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Abstract Title: A health needs assessment to inform the development of an intervention strategy aimed at reducing refractive error visual impairment in Cape Town, South Africa

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Abstract

Uncorrected refractive error is the leading cause of visual impairment globally and in Southern Africa. Refractive error visual impairment (REVI) has adverse effects on individuals' quality of life, and constitutes a socio-economic burden on society, despite being easily detectable during routine eye examinations and treatable with spectacles or contact lenses. In South Africa there is a shortage of full-time optometrists employed in the public sector resulting in failure to meet the eye care needs of people suffering from REVI.

This is the first health needs assessment focused on gathering insights from stakeholders about public sector REVI in Cape Town, South Africa. In this qualitative study interviews were conducted with 13 stakeholders.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the current state of public eye care services in Cape Town does not meet the need of the population. Government was identified as the main stakeholder responsible for addressing public sector REVI in Cape Town, but most participants felt government was not prioritizing REVI enough as a public health concern due to greater health issues, such as HIV and tuberculosis, being prioritized. Other barriers preventing a reduction in public sector REVI were lack of primary eye health policy and funding, a shortage of optometrists in the public sector, a poor working relationship between eye health stakeholders, inaccessibility to primary eye care services in public hospitals, and unaffordability of alternative eye health services and vision aids in the private sector.

Suggested interventions were compulsory community service for graduating optometry students, private-public partnerships, and establishing eye care clinics. However, instead of relying on government to address the reduction of public sector REVI, the most feasible way of optimally utilizing current optometrists is through the implementation a comprehensive eye health programme either by partnering with an existing non-governmental organization (NGO) or starting a new NGO.

Keywords – *Optometry, Primary eye health, Public eye care services, Refractive error visual impairment*

Professional Biography

Abrie Marais completed his B Optometry in 2011 from the University of the Free State in South Africa, and his MSc Public Health in 2016 from the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in his pursuit to combine these two healthcare pathways to make a positive contribution to society and enrich the lives of others.

He is an Abe Bailey Fellow, Chevening Scholar, former Mr South Africa finalist and recently founded the For Sight Trust, a charitable trust in Cape Town aimed at reducing refractive error visual impairment through the provision of free eye examinations and spectacles to people who do not have the necessary funds or access to primary eye care services.



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