

CONGRESS AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Approximately 20 per cent of the world population needs vision correction, yet not one national plan includes affordable vision correction. This problem can not be tackled unless we find affordable vision correction methods. These few words paraphrase the theme of the congress held at St. Anne's College, University of Oxford, August 7-9.

By Mark T. Mackenzie

"Making money does not mean you cannot be a humanitarian", this was one of the conclusions of the Affordable Vision Conference. The list of participants was headed by Professor Dan Sheni, President of the World Council of Optometry. The guest list included Dr. Bhardwaj, President of the Asia Pacific Council of Optometry as well as representatives from India, Thailand, Nigeria, Australia, Tanzania, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the USA. The objective of the meeting was to determine for developing countries

| What is affordable Vision Correction? and How it can be delivered.

Professor Sheni defined vision correction as affordable if the a price to the consumer is less than 10% of their monthly disposable income. This definition was accepted by most delegates. However, Professor Sheni pointed out that this 10% figure can vary widely depending on which country you are dealing with. (Tabelle 1)

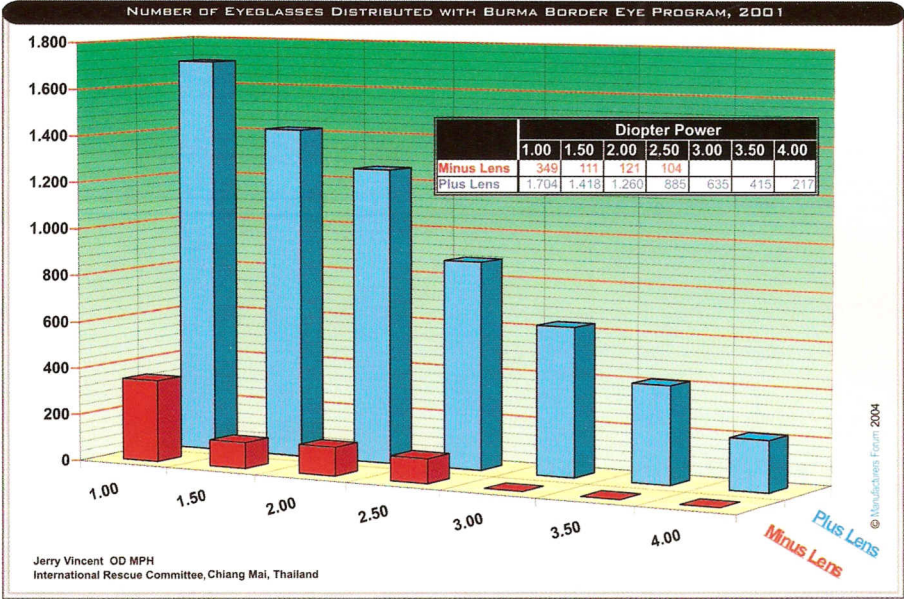
Dr. Harry Seltzer, Executive Director of Vosh International, who has carried out work with the Navajo Indians in the USA pointed out that affordable vision correction is also an issue in developed countries. In the USA there are 14.2 m. people over 45 living below the poverty line. Worldwide, the conference estimated that between 1.0 to 1.3 b. people require vision correction but do not

have sufficient access to it. Several solutions which correspond to the < 10 per cent requirement were presented.

Anthony Carlson, from The Rand Afrikaans University of South Africa demonstrated a system based on CR 39 lens technology: 13,000 different refractive alternatives can be obtained with just 30 different stock keeping units. Interestingly this was the only low price solution which takes astigmatism into account (asc@na.rau.ac.za).

The Scojo Foundation is the not for profit arm of Scojo, a distributor of reading glasses in the USA. They are at present setting up





a subsidiary in India. Reading glasses are a method of supplying fashionable low price solutions for wearers. Even the poorest farmer in the most remote region of India knows what the latest fashions worn by actors in the Bollywood film studios are, Graham Macmillan pointed out (g.macmillan@scojo.com).

Harry I. Zeltzer, Executive Director of Vosh International, said they recycle 140,000 pairs of spectacles per year. They have developed software programmed to allow field workers to access all relevant solutions for a patient. All the used frames received by VOSH are categorised and entered into the Richmond Eyeglass Inventory Matching system. This allows a patient, after refraction, to choose between six to 10 alternatives (harryizeltzer@comcast.net).

The most innovative solution was the Adaptive Spectacle from Adaptive Eyecare Ltd, which Will Pirie explained. The product allows a patient to self refract. A field Study showed that the difference between the refractive values of trained optometrists and a group of 213 patients who self refracted was minimal. The patient can set the lens for distance, intermediate or near vision. Production in China has been ramped up to 1,000 pieces a day and a field trial is soon to be started in Ghana (will_pirie@hotmail.com).

Following the above there was a discussion on mistakes made working in developing countries. Professor Shenj was kind enough to tell recount some errors that he had made. Following this he gave the following guidelines:

- | Understanding of cultural issues is critical. A negative response may be avoided for fear of giving the impression that one is not grateful, resulting in "Is that better...yes, is that better..yes"
- | Understand who is important locally and show that person appropriate respect even though they may have nothing to do with the project; this is key.
- | Gifts, even small ones, are important, in rural areas of South Africa a bottle of Schnapps works wonders.

Another lesson on working with developing countries was given by Jerry Vincent. who works with the Inter-national Rescue Committee. He is an optometrist who for the last few years has been working in refugee camps on the Thailand /Myanmar (Burma) border.

Never take things for granted. He went to the camps expecting to see high incidences of myopia and found exactly the opposite.

Providing eyecare and eyewear to one of the most remote places on earth is problematic. Access by air is not possible and security is affected by occasional fighting spilling over from Burma. In the rainy season the roads disappear into a sea of mud.

The conference did not come up with a list of formal conclusions, but there was agreement from the delegates on the following issues:

- | Affordable vision correction needs to be priced at less than 10 per cent of a person's monthly disposable income.
- | Sustainable business models, where profit is made, are seen as a good thing for future distribution of affordable vision correction.

| There is a vast need for affordable vision correction, between 1.0-1.3 b. people worldwide.

| Vision correction organisations operating in developing countries need to make a better business case for allocation of funds from National Governments and charities. They are, in a business sense, competing against Aids, malaria and tuberculosis.

Currency figures in US dollars	Total GDP*	Average GDP per capita per annum	< 10% per month
Albania	6,124	1,728	14.0
Eritrea	734	165	1.4
Tajikistan	1,303	186	1.5
Nigeria	50,202	366	3.0
Ghana	7,659	369	3.1
Papua New Guinea	3,395	626	5.2
Tanzania	9,872	270	2.25
UK	1,794,858	29,780	248.2

* millions of US dollars: Source World Bank July 2004.

Examples of <10%

Interestingly in the United Kingdom the average price of a complete pair of spectacles in 2003 was £ 144.52 (EUR 214.30), says the report "Optics at a Glance" by the Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians. This figure equates to dollars \$ 241.00 which is 9.7 per cent of the "average" persons monthly income.

On the issue of how to deliver affordable vision correction, the proposal to give health workers short training courses in refraction and eye examination was opposed by India. Villagers are well aware that ophthalmologists and optometrists exist; patients do not want third world treatment from poorly qualified technicians.

On a personal note, it was a humbling experience to attend a conference with so many highly qualified men and women who have chosen to work in uncomfortable parts of the world. They could if they wanted to make much more money by running a private practice back home.



Mark Mackenzie was formerly International Business Development Director for the ophthalmic business of Carl Zeiss. Before this he was European Regional Director of SOLA Inc. In April 2001 he founded Strategy with Vision Ltd., a unique team of eyewear and eyecare consultants based throughout the UK and Europe. SWV consultants carry out vision care market research and data investigation in the UK, Europe, Eastern Europe, the USA and Japan. www.swv4u.com