



Building strong, responsive and resilient health systems in the Indo-Pacific

**SUBMISSION BY THE FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION
ON AUSTRALIA'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

Submission by The Fred Hollows Foundation on Australia's New International Development Policy

November 2022

The Fred Hollows Foundation (The Foundation) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's new international development policy. The Foundation has a long and proud history in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Our locally led work delivered in partnership with governments, local health authorities and civil society organisations promotes lasting, equitable health and development outcomes by restoring sight and building stronger, more sustainable and resilient health systems.

The Foundation fully endorses the submission of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID). We agree that the focus of Australia's new international development policy should be facilitating locally led approaches to sustainable and inclusive development, to achieve systems transformation and poverty reduction. We support the call for an Australian development policy that is rights-based and centered on transformative, inclusive development, which mainstreams inclusion of women and LGBTIQ+



people, people with disabilities, children and youth, and First Nations peoples across all programming and includes dedicated resourcing to enable this.

We also support ACFID's call for the new development policy to include legislated, stepped targets for achieving the 0.7 per cent ODA of GNI by 2030 target that Australia has agreed to as a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes a legislated commitment to reaching 0.5 per cent ODA/GNI by 2025-26 as an interim target and 0.7 per cent by 2029-30.

This submission is intended to complement the recommendations of the ACFID submission with a specific focus on how Australia's new international development policy can advance sustainable, locally led impact in health and avoidable blindness. A strong investment in health, including eye health, guided by a clear long-term framework for strengthening local health systems, provides a critical opportunity to build on Australia's past successes and make a meaningful contribution to addressing the growing global problem of vision loss.

Addressing avoidable blindness is a highly cost-effective development intervention. Every \$1 invested returns at least \$4 to the local economyⁱ. Improving eye health helps eradicate poverty, reduces inequality and fosters economic prosperity. It can produce large scale social and economic benefits for developing nations, with estimates that ending avoidable blindness would inject more than \$517 billion into the world's poorest economies over a decade.ⁱⁱ

While The Foundation welcomes a strong focus on the Indo-Pacific, including through the development of a long-term regional health strategy, we recommend that Australia should maintain flexibility in its support to health and other sectors through programs such as ANCP and humanitarian funding, to ensure that critical and impactful programming outside of the immediate region can be maintained.



Summary of Recommendations

Strengthen investment, capability and collaboration to build sustainable, people-centred health systems that are resilient to future shocks and changing population health needs

- Double Australia's health ODA over the next five years, with a renewed focus on health systems strengthening.
- Develop a long-term regional health strategy for the Indo-Pacific that focuses on strengthening integration across health systems whilst investing in rebuilding DFAT's core expertise and capability in health programming.

Harness Australia's expertise in health as key areas of value-add in strengthening health systems in our region

- Draw on Australia's expertise in health and research to build capacity, support research and design, and drive innovation in health systems, particularly in critical health workforce development and establishing effective models of care.
- Establish and invest in a mechanism to support the translation, contextualization and implementation of world leading Australian health technology and innovation into health systems across the Indo Pacific region.

Enhance meaningful partner participation, decision making and capacity building in development partnerships

- A dedicated focus on and funding for improved coordination, capacity building and local leadership.

Leverage Australia's comparative advantage in health

- Commit to addressing avoidable blindness as a key and value-adding component of Australia's health investments, recognising both the health and development benefits of vision.
- Prioritise the implementation of global health policies and frameworks, such as Integrated People Centred Eye Careⁱⁱⁱ, throughout the Indo-Pacific region.
- Engage the experience of local NGOs and civil



society partners to deliver health assistance at the local level and establish a multi-year, cooperative agreement with NGOs to improve primary health systems and health outcomes for communities in our region.

Build a performance and delivery system that promotes transparency, accountability and effectiveness

- Adopt a performance and delivery framework for health investments based on impact at a systems level, including a strong focus on primary health care and patient centeredness.
- Ensure development performance criteria are linked to improvements in the quantity, quality and accessibility of funding for local and national actors, as well as capacity building support in areas of need identified by local and national partners.

Adopt innovative financing models that catalyse funding from private and philanthropic sources

- Establish a centralised coordination mechanism for strengthening Australia's development finance capability and a mechanism to engage and work with Australian organisations including NGO partners to identify, pilot and scale effective, innovative mechanisms for sustainable development financing.

Key trends that will shape Australia’s engagement in our region and globally and the opportunities for Australia’s development assistance

Over the next decade, the ongoing health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rapidly ageing populations, the increasing burden of both communicable and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and vulnerability to climate change^{vi} are predicted to place growing pressure on health systems and health care costs in our region and globally.

Climate Change and health

The impacts of climate change on health, now considered by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as the biggest health threat facing humanity^{vii}, will continue to increase in coming decades. This includes eye health, where climate change is likely to increase the incidence of neglected tropical diseases (such as trachoma), cataracts, severe allergic eye diseases, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and eye injuries.^{viii} Greater investment is also needed to prepare and reduce risks to health services, infrastructure and capacity from increasing frequency of extreme weather events.

Gender equity in health leadership

COVID-19 continues to exacerbate existing inequalities and places a disproportionate burden on women, including in health-care settings. Systemic challenges and barriers, such as unemployment, low socioeconomic status and

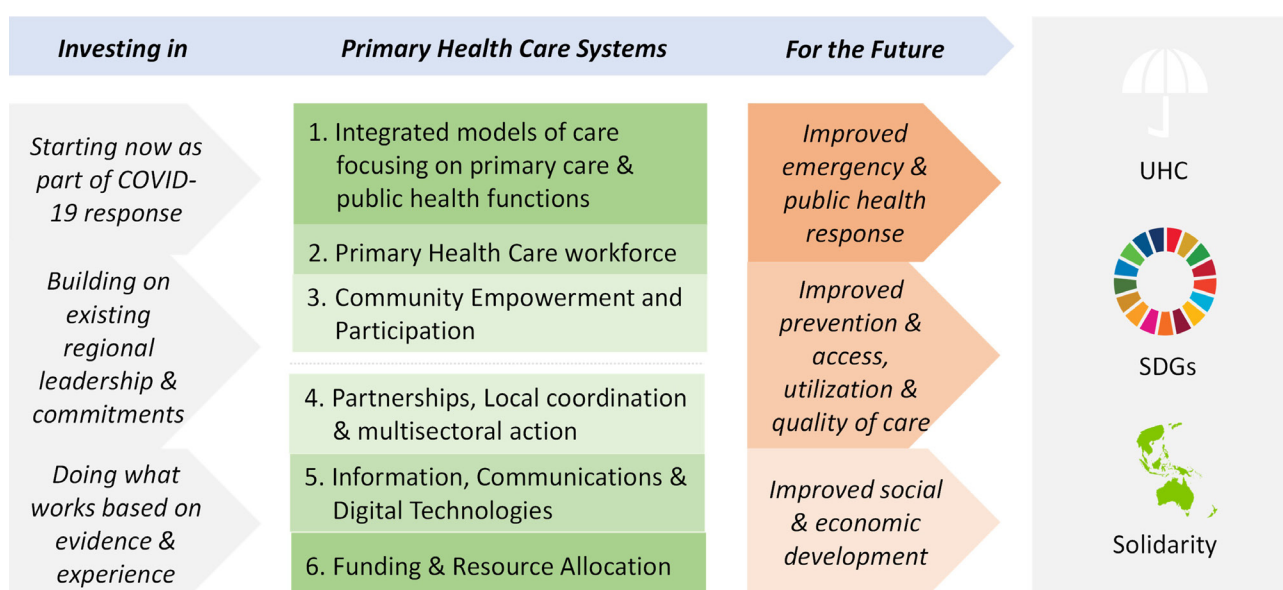
unpaid care have increased during the pandemic, further impacting women’s ability to apply for and fulfil health leadership positions. Australia can build on its investments in gender equity by working with partners to support women’s leadership in and across key sectors including health, ensuring that policies, programs, decisions, and laws better reflect the perspectives of women and helping to reduce gender-based barriers in access to and uptake of health services.

Non-Communicable Disease (NCDs)

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and their economic burden are projected to rise substantially in the coming decades. NCDs – including otherwise preventable blindness – also involve significant, often life-long disability, increasing the social and economic costs to individuals, households and societies. But there are technically feasible, affordable, cost-effective – and even cost-saving – interventions that can prevent the incidence or progression of NCDs. WHO estimates that investing in the “best buys” for NCD prevention and control yields a return of \$7 for every \$1 invested, and \$230 billion in economic gains globally^{ix}.

Rapidly ageing populations

Rapidly ageing populations worldwide¹ will present growing social, economic, and health challenges.

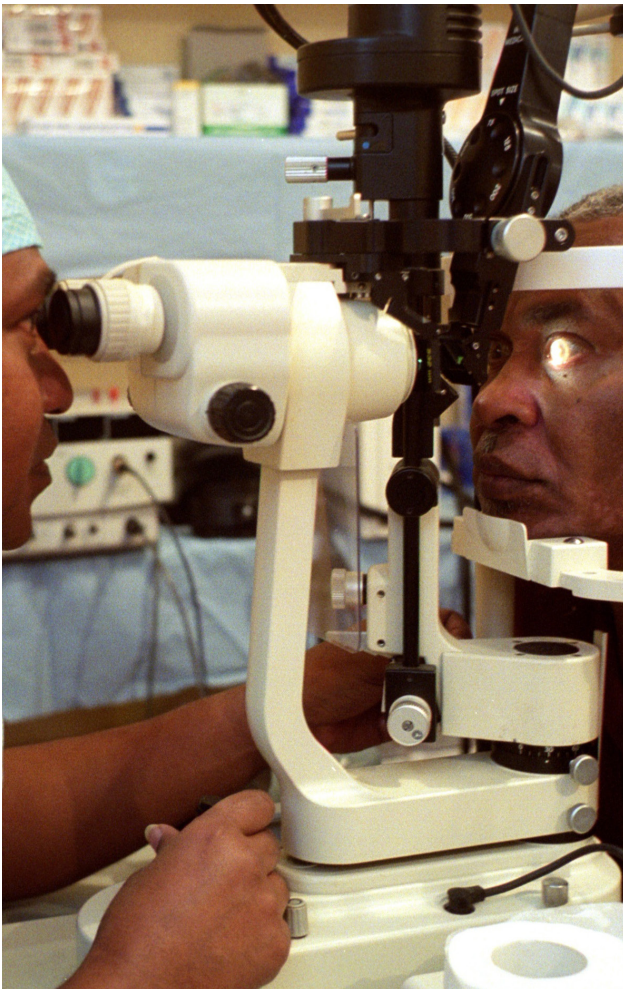


1 In 2017, 1 in 8 people worldwide were aged 60 or over. By 2030, this is projected to rise to 1 in 6. By 2050, one in four people in Asia and the Pacific will be over 60 years old.

The WHO World Health Survey (2018) found that 60% of older people in lower income countries reported that they could not afford a health-care visit (compared to 16% in higher-income countries), and that 33% could not afford transport to see a health practitioner (compared to 9% in higher-income countries)^x. The adoption of effective policies and programs on healthy ageing will serve and enhance the welfare of the ageing population, counter the economic and health burdens that arise from population aging, and harness the opportunities created by the ‘silver’ wave.

An opportunity to strengthen health systems

These challenges highlight the unquestionable need and opportunity for Australia to strengthen struggling and constrained public health systems in our region, ensuring that basic, inclusive and accessible health care services are in place, particularly at the frontline, and that systems can adapt and respond to changing circumstances and population health needs.



Investing in Primary Health Care (PHC) strengthens preventive and promotive health and reduces the progression of disease to advanced stages that require costly treatments in tertiary level hospital settings. This can help transform health systems from being a burden on government spending to a driver of human development and economic growth, laying the pathway for achievement of Universal Health Coverage and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Addressing avoidable blindness

Australian support to health systems in the Indo-Pacific should also include a commitment to addressing avoidable blindness. More than 90% of vision impairment is treatable and restoring sight helps advance the SDGs, by contributing to poverty reduction, zero hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality education, gender equality, and opportunities for decent work^{xi}. Proven eye care interventions, such as cataract surgery and spectacle provision, are among the most cost-effective in all of healthcare^{xii}.

Indigenous health

Indigenous Peoples around the world continue to experience poorer health outcomes, higher rates of health risks and greater unmet needs in terms of health and social services^{xiii}. COVID-19 continues to exacerbate existing inequalities and places a disproportionate burden on Indigenous Peoples^{xiv}. Indigenous Peoples are also at greater risk of climate-related harms^{xiv}. Both COVID-19 and climate change exacerbate the difficulties already faced by Indigenous communities, including political and economic marginalisation, loss of land and resources, human rights violations, discrimination and unemployment^{xv}. Sustainable investment in Indigenous approaches to health care and workforce development will support culturally appropriate and effective solutions to these threats^{xvi}. Increasing partnerships to support Indigenous leadership is crucial for supporting health equity and ensuring that policies, programs, decisions, and laws better reflect the experiences of Indigenous Peoples globally and help to reduce barriers in access to and uptake of health services^{xvii}.

The development capabilities Australia will need to respond to these challenges

A coordinated strategic approach and capability to support effective health systems and health security

The Foundation welcomes the investments Australia has made through the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security. While there is expertise in global, regional and bilateral health program delivery and funding mechanisms, there is no overarching strategy for health in Australia's aid program that goes beyond health security and communicable diseases. Establishing a long-term regional health strategy under the new International Development policy would provide a clear overarching framework to guide



Australia's health investments and support partner countries to enhance equitable access to health services at the same time as responding to future health shocks.



Recommendations:

Strengthen investment, capability, and collaboration to build sustainable, people-centred health systems that are resilient to future shocks and changing population health needs.

- Double Australia's health ODA over the next five years. This should be made from new, additional allocations to the ODA budget and be oriented towards strengthening primary health care systems.
- Develop a long-term regional health strategy under the new International Development Policy, that focuses on strengthening integration across health systems, prioritises primary health strengthening, and is informed by a joint working group of DFAT and multi-sector partners, including local partners. This policy should assist Indo-Pacific nations to:
 - Invest in integrated people-centered health services² to support healthy ageing and combat NCDs, including increasing preventative and promotive population health interventions and improving the quality of service delivery at community health facilities.
 - Improve the quantity and quality of the health workforce, particularly at the primary care level.
 - Support the achievement of equal representation of women in leadership positions in health (such as through data collection, leadership training and capacity building, combating discriminatory structures and attitudes and soft diplomacy).
- Engage and support communities in health service demand and delivery including preventative health and health promotion, in coordination with trusted NGOs and community-based organisations.
- Increase long-term investment in Health Information Systems and help integrate health data systems to drive decision-making down to facility level.
- Strengthen the capacity of all levels of government for health planning, budgeting, and management.
- Strengthen health financing and social protection systems and channel Australian health assistance in an effective and accountable manner.
- Invest in rebuilding DFAT's core expertise and capability in health programming, both in Canberra and posts in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

² Integrated people-centred health services (IPCHS) means putting people and communities, not diseases, at the centre of health systems, and empowering people to take charge of their own health rather than being passive recipients of services.

Utilising Australia's national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program

Many of Australia's world leading health and research facilities have strong international links and could play a greater role in supporting practical assistance and partnership in our region, supporting capacity building, research and design, and innovation.

Australia's long history and expertise in supporting health workforce development provides a strong basis to expand technical assistance and resources for workforce planning and training, guide research and support to enhance health worker effectiveness.

Australia is also well placed to support countries in the region to develop effective and inclusive models of care including by supporting research and design, fostering innovation and pilot

programs, as well as guiding the development and use of national and regional information systems and technologies to promote visibility of results and accelerate progress toward UHC.^{xviii}

Additionally, world leading health technology and innovation developed in Australia has enormous potential to be piloted and scaled in developing countries in the Indo-Pacific to enhance efficiencies in health systems. Support to utilise the excellent reputation of Australian health agencies to strengthen and expand their regional engagement will strengthen regional health as well as drive public diplomacy and strengthen Australians reputation for practical assistance and partnership.



Recommendations:

Harness Australia's expertise in health as key areas of value-add in strengthening health systems in our region

- Draw on Australia's expertise in health and research to build capacity, support research and design, and innovation in health systems, particularly in critical health workforce development and establishing effective models of care.
- Establish and invest in a mechanism to support the translation, contextualisation and implementation of world leading Australian health technology and innovation into health systems across the Indo Pacific region.



Building stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality

DFAT should enhance local ownership of health investments by engaging local partners throughout the development, implementation and monitoring of a long-term regional health strategy, and support government and health sector partners across the region to develop integrated health system strengthening plans.

More support for coordination will be critical to ensure partner countries can meaningfully engage

in these partnerships in the future. Australia should invest more funding in long-term, multi-sectoral networks between government, local community leaders, private sector organisations, NGOs, and academic institutions, which can support improved coordination, encourage knowledge transfer and build capacity and expertise in local health leadership and governance.



Recommendations:

Enhance meaningful partner participation, decision making and capacity building in development partnerships

- Enhance local ownership of health investments by engaging local partners in the development and implementation of a regional health strategy and support the development of coordinated local plans.
- Enhance meaningful partner engagement through dedicated funding for improved coordination, capacity building and local leadership.

Australia's comparative advantage in health

Expertise in eye health

Australia has established itself as a leading donor in eye health through long-term investments over the last two decades, including large multi-year investments such as the Avoidable Blindness Initiative (ABI) and significant ANCP funding through trusted NGO partners. Australia's support over this period (over \$140 million) has helped to sustainably strengthen the eye health workforce, drive contextually appropriate health solutions, and contributed to a significant reduction in avoidable blindness in the Indo-Pacific region (a 38.5% reduction in the Pacific and 43% in Southeast Asia).^{xix}

Advancing local implementation of global development and health frameworks

The new international development policy should seek to amplify Australia's proven leadership in securing strong international development and health frameworks via multilateral and diplomatic forums. For example, Australia has been a leader on eye health in multilateral forums such as the

World Health Assembly, where it led the resolution WHA73.4, *Integrated people-centred eye care (IPEC), including preventable vision impairment and blindness*^{xx} and cosponsored resolution 75/310 on *Vision for Everyone: Accelerating action towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals*^{xx} at the 75th UN General Assembly. Continued leadership to sustain momentum through multilateral forums and local implementation in-country for tangible change should be a pillar of the policy. Practically, this can be achieved by including avoidable blindness in DFAT's definition of disability inclusive development.

Strengthen mechanisms for partnership with Australian NGOs and civil society

The new international development policy should bolster Australia's proven successes in partnering with NGOs and civil society organisations. NGOs continue to provide a unique and value for money role in advancing Australia's development program through grassroots connections with communities, their capacity to operate in

restricted and complex environments, and ability to draw public and other donor support and resources to complement Australia's development priorities.

Cooperative partnership agreements between competitively selected NGOs, such as the Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme, Australia Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement Program, Australia Afghanistan Community Resilience Scheme and Water for Women Fund, have been incredibly effective ways for DFAT to draw on civil society expertise in

creating positive change directly for communities, particularly women, youth and children, and people with disability. Drawing on lessons learned from earlier models, a new health focused multi-year cooperative agreement with NGOs could significantly improve primary health systems and outcomes for communities in our region.

The Foundation also supports ACFID's recommendation to establish a Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Hub in DFAT to strengthen engagement with civil society across the Development program.



Recommendations:

Leverage Australia's comparative advantages in health

- Commit to addressing avoidable blindness as a key and value-adding component of Australia's health investments and recognition of both the health and development benefits of vision
- More effectively align Australia's diplomatic and development assistance efforts to advance effective implementation of priority global development and health policies and frameworks, such as Integrated People Centred Eye Care, throughout the Indo-Pacific region.
- Utilise the experience of local NGOs and civil society partners, who have strong connections to national and local stakeholders and communities, to deliver assistance through robust multi-year partnerships which are responsive to local needs and deliver at local level.
- Establish a multi-year, multi-million-dollar cooperative agreement specifically with NGOs to improve primary health systems and health outcomes for communities in our region.

A performance and delivery systems that promotes transparency and accountability, as well as effectiveness and learning

A harmonised approach to monitoring performance at a health system level can improve measurement of Australia's investments in health from patient-centred perspective, better assess how assistance is enhancing access and health outcomes for a broad range of people including underserved and vulnerable groups and strengthening the resilience of health systems and services to future shocks. This will require additional investment from Australia to enhance Health Information Systems' (HIS) infrastructure and capacity in partner countries, to improve collection and analysis of quality data required to enable regular tracking of progress in strengthening health systems and improved decision making.

Australia's new performance and delivery framework for health should also prioritise investments that strengthen primary health care. This should draw on established tools such as WHO and UNICEF's new Primary health care measurement framework^{xxi}. This tool recognises primary health care as the cornerstone for achieving Universal Health Coverage and the SDGs and provides a series of determinants and indicators based on progress towards three core PHC components – availability of integrated health services, strength of multi-sectoral policy and action, and empowerment of people and communities to optimise their health.



Recommendations:

A performance and delivery system that promotes transparency, accountability and effectiveness

- Articulate a performance and delivery framework for health investments based on impact at a systems level, including a strong focus on primary health care and patient centeredness.
- Ensure development performance criteria is linked to improvements in the quantity, quality and accessibility of funding for local and national actors, as well as provision of strong and sustainable capacity building support in areas of need identified by local and national partners.

The role of ODA and non-ODA in supporting the development of regional partners

Recognising that traditional funding alone cannot bridge the widening financing gap, the new international development policy should articulate Australia's commitment to support and scale innovative financing models. The Foundation encourages Australia's commitment to support and scale innovative financing models, including blended finance that catalyses funding from private and philanthropic sources, and pay-for-performance mechanisms. The Foundation has pioneered several innovative eye health financing approaches, which could inform DFAT's investment and strategies to leverage non-traditional development finance.

In line with ACFID's submission to the Development Finance Review, The Foundation recommends retaining a core focus on development principles and an impact-first approach. In parallel, Australia's development financing should encourage investment from the private sector, for whom a finance-first approach is more suitable. As such, grant funding must remain core to the delivery of development programs and of development funding. Any sort of loans, including concessional loans, must sit outside traditional ODA funding and within a dedicated Development Finance Institution set up for that purpose.



Recommendations:

Adopting innovative financing models that catalyse funding from private and philanthropic sources

- Establish a centralised coordination mechanism for strengthening Australia's development finance capability.
- Establish formal mechanisms to engage and work with Australian organisations including NGO partners to identify, pilot and scale effective, innovative mechanisms for sustainable development financing.

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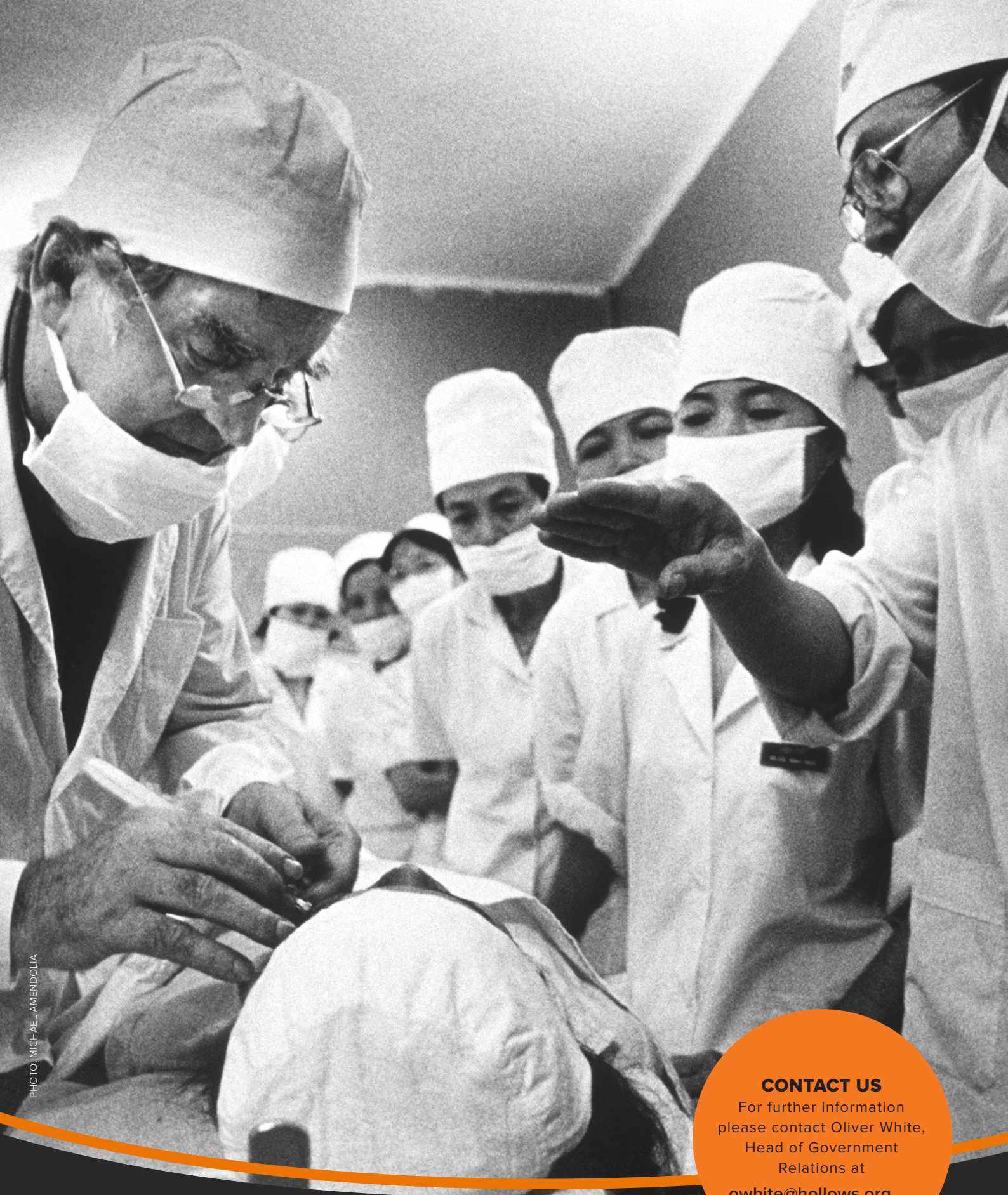


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