



CL Practitioner of the Year

When Nick Howard tried his first pair of PMMA contact lenses at the age of 15, little did he realise how much that early experience would shape his life and career. Nearly 40 years later, Howard stepped up to the stage to become Contact Lens Practitioner of the Year in the 2012 *Optician Awards*.

Describing him as 'a practitioner who lives contact lenses', the judges commended the enthusiasm that he shares with his patients and fellow clinicians. 'His friends might call him a "contact lens nerd" but he's a true evangelist for contact lenses,' the citation read.

Qualifying as a DO in 1980 and as a contact lens optician four years later, Howard has had a varied career path, from regional manager to franchisee, and from locum work to setting up a practice from scratch. Based in Lancashire, he now runs his own fitting, training and coaching company, Icontact, as well as working part time in practice, and his devotion to contact lenses is still as strong.

'I have an inexplicable, unwavering and insatiable desire to provide the very best levels of comfort and vision,' says Howard. 'Contact lenses have changed the lives for many, and can have massive benefits which are not only visual, but are often instrumental in physical, social and psychological development.'

'For the more complex corrections, contact lenses are not a lifestyle choice, they are absolutely essential – quite simple the key to quality of life. That's been my driving force.'

It's a philosophy that has seen Howard's career undergo a natural shift towards more complicated fittings, often referred to him from the hospital eye service. A typical day might include a two-year-old anisometropia and an elderly golfer with bilateral corneal grafts. At the last count, he had fitted over 100 keratoconic patients, as well as lenses for a wide range of other medical indications.

Sharing his experience with his peers and forging close links with local colleagues is another strong interest. He is an active member of his local optometric committee (LOC) and three years ago founded a peer review group which meets regularly to exchange

In winning the Contact Lens Practitioner of the Year award, Nick Howard has been recognised as 'a true evangelist for contact lenses'



Nick Howard: an appetite for the more complicated fittings

ideas and discuss new products.

'It's a nice facility to have – it gets you talking,' says Howard. 'As a CLO you have quite a solitary life and you're often the only person in the practice who fits contact lenses. You can pick up a lot from the group's meetings but we also email or text each other on a day to day basis.'

At one meeting a colleague mentioned a reverse piggy-back fitting she had carried out, with an RGP lens acting as a carrier for a soft lens over the top. 'I'd never in 100 years have thought of doing that, but the next time I come across it in practice I'll know about it,' he says.

Teaching overseas

When he entered the Optician Awards, Howard had already delivered more than 220 training sessions to practice staff at all levels, and taught specialist lens fitting in Finland and Eastern Europe. Since winning, his services have been even more in demand, with sessions around the country from Inverness to Hastings, more meetings overseas and more industry consultancy.

● **Contact Lens Practitioner of the Year sponsored by CIBA Vision**
Winner – Nick Howard, Icontact

Shortlisted
Chaaban Zeidan, Zeidan Eyecare Centre
Keith Tempny, Keith Tempny Opticians

His latest venture is to work with practices to help them introduce new clinical techniques such as orthokeratology, myopia control and dry eye management. He also plans to undergo training himself, to become a peer review facilitator under the enhanced CET scheme.

Positive publicity

Howard's appointment book at David Gould Opticians in Rossendale has also benefited, following coverage in the local press and social media. 'David is a friend as well as a colleague and really maximised the potential of the award – he has a great reputation in the area and recently received a local award himself but he was very comfortable with me getting mine. We've had a number of new patients as a result.'

Above all, winning Contact Lens Practitioner of the Year has been the realisation of an ambition Howard set himself when he first started out in contact lenses: to get to the top of his game. 'It's been a great boost to my self-esteem. Winning did catch me completely by surprise but there's a feel-good factor that the profession has recognised what you've achieved and how you've gone about it.'

And his advice to other practitioners considering entering is simple: 'I'd say go for it. The opportunities it opens up are endless. It's great for your self-confidence, it's great for your CV and it's great for your business. You can't beat it!' ●