

Bridging human resource gaps in the Caribbean

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Caribbean Council for the Blind

Refractionist at work in Guyana

When Caribbean Council for the Blind - Eye Care Caribbean (CCB) facilitated the launch of Vision 2020: the Right to Sight in the Caribbean in July 2003, their strategic emphasis immediately focused on human resource development (HRD) in eye health and inclusive services.

An audit of the HRD needs confirmed a major gap at the mid levels of eye health services. CCB noted that, while in the UK and Australia there is about one optometrist to 10,000 people, in the Caribbean the ratio was closer to one optometrist to every 100,000 people.

In order to improve the ratio, CCB began an intense lobby to identify a host government and university in the Caribbean willing to participate in the establishment of a multi level training programme for optometrists

and refraction technicians. A university-based training programme was essential if the graduates were to have professional credibility within the Caribbean.

Eventually, the Ministry of Health in Guyana and the University of Guyana proved to be most receptive. After more than five years of intense lobbying and sustained programme development by CCB and Eye Care Guyana, the Ministry of Health now hosts vision centres in nine public hospitals providing refractive and referral services to more than 20,000 clients each year, while the University of Guyana offers an optometry degree programme comprising of a Certificate in Refraction Techniques, an Associate Degree in Optometry and a BSc in Optometry.

CCB and the University of Guyana started a

one year Certificate in Refraction Techniques course in 2005, which helped to demonstrate impact while developing trust and confidence among the partners. This provided a solid foundation for the optometry degree programme and the partners plan to continue working together to establish the Caribbean School of Optometry at the University of Guyana.

At the launch of the optometry degree programme in Guyana on 2nd February 2010, the University of Guyana's Vice Chancellor, Professor Lawrence Carrington, said that 'our satisfaction with the programme in optometry is not derived exclusively from the fact that human sight is a primary attribute of human reality, but because we are convinced that collaboration is an ethic that our university must seek to cultivate, exemplify and to propagate as part of its fulfillment of its mission'.

Partners have worked with the International Centre for Eyecare Education (ICEE) to develop a curriculum that meets international standards, resulting in the Caribbean now having a university-level training programme for optometric personnel which is equivalent to the UK.

Since its inception the Certificate in Refraction Techniques course has produced nine refractionists for Guyana, Jamaica and St. Lucia, with another six currently in training. CCB and Sightsavers will support a further 23 refractionists and 15 optometrists over the next five years. CCB knows that training refractionists and optometrists alone is not enough to ensure service provision to poor and rural communities. In order to support a regional refractive error strategy, CCB and Sightsavers also support initiatives to train spectacle lab technicians, dispensing technicians, maintenance and administrative staff.

Along the way we have learned to think and plan for the long term, and that it is key to fully understand academic structures and course approval mechanisms. It has taken up to five years to establish and approve the optometry degree course and during that time people have come and gone from the process. Having a clear shared vision at the beginning has ensured long term commitment of the institutions involved, rather than over-reliance on individuals. This clarity is again being ensured with plans to establish a School of Optometry as the partners are currently involved in agreeing a memorandum of

understanding to guide the process.

Attaining course approval at university level has been complex and required the commitment and understanding of people at high levels within the national and regional partner organisations. They needed to engage with the university's leadership and academic board, clearly present the course, respond to queries and ensure curriculum development and revision corresponded with the university's review and approval mechanisms.

It was also essential to identify advocacy targets and plan an advocacy strategy to suit available resources. Many parties have a stake when it comes to delivering a course at this level, ranging from potential candidates and lecturers to national, regional and international bodies. Knowing when and how to communicate effectively has been vital and keeping communication channels open played a key role – letting discussions stagnate means momentum is lost, ideas dry up and relationships break down.

Sightsavers work in the Caribbean is carried out in partnership with the Caribbean Council for the Blind (CCB) and its member agencies. Sightsavers provides both financial and technical support to HRD programmes.



Spectacles being made in an optical workshop