

Editorial

The 50 Years of Advancing Eye Care by Optometrists in Nigeria

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On the occasion of her 50th anniversary, it is timely to review the Nigerian Optometric Association (NOA), which stands alone as the national face of optometry and her official voice in Nigeria. NOA is the national organisation for all licensed optometrists in Nigeria and its affiliates and as such it represents over 4000 grassroots optometrists spread across the 36 States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. NOA is their advocate before international organisations like the African Council of Optometry (AFCO), World Council of Optometry (WCO) and World Health Organisation (WHO). NOA is a national accelerant for their educational and legislative advancement and also a vehicle by which they participate directly or indirectly in humanitarian programs.

The development of optometry as a profession in Nigeria, from refractionist-optician to primary care clinician reflects the history of NOA and its predecessor organisations; the Association of Optical Practitioners in Nigeria (AOPN) and the Nigerian Optical Association. This development is founded on the efforts of early trained opticians (as they were then called) who grasped the need for optometry to share its resources and experience against the challenges common to every country where optometry has aspired to advance its standards of education and scope of practice. The NOA began in 1968, when **five** professional leaders from different parts of the country formed the Nigerian Optical Association for the purpose of “encouraging the science of optics and the art of the application of the science of optics to the improvement of human vision; and the protection of the members of the association from influences inimical to the prosperity of the profession of an optician.” The small founding membership was slowly augmented with new entrants such as Professor Paul Ogbuehi and like minds. With this influx, a fresh push was made towards the realignment of focus to embrace the tenets of professionalism. It was during this period of the significant paradigm

shift that the association was, at a meeting held in December 1976, rechristened the “Nigerian Optometric Association” (NOA). Nigerian Optical Association, for the first 8 years of its existence, made measured progress, partly attributable to the innate conservatism of the Europe-trained opticians, and partly due to an unwillingness to take optometry too far from its roots in refraction and optical dispensing. There was also the fear that any assertive push to expand optometry’s clinical role would be counter-productive because it would provoke a strong political backlash from organised medicine.

By early 1976, the future of the Nigerian Optical Association had become uncertain because its Eurocentric culture was unhelpful to the fledgling profession in Nigeria where a youthful, dynamic and assertive group necessitated a radical infusion of modernism into the operations of the association. Fortunately, the future of the NOA changed in 1986 with the election of Professor Paul Ogbuehi as the president of NOA. Ogbuehi brought in vigour and needed professionalism into the leadership of the organisation. The Ogbuehi team initiated a strategic planning process that step-by-step transformed the NOA into a dynamic, truly national association committed to upgrading standards of eye and vision care nationally. Among the initial steps were the drafting and adoption of a constitution for the association, and a renewed push for the legal recognition of optometry in Nigeria. First, the adoption of a constitution led to a proper organisational framework and ease of administration of the NOA. The organisational principle was ‘membership by full, associate, affiliate, honorary, external and life membership; governance by state chapter and the NOA national executive council comprising equal representation from the three zones of south east, south west and North in the Vice presidential position.

The push by the NOA leadership led to the legal recognition of optometry in Nigeria in 1989 with the signing into law of **Decree No 34 of 1989 on the 7th December 1989**

by the then military head of state, Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, GCFR. The law established the Optometry and Dispensing Opticians Registration Board of Nigeria (ODORBN), and defined optometry based on the national needs for eye and vision care, models of education and training for optometrists, regulation and scope of practice, eye care service delivery models, eye care workforce needs, optical industry, research and national order. This definition was captured as “a health-care profession specialising in the art and science of vision care and whose scope of practice includes:-

- a. Eye examinations to determine refractive errors and other departures from the optimally healthy and visually efficient eye;
- b. Correction of refractive errors using spectacles, contact lenses, low vision aids and other devices;
- c. Correction of errors of binocularity by means of vision training (orthoptics);
- d. Diagnosis and management of minor ocular infections which do not pose a threat to the integrity of the ocular or visual system; and
- e. Ocular first aid”

Before the enactment of the law establishing optometry in Nigeria, NOA self-regulated the profession, led the fight against quackery, started championing continuing education as far back as 1976 and defined the desired direction of general professional development.

NOA entered into official relationship with the WCO, and was at the fore front in the recognition of Optometry as a health care profession by World Health Organisation (W.H.O) and the formation of the African Council of Optometry (AFCO). With the setting up of more training schools, NOA has since acquired the spread and strength to continually address professional interests and pursue set objectives, especially within the local health system. Through NOA, affiliates have been formed starting from the state chapters of the association, the Nigerian Optometric Students Association (NOSA), the Association of Nigerian Optometric Educators (ANOE), Association of Optometrists in Public Health Care of Nigeria (AOPHCN) and Women Optometrists in Nigeria (WON). These bodies have served to give unity, focus, aspiration,

and purpose to the profession at both state and national levels. The association has continued to grow, incorporating modern trends in its operation. Some of the major landmark achievements of the NOA include the articulation and adoption of the Code of Ethics for professional practice of optometry in 1995, collaborating with ODORBN to get the Government of Nigeria to abrogate the Bachelor of Science (BSc) Optometry Degree and replaced it with the Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree in all Nigerian training Universities (1989), to come up with the uniform OD benchmark for all practitioners (2000), approval of Civil Service Scheme for Nigerian optometrists and approval of call duty allowance for Optometrists at 4% of the basic Salary in 2003. Other land mark achievements include collaborating with the board, Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians Board of Nigeria and the World Council of Optometry (WCO) to establish the post graduate programme of the Nigerian College of Optometrists (NCO), with specialties in seven different disciplines, areas such as: Primary Care Optometry, Public Health Optometry, Cornea and Contact Lens Practice, Ocular Health, Rehabilitative Optometry and low vision care, Pediatric Optometry and also Orthoptics (2000), relocation of her national secretariat from Lagos to her current office in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (2014), Institution of Professional Indemnity, Group Life and Health Insurance Scheme, joining the Nigerian Union of Allied Health Professionals (2015), Institution of the Family of Optometry Mentoring program (2015), unbroken records of external auditing of its accounts and finances annually since 2015, capturing of optometrists in the Relativity Salary Structure and inclusion of interns in the call duty allowance by the National Salaries, Incomes and Wages Commission (2016), launch of the first Compendium on Optometry in Nigeria (2017), wooing of foreign investors to invest in Nigeria leading to the official entrance of one of the world leading manufacturers of lenses Essilor International into the Nigerian market (2017), registration of humanitarian arm of the profession, the Optometry Foundation of Nigeria (2017), sustaining an unbroken series of annual national scientific conferences since 1976, among others (See History of Optometry Book that will be launched during the NOA@50 event)

NOA is registered in Nigeria and her national secretariat is currently located at Jinifa Plaza Central Business

District Abuja where its humanitarian arm, Optometry Foundation of Nigeria is also housed. The Optometry Foundation of Nigeria raises resources to support NOA humanitarian, educational and other ancillary projects.

The objectives of NOA can be summarised as:

1. Setting professional standards to aid members in conducting patient care efficiently and effectively;
2. Conducting research and generating data on public eye care statistics to aid informed decisions on eye care and health policies and programmes;
3. Increasing awareness of key audiences, of the causes of avoidable blindness as well as offering innovative and cost-effective solutions to eradicating the scourge;
4. Advocating for and securing necessary resources for implementing the WHO Global Action Plan (2014-2019) and successive global eye care programmes in Nigeria;
5. Facilitating the planning, development and implementation of national VISION 2020/Eye Health programmes in Nigeria;
6. Lobbying government and key organizations towards adopting Optometry-friendly policies and programmes;
7. Delivering a unified voice about issues affecting the profession and advocating for the interest of Optometrists.

These objectives are pursued and implemented through nine major committees and four subcommittees: Major - Welfare, Education and Research, Legal and legislative, Finance and Budget, Public Health and Development, Disciplinary/Credential and Professional Practice, Election, Publication and Award ; Subcommittees- Advocacy, Children Vision, Political Action and Public Relations. These committees work closely with the national executive council to ensure that all NOA programmes are sensitive to local issues and needs.

Welfare

The welfare arm of the association is chaired by Dr. Maureen Igwe. This committee has three areas of focus. First, this committee develops programmes

that convey to optometrists that membership in the Nigerian Optometric Association is a cherished asset and vital to the continued existence of optometry. It also improves communication with members and non-members regarding the benefits of membership in the Nigerian Optometric Association. Second, it develops volunteer and leadership programmes that provide tangible returns to members. These afford and encourage all Nigerian optometrists to become involved in the Association and third, it maintains a position of readiness to respond to the needs of members in time of need; and report to the EXCO prior to the annual general meeting of any assistance rendered. Through the efforts of the committee, we have in place today professional indemnity, group life and health insurance for optometrists who want to protect and grow their business as well as have some benefits in times of bereavement and ill-health. The committee has not looked back in attending to the needs of members in difficulty. We thank God for the lives of Drs Ike Oforbuike and Dinne Kingsley among others whom today we rejoice with, for the remarkable transformation in their lives after going through life challenges.

Members have started benefitting from the leadership training which was first initiated during the 2017 conference in Benin, Edo state. Apart from plans to make this training regular during future conferences, it has been made a constitutional matter for every elected officer of the association to undergo leadership training immediately on assumption of office.

Other areas the committee has been instrumental includes:

1. Encouraging State Chapters to have more programmes at the state level that give more optometrists the opportunity to participate in activities and have a sense of belonging.
2. Motivating State chapters to develop welfare schemes that cater for the welfare needs of its members.
3. Supporting the Finance and Budget committee to raise funds from privileged members of the association and the general public. Recently, the association has benefitted immensely from such gestures especially from optometrists and ophthalmic industry

shakers. Such gifts have helped us in cutting down the cost of mentoring, conferences and continuing education programmes among others.

Education and Research

This committee is headed by the erudite Professor Okechi Amaechi, currently the Head of Department, School of Optometry, Abia State University, Uturu. This committee responds to growing educational and mentoring needs of members. Earlier headed by Associate Professor Ralph Akpalaba, it developed a strategic framework which addressed the following:

- a. Restructuring and developing current standards of optometric education
- b. Issues associated with a significant change to the optometric curriculum and clinical training model
- c. Funding for educational and clinical activities
- d. Research on needs and demands for optometric services vis-à-vis optometric workforce
- e. Promotion of research and production of good quality journals
- f. Review and selection of papers for NOA conference/AGM
- g. Commissioning of researches that impact on the practice of optometry in Nigeria
- h. Mutual relationship between optometry and ophthalmology
- i. Catching up with the rest of the world educationally
- j. Engage professionals in other specialties to teach optometry students
- k. Unified training model in all optometry schools
- l. Continuing professional education
- m. Educational materials to promote optometry to patients, the general public and members of both state and federal legislatures

The current national executives have been following this framework in carrying out its functions. Significant to mention are numerous actions taken in the area of publications including the launch of the Compendium on Optometry in Nigeria, the renewal and updating

of the NOA journal profile on the AJOL website, publication of higher quality journals that meet international standards, and the book on the History of Optometry in Nigeria; a first in the optometry's history in Nigeria.

To improve the quality of researches, the committee, prior to the 2015 NOA national conference, organised a workshop designed to equip optometrists with the requisite tools to conduct independent researches and report the outcomes appropriately such as can be presented in reputable conferences and/or published in peer-reviewed journals. Some of the workshop topics included Scientific Dissemination in Optometry, Making Sense of Data: Using SPSS Software for Data Analysis, etc. Through the education committee's support, we have initiated the Family of Optometric Mentoring Programme (FOM) which is being coordinated by the VP North. Nigerian optometrists can today acknowledge the role of FOM in uplifting the level of our practice and patient care. Through this programme, we have trained no fewer than 500 optometrists at both national and state levels. FOM workshops have become a regular feature of the NOA national conference. Its impact has generated several requests from optometry training institutions for this service to be availed to clinical students; an aspect we are looking forward to exploring.

The committee further has worked in the following areas:

- developed and integrated all levels of continuing education to meet the needs of our members and to parallel the legislative objectives. The educational goals have encompassed traditional optometric continuing education with an emphasis on patient care, clinical skills, and practice management as well as specific educational programmes leading to various levels of certification as provided by FOM.
- developed meaningful programmes that enhanced the clinical skills of optometrists and assisted in developing educational materials that promoted optometry to patients, the public and the members of state legislatures. We are happy to announce that Imo state has enacted a law that benefits primary care optometry, even as others states are towing the same line.

The committee is looking forward to working with the Nigerian College of Optometrists' to develop and issue Clinical Management Guidelines (CMGs), providing a reliable source for evidence-based information on the diagnosis and management of eye conditions that present with varying frequency in primary eye care.

Legal and Legislative

The Legal and Legislative committee is chaired by Dr. Ozed Okonokhua, a seasoned member and Fellow of the NOA. This committee exists to assist and expand monitoring of optometric activities in Nigeria ensuring that they meet the required standards as stipulated in the laws guiding the practice of optometry. It also advises the executive council on legal matters and has on various occasions liaised with our lawyers to ensure the continued corporate existence of the association. The committee has been alive to its responsibilities as far back as from 1984. Recently it has worked with other subcommittees to organise the first town hall meeting, which assisted the association in aligning and joining forces with other trade unions like Nigerian Union of Allied Health Professionals (NUAHP) and Joint Health Sector Unions (JOHESU), helped in developing several memoranda and position papers on key professional issues, and represented the association during public hearings at the national assembly on National Health Bill (NHB) and National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) Act.

The committee currently has been able to carry out the following:

- a. developed a standard clinical attire for optometrists
- b. worked tirelessly to ensure that we oppose draconian recommendations that is detrimental to the progress and existence of optometry in Nigeria
- c. Reviewed our code of ethics and rules of professional conduct
- d. Reviewed our constitution and byelaws to fit with developmental growth in optometry
- e. Developed guidelines for the training of optometry interns
- f. Provided information, guidance, advice, and legislative resource materials upon request

- g. Monitored laws and regulations dealing with patient access to eye care, non-discrimination against optometrists in insurance plans, hospital privileges, professional corporations and other forms of doing business.
- h. Monitored the impact of federal laws and regulations on optometry.
- i. Monitored legislative and regulatory issues specific to rural areas that are traditionally underserved, and encouraged and supported initiatives to include optometrists in the state rural health activities.
- j. Maintained a constant review and awareness of legal issues that might affect the NOA; investigating the merits of legal actions that may impact the profession of optometry, and provide legal counsel for members.
- k. Identified and promoted legislative agendas that serve to enhance and protect the visual health of our patients and the practice of optometry in Nigeria.

Finance and Budget

The mandate of this committee is to provide oversight of NOA activities pertaining to finance, budget, business development and generation of revenues from all sources. The committee currently headed by the financial secretary achieved the following:

- a. Annually reviewed and prepared financial and budget plans for the association.
- b. Initiated business development policies and procedures that promote optometry business
- c. Raised funds and material resources from individuals, corporate bodies, NGOs, government, parastatals, institutions, private bodies and so on for the Association.
- d. Reviewed, monitored and reported to the executive council on investment and business development opportunities.
- e. Reviewed and recommended to the executive council investments or business development projects and initiatives.
- f. Reviewed and reported to the executive council on the effectiveness and timeliness of management execution of specific projects that were approved by the executive council.

Public Health and Development

NOA has long known that there have been unacceptable inequalities in access to vision and eye care in Nigeria but for a number of reasons, Optometry has been historically excluded from the mainstream of public health efforts to correct these inequalities. However, the magnitude of global blindness is such that Optometry can no longer be ignored as a key stakeholder in the fight against blindness. The Public Health and Development Committee (PHDC) chaired by Dr. Bernadine Ekpenyong is charged with developing and supporting eye care initiatives that serve humanitarian needs in sight enhancement and blindness prevention. In particular, it is working towards aligning with WCO objectives as well as supporting WHO global initiative, Vision 2020: The Right to Sight, and the recent joint action by WHO and IAPB on Global Action Plan (GAP) of reducing avoidable visual impairment by 25% by 2019. Over the past years, this committee has championed these projects at national and state level both in capacity development and humanitarian services.

Recently the public health and development committee has taken giant strides in creating awareness on blindness prevention programmes, humanitarian services, public health research on vision and driving, children's vision and in the process developed Vision Standards for driving and Vision Screening Manual for teachers nationally. During these programmes carried out on World Sight Days (WSD), over 3500 drivers and 90,000 children were screened nationally in 2016 and 2017 respectively and relevant data generated. The committee has also strived to develop a strategic partnership with organisations sharing similar public health goals. Most of the activities carried out by the committee have seen the presence and partnerships of the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC), Society for Family Health (SFH), Lions Club, Brien Holden Vision Institute, Christoffel-Blinden Mission International (CBMI), Red Cross, World Health Organisation, Ministries of Health and Education at both State and National levels.

Disciplinary/Credential and Professional Practice

The Disciplinary Committee exists to receive, investigate

and make a pronouncement on disciplinary matters that violate professional ethics. Over the years, the committee has worked hand-in-hand with the regulatory board to instill discipline and decorum in the profession. Currently chaired by Dr. Sam Edu Ntem, a former NOA President and immediate past Registrar of ODORBN, the committee works hard to ensure disciplinary hearings are fair, just and comply with the procedures set out in the constitution and bye-laws of the association.

Election

The Election Committee is usually constituted in an election year, with the responsibility of superintending the NOA national elections. The committee presents candidates for election as executive officers of the association to the general membership and consequently conducts the election. In enhancing free, fair and credible elections, the NOA constitution recently empowers the House of Delegates to ratify the membership of the elections committee and also to constitute an Elections Petition Committee from among the delegates.

Publication

Publication Committee supervises and directs the production and circulation of the Association's publications; newsletters, journal, compendia, etc. The team is made up of the Editorial Board and Editorial committee. The editorial committee is chaired by Professor Frank Iwuagwu. The committee, headed by various persons in the past, has lived up to its bidding by ensuring that Nigeria Optometry and the NOA are well presented in all print and electronic media outlets. The Journal of the Nigerian Optometric Association, first published in 1985, is to this committee's credit. The journal provides an avenue for the dissemination of high-valuable information on vision care and health to a specialized audience and is listed in African Journals Online (AJOL).

Award

The award committee recognizes individual members of the Association or members of the public who has made an outstanding contribution to the fulfillment of the aims and objectives of the Association, Optometry or the community they live in. This committee has lived up to its expectation right from inception from early

90's. Quiet good number of optometrists and members of the public have in one way or the other been commended, given Optometrist of the year, the Fellow of NOA and Honorary award respectively. Currently, we have a 3-member award committee headed by a renowned Professor of Optometry, Professor Franklin Kio. The awards committee obtains nominations from the membership of the association; reviews and selects worthy candidates for special recognition; and reviews existing awards, revise criteria and create additional awards where necessary with the approval of the national executive council.

Advocacy Committee

This committee, though new, is very important and deserves mention. Before the creation of this committee, "NOA initially had advocacy on the pages of Newspapers, Radios, and Televisions mainly for enlightenment purposes but later on in 1984; this role was taken up by the legislative and legal committee" initially headed by Dr. Ronald Eyime. The later committee within a span of 12 years pursued with vigor majority of the developmental strides in the life of the association before the current advocacy committee was set up. The advocacy committee of the association is incidentally chaired by the immediate past president of WCO Dr. Christabel Uduak Udom who has brought in a clear message to reposition Optometry and eye health in Nigeria. Her relationships and experience helped to identify and source for key global role players in advocacy that trained members on empowering optometrists for a greater future. This training which took place on 6th and 7th November, 2015 was in partnership with the WCO and the Brien Holden Vision Institute and was aimed at building the necessary local capacity needed for a coordinated response to the challenges faced in delivering quality eye care services to Nigerians. Resource persons at this programme included the renowned Professor Kovin Naidoo (CEO) and Hasan Minto, (Director, Sustainable Services Development) at the Brien Holden Vision Institute.

This committee worked with the national executive council to establish platforms that are helping to

outline policies and actions vital in our partnerships with agencies of government and other NGOs. Currently, we have led a foundation for the future advancement of optometry and eye care in the country.

Key capacities that have been developed by the committee include:

- a. Strengthening of the ongoing advocacy, lobbying and networking of optometrists at all levels.
- b. Raising awareness among key stakeholders on the necessity of blindness prevention programmes.
- c. Collaborating with strategic partners to promote the integration of comprehensive eye health strategies into national health plans.
- d. Fitting our human resource and service developments, research activities and social enterprises into plans that can be adopted by government and entities.
- e. Raising awareness of vision impairment in our local communities and of the availability of appropriate care.
- f. Developing leadership and ownership in eye care delivery and education.
- g. Generating support from local health systems and educational institutions for our programmes.

In no distant time, our efforts would have developed local capacity for responsive, culturally appropriate and sustainable developmental efforts towards eradicating the visual impairment scourge in the country.

Strategic Planning

In recent years the NOA has tried to identify emerging issues for the profession. Some of the issues identified have been explored in an expanded forum, and the outcomes from such forum sent to committees for evaluation. The expectation is that the collective wisdom and national perspective of the committees will produce strategies which can help the profession turn daunting challenges into limitless opportunities. At the first session of her extraordinary expanded executive meeting (held outside of the NOA national conference) in Owerri, Imo State on 3rd and 4th March, 2016,

the NOA developed a strategic framework to address the following areas of concern-**finance/-funding, governance and organisational capacity, members and stakeholders, employment and conditions of service, training and manpower development, etc.** This framework has since started receiving attention both at committee and national executive council levels.

Conclusion

Nigerian Optometric Association has over the last 50 years developed as an organisation with the mission and appropriate strategies to improve the quality of eye and vision care in Nigeria. It has kept faith in this by utilising the services of educated, regulated, primary care optometrists. From the expository above it can be seen that a lot has been achieved by NOA, within the west coast of Africa, the African continent and globally. These achievements did not come with a wave of hand but from intense hard work on the part of the NOA even under

harassment, intimidation, and bullying from organised medicine. It also suffices that the general public is unaware of the difficulties we have faced clinically and politically, thus more need to be done as not too many members of the public know who the optometrist is, or the role of the optometrist in the society. The onus, therefore, lies on the Optometrists to continue to “tell the story” which no other can tell better. This reminder is of strategic importance given the tendency to either deviate from professional goals or rest on intermediate achievements, for as Seneca the Younger puts it: “if a man does not know (or remember) to what port he is steering, no wind is favourable to him.

Therefore, all optometrists should feel ownership of NOA and all should have a commitment to its mission to facilitate the enhancement and development of eye and vision care in Nigeria and the world in general. To prosper for a further 50 years, NOA needs continued personal sacrifice, support (both physical and financial) and volunteerism from its members to keep the pace and weather any attendant storm.

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