

Cirencester Science and Technology Society

The Society's February lecture on "20th Century – the last Century of Youth" was given by Dr Jaco Hoffman, Research Fellow, Oxford Institute of Ageing. He aimed to show the increasing proportion of the world population over the age of 60 and the resultant problems, particularly in South Africa.

The increase in the proportion of older people to younger people is associated with the growing economic strength and education, and a decreasing birth rate in a country.

All countries have been showing this trend since the 1950s, with developed countries most affected and Africa least affected. Dr Hoffman highlighted the problems of South Africa, which is the wealthiest country of Sub-Saharan Africa, with a population of 48 million. Its society is multi-racial and multi-cultural. Europeans have the highest age proportion, the Indians next and the native Africans the least, but nevertheless showing increasing ageing. The age expectancy of a 60-year-old African is 16 years compared with 21 years in Europe.

Dr Hoffman has studied the problems of the African community, which has over 35% unemployment and has suffered endemic poverty for many years. Further complications are the AIDS epidemic, mass migration and increasing urbanisation. This has led to over 1 million orphans, and grandparents being left in rural areas without support from their children.

The AIDS orphans have become the responsibility of grandmothers, who instead of being supported now have an increased burden on their time, resources and pensions. Complicating this situation is the strong culture of gender discrimination whereby a large proportion of fathers and grandfathers fail to support their families. Widespread illiteracy and an increasingly material culture worsen this problem. The devotion and care of many grandmothers is met by abuse by rural youth.

The Oxford Institute is not only researching the problems but also identifying policy options. It is involved in several projects of health, education and support centres for the older citizens of South Africa.