

OVERCOMING AVOIDABLE BLINDNESS THROUGH TRAINING IN VISION CARE

Optometric services are a key resource for addressing the challenge of avoidable visual impairment affecting rural communities. However, the majority of optometrists are located in urban areas, limiting accessibility to eye health and vision care services for disadvantaged populations. A decentralized training model at UKZN promises to change this.



In recent years, institutions of higher learning have, in an effort towards redress, increased their intake and access to health science programs for students from previously disadvantaged communities. This has placed a strain on the resources available for clinical training in those institutions.

At the same time, the Department of Health faces increased pressure on health service delivery due to an increasing population and a rising demand for services. In addition, the training of health science students within academic centres has limited the provision of graduate skills in rural environments, where

there are few resources but a high burden of disease.

In response to these problems the University of KwaZulu-Natal has recently adopted a decentralized model for training health professionals.

Decentralized clinical training in optometry presents the opportunity for student clinicians to gain clinical experience in the public health sector prior to graduation and to deliver eye health services to previously disadvantaged communities.

This paradigm shift from training exclusively in academic training centres therefore adds to human capacity development in peripheral sites. It addresses the uneven distribution of human resources for eye health care, and will potentially improve the delivery of these services to rural patients who depend on the public sector, thereby reducing the burden of vision impairment in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.



Towards Research Leadership

Dr van Staden is an Optometrist and Academic Leader for the Discipline of Optometry, School of Health Sciences, UKZN. Her current projects seeks to develop a Socially Responsive, Socially Accountable model of training in Optometry using a community-based, Primary Health Care approach within South Africa.

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