

**Speech by KZN Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo on the occasion of the South African Optometric Association conference in Cape Town at the Lagoon Beach Hotel**

**31 September 2013**

Programme Director, in my appreciation and endorsement of the theme: Increasing Access to Paediatric Eye Care, I should indicate that I have always been perturbed by what William Rowland of the WORLD BLIND UNION, in the paper entitled Blindness, Poverty, and Development; cautioned against, when he said:

*'Poverty and blindness reinforce each other, contributing to increased vulnerability and exclusion. The majority of blind people find that their situation negatively affects their chances of going to school, obtaining work, and enjoying family and social life.'*

I am thus elated that today Private and Public sector optometrists have come together with their relevant statutory bodies to deliberate on modalities aimed at creating a Single United and Independent Optometry profession for Africa.

The reality of the situation is that Optometry has all along been a private service reserved for the privileged and excluding 80% of the population in this country.

The situation is worse when it comes to the offering of ophthalmologist services which are basically only available to cater only for the elite class. Even our concerted efforts directed at transforming the health system have not succeeded in making optometry to expand the scope to increase access to care. In 1997, only 25% of ophthalmologists were

employed in the public sector and sadly that situation has not changed much to date.

We also notice that most of the optometry training follows the secluded private route at universities without the public accessing optometrists in training; a feature that we find in medicine and nursing. This by all means limits the competency of optometrists to deal with the burden of disease despite the shortages of appropriately trained persons.

We are of the view that Optometry clinical training must not be privatised but should be rooted within the public health system to make optometry an integral part of the overall health system.

As we gravitate towards Primary Health Care approach, we are of the firm view that Optometry should serve as a similar resource as the nursing which is the axis that increasing access to services rotates upon. Countries like Cuba have proven that the outcry of the medical profession about shifting towards nurse based PHC was baseless.

We decry the fact that professional bodies in this sector seem to be reluctant in assisting transformation which then perpetuates the imbalance and lack of access for the African majority.

Our view is that more needs to be done to increase access to education and training for instance in the line of the mid-level worker programme that can help in producing optometry technicians.

In this conference I move that we should endorse and canvass for the creation of Optometry Technicians. The professional bodies and councils should assist in guiding the implementation of this discipline by

the universities; we have seen it working with the Pharmacy Assistants as well as in the Clinical Associate category.

We are appealing to this sector to embrace the National Health Insurance and not fear it as only through NHI you are guaranteed to break the hold that medical aid has by providing EVERY practitioner with a guaranteed income.

NHI will also trigger growth in the profession as more optometrists are even now needed to service the majority of the uninsured masses in the underserved areas.

NHI will increase the scope and provide financial stability for Practitioners with relatively little risk given the guaranteed patient base not currently serviced out there.

I am also glad that this conference is graced by the presence of international sponsors as at this juncture, I consider it well-meaning to heap praise on ORBIS International.

Programme Director, in 2011 ORBIS opted to get into partnership with the KwaZulu Natal Department of Health to open the **Paediatric Eye Care** Centre at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital in Durban. This is a state-of-the-art centre aimed at speeding up detection of complex **eye problems in children**, fast tracking them to receive appropriate treatment and ensuring that they obtain the lifelong follow up they require in order to maximise their **sight**.

I am singling out the contribution of ORBIS because in our situation as a Province it assists us to get closer to the realization of our vision of providing 'optimal health for all persons in KwaZulu Natal.' This agreement entails the following:

- Establishment of a dedicated facility which deals with complex paediatric eye diseases comprehensively in a child friendly environment.
- Establishment of a unit that will have more child appropriate ophthalmic equipment allowing easier and more comprehensive examinations of children.
- Addressing lack of awareness in the community of the common paediatric eye diseases and their treatment.
- Training of all staff in order to provide an improved level of care to all children cared for at this unit.
- Monitoring and evaluating processes and interventions instituted via this clinic.
- Having a dedicated co coordinator, who visits clinics in all Districts and reach out into the community to ensure follow up and rehabilitation of affected children.
- Work with other services established at the hospitals such as paediatrics, oncology and social workers to provide a comprehensive service to our children.

What this tells us then is that in this Conference we need mechanisms to employ that will assist in removing or easing off obstacles leading to the establishment of further skills training and the recognition of such skills, this is as practiced in other countries like the USA Broader coverage of eye care services particularly to the marginalized.

I do have full confidence that at the end of these engagements, the outcome will signal resolutions which for good ends will potentially change the trajectory of the optometry profession in our country and the continent at large.

Leaders in the African Union, we have reliably been told by the Chair, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, have pledged political will and support to all health related initiatives aimed at saving the lives of mothers and babies.

Working together we will thus indeed be confident in saying that we are on the right path to creating a continent that will meet the VISION 2020 obligations of *A world in which no one is needlessly blind and where those with unavoidable vision loss can achieve their full potential.*

I wish you wisdom in your deliberations.