

Report

Optometry in Ethiopia

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Ethiopia (see Figure 1), previously known as Abyssinia, officially the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is a largely mountainous country situated in the Horn of Africa. The country is bordered by Eritrea to the north, Kenya to the south, Somalia to the east, Sudan to the west and Djibouti to the northeast. It boasts a population of about 75 million, the second largest in Africa. Its capital and largest city, Addis Ababa, is situated 9°01'N 38° 44'E.

The name Ethiopia comes from the Greek word meaning *sunburned faces*. The ancient Greeks applied the word to people living south of Egypt, because the people had darker skins than the Greeks. Ethiopia is one of the oldest African nations. According to tradition, the first emperor of Ethiopia, Menelik I, was the son of the biblical Queen Sheba and King Solomon of Israel. Emperors or kings ruled Ethiopia for about 2000 years. In 1974 Ethiopian military leaders overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie and took control of the government. In 1987, Ethiopia adopted a new constitution that provided for a return to a civilian government.



Figure 1 Ethiopia

Ethiopians are classified mainly into two large groups based on the languages they speak. The groups are the *Semites* (people who speak Semitic languages) and the *Cushites* (people who speak Cushitic languages). The Semites live mainly in the northern and central Ethiopia. They include the Amhara, Tigre and Gurage. The Cushites live mainly in the southern and eastern Ethiopia. They include the Afar (also called Danakil). The population also includes a few thousand Ethiopian Jews known as *Falashas* or *Beta Israel*. They formerly spoke a Cushitic language, but now speak Semitic languages. Amharic is the official language of Ethiopia. Approximately 40% of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a Christian faith and about 40% are Muslims. A small percentage is Beta Israel practicing a form of Judaism and most of the rest practice traditional African religions.

Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in the world and Africa's second-most populous nation. It has yielded some of the oldest traces of humanity making it an important area in the history of human evolution. Ethiopia was not colonized during the scramble for Africa after defeating Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896; however, it was occupied by Mussolini's Italy from 1935 to 1941. The Italians were later driven out of Ethiopia with the help of British troops.

Historically, by the early 21st century Ethiopia became a crossroads of global international cooperation. It became a member of the League of Nations in 1923, signed the Declaration by United Nations in 1942, was one of the 51 original members of the United Nations (UN), and formerly hosted the UN headquarters in Africa (now located in Nairobi). Ethiopia hosts the headquarters of the African Union (formerly the Organization of African Unity), of which it was the principal founder. There are about 45 Ethiopian embassies and consulates worldwide.

Education is not compulsory, however, great progress has been made in promoting literacy. About 46% of the children attend elementary school, but only about 12% attend high school. Ethiopia has four universities, one in the capital Addis Ababa, one in Asmara in the north east, Gondar in the North West and Awasa in the south.

According to the World Health Organization in its 2006 World Health Report Ethiopia had 1936 physicians in 2003, which comes to about 2.6 physicians per 100000 of the population. Globalization is said to affect the country, with many educated professionals leaving Ethiopia for a better economic opportunity in the West.

Ethiopia's main health problems are said to be communicable diseases caused by poor sanitation and malnutrition. These problems made worse by the shortage of trained manpower and health facilities. There are 119 hospitals (12 in Addis Ababa alone) and 412 health centres in Ethiopia.

Optometry in Ethiopia

The first optometry department at a university began in 2005, although there is already talk of others. The University of Gondar (the capital of Ethiopia about 300 years ago) offers a Bachelor's degree in Optometry. This university, where the optometry course was started two years ago, is located in Gondar, approximately 650 km north of Addis Ababa. Sixteen students, the first to qualify, are due to graduate in June 2008. The optometry department forms part the Faculty of Health Science situated at the Gondar University Hospital. Figures 2 and 3 show a view of the city of Gondar and the entrance to the university respectively.

The Department of Optometry was set up in 2005 by Gemma Peters, an optometrist from England and is financed by ORBIS, an American non-profit organization with headquarters in New York. Mrs Peters was later joined by Ruhan du Plooy, a graduate from The Rand Afrikaans University (now The University of Johannesburg). The two of them, both on contract with the option of renewal, manage and run the whole department. To achieve the best education possible for the students they rely heavily on guest lecturers who are specialists in their fields in optometry, to offer assistance with lectures wherever possible. In order to improve the quality of the course more full time staff is required. I offered my services and spent a week



Figure 3 The main entrance to the Gondar University Hospital

lecturing Ophthalmic Dispensing. Under the circumstances, I was really surprised at the standard Gemma and Ruhan have set. I was impressed by the appreciation they expressed with my presence, their enthusiasm for the course and their level of education. The students were an absolute pleasure to teach.

The whole department comprises a reception area, an optical workshop, a small clinic and a lecture room all under one roof. Figures 4 and 5 show the entrance and the outer building of the department and Figures 6 and 7 the lecture room with the students.



Figure 2 The city of Gondar.



Figure 4 The entrance to the optometry workshop and department.

Education is free in Ethiopia, however, the students do not get to choose the field they enter. After matric the government decides for them on the field and also decides in which institutions they will study.

The top achievers get to study medicine. After completing their degree, the students have to work back two years for the government and only then can they enter the working world. I have suggested to some of the students that they request posts in their Department of Optometry thereby growing the department and in time not needing to be quite so reliant on foreign assistance.

At present there are about 80 ophthalmologists in Ethiopia of which slightly more than half are in private practice. If one does the sums there is about one ophthalmologist per 940 000 people. There are also NGO's and possibly eye-care officers offering eye care in the country. However, in my opinion, they are in desperate need of more assistance.



Figure 5 The Department of Optometry



Figure 6 The students at work

I had the pleasure of meeting the Dean of Health Sciences, Dr Assefa (Figures 8 and 9). The University of Gondar and The University of Johannesburg are at present discussing a Memorandum of Understanding between the two institutions. I do hope the two institutions will bring this about. Although we have an eye care problem of our own in South Africa, we do, however, have more infrastructure and



Figure 7 The class of 2008. Anthony Carlson is first left in the front row and Gemma Peters is third from the left



Figure 8 The entrance to the Dean's office.



Figure 9 The Dean of Health Sciences, Dr Assefa and myself.

expertise than currently in Ethiopia. Anyone interested in offering their expertise and services helping out with lectures, can contact Zalalem Eshetu at zalalem.eshetu@orbis.org.

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