

ADVOCACY IN OPTOMETRY THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE**Dr. Ronald Nze Eyime BSc*, O.D., F.N.C.O**

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Corresponding Author*Dr. Ronald Nze Eyime**Vice President; Nigerian
College of Optometrists.**ABSTRACT**

Optometry was not known to the Nigerian nation state as a profession, until, the year 1989 when Decree 34. Of 1989 (now cap 09) was promulgated by the then military government of President Ibrahim Babangida. This was by the assistance of key government functionaries like Professor Olikoye Ransom-Kuti of blessed memory as the Hon. Minister of Health and Prince, Bola Ajibola (SAN) as the then Attorney General and Minister of Justice of Nigeria. The journey then started in top gear thereafter, when the Nigerian Optometric Association in conjunction with the regulatory board, Optometrists and

Dispensing Opticians Board of Nigeria moved to get the Government of Nigeria to come up with the Scheme of Service for public servant Optometrists in Nigeria, as well as get the National Universities Commission (NUC) to accept the abrogation of the Bachelor of Science (BSc) Optometry Degree and replaced it with the Doctor of Optometry, O.D. degree in all Nigerian training Universities. The Nigerian Optometric Association (NOA) also, in collaboration with the board, Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians Board of Nigeria with the World Council of Optometry (W.C.O) established the post graduate programme of the Nigerian College of Optometrists, (N.C.O) 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. Advocacy has been the major tool that has made the Optometry profession not only the new toast of the eye care professions in Nigeria but the world over.

ADVOCACY

Advocacy can be defined as a political process by an individual or group which aims at influencing decisions within political, economic, institutions and social system. Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media

campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research or conducting exit polls or the filling of amicus briefs.

Advocacy involves getting government, business, schools, or some other large institutions to correct an unfair or harmful situation affecting people in a community or environment.

Advocacy is also, a tool, in resolving pressing issues through persuasion or through political means as well as, legal actions which require careful strategic planning and tactics.

OPTOMETRY

Optometry is defined by the **Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians Registration Board of Nigeria (ODOBN)** law, as a health-care profession specializing in the art and science of vision care via Decree 34 of 1989 now Cap 09 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.

The World Council of Optometry (W.C.O) defines Optometry as a healthcare profession that is autonomous, educated, and regulated (licensed/registered), and Optometrists are the primary healthcare practitioners of the eye and visual system who provide comprehensive eye and vision care, which includes; refraction and dispensing, detection/diagnosis and management of disease in the eye, and the rehabilitation of conditions of the visual system.

NIGERIAN OPTOMETRY IN FOCUS

Optometry In Nigeria Before Independence And The Journey So Far

The Optometry profession started in Nigeria before Nigerian independence in 1960, as Ophthalmic Opticianery, with the formation of the Nigerian Optical Association which eventually became the Nigerian Optometric Association (N.O.A) with late Dr. Alfred Isijola as its pioneer president.

This group started in earnest to meet and strategize on how to fight intruders into the Optometry profession in the country. These perceived intruders included all comers like uncertificated people who called themselves Dispensing Opticians as well as sellers of optical frames and lenses, etc.

The intrusion of these persons brought about the resolve by the Nigerian Optometric Association (N.O.A) to get the Nigerian Government to recognize Optometry as a health care profession. It would be necessary to recall that before the Nigerian independence in 1960, and even long after then, the word “**optometry**” never existed in any Nigerian statute book, be it legal, educational, labour nor health statute.

It was when there became a move by the Nigerian government to, through; the Nigerian Ministry of Health produce a law to be called “**A law establishing the medical and allied health professions law**” in the early 1980s that the Nigerian Optometric Association (N.O.A) became desperate to get its own legislation as a profession in health care.

Before this time, we the Nigerian Optometric Association (N.O.A) had our Advocacy on the pages of Newspapers, Radios and Televisions mainly for enlightenment purposes.

The Nigerian Optometric Association (N.O.A) then in 1984 inaugurated an Optometric legislative/legal committee. This committee was headed by the then National Publicity Secretary of the association Dr. Ronald Eyime who swung into action to see to it that the Optometry profession was separated from the umbrella board for the purpose of having independence as a professional health group.

The journey then started in earnest with our urgent resolve to carry the advocacy directly to the Nigerian Federal Government through the Federal Ministry of Health. With the assistance of some Nigerian Federal Government dignitaries like Professor Olikoye Ransom - Kuti of blessed memory, as the then Hon. Health Minister and Prince Bola Ajibola as the then Attorney General and Minister of Justice.

Dr. Yomi Awe also of blessed memory, who was then, the Federal Ministry of Health Regulatory Bodies Schedule Officer, were some of the numerous officials that helped to facilitate this process.

There were however oppositions from a number of other health/eye care related bodies who wrote several letters to the Federal government, including the then President of the Nigerian Federation at that time. Some of these opposition agents included the Ophthalmological Society of Nigeria (O.S.N), The Nigerian Medical Association (N.M.A) proper, The Nigerian Union of Optical Companies to mention but a few, asking that, the government does not give Optometry its independence.

It is also safe to say here, therefore, that God was, and is still behind the Optometry profession in Nigeria, because even with the massive opposition against Optometry, the law recognizing optometry as a profession in Nigeria came to existence in the year, 1989 under the military government of President Ibrahim Babaginda.

The advocacy did not stop at just getting the law established, as these same opposing forces especially the Nigerian Medical Association (N.M.A) and its Ophthalmological Society of Nigeria (O.S.N) ally, battled to have government stop the constitution of the board so that it could not function.

It took up to the year, 1994 before the Board could be cleared to function. Even at that, the first Chairman of the Board was a general medical practitioner, Dr. K. O. Sosan even when the law was explicit on the fact that the Chairman shall be an Optometrist.

We had to put up with this, till the end of that Board tenure. The Chairman of subsequent boards till date has always then, been an Optometrist thereafter. The first chairman Optometrist was Prof. P.O. Ogbuehi.

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE OPTOMETRY PROFESSION IN NIGERIA

It was when the University of Benin started a training programme in Optometry, in 1974, that Optometry started the journey of the recognition of the Optometry Profession.

The President of the then new Nigerian Optometric Association was Dr. Alfred Isijiola, Later the president was Dr. Jokotoye Babalola, Prof. P.O. Ogbuehi, Dr. E.U Effiong, Dr. Ronald Eyime, Dr. Emma Esenwa, Dr. Joe Owie, Dr. Sam Ntem, Dr. Uduak Udom, Dr. Iyke Nwakuche and presently Dr. Demian Echendu in that order.

Nigeria led the rest of the world to jettison the former International Optometric and Optical League (I.O.O.L.) with headquarters in London to form the World Council of Optometry (W.C.O) headquartered then in Pennsylvania, U.S.A.

Nigeria through the then Chairman of the Public Health and Development Committee (Dr. Ronald Eyime) at that time, led the W.C.O to fight for the recognition of Optometry as a health care profession by the World Health Organization (W.H.O).

The W.H.O at that time required the Optometry profession in this case the W.C.O to prove that refractive errors and low vision constituted up to 10% of the causes of blindness.

W.C.O had to commission the International Center for Eye Care Education (I.C.E.E) then headed by Prof. Brian Holden to conduct that study, surprisingly it was found that refractive errors and low vision actually constituted 12.5% causes of blindness the world over.

It was at this time that the W.H.O accepted the W.C.O as an observer member in the first, second and third years before it accepted the W.C.O into its fold, (W.H.O) as a full member of the health/eye care team till date.

It was when the W.H.O had recognized the Optometry profession that it became easier to get certain benefits for the Optometrist from the government of Nigeria, since Nigeria, was a Signatory to the United Nations charter as it concerned the World Health Organisation (W.H.O).

The Nigerian government then put in place, a Scheme of service for the Optometrist with O.D. at grade level 10 at that time, same with that of the Medical Doctor with M.B.B.S.

The National Salaries and wages Commission also approved the call duty allowance of the Optometrist at 4% of the basic Salary at par with their colleagues in Medicine.

The African Council of Optometry was also formed by Nigeria as recommended by the World Council of Optometry, also through Dr. Ronald Eyime's initiative at the W.C.O board.

It is important at this point to record that After the University of Benin started the Optometry programme in 1974 with a B.S.C. degree being obtained, the Imo State University in 1986, started the training of Optometrists with the Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree, and later Abia State University as well as the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Imo State

joined. There are a number of private Universities now doing the OD, programme amongst which is Madonna University, Okija.

The Profession has benefited from the establishment of the Nigerian College of Optometry with the aid and co-operation of the World Council of Optometry. The College has been producing Fellowship holders of the F.N.C.O. since the W.C.O. set this programme up.

Today, F.N.C.O holders have risen to the position of Professors with the F.N.C.O Certificate, in all Nigerian Universities.

OTHER SUCCESS STORIES

The Nigerian Universities Commission (N.U.C), which made a profession that started with a Bachelor of Science (BSc.) degree in 1972, to operate a 6 year Doctor of Optometry (O.D) programme compulsory in all Nigerian training Universities, with effect from the year, 1986.

Now there exists a postgraduate fellowship programme leading to the award of a Post graduate fellowship in seven specialty areas: Primary Care Optometry, Public Health Optometry, Cornea and Contact Lens Practice, Ocular Health, Rehabilitative Optometry and low vision care, Pediatric Optometry as well as, Orthoptics leading to the award of the fellowship of the Nigerian College of Optometrists (N.C.O).

There has also, been advocacy within our Nigerian Universities as well. This led to the approval of an MSc., PhD. programme in conjunction with the Nigerian Postgraduate College of Optometrists (N.C.O), in Abia State University (ABSU), leading to not just the award of PhD. but the F.N.C.O in the same package.

Before the Abia State University (ABSU) feat, the National Universities Commission (N.U.C) had taken a position and directed all Nigerian Universities not to promote Fellowship holders without a PhD. to the post of a Professor. Other Nigerian Universities are advocating to introduce this same programme as well in their own training institutions.

This directive was not given to the Universities as it affected only Optometrists, but even to the Medical/ Dental professionals as well.

CONCLUSION

Advocacy is an inevitable tool necessary for the survival and growth of any profession, especially in these days of battle for survival. Considering also, the rampant proliferation of professional independence, arising from multiplication of skills in various endeavours or disciplines.

The Nigerian definition of Optometry is near a novel one. That law is one of the best in the world. The World Council of Optometry (W.C.O)'s definition of Optometry is only a little better than the Nigerian definition as per (Cap 09).

This undoubtably makes the Nigerian law, one of the best, and as already stated, was obtained by a well co-ordinated advocacy model.

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