do so, but even then, there's no guarantee that the doctors would respond. Meanwhile, our children's eyes are being checked in preschool, kindergarten, first, third and fifth grades!

During the screening period (which usually begins in September and lasts until the Thanksgiving) a doctor sees close to 300 kids a day. The success rate of the screening is extraordinary: over 90% of those referred for further evaluation discover that they do indeed need medical attention. (In comparison, at places where screenings are done by an optometric technician, rather than a doctor, there's a high number of false alarms.)

At the screening, doctors perform an acuity test, making sure that the child's eyes work as a team. They also look for signs of far- or near-sightedness. They can even detect learning problems.

By now, the process is so well-choreographed that the doctors know well in advance when they'll be needed. The screening always begins in the North, and, after moving through every town in the county, finishes in Atascadero. The members of the Atascadero club have always played an especially important role: they've provided, equipped and fixed the trailer for the exams—and it's not a small job: "We wore out three trailers already," Doctor Major admits.

According to the Atascadero Lions Club' secretary Larry Bryant, his club has fifteen members, but they're all really committed to helping the kids. "In Atascadero alone, we screen over 1800 students a year," he says.

These "crusty old guys" do BBQs and donate the funds to families in need. "They're amazing," Doctor Major says. "They've done it for years, so they sometimes forget how much their work means to us all."

When the trailer starts rolling, a doctor should be there every day. Even if at times someone isn't eager to leave his office for several grueling hours on a school campus, in the end the doctors come through, and they all do a great job. All together they screen 16,000-17,000 students and 3,000- 4,000 preschoolers a year!

And then, there're the school nurses. They are the third crucial element in the arrangement that makes the whole program work. Nurses help coordinate the schedule, assist in the van and make sure that the parents follow the doctor's recommendations. "The program cannot work without the school nurses. They're our heroes," Doctor Major says. And he has a point: each screening identifies 25-30 kids who need further attention. It falls on the school nurse to do a follow-up with the families so that the kids get the care they need.

The screening days can get hectic, but for the kids they're usually more fun than frenzy. "Students like going on the van because we show them a video—to give them something to look at in the distance. And both the optometrists and the volunteers are very patient and nice," Judith Grier, a school nurse from San Luis Obispo, explains. "The nurses and the teachers like the Lions Club's program because we see that it works."

"This program is like a dinosaur," Doctor Major laughs. "I was fortunate to come to this area when the idea of community service was very strong, and the doctors' work was community-based. We need to keep it going. As long as I'm around, I'll make sure it does," he adds.

For more info, go to www.slolionseyes.org

Update on Dental Care

Your Mouth Works Hand in Hand with Your Body



Dr. Dassenko

Dental care is just one part of total health care. Because of that, we need to keep current with your entire health history, the good and the bad.

Be sure to tell us if—since your last visit—you...

- have experienced any new allergies or sensitivities
- have quit smoking (or started)
- are taking any new medications, even over-the-counter drugs
- have had any accidents or injuries
- have been diagnosed with any illness or other medical condition
- have had a baby

We may need to use an alternative local anesthetic, for example, or to administer

an antibiotic before treatment, depending on what you tell us.

In turn, we'll alert you to possible problems for you to discuss with your physician. Over 40 serious diseases—including bulimia, tumors and diabetes—can be detected in the mouth. The texture, color and condition of your tongue and gums give us clues to high blood pressure or osteoporosis. That's why we encourage you to make regular dental appointments. We're here to make sure your teeth stay in great shape, along with the rest of your body.

Pamela Dassenko, DDS practices cosmetic and family dentistry at: 1250 Peach Street, Suite G San Luis Obispo CA (805) 549-8483

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A Paid Health Commentary