

# CAN YOU HEAR ME?

## DEAFNESS IS NOT MENTAL DISABILITY

**IN PRIVATE HOSPITALS NEONATAL HEARING SCREENING IS PERFORMED ON NEWBORN BABIES. THIS IMPORTANT TEST IS, HOWEVER, NOT AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN BORN IN STATE HOSPITALS AND CLINICS TO MOTHERS WITHOUT MEDICAL AID, DESPITE THE EQUIPMENT COSTING A MERE N\$50 000.** With an estimate of 46 000 deaf children in Namibia the Ministry of Health and Social Services employs one audiologist to serve the young and old of the whole country while the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture employs two audiologists to assess and assist school-going children.

In 1989, a desperate mother from Windhoek made a call to Germany in search of someone with experience in early Deaf Education. Always ready for an adventure, Heide Beinhauer, a specialist teacher for hearing and speech impaired children, would eventually extend her initial one year stay to remain in Namibia indefinitely. What began as assistance to one individual family whose son was left with a hearing impairment following meningitis, transformed into a parents' organisation and later to what is today known as CLaSH: The Association for Children with Language, Speech and Hearing Impairments of Namibia. For the twenty-seven years of its existence, the CLaSH mission has been to facilitate development towards equal opportunities; ensure access to education and training; and promote services to meet the needs of children with language, speech and hearing impairments as early as possible.

According to Heide, the current director, the new generation of parents thankfully acts faster to get their children assistance compared to a generation ago when parents would only bring their children to school when the frustrated child had reached puberty and began expressing their inability to communicate through anger and aggression. Misconceptions about deafness and a lack of information on available help may be among the reasons why parents hide their children from the world until things become unmanageable. To inform the public at large CLaSH produces and widely distributes numerous materials to raise

by Vida de Voss Links  
• photograph CLaSH



awareness such as leaflets, posters, books, DVDs and calendars. The organization also makes use of radio broadcasts. Though parents now act faster they and their children are still faced with a lack of services and/or ignorance in the health sector where it is possible to find children with chronic middle-ear infection being sent away with painkillers.

A major CLaSH project includes the running of Namibia's only pre-school and day-care unit for deaf children where specialised education built on Montessori and early childhood development principles is offered. Children there are stimulated holistically and not only cognitively so that their emotional well-being, their



self-esteem and social skills are also nurtured. Early intervention is vital as the first 1 000 days are critical for a child's later development and achievement. This fact has yet to be widely acknowledged in Namibia. Unfortunately many people, including some key decision makers still think early education only starts with Grade 1 of primary school.

CLaSH supports integration into mainstream education wherever possible through awareness raising, advice and provision of resources to children, parents and

the schools involved. At the same time CLaSH recognises that inclusive education cannot do justice to every child and therefore equally supports specialised educational approaches when appropriate. For example, the deaf children from the CLaSH Unit usually move on to NISE School for the Hearing Impaired, a specialised government school in Khomasdal.

In addition to the awareness raising materials it produces, CLaSH runs workshops and training sessions to inform and empower parents, communities, education and health practitioners. The provision of sign language classes and parents meetings are for empowerment and support so parents can share experiences and learn to communicate with their children. Learning to sign is like being given a connection to life for it opens the minds of the hearing impaired and enables them to express themselves in meaningful communication.

In addition to providing hearing aids and ear moulds to children with hearing loss as well as otoscopes and screening audiometers to rural clinics and state hospitals, CLaSH has been conducting outreach visits to the regions often in collaboration with the audiologists from MoEAC. During these trips they screen, diagnose and refer children, raise general awareness on ear care, prevention of hearing loss as well as conduct early education and (sign) language stimulation for children with communication difficulties. As an NGO, supported by donor funding, CLaSH takes on an immense responsibility that is left by the gap from missing or underfunded government services to the Namibian population.

Since 2003, CLaSH has facilitated "Operation Omakutsi," a successful German-Namibian cooperation between Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) surgeons from Germany, the Ministry of Health and local ENT doctors. Since inception "Operation Omakutsi" has taken place seven times in northern Namibia, assisting an average of 40 patients each time with free middle ear operations that restored the hearing of many of their patients.

It should be made clear that hearing loss is a physical condition, not a mental disability. The cognitive skills of a child with hearing loss are no different to those of a hearing child. Due to a lack of awareness, understanding and support, children with a hearing loss are, however, often not given the opportunity to develop their full potential. Hearing loss varies so that some children are indeed able to hear most sounds whilst others hear very little or nothing. Yet all hearing-impaired children can be helped to read and write. Some can learn to speak while others communicate in sign language. After all, learning depends on curiosity, not hearing.

So how do children become deaf? In Namibia, causes for hearing loss include:

- complications during birth or pregnancy
- genetic causes
- chronic ear infections
- meningitis
- malaria

Whereas the conditions in the North pose a higher risk factor for young children to contract diseases that could ultimately lead to deafness, the Oshakati Intermediate Hospital is not equipped to assist young deaf children with diagnostic assessments or provide information and guidance to their families.

Requirements to apply for a special maintenance grant for children with disabilities under 16 years of age from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare include a full birth certificate and an officially recognised formal diagnosis for the child. At the moment only Windhoek Central Hospital has the facilities to verify the diagnosis of a hearing loss in very young children, which makes it particularly challenging for a poor family living outside Windhoek to access such a government grant.

Through their services and advocacy, CLaSH strives to see deaf people have access to the same services and opportunities as their hearing counterparts.

