



He's head of an NGO, a zealous humanitarian and an ardent proponent of social responsibility, but don't call Brian Doolan a "basket weaver".

By Felicity Pontoni



BLIND faith

Not many CEOs can claim to work for an organization that makes blind people see. As CEO of the Fred Hollows Foundation, Brian Doolan can. His role underpins medical teams performing sight-restoring surgery to thousands of needlessly blind people around the world. His organization is built squarely on the audacious tenacity and indomitable spirit of its late founder, Fred Hollows, who still has huge pulling power as an individual and as a brand.

Doolan first met Hollows at a clinic in outback Australia when he was screening people in the 70s, and later found himself having a chat with Hollows at the local pub.

"Fred was a man who commanded attention," says Doolan.

"We very much depend on Fred's image and the memory of his work which is now carried on through his wife, Gabi - still active on the board of the Foundation - and their children."

While Doolan doesn't command the legendary presence of Hollows - who would - there's a zen energy about him coupled with a palpable sense of commitment to the cause. And although fairly new to the role - he became Chief Executive of The Fred Hollows Foundation in early 2005 - the fit is a natural one.

"This position brings together what I've been working for my whole life," says Doolan.

"If you cut my working life in two one half has been working with Aboriginal communities in Australia and the other in international development."

Strongly motivated by the values of social and economic justice, Doolan has a close ideological and political identification with The Fred Hollows Foundation and its work around the world.

An Australian national, Brian Doolan was Country Director of CARE International in Iraq from '93 to '95, Vietnam from 1995-98 and again in 2000-2003. In Vietnam, he guided efforts in more than 80 projects which focused on health and HIV/AIDS prevention, agriculture and natural resource management and emergency responses. Under his leadership, the first successful work-based initiatives for HIV/AIDS prevention and management were established and now serve as the national model.

In 2004, Doolan was awarded the Medal of Friendship for his significant contribution to the economic and social development of Vietnam; the highest award a foreigner can receive.

Prior to joining the Fred Hollows Foundation, he was in Thailand as Regional Director (Asia Pacific) of the US based Global Alliance for Workers and Communities - a non-profit organization funded by Nike and Gap providing support and development programs for factory workers in China, Vietnam, Thailand, India and Indonesia.

Four-year-old Grace Wambui smiles after undergoing surgery to remove post operation swelling at Rift Valley Eye Unit in Nakuru, East Africa. Photo courtesy of www.lannonharley.com



Below: A post operative patient at an outreach clinic in Dhading, Nepal. Photo courtesy of Sarah Elliott.

Right: Muhammad Mustafa speaks with Dr Rubina Gillani, and Brian Doolan (left to right). Muhammad Mustafa is managing a tent camp in Muzaffarabad, which The Fred Hollows Foundation is supporting by delivering tents, food and emergency supplies to survivors of the 8 October 2005 South Asian earthquake in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Photo courtesy of www.hollows.org/photolibrary/



Below: Phaguni Chaudhary, a 71 year old Nepalese woman from the Surkhet district in Nepal, after her cataract surgery. Photo courtesy of Tilganga Eye Centre.



Below: Patients happy with the result of their eye operations at an outreach clinic in Dhading, Nepal. Photo courtesy of Sarah Elliott.

Right: Benalias Anderson eating a nutritious lunch at Wugularr School, east of Katherine in Australia's Northern Territory. Photo courtesy of Wayne Quilliam.



His current role is focused strongly on eye care and eye health, internationally. And he's quick to break it down to the bald facts.

"There are 37 million people in the world who are blind, 80 per cent of those people don't have to be. It's preventable or it's curable.

"Of those, over 60 per cent are blind because of cataract - a condition that everyone will get if they live long enough - but in most societies you go to the doctor and it's treatable," explains Doolan.

"In developing countries people go blind from cataract because it's not treated."

A cataract operation is much more of a technical procedure than a medical procedure, according to Doolan.

The patient lies on a table, anesthetic applied to their eye, the ophthalmologist removes the cataract and inserts a simple intraocular lens. A patch is put over the eye and the next day the patch comes off and the person can see.

"We're talking about people who may not have been able to see for many years; the procedure takes about six minutes but it's life changing."

For Brian Doolan there's no more powerful motivator.

"I've been privileged to sit in on a number of cataract operations and there's nothing like looking down the microscope as the cataract is removed, seeing the lens inserted and then watching the person the next day when the patch comes off - they might be looking at their grand child for the first time.

"They have been an economic drag on family because people who are blind need someone in the family to look after them and that's often a child which means that child doesn't go to school, so there's all those kinds of impacts."

According to Doolan research done some years ago looked at the cost impact of cataract surgery in India which showed that within the first year after the operation the return on investment (cost of cataract operation) was around 1600 per cent.

"My job is about supporting the people we have in the field

in the country offices and helping them build the capacity within their country for preventable blindness to be addressed.

"Making sure the operations are performed and addressing obstacles that may be blocking them, and principal among those of course is cost."

At the time when Fred Hollows was active in the 1980s the cost of the intra-ocular lens was about US\$100 per lens. He developed a high quality, low cost lens and set up two factories - one in Nepal and one in Eritrea to produce the lens. As a result the world price for intra-ocular lenses dropped to less than \$5 which had an enormous impact and opened up the operation to millions of people who would otherwise have not been able to afford it.

"The factories are still operating as fully independent, commercial operations developing new products and competing in the commercial world. And we still have very close relations with them," says Doolan.

Enabling the factories to be self-sustaining and commercially viable is an important part of the Foundation's business strategy.

"We're not medical tourists," says Doolan emphatically.



The second string to the Fred Hollows Foundation is its work in Australia with indigenous communities. Hollows, together with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists ran a large eye health program under which they visited about 480 Aboriginal communities particularly to tackle what was then the chronic problem of trachoma - a form of conjunctivitis.

While addressing eye health issues they highlighted the desperate living conditions in a lot of those communities; and the overt racism that they were dealing with.

Fred Hollows became famous for drawing attention to these issues and they became part of the reason that he was so well known and admired.

"Indigenous Australians die 17 years earlier than non-

indigenous Australians. In the area of the Jarwan communities, in which we work in Australia's Northern Territory, the average life expectancy of a man is 46. These people aren't living long enough to get cataract so eye health is lower down on the priority list.

"The two major health problems facing indigenous Australians at the moment are diabetes and mental health - diseases of lifestyle and nutrition," says Doolan.

The Foundation has worked with these communities to get nutritionists based within the health service.

It has also formed a partnership with Woolworths supermarkets in the Northern Territory working with stores in remote communities to develop management practices and promotion of healthy items, fresh fruit and vegetables.

The collaboration has worked well and is an exemplar of big business putting its corporate and social responsibility strategy into action.

Now Doolan has his sights firmly set on expanding the Foundation's work internationally.

The Foundation currently has active development programs in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Eritrea, Indigenous Australia, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea. Through its sister operation in New Zealand it also supports operations in the Solomon Islands, South Africa, Vanuatu, Vietnam and throughout the Pacific region (including the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa and Tonga).

In the next 12 months, Brian Doolan is looking to expand operations in North Korea, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Mozambique and to upscale support for the work that has been going on in Nepal.

"Secondly we're being far more serious about monitoring and evaluation of our impact.

"So not just doing things but measuring the impact and being far more stringent about evaluating the impact, cost effectiveness and the sustainability.

"Good practice has driven this," he says.

At large, believes Doolan, is a view that NGOs are soft

businesses and some people unkindly refer to those that work for them as "basket weavers".

He doesn't subscribe.

"Running a non-profit organization is in many ways far more difficult because it's not purely about the bottom line."

"In business, you have a very clear success or failure indicator and that is the bottom line. In a non-profit organization you don't have that luxury and so measuring your impact needs to be far smarter and you need more developed mechanisms.

"In our case that's the number of cataract operations and the number of sight restoring operations which take place.

"We need to constantly be measuring the impacts in terms of the costs of the operation and bringing these down all the time. And not just our own costs but the cost of consumables for eye care - the drugs, the sutures the operating equipment, anything that may pose a barrier to people accessing good eye health and operations to restore their sight."

It's also about performance management within the organization.

"Motivating people and having a clear strategy; just as any business has to have a good business plan, so too an NGO needs to have a very clear strategy of where its going and the work it's doing.

"We need to have as lean a possible machine operating, to keep our costs and overheads as low as we possibly can."

Imperative for an organization that relies on donations from companies. Sure the giver delights in the giving, but in a compassion-fatigued world, folk don't want to see 40 or 50 per cent of their donation gobbled up in the costs of running an organization.

"There is tolerance; people understand that it does cost and will accept 10-20 per cent of their donation used like this but go beyond that and they say 'hang on a second, is that what I really want to support'," says Doolan.

"And in many cases we're able to use \$5 to leverage \$10



Fred Hollows.
Photo courtesy
of Mike
Lynskey.

“That’s where some of the global companies have really done some groundbreaking work in being able to demonstrate that social responsibility does affect the bottom line.”

from other international donors, from bi-laterals or multi-laterals - we’ve got to be doing more of that.”

Doolan’s vision for the organization is for growth but taking into account that the growth will demand a structure.

“For me it’s very important that we internationalize the Fred Hollows Foundation.”

To that end, there exists already the Hollows Foundation in New Zealand and a separately registered Foundation in South Africa and in the UK.

The EU - the world’s largest multi-lateral donor, funding development projects all over the globe – is top of his target donor market.

“Having those independent but linked organizations in a company structure and by using the Fred Hollows Foundation in the UK, for instance, will provide access.

“The EU doesn’t fund many eye health organizations but I’m very keen for them to become a donor to the Fred Hollows Foundation in the UK and for that operation to then principally focus on Africa,” explains Doolan.

“We know the British Government is very interested in Africa and we know European governments are interested in Africa so by building a strong Fred Hollows Foundation in the UK we could access those resources to grow the organization.”

Doolan’s experience of social responsibility is mixed.

“There are still companies that just want to make a donation and see something good happen but I think that’s a shrinking group,” he says.

“My experience internationally is that building corporate socially responsible policies into business is far more accepted in a country like the US whereas in Australia it is far younger and newer here.

“Companies like Nike and Gap and others have gone way past the debates about whether or not social responsibility is a good thing for them to do. It’s about how you do it most effectively not whether or not to do it.

“And for most it’s also about being able to demonstrate to the shareholders that undertaking social responsibility initiatives do actually pay off at the bottom line; that it’s not just about good feelings and doing good but in fact leads to increased productivity and shrinkage in terms of loss.

“That’s where some of the global companies, particularly the global buyers that are dealing with the developing world have really done some groundbreaking work in being able to demonstrate that social responsibility does affect the bottom line.”

He cites the corporate responsibility journey at Nike as an example of how a company responded when it became the target of a well organised corporate campaign focused on its overseas contract manufacturing practices.

“In the mid-90s Nike came under attack over factory sweat shop allegations and they were caught out.”

According to Doolan: “Nike is now one of the global leaders in terms of worker support programs and ensuring that the factories from which they’re purchasing their products do comply with codes of conduct and do go beyond those codes in support of their workers.

“They know their very brand was under threat and they’ve pushed through to the other extreme,” he says.

“What they’ve found is that as they address questions of workers rights within the organization and as the workers are consulted more about the factory, productivity has grown, wastage has dropped, attendance has increased and so their bottom line has improved.”

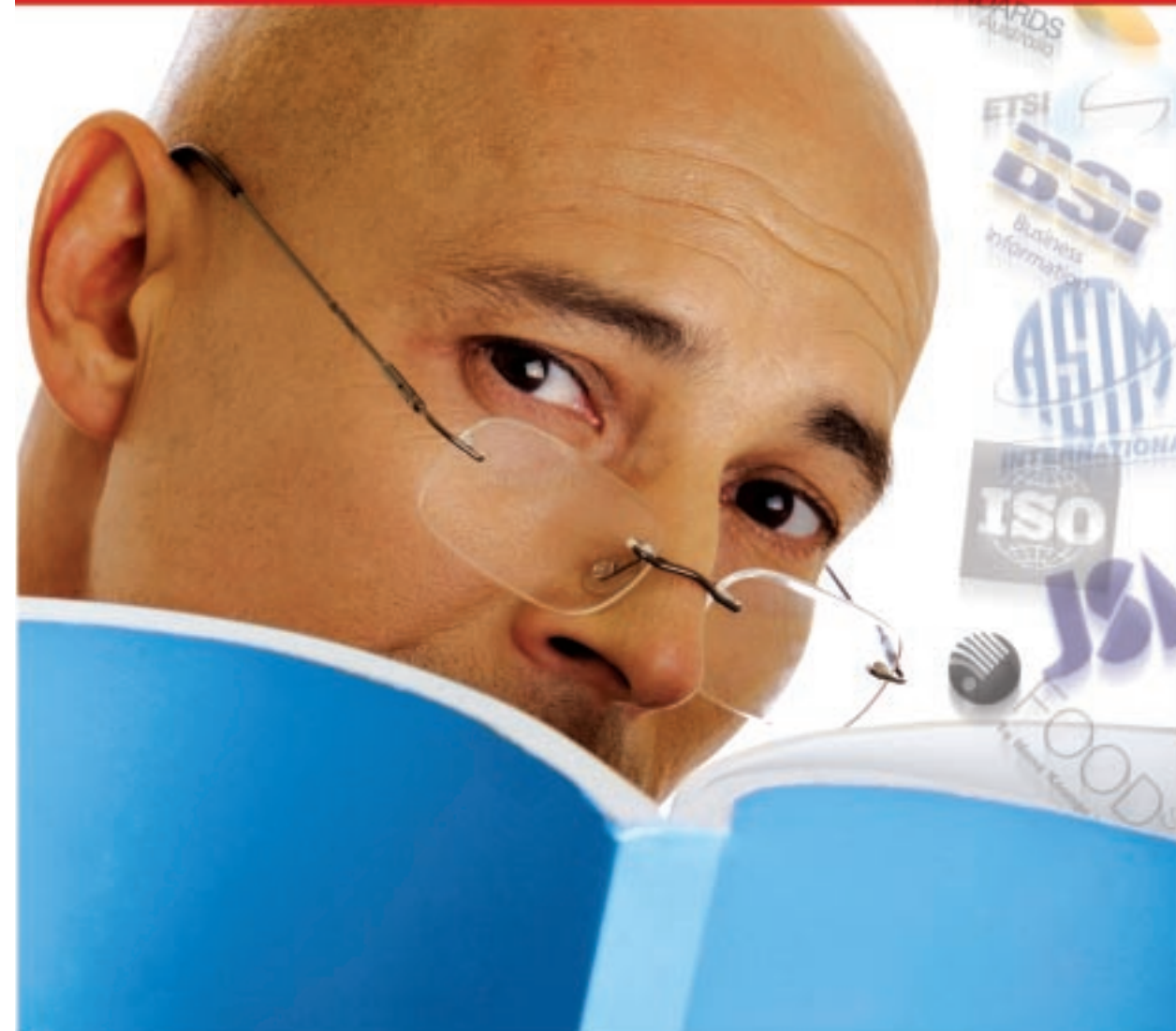
He gives the example of a factory in Bangalore which found that 90 per cent of its workers were anaemic.

“Being Hindu they were vegetarian and weren’t getting the iron intake they needed. They were tired on the assembly line, so by addressing that through iron supplements productivity increased.

“It’s not just about good works, it’s about being smart.”

Doolan is interested in working with companies to develop a

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strategy which puts the Hollows Foundation in to their organization as part of their business strategy and brings their company into the Hollows Foundation.

“By that I mean participation by workers.

“A marketing company for instance may want to offer its employees the opportunity to work for a period with in the Hollows Foundation in a country office to help that office develop its own marketing strategies.

“There are all sorts of ways that we can benefit from the skills that private enterprise has and private enterprise can also benefit from us by motivating their staff and learning about other markets.”

Partnership is his social responsibility mantra.

“It’s not about one being the giver and the other the receiver. It’s about exploring ways that we can work with business and create a win-win for the organizations and ultimately to the benefit of the people we’re trying to serve.

“In Australia it’s early days, but some of the resource companies are starting to see it.

“When they’re looking at new markets, particularly in Papua New Guinea or some African countries they know that just going in as resource extraction groups doesn’t make them very popular.”

“To be welcome in that market a company needs to bring more than just its goal of profit.

“But by partnering with an NGO and bringing something more into that society they find the entrée is much more welcoming and a more valuable learning experience.”

The Hollows Foundations only works through local people and does not employ Australians overseas.

So what are his top tips for business on social responsibility (SR)?

“Firstly I’d say that if a company doesn’t have a good SR policy then it’s way behind the game.

“For those that are developing their policies it is a matter of looking closely at their business plans.

“Don’t divert from the business plan but try and see where corporate and social responsibility practices can be embedded.”

“I would encourage business to partner with NGOs.

“Have some in-depth discussions, learn about the company and vice versa, respect the professionalism on both sides and work out a joint strategy where benefits flow to both.”

Life credo: “It’s got to be fun.”

“I feel fortunate to be able to live my dream. I’ve never pursued personal profit but I’ve always wanted to do interesting things.”

Brian Doolan has gone in and out of war zones and lived with remote Aboriginal communities. When we spoke, he’d just come back from being in Pakistan during a recent earthquake.

“Being able to move amongst people in their lives at a time like that and see their strength – I’m incredibly privileged and one day someone is going to send me a bill.”

www.hollows.org

Felicity Pontoni is Editor of Thinking Business.

SR GUIDELINES AND INITIATIVES

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is a multi-stakeholder process and independent institution whose mission is to develop and disseminate globally applicable Sustainability Reporting Guidelines. These Guidelines are for voluntary use by organizations for reporting on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of their activities, products, and services.

The Global Compact is a United Nations initiative that promotes corporate responsibility by advancing universal values in business operations around the world. The Compact challenges business leaders to adopt and apply nine principles in the fields of

human rights, labour standards, and the environment.


The OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (MNEs)

aim to encourage corporate accountability and responsibility. They have been approved by governments and are addressed to multinational enterprises. The Guidelines share common elements with the Global Compact as they both relate to economic, social and environmental issues.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is developing new international guidelines for social responsibility due for release in early 2008.

ISO 26000 aims to provide guiding principles with global relevance that will be useful to organizations worldwide in establishing, implementing, maintaining and improving the way they address social responsibility.

According to those leading the work: “ISO can add value by developing an international consensus on basic guiding principles that will bring clarity, encourage communication and allow meaningful comparisons in the field of social responsibility.”

The AA1000 Framework: Standard, Guidelines and Professional Qualification, launched in 1999, provided the first systematic stakeholder-based approach to organizational accountability and performance improvement. It has been used worldwide in framing corporate responsibility policies, stakeholder dialogue, social, ethical and environmental accounting, auditing and reporting, and professional training. 

STANDARDS

The world’s first Standard on corporate social responsibility was published by Standards Australia in 2003 as part of its corporate governance suite.

AS 8003, Corporate governance - Corporate social responsibility is designed to be a “road map” for any organization that is interested in establishing, implementing and maintaining an effective corporate social responsibility program.

The purpose of the Standard is to:

- > Provide the mechanisms for an organization to establish and maintain an ethical culture through a committed, self regulatory approach; and
- > Provide a framework for an effective corporate social responsibility program, the performance of which can be monitored and assessed.

According to the Standard, the concept of corporate social responsibility is equally applicable to public and private entities, government departments and not-for-profit organizations. The use of the word ‘corporate’ should therefore be read in a broad sense as applying to all of these entities.

This broader scope is certainly the way in which ‘corporate social responsibility’ is commonly understood in other fora, such as the European Union.

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SR champions

Verizon (www.verizon.com) one of the world’s leading providers of communications recently captured the No.1 spot in the telecomms industry on this year’s Fortune magazine list of America’s Most Admired Companies. Social responsibility was one of the rating criteria.

Nike (www.nike.com) learned some painful lessons in its corporate responsibility journey but is now an SR global leader.



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