

Adding value

From the Channel Islands to Scotland practice staff are deciding to study for a formal qualification, writes **Graham Jones**

Sixteen months ago, Alice Godfrey began working as a receptionist at Baines & Band Optometrists, an independent in St Brelade on the island of Jersey. Like most practice staff she loves her job, and like most practice staff she started from scratch: 'I've had glasses since I was young,' she says, 'so I've been familiar with going to the opticians for quite a while. But I had no background in optics at all. I hadn't done anything to do with optics at school, and I didn't have any previous work experience connected to it.' And so – like an increasing number of practice staff throughout the British Isles – she decided to study for a formal qualification.

At the suggestion of her manager, she enrolled on the Level 2 Certificate in Optical Practice Support (OPS) with the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (WCSM). The course is a nine-month, tutor-supported distance-learning programme that covers the eye and ametropia, spectacle lenses, spectacle frames, contact lenses, and roles and communication in optical practice.

'The whole course was very relevant to the things I do here at work,' says Godfrey. 'All of it was useful. For example, the contact lens section where we learned about solutions was helpful because we sell those over the counter quite readily. And it's not always to patients. It's to walk-ins as well, who ask, "I'm on soft lenses. Which solution should I use?"'

Level 2 OPS is aimed at those who are new to the sector, plus more experienced members of staff who want to build on their existing knowledge. For employees, it is a way to boost skills – and confidence – on both the clinical and retail side of optics. For employers, it is a way



to increase the effectiveness of the front-of-house team, and demonstrate to patients and customers that staff have undergone formal training and assessment. For the profession as a whole, it is a way to provide stepping stones towards other qualifications such as the FBDO.

Holly Sturgess, an optical assistant at Memory Opticians in Salisbury, took the Level 2 OPS course in 2011/12, and then immediately followed it up with Level 3 OPS in 2012/13. The Level 3 Certificate is aimed at senior assistants and supervisors, and includes units on general optics and optical screening, legal requirements, and managing people. 'It's more involved in terms of management,' she says. 'And it's brilliant on the how to sell and

dealing with customers side of things.'

According to Sturgess, the qualifications have made a difference not only to her, but to the other members of the practice team, too. 'It's helped everyone all round. I don't have to refer everything to my colleagues, I can do more myself. I can add more value to the business.'

The Level 3 examination consists of five short written papers, which can be sat at a number of centres. The Level 2 examination, which is a single paper, can be taken by e-assessment at the candidate's workplace. Two of the advantages of e-assessment are that no time or money is spent on travel, and examination day stress is reduced. 'The exam was quite varied,' comments Godfrey. 'I was a bit worried about the time, because it was only two hours, but actually I had some spare time at the end to read over and check everything.' ●

Holly Sturgess receives her Level 2 OPS Certificate from the then WCSM Master, Gordon Jones

● The WCSM is one of the historic livery companies of the City of London. It offers a range of qualifications for practice staff, technicians and others working on the non-regulated side of optics, and the Company works closely with government, professional and industry bodies. In Scotland, for example, it delivers courses in partnership with NES, the training arm of NHS Scotland. As a leading member of the Livery Companies Skills Council it recently helped to win a £1m government investment in apprenticeship schemes. More information is available at www.spectaclemakers.com/education



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