



REFLECTION ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN OPTOMETRIC ASSOCIATION (SAOA) CONFERENCE & EXHIBITION 2026

– Thendo Mashudu

I had the privilege of participating in the South African Optometric Association (SAOA) Conference & Exhibition 2026, held at the Durban International Convention Centre (ICC) from 26-29 August 2026. The conference was a valuable professional and academic experience that provided an opportunity for learning, networking, research dissemination, leadership engagement, and meaningful reflection on the future of the optometry profession in South Africa.

One of the highlights of the conference was the opportunity to present a research paper arising from my Master of Optometry degree, titled “**Prevalence and Determinants of Vernal Keratoconjunctivitis among Grade 1 Learners in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District, South Africa.**” This opportunity was particularly meaningful to me because it was the first time I had formally presented my research outputs within a professional optometric conference setting. Being able to share findings from my postgraduate research with fellow optometrists and other professionals was both rewarding and affirming. It also allowed me to appreciate the importance of translating academic research into knowledge that can contribute to professional practice, practical solutions, public health, and improved patient and community outcomes.



I was also impressed by the organisation and administration of the conference. The programme was well coordinated, orderly, and professionally executed. The range of local and international speakers provided valuable perspectives on different aspects of optometry and eye health. I learned considerably from the presentations and discussions, particularly through exposure to different approaches to clinical practice, professional development, leadership, and the broader role of optometry within healthcare systems.

An important reflection arising from the conference was the need for greater collaboration between optometrists working in the private and public sectors. South Africa's optometry profession has significant potential to contribute to addressing the country's eye health challenges, but meaningful and sustainable change requires collaboration across different sectors of the profession. I believe that the SAOA is well positioned to serve as an important vehicle for professional collaboration, advocacy, and initiatives aimed at strengthening optometry and eye health in South Africa.

Representing VOSH International at the conference was another significant honour. It provided me with an opportunity to engage with South African optometrists about VOSH's humanitarian work and to explore how its mission and model could be applied within the South African context. These conversations highlighted the potential for greater involvement of local eye care professionals in humanitarian eye care initiatives and community-based service.



The conference also brought together several areas of professional interest that are important to my own development, particularly leadership, public health, advocacy, research, and professional development. Through lectures, presentations, networking opportunities, and informal professional engagements, I was able to connect these interests in a practical and meaningful way. The experience reinforced my belief that the future of optometry requires professionals who are not only clinically competent, but who are also willing to participate actively in advocacy, policy discussions, public health initiatives, research, and professional leadership.

Looking ahead, I believe there is an opportunity for VOSH International to consider establishing a South African VOSH Chapter. Such a chapter could provide a platform for qualified, registered optometrists, and other eye care professionals to participate in humanitarian activities and community-based eye care initiatives. It could also strengthen the connection between VOSH's International mission and local eye health priorities, while creating additional opportunities for professional collaboration, volunteerism, leadership development, and service.

Overall, I leave the SAOA Conference & Exhibition 2026 feeling encouraged, inspired, and motivated. The conference reminded me of the important role that optometrists can play in advancing eye health and addressing broader public health challenges. More importantly, it strengthened my resolve to actively contribute to the profession, not only through clinical and academic work, but also through advocacy, leadership, collaboration, and initiatives that can drive meaningful change.

The experience has reinforced my commitment to standing up for the optometry profession, contributing to its continued development, and working towards a more equitable, collaborative, and impactful eye care system in South Africa.



“The future of our profession is not defined by what we inherit, but by what we choose to advance, protect, improve, and leave behind.”

- Thendo Mashudu