

From the Editor's Desk

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This year has really started with a fury - what with the recent events in the Middle East and earthquakes, tsunamis and nuclear accidents in places like New Zealand and Japan. In Ghana optometrists are starting to receive doctor of optometry (OD) degrees as for Nigeria also, and, of course, following the general approach that applies to optometry in the United States of America and Canada. So, there are presently at least two countries in Africa where the OD type of tertiary educational programme in optometry is being followed and one can anticipate that, in the future, other countries in Africa may also follow this same route. In South Africa, medicine also essentially follows a two degree approach that is very similar to what is happening in Ghana in optometry where students study for their initial Bachelors degree which is then followed by the optometry degree or OD. This method has a lot going for it as one thus gets people with either a BSc or BA undergraduate degree eventually bringing relatively high levels of skills and knowledge of other, diverse fields into optometry. The length of education is typically about six to seven years with three or four years devoted to optometry itself. Another advantage, of course, is that these sorts of graduates have greater options than optometry only since they have other skills and their background allows them to follow other career paths should they decide to do so. For example, someone who majors in, say, biochemis-

try and mathematics can pursue post-graduate qualifications in either of those two areas or may work within other fields or industries should they choose to, and naturally assuming that such an individual decides eventually that optometry is not really the direction that he or she wants to follow despite also having their OD degree. In the 21st century having a multiplicity of skills that extends beyond only one specialty such as optometry, for instance, can be of obvious importance especially with the very rapid changes that are happening in almost all fields of endeavour. Most of these graduates would likely stay in optometry but, at least, the option would be there for some and the double-barreled degree process would typically produce better educated and more highly skilled graduates for both the profession and the society within which they live and work.

The idea of starting an OD degree programme was attempted earlier in South Africa, mainly through the efforts of the Department of Optometry of the University of Limpopo. But, to the best of my knowledge, then the emphasis seemed to be mainly towards perhaps expanding the education of South African optometrists from four to six years rather than to having students enter optometry programmes, already having an undergraduate BSc or BA qualification. Perhaps it is time that this educational approach should be seriously considered and that some sort of OD qualification or



combination BSc BOptom process should be attempted. Of course, there is nothing to stop departments of optometry in South Africa increasing their current intakes of individuals who already have suitable undergraduate degrees and who would then complete the existing Bachelor of Optometry degree (and likely qualify for credits for some or all of the first year subjects or courses of present BOptom degrees). Although they would not receive a Doctor of Optometry degree they would have a BSc BOptom combination. This certainly could be an intermediate step prior to the HPCSA and DOE and similar bodies allowing a different approach to the education of optometrists in South Africa. Such changes would also benefit the general public who would thus have optometrists qualifying who would be better and more widely educated and thus almost certainly be more skilled and knowledgeable.

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