

Jordanians beneficiaries of West Palm op

By Jennifer Rubenstein
Staff Writer

THE VISION OF peace in the Middle East is a bit clearer for 12 Jordanians who were recently given the gift of sight by a Jewish ophthalmologist from West Palm Beach.

As a child growing up in the coastal region of Israel -- just a few miles from Palestinians in Gaza -- Dr. Steve Spector never imagined that one day he would be performing cornea transplants on Jordanians, much less become an ophthalmologist.

Spector, who received his bachelor's and master's degrees in nuclear engineering from the University of Florida, swung toward ophthalmology when he began doing research with argon lasers as an engineer. He decided to go to medical school, and he finished his residency at the University of Florida.

After traveling to Namibia last year to perform cornea transplants, he became aware that there was a lot of blindness and a real need for eye surgeons in Jordan. He personally contacted the head of the ophthalmology department at the University of Amman in Jordan.

"I felt like, since I had been a neighbor of the Palestinians when I was young, I wanted to give something back to the Arabs," he said. "They are very superstitious. They need to be buried whole, so they do not believe in donating their eyeballs after death."

The mission was made possible through an international organization called Surgical Eye Expeditions (SEE). The organization was formed in 1974 to recruit volunteer eye surgeons, technicians and nurses to provide free operations to restore the sight of indigent people throughout the developing world.

Spector arranged with an eye bank in San Diego and managed to get 12 corneas donated. He said that eyes cannot be frozen and they must be used within 48 to 72 hours of receiving them, so he had to coordinate with the airlines to make sure there would be no delays. Luckily, he said, thanks to the efforts of SEE, the corneas arrived the next morning.

"The most gut-wrenching part of the trip was selecting a dozen from a pool of 100 deserving patients," he said.

Spector said that he was surprised to find that most of the medical residents at the University of Amman Medical School were from Syria and Iraq. He said that he found the patients and staff to be appreciative, caring and determined to overcome the misinformation and discomfort that is generated by their respective governments, Iraqi and Syrian. He said that they



SIGHTLINES: Dr. Steve Spector performs a cornea transplant on a Jordanian at the University of Amman in Jordan.

were very hungry for information about America and for advances in ophthalmology.

"Although throughout my trip, I was gently reminded to keep my Hai hidden, I found it to be a humbling experience as a former Israeli and Jew

working with such sensitive and capable people, Spector said. "I feel it is our obligation to build bridges, and I believe this surgical expedition to be one such narrow bridge."