

Community sees clearly thanks to eye clinic outreach

MARIE STRACHAN

HUNDREDS of pupils from 12 schools and surrounding community members in the Mkhanyakude district are now able to see clearly thanks to the provision of corrective eyewear by the international team from One Sight supported by Mpilonhle.

Over two weeks, 41 ophthalmic professionals from various countries representing the One Sight organisation, in conjunction with the KZN Department of Health, ran massive eye care clinics at 12 schools administered by Mpilonhle's health and education outreach programme.

About 16 000 pupils and community members had their eyes tested and checked for corneas, cataracts and glaucoma, often relating to diabetes. More than 60 percent of community members tested were found to have cataracts, which are caused by bright sunlight.

Referral letters were given to these community members to attend a special clinic at the Hlabisa Hospital where they would be screened by an ophthalmic medical officer and eye care team and, where necessary, appointments could be made for surgery to remove the cataracts.

Generally it was found that few pupils needed corrective eyewear, but those that did were not always happy with their frames.

"The goal is that they can see properly," said Derrick Mitchell, a trainee ophthalmologist from Chicago.

Each day, clinics were hosted at two different schools simultaneously with one being the base clinic where the stock of donated old prescription glasses and new lenses and frames was managed.

The clinics were run in an orderly fashion with pre-screening done at the first station by a basic eye test, before the patients moved on to the next station where their eyes were assessed by means of an auto-refractor, a machine that measures the eye and prints out a starting point for the lens prescription before the patient sees the doctor.

Corrected

At the eye health station, doctors checked for cataracts and diabetes as well as the retina at the back of the eye, and assessed if the patients' eyesight could be corrected with glasses. According to the doctors, most of the patients they had seen had good vision and healthy eyes, and were dealt with quickly. More time was spent on the older members of the communities, many of whom had cataracts.

Those requiring corrective eyewear then waited while the relevant prescription was checked against the database of thousands of



Kathy Clark fits a pair of glasses for one of the hundreds of community members to receive corrective eyewear during One Sight's clinics in uMkhanyakude district. **RIGHT:** Pupils who have been identified as having weak eyesight have their eyes measured by an auto-refractor which prints out a prescription of the lens they require.

PICTURES: MARIE STRACHAN



donated spectacles for the correct lenses. Should there not be a pair of glasses to suit the patient's prescription, a new pair of glasses was made up at the "Chabella" area where appropriate lenses were drawn from the hundreds of lenses already made up, and fixed into new frames to suit the required prescription.

One Sight is a Luxottica Group Foundation programme of a family of charitable vision care programmes dedicated to improving vision through outreach, research and education. Through One Sight, Luxottica employees, doctors, partners and other community volun-

teers give the gift of sight. This is the second two-week clinic held by One Sight in South Africa as, working through Oprah Winfrey's charity, Oprah's Angels Network, a clinic had been held recently in the Kokstad area.

Mpilonhle's health and education mobile units operate at 12 schools in the uMkhanyakude district, assisted by the organisation of the eye care clinics in the area.

Mpilonhle executive director Dr Michael Bennis said while they provided health care to the 12 schools in their project, they had become aware of the need for eye care for pupils and communities in

the area. "We realised that some pupils may have learning problems because they have poor eyesight. Through Mpilonhle, we invited One Sight, in conjunction with the Department of Health, to run clinics at our schools."

Apart from Oprah's Angels Network, Mpilonhle health and education mobile units receives funding from the US President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief as well as Charize Theron's Africa Outreach Project to administer Aids awareness, health education, basic health care and computer training to rural schools and their surrounding communities.