

## PIONEER OPTOMETRIST-THE BURDEN KENYAN VERSION

The word pioneer according to dictionary means One who goes before, as into the wilderness, preparing the way for others to follow, person or other entity who is first or among the earliest in any field of inquiry, enterprise, or progress.

Being a pioneer is good. Isn't it? Especially when expectations are high. As a pioneer you hope to reap big from the very first fruits given the field is still virgin and full of potential. Pioneer professionals in many instances are hot cakes. They sell. However, this is not obvious to all professions as it comes with a heavy burden. A lot of factors come into play ranging from readiness and depth of the market. Acceptability levels also vary.

In Kenyan optometry the very first challenging burden was to not only know but understand our identity. As at the time I joined the training I never understood what it was to be an optometrist. Many suffered from the same predicament. We had lecturers who were fundamentally oriented to ophthalmology and other health sciences disciplines. A vacuum existed on matters of who to look up to as an optometrist. Times and again debates would ensue amongst ourselves. The bone of contention always was who we were, what would be the scope of our practice and most importantly how we would manoeuvre the ever shrinking job market upon graduation. Apparently there would be no unanimous conclusions ultimately. Two fundamental factions emerged whenever such discourses ended. There was this optimistic group that believed all is well, the future is secured and optometry is bliss. It is the lot that thought so highly about the profession. Could be they became too over-ambitious with their perceptions. Only time would tell. On the other hand was these individuals full of pessimism. To them optometry was a field clouded with misery, cladded in uncertainty and would end in despondency and disillusionment. They always demanded answers and explanations for all the happenings. Having not much to salvage they would adopt a wait and see attitude. Interesting tales exist among optometrists about how they came to join the program. Doubt it! Then ask any pioneer around a simple question; how did you end up to be an optometrist? Some were victims of welcome fortuitousness while others may have been curiously brave adventurers.

Out during the practicum the burden of telling the innocent world around us who we were followed. Public Institutions where we were to get the much important clinical experience would welcome us albeit with caution. Some cadres proved needlessly hostile. They labelled us intruders and gate crushers who had arrived to spoil the sweet party. We were often asked daunting questions concerning optometry that rarely few would answer satisfactorily. The created idea was that optometry is a misplaced priority that will crash with its take -off. We had to remain steadfast despite all these and with subsequent years confidence levels grew. We were better placed to adapt to the prevailing conditions.

As numbers grew there arose the need to form an association that would champion the interests of optometrists. Optometrists Association of Kenya (OAK) came in handy. The burden of pioneering would still rear its ugly head. Members were extremely complacent to register. Accusations and counter accusations was always the order of the day between members and the executive. This crippled the

operations of the association. Consequently OAK remained "dead" for a better duration of its existence. Member registration and subscription still remains an uphill task to this moment. However, worth noting forward steps have been made towards achieving the numbers.

Pioneering in optometry has had its good, bad and ugly. We can't paint all our experiences with the same brush. It has been a field full of mixed fortunes.

I may not have been the best to tell the tale of pioneering in optometry. However, I believe I've had my own small instrument to play in the larger pioneering orchestra. The journey is still on. We are here to set standards, provide mentorship and make a way on the uncharted path so that the coming generation may not face the same old problems we faced. Optometry today is not the same thing it was 10yrs ago. A lot of progress is evident. We can only say in Martin Luther King jnr's words that we've been to the mountain top, we've seen the Promised Land and although we may not get there, it's a blessed hope.

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