There has long been a need for a representative body to act as a voice for healthcare professionals in Africa, and back in 2005 a group of dedicated medical leaders took the first steps towards this vision. The result was the Africa Medical Association, and here, Secretary General Dr Delon Human, discusses the initiative’s priorities and its desire to reach out to a pan-African membership.

Could you begin by giving an overview of your background; specifically providing an insight into your transition from family practitioner to Secretary General for the Africa Medical Association (AfMA)?

I was fortunate to grow up in South Africa, where I also trained as a physician. After specialising in family medicine and working as a clinician, I spent two good years in the UK as part of a fellowship programme at the University of Oxford. Following this, I continued my work as a physician in South Africa until 1997, at which point I was appointed as the Secretary General of the World Medical Association near Geneva. After serving in this position until 2005, I decided to step down, but then helped to establish the Africa Medical Association (AfMA) – of which I still act as Secretary General.

What challenges have you encountered to date, and how would you describe the overall goals of the Association?

AfMA is a fledgling organisation, born out of the need for a continental representative voice for physicians. Africa’s medical needs are very specific, so a tailored, Africa-centric representation is required. Lack of access to healthcare, diagnosis, treatment and stable systems has always been an issue in Africa, and we hope that through our efforts we can help rectify this deficiency. AfMA sees overcoming these challenges as part of its role.

Our ethos can be defined as promoting caring, ethics and science development throughout the African continent. AfMA is an advocate for physicians and patients, and our goal is to achieve the highest possible level of healthcare in Africa.

Can you outline AfMA’s current focal areas, and what your ambitions are for the years to come?

These can be summarised as follows:

- Prevention and control of chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, lung and heart problems (mostly related to smoking, physical inactivity and poor diets)
- Tackling malnutrition
- Outreach and membership growth in African French- and Portuguese-speaking countries
- Professional development for African physicians
- Democratisation of healthcare services in Africa. As it stands, diagnostic and care services are too expensive and unequally distributed – we would like to bring healthcare to everyone across the continent
- Supporting the World Health Organization (WHO) and other relevant intergovernmental agencies to help combat communicable and non-communicable diseases

What financial constraints are facing healthcare providers in the region?

One of the most basic issues is securing funding for diagnostic services and some treatments; especially in rural and poverty-stricken areas.

African Journals Online

The African Medical Association supports the work of African Journals Online (AJOL), the world’s largest online collection of African-published, peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Historically, scholarly research has flowed from the West to the African continent and not vice-versa, and to make matters worse it has been difficult for African researchers to access each other’s work. Important areas of Africa are not covered by publications from the developed world and as such the research produced in these regions tends to be overlooked and under-cited.

AJOL is setting out to change this situation. While the internet should allow universal access to information, many peer-reviewed African journals cannot host their content in isolation because of resource limitations and the digital divide. AJOL provides free hosting for over 400 peer-reviewed journals from 30 African countries, covering an array of academic disciplines with particularly strong health and agriculture sections.
Furthermore, in many countries our physicians do not even receive regular salaries due to economic and political collapses.

Can you discuss some of your most recent innovations in point-of-care diagnostics?

Instead of using big lab equipment for the diagnosis of conditions such as malaria, we now have reliable rapid diagnostic tests at our disposal that simplify and accelerate diagnoses. We are especially excited by the development of new databases where these diagnoses can be recorded using cloud computing systems, which greatly improves epidemiological tracking and healthcare systems management.

Patients do not have free access to healthcare services in many parts of the world. Do you think this situation is improving?

No, although it is difficult to assess how bad the situation is. The last assessment of the level of healthcare provided in different systems was by WHO in 2000 – clearly we need to be better at measurement if we are to improve this state of affairs. Of all the aspects in global health systems, the most glaring deficit is in the monitoring and evaluation of health funds (eg. the work of the Global Fund and government programmes).

Can you give some examples of how AfMA actively participates in world health issues?

We participate in meetings of WHO such as the World Health Assemblies, and have been included in some of their programmes which focus on both chronic and communicable diseases. We also make broader contributions in terms of content, communication and collaboration with other health professional organisations in areas such as nursing, pharmacy and dentistry.

Membership of the Association is open to all the countries and customs territories of Africa. Do you have plans to further expand your current membership?

Yes. We would like all countries in Africa to be represented in AfMA and we plan to host future AfMA meetings outside of South Africa in order to better engage with other nations.

What do you think events such as the World Research and Innovation Congress (WRIC – www.worldresearchcongress.com) can bring to the world of healthcare?

These events serve to raise awareness of the need for innovation in healthcare, especially in regions like Africa, and also to facilitate the development of new networks. In the future, we would like to bring the work we have done developing point-of-care diagnostic services to one of these conferences.