

OPTOMETRY IN GHANA: A FOREGROUND OF PRIMARY EYE CARE.

By Eugene Appenteng Osae

For many people in different spheres of life, their proudest achievements may be things like receiving a gold medal in sports or having been a dux of their graduating class. It could even be more personal things like coming from a wealthy family. These are reasonable and diverse opinions but for me, my greatest pride is my profession – the Optometry profession!

Optometry is fairly old in Ghana. With its beginnings in the early nineties at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and a subsequent start - up at the University of Cape Coast, the professional programme has successfully transitioned from the award of a postgraduate diploma to the doctor of optometry (OD) degree. The training of doctors of optometry – “ODs” as we are popularly called in Ghana, takes a thorough six year period and is founded on solid principles of professionalism.

As a crucial part of the eye care team in Ghana, trainee optometrists receive coaching from excellent faculty including optometrists, ophthalmologist, vision scientists and public health experts. We are also trained to work with ophthalmologists, opticians, ophthalmic nurses, nursing aides and other health professionals. Today, there are hundreds of optometrists in Ghana – some working in primary, secondary and tertiary health facilities and private practices. Optometrists in the country are trained to examine, diagnose, treat and manage diseases and disorders of the eye and visual system. They also form the first point of contact for most patients seeking eye care in the country.

Besides our high level of proficiency in detecting and correcting refractive errors with spectacles and contact lenses, some Ghanaian optometrists provide low vision services for

patient in need of low vision aids. Other ODs are in the frontage of Orthoptics and vision therapy- where they help correct persons with eye deviations and other binocular vision problems. We can never dispute the medical fact that, the eye is a diagnostic organ which gives clues to systemic conditions like diabetes, hypertension, jaundice and other debilitating diseases. Ghanaian optometrists are thus trained to identify such conditions using “clues from the eyes” so they refer appropriately and or co-manage patients with such conditions.

Now what forms my pride in optometry? I think I am of one the lucky youths who identify themselves with this great profession. I derive my satisfaction in helping people see and maintaining good eye health! My drive keeps on increasing anytime I receive a “thank you” from patients whom I have helped improved their vision, even just by the use of spectacle corrections. I desire to do more, to help people who are needlessly blind to see and to rehabilitate those who are blind adjust to their conditions and live near-normal lives.

What draws my attention is that, **optometry gives me the opportunity to form part of the global force to combat blindness and other vision related problems.** The training to become an optometrist in Ghana is a hurdle; like many other professions, it comes with news of disappointments and daunting tasks to perform but it is ultimately worth the smile that is placed on a patient’s face. I could not be any happier the last time, when I heard one of my patients who had his vision improved with spectacle after cataract surgery shout, ***“The grey and misty fog is lifted! It’s gone!”***. I had done my job for him- he could see better and I could not resist sharing in his joy!

However, optometry still has more to offer this country and there is much to be done for optometry in return. The patient – eye doctor ratio is still overwhelming. Much of rural Ghana

lacks optometric services. This does require very good national and international policies, support for the training of optometrists, regulation of optometric practices, the staffing of eye care facilities at all levels of care with optometrists as well as promoting the spread of optometry.

I am positive that through the power of private –public partnerships and with the spirit of volunteerism many poor persons in rural Ghana could be reached through vision screening programs. The continuity of optometric services and the sustainability of these screening programs lie in training and supporting dedicated personnel. Personally, I do and will continue to encourage the up and coming youth to opt for this rewarding career aimed at helping humanity to see.

I dream of optometry in Ghana becoming a profession that will mature to offer evidence based eye care services by continuing to offer quality training and increasing capacity for research in optometry, vision science and epidemiology. I am poised to be an influence in this profession and cannot wait to see optometry in Ghana be a model eye care profession for the rest of Africa. Let's join optometrists in saving the sight of people. Good visual health is indeed a prestige!