

NURSE'S VOICE FROM THE FIELD

The Gift of Sight: A Nurse's Journey in Bridging Grief and Hope

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Abstract

This reflective narrative chronicled a nurse's lived experience in bridging grief and hope through the Eye Tissue Retrieval Program of Baguio General Hospital and Medical Center (BGHMC), the first eye bank in the Cordillera region. Anchored in compassion, cultural sensitivity, and indigenous values, the story illuminated how nursing care extends beyond clinical practice to embrace empathy, ethics, and human connection. Drawing from real encounters with donor families, the article highlighted how nurses facilitate the transformation of loss into legacy, and sorrow into service. Challenges encountered—such as cultural beliefs, time constraints in tissue retrieval, and limited awareness—were discussed in the context of eye-banking practices in developing countries. The narrative concluded by honoring the courage of donors and their families, while underscoring the enduring role of nurses as healers, advocates, and bridges of light in the journey from grief to sight.

Keywords: *eye banking, corneal transplantation, nurse coordination, cultural sensitivity, grief and hope, donation ethics, Cordillera, Philippines*

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The night was still when I received the call. Virginia, a 52-year-old mother dearly loved by her family, had just passed after a brave battle with cancer. Four days earlier, as she lay quietly in her hospital bed, her husband Jesse gathered the courage to ask a question that would change lives: "Can we make a difference in people's lives?"

Moved by his words, Virginia expressed her final wish—to donate her eyes. When her family reached out to our Eye Tissue Retrieval Unit, their decision turned grief into generosity. In honoring Virginia's wish, they gifted light to another's darkness. As a nurse and transplant coordinator, I carried not only corneal tissue but also a sacred promise: that love which transcends both death and grief can become a source of grace.

The Heart Behind the Program

In April 2019, Baguio General Hospital and Medical Center (BGHMC) became home to the first eye bank in the Cordillera Region—a satellite retrieval unit in partnership with the Eye Bank Foundation of the Philippines (EBFP). Before this initiative, eye-tissue donation and transplantation were concentrated mainly in Metro Manila, leaving regional hospitals dependent on the national eye bank for tissues (Eye Bank Foundation of the Philippines, n.d.).

Eye banking plays an essential role in corneal transplantation by collecting, processing, and distributing corneal tissue for grafting (Loh & Terry, 2010). A functional eye-banking system is critical to addressing corneal blindness, which remains a leading cause of reversible vision loss worldwide. Yet, in developing nations, eye banking faces persistent barriers, including sociocultural beliefs, limited awareness, and logistical constraints (Rao et al., 2015).

Within its first months, the BGHMC-EBFP program facilitated 11 successful corneal tissue donations, a milestone proving that generosity thrives even in the highlands. Success here is not merely procedural—it is cultural. In the Cordillera, where indigenous beliefs shape attitudes toward life and death, engagement requires humility and respect. I grounded my practice in our people's values: "*Adi tako bukodan di gawis*" (we do not keep goodness to ourselves) and "*Inayan*" (the sacred caution not to violate what is right). These values resonate deeply when families choose to share the gift of sight.

Conversations in Compassion

As a transplant coordinator, I often entered spaces of profound grief carefully. I do not rush. I listen. I let silence breathe. Families ask difficult questions. Some hesitate, but many display remarkable courage. One wife fulfilling her late husband's wish said, "He always said, if I go, at least I can leave a legacy." A mother shared, "He was so young, yet even in his passing, he continues to give."

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Such moments reminded me that organ and tissue donation is not merely a medical act—it is an ethical and human one. Literature emphasizes that transplant coordinators navigate complex moral terrain, balancing empathy for donor families with responsibility toward recipients (Shimazono, 2022). These conversations require more than training; they demand cultural fluency, emotional intelligence, and the strength to hold space for both sorrow and hope—qualities that define nursing at its core.

The Road Through Challenges

Building and sustaining the Eye Tissue Retrieval Program came with challenges:

Cultural Beliefs: In many Cordilleran communities, traditional rituals and fears about the body after death shape attitudes toward donation. Building trust required culturally responsive dialogue.

Timely Retrieval and Preservation: Corneal tissues must ideally be retrieved within six hours after death to maintain viability (Loh & Terry, 2010). Our mountainous terrain and limited transport made this a daily test of coordination and endurance.

Awareness Gaps: Community knowledge of corneal donation was limited. Continuous education campaigns were essential to demystify the process.

Limited Personnel: With few trained staff, nurses often filled multiple roles—counselor, educator, logistics planner, and advocate.

Despite these constraints, every success story reaffirmed the program's value. A grandmother once again read her prayers. A child saw her mother's face clearly. A farmer returned to his fields. These are not merely restored visions—they are renewed lives.

In the Philippines, national data show that between 1995 and 2021, 86–93% of cornea donors were medico-legal cases, 80% were under 40 years of age, and 85% died from trauma (Gonzales, 2023). Such data highlight the ongoing need to expand voluntary community-based donation programs and to sustain retrieval efforts outside urban centers.

Steadfast Through the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, global eye-banking activities suffered severe disruption due to infection-control restrictions, declining donor numbers, and heightened safety concerns (Tan et al., 2021). In the Philippines, the BGHMC Eye Tissue Retrieval Program adapted swiftly—revising protocols, wearing full PPE, and collaborating with infection-control units to ensure safety and continuity. Even in isolation, the gift of sight continued to be shared.

Honoring Our Donors and Partners

This mission would not have been possible without our heroes—the donors and their families—who said yes in moments of profound grief. Their decision transformed pain into purpose. To say yes in sorrow is to leave behind a legacy of light.

We are also indebted to our partners—the Eye Bank Foundation of the Philippines, the Department of Health, the BGHMC team, community health workers, and local leaders. Each eye retrieved represents teamwork and shared humanity; each transplant celebrates what is possible when hearts align in compassion.

A Legacy of Vision

Through this journey, I have learned that the gift of sight is not merely about restoring vision—it is about restoring hope. Behind every successful retrieval lies a family's courage, a nurse's compassion, and a community's belief that goodness multiplies when shared.

In the quietness of every night's call, I remember Virginia's eyes—her final gift that continues to see the world through others. Her legacy, and that of many others, lives on in every smile, every sunrise, every life that now sees clearly.

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