

From the Editor's Desk

December 2012

It's that time of year again when students in optometry courses in South Africa have mostly written their examinations. About 120-150 students graduate each year from the four degree courses available in this part of the world - and with each year optometric educational courses gradually evolve and improve. Certainly there has been tremendous development when one compares the typical education that such students receive today in comparison with that of, say, one or two decades previously. But, as always, there remains room for further improvement. Recently, there has been talk about a community year for young optometric graduates and hopefully this will actually come to fruition. But, for many years there has been discussion about such a year of, primarily, clinical and practical activity. That there is a huge need for eye and vision care services in many parts of South Africa is undeniable. A year, or even only four to six months, of community service would significantly improve the overall clinical skills of most graduates. The potential effects that this type of activity plays towards developing a particular community-based mind set is another positive contribution that would serve both society and the profession. Indeed South Africa would benefit greatly from a general period of community service for all youth and, despite the associated costs and administrative issues, such a period even if it were relatively short would go a long way to developing skills and assisting to get young people into productive activities. This is, of course,

particularly relevant given huge unemployment in this country and the recent census estimated that the young unemployed constituted between 30-50% depending on factors such as racial group and whether or not individuals had given up on trying to find employment - a rather convenient method whereby politicians and others sometimes try to pretend the issue is less severe than otherwise!

If all youth completed some period of community service either before, during or after their tertiary education (where applicable), then this would allow such a system to be properly integrated into the life cycle of all South Africans. In other parts of the world such community service allows youngsters to gain experience and work in various situations including in hospitals, in schools, in homes for the orphaned, aged or disabled, and even in some areas of the private sector. Police and fire stations are other areas where young people could be usefully employed to provide some, for example, simple but perhaps neglected administrative services. Many municipalities, in this country would also perhaps benefit from some young, but enthusiastic, assistance and at the same time these young people would also be making a positive contribution. Some young people could also choose to work within sectors of the military services and perhaps this might lead to careers for those that might be interested in such directions.

But, returning to the more limited issue of a period of community service in optometry,

perhaps it might even be expanded to allow for opportunities towards doing such service within tertiary environments. So, short-term internship might be instituted and the emphasis could be towards various areas including public health, specialization and, perhaps, even research and given the limited resources available this could be highly beneficial for the interns, the tertiary institutions and society. Indeed it might be possible to combine periods of internship and externship to allow some fortunate individuals to benefit from both types of community involvement. Others may prefer to do purely external community-based service and hopefully such flexibility might be incorporated into any optometric community service that might be forthcoming in South Africa!

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