

years wore some form of corrective eyewear compared to 51 per cent of those aged 18-29.⁶ This reflects the fact that visual acuity is known to decline with age.³ However, older people were significantly less likely to wear contact lenses, with just 8 per cent of 50-59 year-olds doing so compared with 18 per cent of the younger age group (18-29). Perhaps not surprisingly, older people were most likely to consider sight tests important; 86 per cent compared to 71 per cent of 18-29 year-olds. Interestingly, however, 28 per cent of carers for older people, both professional and non-professional did not know that sight tests for those aged 60+ were available on the NHS.

Looking to the future, as more older people work for longer and engage in sport and leisure activities, this age group will be an important client group. So too will be their employers, many of whom will wish to support their workers in maintaining their visual health. Furthermore, 'younger' older people are often engaged in the provision of informal care to older parents, spouses and other family members. Thus they may be important sources of support and providers of information to the 'older' elderly population. It is likely that tomorrow's elders will be more active consumers, wanting more choice in eyewear and eye care as they age. ●

References

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Going digital

Caledonian Optical is ready to take its freeform revolution nationwide. **Mike Hale** reports

Apart from granite buildings, Aberdeen is probably best known for its oil industry and indeed most facets of the city have some sort of connection to it if you look hard enough. Prescription house Caledonian Optical is no different; part of the lab's business is providing safety eyewear for use on the oil rigs. 'As the rigs have gotten older, there are more rust and other particles flying about,' says Mike Stewart, general manager of Caledonian Optical. 'To have a prescription in a wraparound model is a reasonably complex process and you need to have the correct equipment and the BSI standards in place because everything has to be done in a controlled environment.'

With governmental contracts in that area, such work makes up a decent amount of business and the lab also has a specialist rimless department. However, the main focus of the lab going forward is on offering cutting-edge freeform technology. From humble beginnings, Stewart says Caledonian Optical has grown through a policy of embracing technology to stay ahead over the years.

'The lab was started by the Duncan & Todd group of optical practices in 1976. This was just in a little room but it was still one of the first labs in Britain to offer a one-hour service for a cut, edge and fit. Since then the lab has slowly progressed in size over the years and we started surfacing in 1991. The key has been that we've always kept up to date with the latest technology thanks to the financial backing of the owners.'

An example of this from the past is the purchasing of Nidek robotic edgers once they were available to improve glazing services. 'This allowed us to increase capacity and service without increasing staff levels,'

notes Stewart. 'The same happened with rimless work – our staff have the skill to do the drilling and other work by hand but the machines can do most of it now.'

Caledonian moved to its current premises in central Aberdeen seven years ago, a move that doubled the amount of space available to the surfacing and glazing processes.

'We were at a point where we needed to invest in bigger and better machines and to incorporate them effectively it made sense to move,' says Stewart. 'We are already at the point where we might have to move again because the business is growing.'

Freeform investment

The lab's business from the Duncan & Todd group, which currently numbers 23 practices, has remained fairly constant in recent years so growth is coming from new business. The driving force behind this is the freeform service offered by the lab courtesy of a £400,000 investment in the necessary equipment.

'Years ago, when we first did work for practices outside the Duncan & Todd group, there was no overriding reason for them to send us work rather than to a local lab. Now with the freeform technology, we are making our own lenses and, when any new lens comes out, we can apply our technology to the material and have it available as soon as possible.'

'The digital revolution has really helped us,' adds Mark Robertson, business development manager of Caledonian Optical. 'We can compete with the larger lens companies but we are still an independent company that offers clients a personalised service.'

Robertson outlines the way that freeform has allowed the lab to benefit patients, saying whereas before a patient might have to adapt to a particular varifocal lens, freeform allows the construction of a lens



Mike Stewart (left) and Mark Robertson (right): inviting practices to get into freeform

according to what the patients want.

'If they want wider visual zones for distance or reading, with old varifocals you might not get that design for a particular frame but now it is digitally manufactured from source there is no problem. The lenses are fantastic and can be any material – photochromic or a strength material like Trivex or as thin as possible 1.74 index or Drivewear. There are so many options and we can make our design in that material for that specific frame.'

Robertson works to help client practices train their staff in how freeform lenses can best help patients.

'People transferring to modern lenses sometimes struggle and this can be because a practice is falling short in terms of shop floor training in that area. I mostly go to the practice and do a PowerPoint presentation with all the related information and take the staff through the steps and variations involved. Or it could be a case of speaking to the DO and then they can subsequently train other staff.'

Free trial

The lab offers a free trial of its freeform product with potential new clients offered the chance to get a pair for a member of staff who wears varifocals and who can give an informed and impartial account of the lenses' performance. Caledonian also offers existing clients a variety of promotions and incentives over any given year.

Stewart points out that practices can always call up staff at Caledonian for help and advice. 'We are constantly on the phone to clients, there is a lot of experience here – people that know really know lenses – and it is all available.'

The lab employs nine surfacing and glazing technicians, four of whom have been with the lab over 20 years. They are complemented

by four administrative staff who do the booking in and order the lenses and one member of staff who assists Robertson in business development.

A collection and delivery service is offered by four vans with specialist drivers, covering the country north as far as Inverness and St Andrews in the south. Caledonian Optical also has a satellite lab in Elgin with its own van service. This lab sends orders for surfacing down to Aberdeen then cuts and fits the jobs in Elgin.

Raising capacity

With business going well Stewart is planning to raise the lab's capacity by introducing a second line of machines.

'We have staff coming in on different shifts already so it won't change things too much in that respect. We only shut down between 2am and 6am. We've always focused

on quality and service and we can take on more business without compromising either of these thanks to the quality of staff and equipment.'

Robertson adds: 'Price is a big incentive in optics and we are certainly competitive on that front, but if a lab ever lets a practice down with slow service or a bad product then the practice loses that customer for good. We can deliver on all fronts.'

Discounting the Duncan & Todd part of business, the lab's customer base is split 50/50 between the local area and the wider UK. The lab has a good proportion of practices in England, including a concentration in the Cheshire area.

'While local businesses can be attracted by the convenience of our van run, with practices further afield we trade more on quality of product with particular reference to the freeform options,' says Stewart.

Freeform is at the heart of the lab's plans for the future.

'We want to expand across the UK and offer more and more options to our lenses,' says Robertson. 'The lens companies are ahead of the game with the accuracy offered in constructing a freeform lens. With our equipment this can be down to a hundredth of a dioptre, while opticians are not testing eyes to near that accuracy yet.'

Stewart adds: 'If a practice wants to get into freeform they can do it via us. Mark is ready to go anywhere to show the quality of lens we can produce.' ●



The lab has invested heavily in equipment over the years including this Schneider digital freeform generator