

IN CONVERSATION WITH

De Wet Swanepoel, President of the International Society of Audiology

Gareth Smith caught up with the new President of the International Society of Audiology, **De Wet Swanepoel**, about the aims of the society, the upcoming World Congress of Audiology and the current state of hearing healthcare in Africa.



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Declaration of competing interests: The University of Pretoria holds the IP to the hearScreen and hearZA products licensed to the hearScreen (Pty) Ltd Company for commercialisation. De Wet Swanepoel serves as a lead scientific advisor to the company.

Firstly, congratulations on your appointment as President of the International Society of Audiology (ISA). Can you tell us a little about the Society?

Thank you, Gareth. ISA is the international home of audiology and has a proud heritage dating back to 1952 when the Society was started. The Society supports and advances audiology around the globe. Its World Congress of Audiology (previously called the international Congress of Audiology) is a biannual meeting that showcases audiological research from around the world. ISA is also one of three owner societies of the *International Journal of Audiology*.

ISA has two types of membership: individual membership includes access to the *International Journal of Audiology*, discounted rates to the World Congress of Audiology and access to the international community and networks. ISA also has an affiliate membership for local audiological societies from around the world. Currently, more than 30 affiliate societies belong to the ISA network of audiological societies on every continent (excluding Antarctica!)

As President, what are the aims for your tenure?

As the first president from Africa, and considering that the 2018 World Congress of Audiology will be the first to be held on the continent, an important priority for me will be to leverage this historic event to stimulate awareness and growth in audiology across Africa.

Another important priority will be the continued support for the World Health Organization (WHO) and its initiatives in hearing healthcare. ISA is an official partner organisation to the WHO, and directly supports the position of the technical officer for hearing loss and deafness. It is an exciting time for global hearing health, with the World Health Assembly considering a new resolution on hearing loss in May 2017 towards adoption by member states. ISA will continue its strong support for this important global initiative to raise the awareness and advocacy for hearing loss.

Where can we find out more about the ISA Conference?

The past World Congress of Audiology was held in Vancouver Canada in September 2016. The next one will be in 2018 from 28-31 October in Cape Town. More information can be found on the World Congress website (www.wca2018.co.za) or from the ISA website (www.isa-audiology.org).

Tell us the headlines regarding the state of hearing healthcare in Africa.

Close to 40 million people are living with permanent disabling hearing loss in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of these people are unable to access hearing healthcare due to challenges, including a lack of human resources and hearing health infrastructure. There is a dire shortage of audiologists across Africa, with one audiologist for every million-people being typical for countries



The 2018 World Congress of Audiology will be the first to be held in Africa.



Community care workers facilitating the Peek Vision acuity test.



Smartphone linked to calibrated headphones for hearScreen App.

in the region. These circumstances are necessitating prioritisation of innovative service-delivery mechanisms alongside training for hearing health providers.

Thank you for your contribution on mHealth hearing screening in this edition of ENT and Audiology News, which readers can find on page 72. I know you're always busy with new projects; what are you currently working on?

One of the exciting projects we're busy with is to combine mHealth solutions for hearing and vision screening. Screening ears and eyes together as a sensory screen makes a lot of sense. To do this we've partnered with an innovative UK-based company called Peek vision (www.peakvision.org) who have developed mHealth solutions for vision that are very similar to our hearing solutions. Employing a centralised data management app that calls up the hearing or vision apps allows for efficient screening of vision and hearing using the same smartphone operated by a minimally trained person. A cloud-based data management portal directs referrals to the closest service providers. Our current project provides this sensory screening to 6000 pre-schoolers in an underserved South African community. The aim is to ensure healthy learning by eliminating possible hearing and vision barriers.

With all of your activities and a young family, how do you relax away from work? Do you have any advice about maintaining a work / life balance?

My best relaxation happens when I'm away with my wife and two kids. It's wonderful how kids can draw you away from the pressures of work. They need it and I need it! So we plan ahead, especially before or after busy travel schedules, to set aside a

week here and there to get away. My wife's good at keeping a calendar in the kitchen to keep track of my schedule to ensure we have enough of these times set aside.

If you had any advice for your 21-year-old self, what would it be?

Life has many unexpected turns, for better and for worse. Keep the faith and stay focused on what matters most. Invest in quality relationships. These chart the course of your life to a very large degree.

Who do you look towards as your role models / mentors?

I had the privilege of getting to know Marion Downs early on in my career and had the honour to deliver the Marion Downs Pediatric Lecture at the AudiologyNOW! meeting many years ago. She's been a particular inspiration to me because of her persistence and commitment to make a difference despite overwhelming challenges. Addressing issues relating to hearing healthcare in underserved world regions like Africa bring about many of the same challenges she faced when pushing for universal newborn hearing screening way before her time. Her resilience and drive ultimately resulted in universal screening and this vision is now benefiting thousands of young children with hearing loss around the world. I draw great strength from her example.

If a student or researcher who is new to the field asked for one book to read, what would you suggest they pick up?

For me, the classic general text remains the *Handbook of Clinical Audiology*, edited by Jack Katz and now in its fifth decade. It covers the range of audiological areas with subject experts writing the chapters. You can even find some mHealth mentioned in the tele-audiology chapter!

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I know you travel a lot for work. What is the one item you try not to leave home without?

Talking about mHealth, apart from a passport, my smartphone is my essential travel companion. It keeps me connected. I also carry my Kindle along and catch up on reading when I'm away from home.

And finally, any other life hacks you can share? Last time we met, we discussed the finer points of the children's expectations of presents every time we go away on a trip, your advice of 'buy them before you leave home' was inspired – anything else to help make life a little simpler?

I try to simplify my life wherever I can. Prioritising helps me do this and my family are a good reminder of what's important.

INTERVIEWED BY



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