

Erica Johnston during a basic eye test in an Indian village.



Erica Johnston has been an optometrist since 2000 but never have her services been more appreciated than on a recent trip to India. The Specsavers Mount Gambier co-owner added a two week volunteering mission to an Indian holiday and while she was working longer days and seeing more than five times the patients she normally would in a day it was the most memorable part of her February holiday. "It really didn't feel like work," Erica said. "It was

such a great experience to see the 'real' India, and not just the tourist parts." Erica volunteered through Perth based volunteer organisation Equal Health. "A friend that I studied with went a few years ago and when I decided I wanted to go to India I thought it would be the perfect time to volunteer," she said. Equal Health makes an annual pilgrimage to India every year. Forty medical professionals, including doctors, nurses, dentists and physiotherapists, made the trek and were then split into two teams of 20 - one team heading south and Erica and her team heading north and working in and around Kolkata.

Erica was the only optometrist in the 2012 contingent. Every day the team made the one to one and a half hour journey to an outreach clinic in a village and set up their makeshift consulting room. "I needed a dark room for my eye checks and it was sometimes quite challenging because everyone wanted to see what you were doing and were peering over your shoulders and trying to open shutters and see what was going on," Erica said. "It was so good to be able to help people even though it was a basic eye test and finding them some suitable glasses." The glasses were supplied by various companies donating old stock. "There were some designer ones among the selection of glasses and I even saw a pair of Tiffany & Co. glasses," she said. The two week stint was all about basic eye checks and finding glasses to suit the patients and Erica did find it frustrating not to be able to do more about the

eye health issues she encountered, especially the prevalence of cataracts. She saw 100-120 patients a day, compared with a usual caseload of 20 on a typical day in Mount Gambier. "They were just so appreciative though and even the difference a pair of glasses made to their sight was amazing," she said. Erica worked with a newly trained optical dispenser and a translator. The team stayed in a home for mentally and physically disabled children and Erica spent one day consulting with the children from the local special school. "Not once did it feel like work and I was so lucky because if I hadn't volunteered I would never have seen so many amazing parts of India and experience how people really live," she said. "By the end of the two weeks you could even tell which villages were wealthy and which were really struggling," Erica said. "I would really love to go again and maybe work in the south this time." And



Erica Johnston with her final patient of the Indian volunteering trip.

while she probably won't be eating a curry any time soon, Erica said the curries and traditional Indian cuisine they were treated to during the trip were divine. A Grant

High School graduate, Erica is originally from Lucindale, and studied her optometry degree at the University of Melbourne. She worked at Echuca when she

first graduated in 2000 before returning to the South East in 2002. She opened the Specsavers store in Mount Gambier with Kathryn Benjamin in November 2009.



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a fact?**

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is different.

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PORT MacDONNELL COMMUNITY COMPLEX PROGRAM

THUR 5 APRIL

LAUNCH OF ART/PHOTO COMPETITION— 5.00 to 6.00pm
Soft drinks & nibbles supplied

FRID 13 APRIL

SA LAUNCH OF YOUTH WEEK—2.00 to 8.00pm
Old Mount Gambier Gaol—**FREE ENTRY**—Bands, workshops, giant rides, food stalls

MON 16 APRIL

INSPIRATIONAL BADGE MAKING— 2.00 to 3.00pm—Free event

TUE 17 APRIL

TIA CHI WORKSHOP—2.00 to 3.00pm—Free event

WED 18 APRIL

FORENSIC CRIME SCENE EVENT—2.00 to 3.00pm—Free event

THUR 19 APRIL

COOKING WORKSHOP—2.00 to 3.00pm—Free event

FRI 20 APRIL

BLUE LIGHT DISCO 10YRS & UP—6.30 to 9.00pm—Free entry
Prizes, Give-a-ways, comps, Pizza & soft drinks



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