

CET goes online in Tanzania

Dr Hannah Bartlett describes how Aston University has helped the development of optometric training in Tanzania

At last summer's African Council of Optometry (AFCO) Annual Conference held in Dar Es Salaam, students from Aston University were invited to launch a new CET website – Training Optometrists in Africa Online (www.toatraining.com).

The site is the first of its kind in Africa and indeed in many other parts of the world. The project began in September 2008 and was the result of a partnership between Aston University and the Tanzanian Optometric Association (TOA, whose function is similar to the College of Optometrists and the Association of Optometrists combined in the UK).

Tanzania is the only country in east and central Africa where optometry is a legislated profession under the Optometry Act 2007, and in stark contrast to the UK patient to practitioner ratio, it has one of the lowest in Africa with only around 250 optometrists for a population of 40 million. The long-term aim of the Association will be to encourage professional development and as in the UK, make continuing education a pre-requisite for registration to practice in Tanzania.

Access to training

Following the TOA annual conference in 2008, at which Hannah Bartlett and Frank Eperjesi of Aston University were invited to speak, it was clear that there is a huge range of knowledge and experience among optometrists in Tanzania. Some have been trained in the UK and US, while many have had very basic training at institutions within the country. While some optometrists struggle with basic refraction and ocular health assessment techniques, most are keen to learn and to develop their skills and understanding of all aspects of optometry; however, despite their enthusiasm they have little or no access to up-to-date books and training materials.

Rajeshwari Sagar is a key player in the development of optometry in Tanzania. She has represented Tanzania at the World Council of Optometry (WCO), has worked



Tanzanian optometrists must pay a small fee for access to the scheme

with the Ministry of Health in Tanzania, takes responsibility for the organisation of the Tanzanian annual training conference, and more recently has been appointed president of TOA. She is keen to develop a CET programme to encourage practising Tanzanian optometrists to develop their skills and knowledge.

With both financial and time constraints being prohibitive in organising lectures and events, Training Optometrists in Africa Online was the solution. A web-based learning environment would overcome many of the hurdles that come with administering CET in a country as vast as Tanzania. Rajeshwari, along with Hannah Bartlett (clinical editor of Training Optometrists in Africa Online) enlisted the help of Aston optometry undergraduate students to build the site and implement the system both in the UK and in Tanzania. Marcello Leucci, a current Aston Optometry undergraduate and experienced web designer, offered to volunteer his time to design and administrate the site, while fellow students Mahrukh Mohammad and Taha Jalal have been involved in writing articles and site implementation in Tanzania.

The site was completed in early June 2009 and Leucci, Mohammad and Jalal were invited to the African Council of Optometry (AFCO) conference in Dar Es Salaam in August 2009 for the official launch. The popularity and indeed necessity of the site became almost immediately clear and delegates were impressed by many of its features

which include: the ability to accrue CET points online, discussion forums, a tele-medicine service and a messaging service which allows members throughout the country to keep in contact.

Both AFCO and International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE) representatives were also particularly impressed by the site and Leucci and Jalal will be attending the World Conference on Optometric Education in Durban in September to present a poster detailing how the website has been received. Users of the site were surveyed to assess its impact; the results demonstrated that awareness of the need for CET was high, as was opinion that such a programme was important to the profession. It was noted that internet accessibility was not a prohibitive factor in the deployment of an online CET scheme and a programme of CET was seen as financially viable with users willing to cover low administration costs. Optometrists were also shown to be performing well on the CET tests.

Supporting the profession

To be registered with the site, Tanzanian optometrists must take up membership with TOA, and pay a small fee for access. This fee is used by the association to improve training opportunities within the country. In this way, the expectation is that Training Optometrists in Africa Online will support development of the profession as a whole within Tanzania.

The CET system on the website currently provides materials at two levels to cater for people who work mainly in refraction, as well as those who are involved in detection of disease. The need for two separate levels within the system reflects the changes in optometric education that have occurred in Tanzania over the past 30 years. Articles are written for both levels and *Optician* has generously donated a number of articles to the site. If anyone is interested in getting involved with Training Optometrists in Africa Online, or wishes to provide articles, please email Dr Hannah Bartlett (H.E.Bartlett@aston.ac.uk). ●

● For more information, visit the website at www.toatraining.com