



ENGINEERING HEARTS AND CHANGE

TEXT:
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PHOTO:
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Swiss cardiovascular surgeon Paul Vogt set up his EurAsia Heart foundation to spread medical know-how and surgical expertise in developing nations. European doctors – working on an honorary basis – operate in his organization throughout the world every day.

There's no averting your eyes from the open chest bathed in bright light at the center of the picture. Gathered around and looking down at the patient are several people, some dressed in green, others in blue. Surrounding them, wrapped in shadow, are even more people and various kinds of equipment.

An oversized shot of the dramatic view described above hangs in the Spartan office of the man whose shoulder we are looking over, as he performs his job. Professor Paul Vogt, a successful cardiovascular surgeon at Zurich's renowned Clinic in the Park, one of fourteen belonging to the Hirslanden private clinic group in Switzerland, is the man featured. The picture shows the Swiss doctor and professor not in Zurich, but in Russia. "The photo was taken at the St. Petersburg Military Academy," he explains. "They still have one of those old operating theaters where you can watch the proceedings through a glass dome." Professor Vogt, who was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Pavlov

Medical University in St. Petersburg in 2011, often performs operations a long way from home, such as Russia, as well as other countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, or in Asia. Through his EurAsia Heart foundation, he has established a medical network specializing in cardiac and circulatory disorders, mainly in children and adolescents, but also in adults. The organization brings doctors from Europe together with heart specialists in Eastern Europe and Asia. These doctors travel abroad to take care of patients who need treatment urgently, but who cannot be operated on either because of a lack of know-how or of financial means. The main point of the cooperation is to train other surgeons, and to pass on expertise. "Our aim is to help others help themselves," stresses Vogt. "Basically, our ultimate aim is make ourselves superfluous."

Nevertheless, Professor Vogt and his ever-increasing battalion of "surgeons in arms" – all of whom work in an honorary

capacity for EurAsia Heart and receive no form of compensation – will not become redundant for some time. Many of the countries they work in are still a long way from having an even rudimentary medical service available nationwide, and are even worse off when it comes to Vogt's specialist area.

"Cardiovascular diseases remain the main cause of death, both of adults and children, in the developing and threshold countries," explains Vogt. Such is the case with Myanmar, for example. "The country has a population of just under sixty million people, but has only one heart surgeon. About two hundred heart operations are carried out every year in the entire country. They're only able to carry out a restricted range of operations, but the scope of the disease is enormous, and mortality rates are unknown." As a sobering comparison, heart surgeons in the western world carry out around 1,000 heart operations per one million people annually.

New clinics alone, even equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, are not enough for the developing and threshold nations. "The most important part of any good heart clinic is a highly qualified staff," says Vogt. "No matter how much money you invest in new cardiac centers, there are three things money can't buy: knowledge, expertise and experience." For this reason it is vitally important to arrange for a direct transfer of these three components to the new centers. "Our principal aim is to provide help," explains Vogt.

Effectively, this means that EurAsia Heart offers local teams on-the-spot training with their own equipment, treating their own patients in their own clinics. "Performing operations is something you can learn," says Vogt, who is personally involved in between two hundred and fifty and three hundred of them per year. "But the first thing you need to know is who you're operating on, how and why. After that comes the seriously medical part. Both parts, recognizing the medical indications and the intensive medical techniques used during an operation, are difficult to learn because they are often complex and can't be depicted visually, like the operation itself."

Paul Vogt founded the EurAsia Heart foundation and is also the man at the helm. He is uncompromising in his support of the foundation, but repeatedly points out that its work is not his sole responsibility: it is, he stresses, a team effort. He has succeeded in persuading two well-known former politicians to act as presidents: German ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and former Swiss President Adolf Ogi. They too work on an honorary basis for what they consider to be a worthy cause. "We keep costs low

and we don't pay attendance fees," says Vogt. The foundation gets by with minimal administrative costs. Hotels for the doctors are usually booked by local partners because they can get better rates than if reservations are made in Zurich. They fly economy. "We only stretch to business if the doctor in question has to go directly to the operating theater after landing," explains Vogt. Any materials the doctors take with them are donated. Apart from travel expenses and on-site expenses, the administrative costs paid for by the foundation are restricted to the setting-up and running of its web site (www.eurasiaheart.ch).

Although the foundation was only founded in Zurich in 2006, EurAsia has been active since the end of 2000. Since its inception, it has carried out more than 1,500 cardiovascular operations and over 3,200 consultations. Nowhere else on earth is there a foundation that carries out a comparable amount of work. No wonder, then, that EurAsia Heart receives numerous requests for help from many East European, Asian and African countries. To date, the organization has been primarily active in Russia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Myanmar, China, Vietnam and Eritrea.

In Russia, intensive cooperation is well established in St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk. Now, EurAsia is working with a foundation from St. Petersburg and one from the USA to set up an International Educational Center in St. Petersburg. The work of European doctors is also much in demand in other parts of Russia, particularly the South. Cooperative arrangements are firmly established in Lviv, Kiev and Donetsk and the Swiss foundation is also active in Uzbekistan. Although China has many very good cardiovascular centers, EurAsia Heart regularly receives calls for help and is subsidized directly by the Chinese government. In Vietnam EurAsia Heart works in several heart clinics in Ho Chi Minh City and is planning a new center in Nha Trang. In Myanmar, the foundation is directly involved with the General Hospital in Yangon, where it donates material and also plays an active clinical role. In Eritrea, EurAsia Heart is overseeing the development of a heart surgery in Asmara, which is being set up as a joint project with a German organization.

"Our teams of doctors are out in the field forty to forty five weeks a year," says Paul Vogt, with a smile of satisfaction, but not with zeal. He speaks about his work and commitment quietly and objectively, and he is very persuasive in his own way, without coming across as a showman. Professor Vogt has no desire to put himself in the limelight. "It's not all about me," he says, "I'm not a lone soldier. I couldn't do much on my own. We're a terrific team."

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HELP THEMSELVES AND
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PAUL VOGT

EURASIA HEART FOUNDATION

A MEDICAL NETWORK TO FIGHT HEART AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASES



Noble goal: Medical assistance to local doctors.

Cardiovascular diseases are still the main cause of death in third-world and developing countries. In some countries, untreated heart diseases and congenital heart defects in children below the age of five cause more deaths than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. This is why the EurAsia Heart foundation has established a medical network in Eastern Europe and Asia that deals with heart and cardiovascular diseases of all age groups. It consists of a group of European medical doctors under the leadership of Swiss surgeons and provides medical assistance to doctors in Eastern European and Asian countries. The organization offers help locally and supports patients in those countries who need vital treatment but do not have the necessary financial resources. European medical doctors cooperate on a voluntary basis and without payment with heart specialists from Asia and Eastern Europe aiming to improve skills and teaching new techniques. Improved standards of diagnosis, therapy and prevention of heart and cardiovascular diseases should ideally be achieved so that afflicted patients can live "normal" lives. More information about the EurAsia Heart foundation and ways to support the organization can be found on the Internet at www.eurasiaheart.ch