

# Khan's global vision

**T**hink of the name Imran Khan and the Pakistani politician and former cricketer or the high-profile lawyer in the Stephen Lawrence case may spring to mind. But another Imran Khan looks set to be increasingly prominent in our own profession as he takes over as international programme director at Vision Aid Overseas (VAO).

Khan joined the charity last month and will lead its overseas programmes, working closely with VAO's professional volunteers. Unusually, he is an optometrist with wide experience of international development and a CV that reads like a travel guide.

Khan's first exposure to international eye care was as a second-year optometry student at the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in 2000 when he joined a mission to Guatemala organised by the US-based agency Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH). It was a trip that would lead him to take part in similar projects in many countries around the world. 'Basically from that moment I was hooked,' he explains.

After leaving optometry school with a Masters in low vision rehabilitation, he completed a post-doctoral residency at the University of California, Berkeley then moved to New Zealand, taking on a teaching role at the University of Auckland. A brief spell in practice took him back to California, to Hollywood, where his patients included actors and screenwriters.

Relocating to Holland in 2005, Khan found that his post at the University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht allowed time for lecturing in optometry around Europe and, during the summer breaks, extended missions to the Thai-Burmese border and to Ghana with the US charity Unite for Sight.

## Public health approach

What was lacking with some of the projects, he says, was a long-term sustainable outcome. 'I was really missing that public health approach.' The solution was a move to the UK to begin a second Masters course, this time at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Here Khan was studying public health alongside ophthalmologists and other professionals from many developing countries. His course majored on health service management and included

The latest recruit to the Vision Aid Overseas team is an optometrist with a familiar name and an unusual CV, as **Alison Ewbank** discovered



**Imran Khan: a passion for optometry, public health and education**

a thesis looking at the effectiveness and impact of an eye care training programme in Papua New Guinea run by another aid agency, the Fred Hollows Foundation.

'Specifically we were looking at workplace transfer – whether concepts learned in the classroom were actually being transferred to jobs.'

Consultancy for the Foundation and for the International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE) followed, again in Papua New Guinea and also in Vietnam and Nigeria. At the same time, Khan was in demand on the European lecture circuit, presenting on demographic trends and unmet needs in the contact lens sector, through contacts he had made in industry.

Contact lenses and international development may seem poles apart but Khan maintains they are interlinked and both have a public health perspective. His new position at VAO involves all three of his main areas of interest: optometry, public health and education. 'This post is great because it brings together so many different aspects of my interests and passions, and combines them very nicely.'

## Evaluating training

So what will his background in optometry bring to the role? 'As an optometrist, it's having an understanding of what goes into the training within the country, as well

as the logistical issues and recognising some of the barriers. I'll be able to work with the volunteers to develop the vision centres and the educational material for training.'

For Khan, evaluating the training of local personnel will be key. Recent work with the Pennsylvania College of Optometry on programme implementation and evaluation should prove invaluable to VAO at a time when its focus is sustainability.

'It's a very exciting time for me to be joining VAO. We're getting a lot more involved with long-term sustainable programmes. My predecessor Suzy Lamont has put in place a lot of the operational components that make it easier for me to come in. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to join an eye care organisation that has human resources development at the centre of its operations.'

'You can have a great training programme but if there's no place for the graduates to go and work, and if that infrastructure's not there to support them, then the whole intervention is not going to be successful.'

## Bursary scheme

Khan will also be looking at creating longer term placements overseas for volunteers, which could be in educational roles supporting universities with UK-trained optometrists. A new bursary scheme to be launched this year will be pertinent to these placements and to students, as well as to the usual two-week projects.

Attracting new volunteers will be among the goals for the first CET event VAO will be holding in London in October to coincide with its annual general meeting. The event will offer the opportunity to learn about international eye care and tropical eye diseases, and how the charity is building up health systems in its partner countries. ●

● Places are still available at the VAO volunteers' training day to be held in Birmingham on Sunday March 25. Visit [www.visionaidoverseas.org](http://www.visionaidoverseas.org) or call 01293 535016 to register