Donating a Year's Salary: Dr. Stuart Clive's Mission to Cure Blindness in Ghana Transcript

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Podcast Introduction and Guest Background

Welcome to the Doctors Making a Difference podcast where we help physicians to be empowered with the tools they need to successful in medicine, in finance, and in life.

Join us as we highlight doctors and other professionals around the world who are making a difference. We are privileged today to have as our guest Dr.

Stuart Clive. He's given me permission to call him Stu. Dr Clives has been practicing in Western Idaho as an emergency room physician for a long time and has this amazing story of donating a one year salary completely to help restore blindness.

every secure blindness for people in Ghana. And I read this story and I was pretty inspired. Couldn't wait to meet you as Stu. I think it's pretty cool.

So I'm interested to hear kind of this whole career path that led to this interesting place. Would you mind introducing yourself to our audience? Sure, I'm Stuart Clive.

I am an emergency physician. As you mentioned, been practicing in Western Idaho for, that's approaching 20 years. And before that I was in Minnesota. Did my undergrad at BYU and I went to medical school at Emory University and then I did residency training at UT Houston.

You know, I think most of the audience are physicians. Most people will say like, well, they did this pedigree and they went to this many schools and went this place and have this board certification.

And, you know we all need to have that as far as our basis. What led you back to Western Idaho? Is that where you grew up or what led to that part of world?

My parents are retired out to Washington state and my wife's family was headquartered in the Salt Lake. So we split the difference and settled in Boise area.

It's a nice place over there. It seems like the population of Boise in particular has grown a lot, especially during your 20-year period that you've been there, I imagine you have seen a lots of changes in that part of the world.

It's grown too much, unfortunately, but it's still a great place. Very moderate weather. We are not suffering through the winter like most of the country is.

Yeah, that's true. And Western United States has been particularly dry this year. I enjoy skiing and snowmobiling and all those things, so we are wishing it would snow a little bit more, So just kind of another question on this.

So you went into emergency room medicine. And so this is part of the story. I want to hear a little bit more about your decision to support curing blindness in Ghana.

The part I thought was interesting is, you're not an ophthalmologist. You don't really do eye health. What led to this decision? So first of all, just tell us about what you committed to do and the nuts and bolts of how it's working and then how did you arrive at that decision.

Sure. It's not straightforward. I guess I've just spent a lot of time over the course of my life and career pondering how you can get the most meaning out of life, how do you be of most value to your community, to the people in

need.

Why Stu Chose Western Idaho and Emergency Medicine

I had seen a documentary some years ago and they went to North Korea and in North Korean this ophthalmologist would do these outreaches and he would over the course of a week about 700 surgeries.

It was just every 10 minutes curing a person's blindness. And it was just this phenomenal thing. I was so impressed that I went and researched the charity that he was with and found that they could cure blindness for this incredibly small amount of money.

And I think that it can be as cheap as like a hundred dollars to cure someone of blindness in some countries. Gamma's a little bit more mature and so it's little more expensive there.

Just when I thought about the potential impact that a contribution could make, I just couldn't imagine anything more than giving someone sight for $100.

Are they primarily doing cataract surgery or lens replacement or what type of surgeries are they able to do? It's primarily cataract. As their system is maturing, they are getting more advanced procedures.

They're able to do some retina surgeries, They are able do cornea transplants. they're getting much more robust. Initially it was just catarax and I think that's how it's progressed.

My contribution is tagged for completing a residency in a hospital in Ghana. And they were able to build the hospital primarily, but they didn't have the funds, the USAID shut down.

And so they did not have funds to complete the administrative offices, residency offices and weren't going to be able start a residency. So my funds will go to that project.

And so, yeah, so it'll be, I guess, the full spectrum of ophthalmologic care that I'll support. Well, and not just those folks who have the surgery, but you're also, it sounds like, involved in the education process of others who are going to learn to be opthalmological surgeons and going on to correct probably tens of thousands of cases of blindness over the course of a career.

That's even more than I actually had envisioned that this would impact. It's amazing. I feel tremendously blessed to have found an opportunity like this where I can make a significant difference.

One of the things we've talked about on this podcast quite a bit is it seems like the news media and a lot of stories that kind of bubble to the top talk about all the challenging sides of medicine, burnout and EMR usage and Poor compensation and prior authorizations and all those things are the lived reality of all of us.

I'm a practicing physician just like you. We all deal with the imperfections of the system. And so I think this is kind of incredible because a lot of times we focus on the negative so much it's easy.

It's hard to see past it and see what kind on the world with my own skill set. And you specifically are talking about doing something that's going to be really impactful to lots of people thousands of miles away.

Discovering the Impact of Cure Blindness

It's not even in your area of specialty. I know you just say it like it's kind of a normal thing, but I do think this is actually pretty incredible to find a way to give back and to leave a lasting legacy or impact.

So I'm curious, how did you decide to actually act on it? So I guess I'm religious, I am Christian, and as a result of going to church every week and being doing that constant prompting of like, are you doing enough?

Are you following the example of Christ? I have just over the course of my life, always thought about it. Always wondered if I was making enough of a difference in the world.

And then having donated some to this charity in past, knowing what good work that they were able to accomplish. I guess it was just in the back of my mind that as I approached the end of career, did I really want to just lay it down, or could I do something more with my training and education?

And, you know, I suppose you spoke earlier about burnout. I was certainly pretty burned out, as are many people in our specialty. And, you know, I had already kind of reached my target, my goal.

I planned on retiring at 57. And so I crossed that threshold. Looked at my finances and when I reviewed my finance, as I realized I'm in pretty good shape.

My colleagues are retiring with comparable savings. and they're at comparable ages and laying down their tools. But I still felt healthy and strong and I felt like I was able to do the job.

And I've been blessed with having a great job that is much less stressful than some of the jobs that I have had in the past. So I didn't feel the urgency to get out of that emergency department.

I just started thinking about well, How long would I work to cure a stranger of blindness? And when I pondered the question that way, I was like, it would certainly be way more than an hour or way than a shift or, you know, way And when you do the math and you realize that you can, say, cure not just one person in a shift, but many, potentially dozens, depending on what your salary is, it kind of made math easy to me.

I realized, okay, I would do that for a stranger. So the question became, how many would I want to do this for? How many what I'd be willing to this? And that was actually kind of the harder question, was not whether, but kind how long to do it, how much of a sacrifice.

And I wanted to it enough that I felt like I had done as much as I could, that had really pushed myself to really sacrifice, and a year just made sense.

It was a nice round number to prolong my career that much. So that's the commitment I've made. The experience that has been so positive and so gratifying that, I don't know, it may end at a year.

I shouldn't say this if my wife listens, but… may continue on beyond the year, we'll see. Well, you have this ability to make a big impact. One of the things, this kind of harkens to lots of things we've talked about on this show.

And one of, the big underlying things that I think is pretty important, foundational to be able to, make an impact is to have your financial house in order.

and I, think that's basically what you're saying. You hit those financial targets. you can get to where it hits your, financial independence number. then at that point.

you're not working just because you have to make a paycheck. You're working because he wanna make it difference. And you not necessarily doing it to please some administrator or anything like that.

Because you said, I love helping people and maybe I can use my time and energy and resources to do something good in the world. It's just amazing. It was, it inspired me when I read about it.

Funding Ophthalmology Training in Ghana

And I think it'll be inspirational to others to not just think about what you can do right here, right now in your community, but what could they do to give out?

What could I do? To make a difference to other people. a Christian background or other religious background, or

just people who are really humanitarian in their hearts.

They really want to use that skill set and the aspirations of becoming a physician to make a big impact and a tremendous difference. It sounds like you've had a real kind of awakening or an understanding on that.

One of the biggest surprises of this experience, and I've been doing it for three months now. And so I have been donating all of my income for that time.

The biggest surprise in doing that has been my change in perspective on going to my shift. I started heading this direction, got all the Gabby. Yeah. I mean, I was burned out a little bit, not as bad as I could have been, but I wasn't excited to go to my shifts.

But now doing this, it really is something that I'm excited about. And I no longer wondering, oh, geez, when's my next shift? When am I going to have the opportunity to do more, to make more of a difference?

And then when I am there, and happier, nicer to the patients, good for the soul. When you're putting your dollars to work, we all need to the mindset that every dollar we earn gets a job and gets put to work so that it can be good for our finances.

But in this case, you say, look, my financial house is in order, and now I'm trying to restore vision and help people across the world. And that is joyful if you realize that, every shift, or every $1 you make is going to go and, help somebody else who is, in tremendous need.

That's got to be a big perspective shift. How has it affected your Like just career burnout. Like you even talk, and hinted maybe even doing it longer if you're not feeling burned out.

Right, I don't feel that urgency anymore to be done. Before, as I mentioned, got a good job. The nights were the thing that were getting me, that we're making me feel being up all night was, cause I worked 24 hour shifts.

And so that got pretty long sometimes. Until yeah, it was hard. But now I had a shift and I'd been up for 22 hours or 23 hours, or something like that.

I'm just steadily busy dealing with some critical patients. And I stopped and I just pondered, where would I rather be? You know, would rather I be in Europe?

Would I Rather be visiting my kids? would i rather Be going to a game or whatever? No, I'd rather. Be here. This is where I want to be. Well, and you know you can find a balance or you try to find some harmony between all those different things.

But I think it's interesting and a lot of times folks who find themselves a burnout and i've been there too. We all find ourselves saying, Is this it?

What comes next? And maybe the only thing you can think of is escape. How do I get out of this? I gotta get outta this as quick as possible. And yet it's a lot healthier to say, I found a way to make sure my finances make sense, but I'm no longer doing this because I have to do it right this minute.

I'm doing it because I choose to, and I want to show up for my patients. And I wanna be able to use the skillset. So I feel like I am a much better doctor when I show that way for patients, if I have well rested and want be there.

If I doing just because it's another shift and have to do it and it feels kind of drudgery, I not as good a doctor. I think these financial things you talked about and kind perspective shift, it not just a good idea.

It's almost like mandatory that we find something that's a little bit higher purpose to what we do. Right. Yeah. And getting ahead of the game, being comfortable that you're secure so that, you can then look outward.

I mean, that's all the things I guess I'm a little bit embarrassed about. Oh, so how much have you given in past to this charity? And I've been embarrassed because, I would just give a bit here and there each year at the end of year.

So for my own security, had to settle my financial house and be totally ready and then I could start we're making a significant contribution. Yeah, depending on how you structure your career, some people do it like that where they wait till everything is settled and then go it.

Burnout, Financial Independence, and Purpose

Other people will do that a little bit. Along the way, they say, I've met my financial targets for this fiscal year, this calendar year. And the rest of it can go to charity or tithing or whatever it may be, whatever you want that money to do good.

I think it's helpful for all of us to say it is not just money. It's time. Its expertise, its skill, and it just looking out for our fellow neighbor. What do you think of when I've talked about international service?

Because I have done quite a bit of that type of stuff. Sometimes people will say, well, what about us here in our town? How come you're not giving us of your time and resources more generously?

We certainly do all that stuff, but it's a little bit more quiet, a lot more anonymous. And so I was curious, how did you decide on Ghana? And how do respond to folks who say well how come your not donating a year's salary to our local charity cause?

That is something that I've pondered a lot. I have actually had this discussion with my children. How do you balance that you're giving, your charity, between people that are distant and people they're near?

Do you have a greater obligation to your neighbors? And I guess as I have with my children traveled to the third world several times, and then I served a mission in Ecuador for a couple of years, I personally, through that experience, have developed quite a bond with the people in the Third World.

So I feel connected to them. I felt like they are my neighbors. And so I didn't have as much of a hesitation about sending my dollars far. But even with that factored in, the backup reasoning in my mind was where can I make the most difference?

If I gave my year's salary here in community, sure, it would be great. I could add significantly to the joy in the world. But if instead I can cure a thousand people of blindness in a third world, which is making the best place it can possibly be.

And that was how I made my decision. Yeah. Well, and you've noticed the same thing I have. There's opportunities to help people everywhere and people who are generous tend to do that throughout their entire lives.

I can say it's often done kind of quietly through opportunities at home. And sometimes when you get on an airplane or you send money to a different place, it receives a little more attention, but it all kind the the thing.

If you consider yourself a citizen of planet earth and the people on the world are your neighbors and look out for each other, It's a tremendously good way to to it.

And the other thing I've noticed, just like you kind of hinted to, is when you talk to people in developing countries and you assess the needs there, it's just orders of magnitude different.

And I noticed when we've gone on similar trips to Africa and South America to go help folks. Our relatively small contribution usually bring in something less than $5,000 worth of aid to help with some cause.

And it'll fund them for months. Like the amount of impact they can have with that relatively, small amount, of money

is just incredible. And so it is a way to magnify the effort.

And then if you give somebody just a little bit of independence, if use have someone in Ghana who now can see and take care of themselves, that's a person who's no longer in that deep poverty cycle.

They pull themselves out of it because now they have an opportunity. That's the gift that is unmatched. It's amazing. People from my charity have pointed out that when you have a person in the third world who's blind, they aren't the only person that's affected by this.

There's typically another family member who is drafted to support them, and so essentially by curing that blindness, you're curating two people. or saving two people.

You're giving one person the autonomy and the independence to care for themselves, and you're given that other person that usually they said a girl that's pulled out of school.

And so you are giving her education and her future as well. Well, you've discovered the same thing. I have most people, if you give them an opportunity and a chance, They don't want to hand out.

They just want an opportunity. If they want a way to be able to lift themselves up, there are some who might want handouts and might it to just something that's given to them forever.

But the majority of people, when they're given a chance to receive an education, given the chance, to improve their health, they wanted, and they'll take it.

And that how some of these countries that are in the developing process will continue to make tremendous headway is just by individually is one by one, giving them that opportunity, then they pull themselves.

It's incredible. So cool what you're doing. Thank you. I feel that I'm the one that's blessed about as much as anyone. It is just an amazing opportunity to serve.

There have just been an accumulation of blessings over the course of my life that have made it possible for this to happen. Everything the parents taught me that made possible me to go to school and earn a good living.

And then just the training and the experiences that I've had that have made me look outward. And now to be able to do this, it's just really one of the great blessings of my life to.

Choosing Global Service Over Local Giving

Awesome. Well, I want to talk a little bit about what advice you would give to others, because people listening to this are across the entire spectrum.

Some are medical students, some are residents, and some have been in their career for a lot of years. In perspective of now and hindsight, how would you advise people to find things like this to give back to, whether it be local or far away?

Because there's a lotta people say, "I'm so busy, i don't have time to even think about this," or "i don' have enough money, or i'm in so much debt, that i can't think of doing anything else to help somebody else." You've talked about the joy it brought you, and I'm just curious, what advice would you give to others who are along that path?

I would have two bits of advice, I guess. The first is to look and try to find that thing that you're excited about. You sense my excitement about this project, and it is a wonderful thing to me, but it might not be the same for somebody else.

Somebody else might want to fix the hunger problem in their community. Someone else may want dig a well in the third world. This is something that I'm just thrilled about, just excited And so seek out something like that so that

you then have that thrill and that satisfaction in meeting that need.

And then the other thing I regret not doing earlier is dedicating a shift. If I had had that opportunity or if I'd had thought previously, if thought I'm going to pick up an extra shift and donate those funds to the charity of my choice, that would have provided some of that, I think, burnout resolution a lot earlier in my career.

Because as I've said, you know, when you, know what you're doing, When you are excited about what your doing and you go in and work that shift, it sure changes your experience on that.

Now, when you tie what you're doing to a higher purpose, I think it always helps. I've had a chance to volunteer quite a bit in some of these in Uganda and South America.

And one of the things I noticed for myself and for other volunteers who've come with us, because we're not going there to earn money, we are not specifically going one by one to say, well, how many dollars did I make on this shift and what am I going to do with those dollars?

The ability to volunteer your time and resources to help somebody else. It almost just feels like a vacation or it's just pure because you're helping somebody who has a need.

And I think all the way through our careers, if we can lace that through and say there's an opportunity to, to somebody without necessarily just punching the clock and doing it because I have to earn so many RVUs, I'm doing because want to.

Help this person, those opportunities. I mean, for me, that's brought me tremendous joy. and I've think that that wonderful thing to try to figure out a way to do it in your career like you mentioned.

Right. Integrating it into my career is the most kind of interesting thing about it for me. I had considered doing Doctors Without Borders or going on some of the mission trips that I have seen and those are wonderful.

Those are great experiences. Everyone that i've spoken to has done those. has had a fantastic experience and has come back a changed person and so those are wonderful but like I said the fact that I have this experience during my shift within my career or the same things that i've been doing has been quite different and surprising.

Yeah I actually like your idea of taking one incremental piece of your career integrated throughout an entire career path and said, every so many shifts or every, so, many dollars, a portion of that goes to something that I really believe in, or I want to help somebody.

Because I think that does help give us purpose when you realize it's not selfish. It's, not about me, it is about helping others. And so I like that idea quite a bit, actually.

Well, It is not just an idea. Something we probably need to do to avoid burnout. Right, right. That's cleansing for the soul. So another question, have you been to Ghana yet?

I have not. My wife and I are planning on going this summer. Seeing the hospitals, seeing the countries, and seeing people. And we're pretty excited about it.

That'll be awesome. Yeah. You can imagine.

Advice for Physicians on Meaningful Giving

It really changes your perspective on the trip. Oh yeah, yeah. You're not going there necessarily as a tourist, you're going to go as an integral part of this team and you are going see the work that's been able to be done because of the contributions that you've had.

I'm sure you'll meet others there who are benefiting directly from that and it'll really solidify your efforts. Probably

after that, your wife will be on board with doing even more if you want.

When I first proposed the idea to her, my wife was hesitant. Let's phrase it that way. She says, you want to go do what? How much do you wanna give, do wanna do?

But then when I spoke with the people at Cure Blindness, when they gave us a list of what could be accomplished by this and mentioned the scale of the problem.

In Ghana, there are 200,000 people that are blind that have curable blindness. And with our gift, we'll be able to take out a little chunk of that But when my wife heard about how many there were, she was like, well, we should turn them all.

And so that got her on board. I don't know if I have that many years left in me. A century left me, but she's pretty excited about it. She's. It's a hesitation when she thinks about it one way, but when you think about another way she's thrilled.

That's pretty cool. And you know, the other thing like I mentioned earlier is I still think it's really interesting that this is not within your field of expertise.

I mean, as an ER doctor, you kind of deal a little bit with everything, But you're not an eye surgeon. So you wouldn't think like that, eye surgery was going to be kind your main thing that you are doing with a donation.

But I've found that same thing with other international service things that I have been involved with. You have a broad medical training and your understanding of the disease process.

Even if that is not exactly what you've done with your specialty, you have the opportunity to help a lot of people. And I've had people sometimes say, well, I'm such and such specialist.

I can't go with you or donate. You know, they can always send money, but they don't really have. The understanding because they say that's not my specialty.

But I would say goodness gracious, your physician you train in, uh, You're a fully fledged MD or DO you. Have that training. Just because you narrowed it a little bit in your specialty.

It doesn't mean you still can't participate or understand that disease process. So that's, again, I think it's remarkable that an ER doctor is the one that is sponsoring this and taking this on for probably, you know, eventually tens of thousands of people who will benefit directly or indirectly from the work that you're doing.

But we all went into medicine, I think, to make a difference is ultimately what it was about. And like I said, you just find that thing that resonates for you.

There are great things that you can do in emergency medicine. I have colleagues that have used their emergency medicines backgrounds to do service. That's wonderful, but that just wasn't the thing.

It made me feel like i was making the biggest possible difference. Well, so tell us a little bit more about the organization you're working with. I know you mentioned the name of it, but if you don't mind, tell the audience where to find it and what it's called.

And if somebody feels inspired by this, how do they contribute or get involved in something as great as this? Sure. So it's called the Cure Blindness Project.

It used to be referred to as the Himalayan Cataract Project, but they've expanded and now are a global organization with the majority of their work being done in Southeast Asia and in Africa and India as well.

I think are kind of the main locations. And so I've mentioned, I guess, a couple of the things they do, the outreach

projects where they'll go into a region, gather all of blind people that they can reach in that region and then do a week of cataract surgeries, just one after another.

And then they also want to build an infrastructure that can provide a more lasting benefit rather than just solving that one person's problem, but rather curing the future as well, as you mentioned.

How to Support the Cure Blindness Project

There's a big problem in a lot of developing countries with vitamin A deficiency, and that leads to a huge cataract burden in the world. And so there are, I believe they said, sometimes on order of 30 million people in blindness.

So it's a big project that they're working on, but the scale of their operation is impressive. I don't know the number of countries, there are many, many countries.

If you look at the map, they are pretty broadly working and as I said, creating hospitals, create residencies and really making a huge difference out there.

And I love the perspective of thinking long term, not just that we're here to solve the blind inverse for these people that are having surgery this week, but to develop systems, hospitals, residencies, training programs that can benefit tens of thousands, if not millions of people over time.

And that's like you said, your donation is going to not specifically cure the blindness for those individuals, to help establish a program that hopefully for years and years down the road, you'll have people come through that.

then they can take care of folks as they come along and maybe not let it go so long or become so advanced. Right. Ghana has 200,000 blind people, as I mentioned, and they only had two ophthalmology residencies in the country.

And so this will add a third. So in terms of the percentage of capacity, it's really a huge difference. Oh, yeah. Do they have a website or a social media page or how would folks find them?

They do. I wish I knew it off the top of my head, I'm sure I can get that to you and we can put it in the notes. Awesome. But I think if you just search the Cure Blindness Project or even the Himalayan Cataract Project, it still comes up under that name as well.

Another question is, people are pretty interested in this story. If somebody wants to contact you, do you maintain a LinkedIn page or do any way that folks could contact if they want to say, hey, got to get a hold of Dr.

Clive. Ask a little bit more about this. Oh, sure. So LinkedIn would be one way to find me. I'm on Facebook. My name is actually kind of rare. And so there aren't many Stuart Clives out there and I am certainly the only Stuart clive physician.

Well, as we wrap up our time, I just want to summarize for a minute. We've talked about the financial importance of being able to be prepared so you can do stuff, the importance integrating service throughout your career so that you stay focused and keep your mind on making a difference on why you went into this, and then looking at some of the big ticket items.

You can make a different for tens of thousands or eventually maybe even hundreds of thousands or millions of people over a timeline, even beyond your own lifespan, if you make this kind of an investment.

So it's really cool, it is really inspiring. Are there any final thoughts you want to leave with our audience as we kind wrap up our time? I just can't emphasize enough how it gets to your benefit.

Closing Reflections and Podcast Outro

I had a colleague who said, well, I guess you're going to heaven now. That doesn't even come to my mind. good

person or benefiting from this in the future in that way, it's just a tremendous benefit now.

Yeah. Well, and I think it makes us more whole as human beings. If we look out for each other, we're not just focused on ourselves because when it all shakes out, you only get to be on this earth for a few decades at best.

And you hope that you've done some good with the time that your here and the legacy of service that this will show to your family, your children, grandchildren.

I mean, that's worth more than the money it could buy as well. So anyway, I applaud what you're doing and it's so neat and really appreciate you being willing to take the to share it.

Thank you very much. I'm glad to be able to get the thoughts out there. Thank You. Thanks for tuning into the Doctors Making a Difference podcast. And thank you for what you do to help your patients and your community.

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See you next time.