

African leaders unite to address the Continent's corneal tissue need: GAEBA Supports

November 13, Stellenbosch, SA: Key stakeholders from Sub-Sahara Africa, gathered at the South African Tissue Bank Association (SATiBA) Annual Conference, putting in motion the foundation steps to develop long term tissue bank services across the Continent. The meeting recognized need across all tissue types, focused on eye banking, corneal tissue and corneal services.

SATiBA and African leaders, with support from international co-hosts (the German Society of Tissue Transplantation (DGFG), World Union of Tissue Banking Associations (WUTBA) and GAEBA) took their first steps towards long term sustainable corneal tissue service development across the Continent, by attending a Roundtable side meeting alongside SATiBA's 6th Annual Conference.

"Currently, there are not enough corneas for transplant need in Africa," says SATiBA President Ms Sandra Venter, Roundtable host and event spokesperson for GAEBA.

"While nations such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Africa sustain local eye bank services – be them limited, a majority of African countries rely on imported corneas, or alternatively they simply do not offer corneal transplant services.

"Training opportunities and other resources are few, and there is little connectivity, planning or the opportunity to connect with local and foreign agencies and experts that are working across the Continent.

"The opportunity to use the SATiBA Conference to bring together key stakeholders to discuss corneal access, for the first time, is a dream come true and our honor.

"We welcomed tissue donation counselors, tissue bank staff, government representatives and medical professional colleagues from Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa.

Meeting Findings

The meeting highlighted that nations with and without eye banks, transplant/tissue acts, government, legislative and regulatory support and/or partnership with local and international development agencies all experienced similar issues. The international guests indicated that this is not unique to Africa and that there are a range of resources available, and that people from other organizations, with firsthand experience, could assist Africa. In summary, participants highlighted that there is a:

- Lack of opportunity for Africa to routinely unite on their own terms, for their own needs, and to develop their own services for Africa
- Lack of trained resources and regionally recognized training programs or routine professional development programs
- Reliance imported corneas (including limited quantities and varied quality)
- Need to build sustainable African services inclusive of donor awareness, donor notification and identification, recovery, processing and allocation
- Struggle to develop awareness in the community and amongst healthcare professional groups
- Lack of clarity on how to get started with building a service, as it seems overwhelming and complicated
- Limited level of government, legislative and regulatory support
- Desire to do something about it

What's Next

"The meeting was electric, conversations and new networks and opportunities emerged," says Ms Venter, "While we are currently evaluating the feedback, anecdotally there was agreement that Africa needed to continue to work together to develop services for Africa.

"There was an appetite to host follow-up opportunities in 2023 and/or 2024, and a desire to develop a network (e.g. an association or special interest group) to help to continue the conversation."

“While the partners involved in the Roundtable are just a small handful of peer voices who can help Africa – and will no doubt continue to, we are hopeful that more local and international organizations with similar shared values will support Africa to meet its end goal of improving access to local corneal tissue for local use. In other words, by Africa – for Africa” says Ms Venter.

Get Involved

GAEBA and partners are currently working through future opportunities and welcome others to get involved. To find out more, please contact GAEBA via: info@gaeba.org

Congratulations

GAEBA would like to congratulate and thank the delegate travel sponsor awardees who helped to lead the conversation and share the experiences from their nation. We recognize: Dr Angela Meric Birungi, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Uganda; Mr Nega Demessie, Eye Bank of Ethiopia, Ethiopia; Dr Vishwanatha Gokhale, Lions Medical Centre – Lions Eye Hospital, Kenya; Dr Fredrick Kipkoech Korir, Lighthouse for Christ Eye Centre, Kenya; Mr Christopher Mwangala, Lions SightFirst Eye Hospital, Kenya; Dr Mukiri Mukuria, University of Nairobi, Kenya; and Dr Patrick Ruhagaze, Kisii Eye Hospital, Kenya.

Thank You

We thank our international Roundtable co-hosts who managed the planning, fundraising, and travel awardee selection, being: DGFG (lead and round-table moderator), SATiBA, and WUTBA.

We thank the delegate sponsors: Cornea Help e.V., Eye Bank Association of Australia and New Zealand (EBAANZ), Foundation of the German Lions, GAEBA, German Fund for the Blind (DBHW), Geuder AG, KL medical GmbH, Lions Clubs International-Eye Bank Working Group (LCI), and Lions Club Wedemark,. Finally, we thank the attending international expert guests who were in the room and on MSTeams: Dr Manisha Acharya (Dr. Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital/EBAI), Mr Martin Börgel (DGFG/WUTBA/GAEBA/EEBA), Mr Jason Brosious (LCI), Mr Patrick Emery (Sightlife), Ms Kristin Kleinhoff (DGFG/GAEBA), Dr Heather Machin (GAEBA/EBAANZ/LCI), Tolulope Oyedun (LCI), Dr Anna Salz (DGFG/EEBA), Ms Stacey Troha (LCI), and finally, Ms Sandra Verner (SATiBA).

Photos and videos of the post conference report are available on DGFG website: www.gewebenetzwirk.de!