

health & Fitness

Shreveport Sees Russia

Exchange of ideas saving the sight of children

Retinopathy of prematurity is a leading cause of blindness in 1.5 million children worldwide. Half of the children without sight in Russia and Eastern Europe are blind because of this disease. Fortunately, this condition is treatable and even preventable, and Dr. Alan B. Richards, of Pediatric Eye Specialists in Shreveport, helps lead the charge to eradicate the condition in this part of the world.

ROP is a potentially blinding disease affecting the retinas in premature infants. The retinas of premature infants are not completely developed at delivery. When premature infants are placed in incubators with increased oxygen levels to help with immature lung development and breathing difficulties, the increased oxygen levels can cause retinal blood vessels to grow abnormally. This can lead to bleeding, scarring of the retina, retinal detachment and visual loss.

The neonatal care of premature infants is improving in countries like Russia, and many more infants are surviving. However,

the techniques for properly administering oxygen and for examining and treating the eyes of premature infants is not well-known, and therefore, the incidence of blindness in these children is increasing.

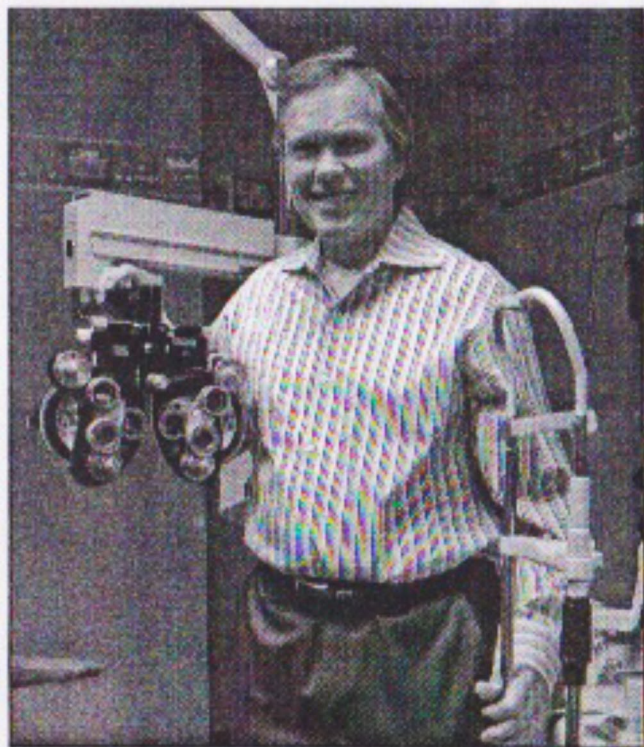
Today in the United States and other highly developed countries, the oxygen level in incubators is carefully monitored and most premature infants are seen by a pediatric ophthalmologist who treats signs of ROP with laser and/or preventive measures. "We just learned how to treat this in the last 20 or 30 years in the U.S.," Richards said. "We can treat ROP with about a 90 percent success rate. In Russia, there are a lot of children going blind because they didn't know how to treat it."

So how did Richards become involved? Dr. Natalia Potapova came to Shreveport for her ophthalmology residency in July of 2006 after completing an ophthalmology residency at the prestigious Fyodorov Microsurgery Center in Moscow. While studying as a resident at LSUHSC, Potapova received a call from a colleague, pediatric

ophthalmologist Dr. Irina Astasheva, asking if anyone in Louisiana could help treat infants in Moscow with ROP.

Richards began spearheading an effort to hold a series of seminars in Moscow to teach physicians how to successfully treat ROP. Drs. Richards, Bryan Vekovius and Tom Rodens traveled to Moscow in September of 2008 and worked closely with pediatric ophthalmologists on the treatment of ROP. Subsequently two of the pediatric ophthalmologists from Russia came to Shreveport for further training in 2009, and Richards made a second trip to Moscow in December of 2009.

"I formed a limited liability company called Shreveport Sees Russia in order to raise money to keep these efforts going," Richards said. The money raised through the LLC will help educate ophthalmologists, neonatologists and nurses on how they can change these staggering statistics of



Dr. Alan B. Richards, of Pediatric Eye Specialists, formed Shreveport Sees Russia, which helps prevent ROP in Eastern European children.

blindness in children. The money pays for transportation for both the teaching ophthalmologists and for the seminar participants.

Shreveport Sees Russia is supported by the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness in this philanthropic endeavor and has agreed to assist with the raising of funds by providing the conduit through which tax-deductible donations can be made. For more information on these efforts, you can visit the IAPB website at www.IAPB.org.

— Kirk Fontenot