

Strengthening eye health research output in the region

In this issue of the journal, we are pleased to announce an exciting three-year partnership with *'Eye' Journal* team of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists (RCOphth). This partnership is part of the VISION 2020 COECSA-RCOphth LINK partnership that has been in existence for the last 10 years and has led to development and strengthening of the COECSA fellowship exam and examiner training, curriculum development, 'train the trainers' and online CPD.

The purpose of this new partnership is to leverage on the COECSA-RCOphth relationship to raise the standard and profile of *JOECSA* as a strong scientific ophthalmic journal sharing research results across the region by providing mentorship to the journal editorial board, reviewers, and administrators. This mentorship will be offered by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and the *'Eye' Journal* team of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists. This process is co funded by British Council for Prevention of Blindness (BCPB) and the RCOphth.

It will build on our previous experience of implementing "Research mentorship trainings" in the region that were funded by BCPB. Briefly, faculty from three training institutions (University of Nairobi [UON], Mbarara University of Science and Technology [MUST] and Kilimanjaro Christian Medical College [KCMC]) underwent a Training of Trainers session on how to supervise ophthalmology residents master's research. The experience of the faculty was that this was a very essential training that most had never received. The faculty then went on to cascade this training to their colleagues and residents at the three institutions. The positive feedback from this led to an annual research mentorship workshop held alongside the COECSA scientific congress.

In the same pattern, this new partnership will enable the editorial board of *JOECSA* and of *'Eye'*, the journal of the RCOphth, to work together to address the needs and develop a respected scientific journal publishing the results of clinical and public health research by ophthalmologists across Eastern, Central and Southern Africa. This will enhance research quantity and quality and will foster sharing of learning within and between countries in key eye health issues, directly advancing the VISION 2020 goal of eliminating avoidable blindness. It will primarily provide the skills

needed by the editorial board, reviewers and editorial office of *JOECSA* through sharing learning from *'Eye' Journal*. Participants will include the Editors-in-Chief of *JOECSA* and *Eye*, publishers of "Eye" Springer Nature, members of the editorial boards, members of the *JOECSA* editorial office in Nairobi and the *Eye* editorial office at the RCOphth.

Despite the efforts of Ministries of Health, NGOs and dedicated eye health professionals in sub-Saharan Africa, the problem remains that, by and large, eye care services do not reach the people who most need them – the poor and those who live in remote areas far from cities. For the VISION 2020 goal to be reached in Africa there is an urgent need for service improvement in order to reach this underserved population. This needs to be guided by relevant, practical, service and patient-orientated research - both epidemiological and clinical - at the community, district and national levels. But the research results have to be easily shared in a way that is accessible to the important audiences – fellow eye health professionals across the COECSA region.

Building the quality of the editorial processes of *JOECSA* is central to the objective of having a quality journal relevant to the region and in order to encourage eye health professionals to undertake and publish quality research that will inform future eye health policy and practice in the fourteen countries in the COECSA region.

This partnership was officially launched in May 2020, however, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, it has not been possible to have face to face meetings. The teams have been able to conduct monthly ZOOM meetings to discuss potential training themes, share key resources on Journal management. The *JOECSA* editorial board has been reformulated, a new journal online management system has been set up and the editorial team given online training through ZOOM. A list of potential reviewers has been developed; this list is still being updated through the journal website (journals.coecsa.org) or joeecsa@coecsa.org for those who are interested: Beyond the funding award, the teams representing the two journals will continue to collaborate to further build research capacity and produce quality research that will inform eye health policy and practice.

From the perspective of COECSA, the partnership has been of great help in achieving one of our key objectives as a college –promoting the generation and dissemination of evidence on eye care in the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa and beyond. Looking into the future, we shall build on the small footsteps of the pool of researchers and capacity invested to grow our research eco system. COECSA remains utterly thankful to funding partner –BCPB fro enabling us achieve this milestone and RCOphth for the partnership. This is indeed a demonstration that through, we can do more!

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