Cataract Q & A

What is a cataract?
A cataract is a clouding of the lens of the eye—an area that is normally transparent. The clouding prevents light rays from passing through the lens and focusing on the retina. Over time, the cataract may grow larger, making it difficult to see. Symptoms include cloudy or blurred vision, faded colors, double or multiple images, and poor night vision.

Around the world, 50% of curable blindness is due to cataracts.

What does cataract surgery involve?
The cloudy lens is removed and replaced. It is one of the safest and most commonly performed operations around the world. Two types of cataract surgeries are performed around the world, and both will likely be performed in Haiti: ultrasound phacoemulsification (phaco) and SICS, or small incision extracapsular cataract surgery.

For phaco, the surgeon creates an incision in the cornea just large enough to pass the surgical instruments through. Following the incision, the surgeon will gently peel off the front layer of the lens. This will allow access to the inner areas of the lens where the cataract has formed. Next, the surgeon will use a tool to break up the cataract into smaller segments. As the cataract is divided into segments, the surgeon will vacuum up the fragments. Once the cataract has been removed, a replacement lens is then inserted into the capsular bag, where the natural lens used to be. In most cases, this is an intraocular lens, which is foldable and slips in through the tiny incision. Because the incision is so small, it is often watertight and does not require any sutures, particularly if a foldable lens has been used.

SICS is most often done in developing countries, as it doesn’t require the use of an expensive phaco machine. When performing SICS as opposed to phaco, a slightly larger incision is made and the cataract is taken out whole. The replacement lens is inserted in a similar manner to phaco.

What is a white cataract?
White cataracts are generally more mature, denser or harder, than most. They may have been caused by trauma to the eye. While not the norm in the United States, absolute cataracts—white cataracts—require that physicians consider different factors and use advanced, complex techniques than they would for routine cataract surgery.