



Engineered for growth

Expansion at Vistakon Ireland signals the importance of contact lenses to an economy committed to growth through manufacturing. It also cements the facility's claim as the world's largest contact lens manufacturing plant.

Prior to this year, the Johnson & Johnson contact lens plant was already a major employer in the Mid-West region of Ireland, with close to 1,000 people on the books in Limerick including scientists, engineers and technicians.

Since operations began in 1996, the company has manufactured 10 billion contact lenses at the Limerick plant.

Following a large-scale expansion (News 18.01.13), it can now boast significant extra production lines to increase capacity of 1 Day Acuvue TruEye, which is growing in popularity, and boost staff numbers to 840. Altogether Johnson & Johnson employs 1,900 members of staff in Ireland across various franchises.

As plant manager Barry O'Sullivan explains, the operation of flagship brands in Ireland, which include Intel, Google and GlaxoSmithKline, has elevated medtech and software alongside indigenous industries of tourism, food and drink. It has been a boost for local jobs and attracted overseas talent to the country.

O'Sullivan says: 'Over the past 25-30 years there has been strong influx of healthcare and medical devices alongside traditional companies who have been here a

Johnson & Johnson Vision Care's manufacturing plant in Limerick has expanded to meet growing demand for its Acuvue TruEye range of one-day contact lenses. **Joe Ayling** visited the Irish factory

long time. It has been helped by the availability of a skilled and flexible workforce, a favourable cost base and tax regime. Ireland is a country that is pro-business, Irish people have a strong "can-do" attitude.

'On rare occasions we may go overseas looking for certain specialised skills but we are fortunate that Ireland is a place that is attractive for people to come and live.'

He cannot explain how this reported boom in manufacturing might be replicated on the other side of the Irish Sea. 'I started off my working life in the UK working for RHM and Mars but I cannot speak with any authority when it comes to comparing manufacturing industry for regulated products like ours,' O'Sullivan adds.

Indeed, nine out of the top 10 medtech and pharma companies are now represented in Ireland with exports worth €62bn, he confirms. One clear benefit for Vistakon Ireland is having joined-up manufacturing partners within Ireland to source materials, machinery and distribution systems. This permits the company to deal with 300 different Irish suppliers.

'Tru' expansion

It is *Optician's* first visit to the plant, located at the National Technology Park near the University of Limerick,

since the opening of a new building to increase the capacity of TruEye daily lenses being made (see picture on page 30).

Substantial production lines have been added, with more opening this month. The scale of each line dwarfs others in the factory, which is necessary due to the heightened complexity of the TruEye production process.

An external wall was knocked down to make way for the extension, with the division still faintly visible on the floor and jokingly referred to as 'the equator'.

'We were doing the construction work and machine installations through the nights and weekends to hit the deadlines, but everything is on target for this important project. We are delighted with the demand for 1-Day Acuvue TruEye – from all our customers around the world,' says O'Sullivan.

The €100m expansion has resulted in the recruitment of 100 new workers at the Limerick plant, and follows the creation of 200 construction jobs back in January.

Therefore, although the group cannot share a breakdown of its contact lens sales, there is clearly an appetite out there for TruEye that it wants to meet.

Among the other contact lens



brands manufactured at Limerick are 1 Day Acuvue Moist, Acuvue Oasys and Acuvue Advance, with 30-plus manufacturing lines operating at the 300,000-plus square foot factory. Each of the brands has its own dedicated team and production lines, which run 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

A tour of the plant begins by donning a lab coat and gloves before stepping through a sticky blue gel hygiene mat onto the spotless factory floor. O'Sullivan talks *Optician* through the various moulding, polymerisation and rinsing processes on the condition the details are kept under the netted hat.

Since 1996, the company has made 10 billion contact lenses at Limerick

Indeed, the development of sophisticated silicone hydrogel technologies in the contact lens market have resulted in a level of secrecy among the major manufacturers not dissimilar to the search for the perfect Coke recipe.

Optician is told how the Japanese-manufactured robot arms powerfully shifting goods along the production line with absolute precision are assembled close to home, and nothing is left to chance. O'Sullivan explains how the machinery helps avoid yield loss, and even the slightest defects will be detected by pinpoint monitoring systems.

At no step is anything touched by human hand.

He says: 'We manufacture our Acuvue brand contact lenses using highly automated production lines, built on the principle that automated systems can provide more repeatability than we humans can. We invest heavily – in both our plants, on the very latest automation, every year.'

'We partner with our colleagues in R&D to bring the latest products to market.'

'We have the same quality standard for everybody who wears Acuvue brand contact lenses. We do not make lenses for anybody else – only Acuvue brand contact lenses are made in our plants.'

'Contact lenses are medical devices that go into your eyes so it doesn't get much more personal than that. We want the perfect lens every time. Success for us means the lens is so comfortable you don't realise you are wearing it.'

'We are delighted to see demand for our Acuvue brand contact lenses continue to grow. Our entire team of scientists, engineers and manufacturing associates are continuously working to improve customer satisfaction. We have a very strong emphasis on team work in the plant – everybody works together to achieve our goals. People get great job satisfaction when they achieve new heights through continuous improvement.'

Community contacts

In addition to developing the reputation of the Acuvue brand, O'Sullivan wants youngsters in Limerick to inherit a passion for engineering, and a huge marquee has been constructed for the annual Vistakon children's party. As well as the bouncy castles and clowns, children are invited to dress in white coats and hygiene hairnets and take a look of the factory machines.

He says: 'We have 800 people coming to our family day this weekend. Our business is technology driven. We encourage people to come and visit our plant, particularly the families of our staff and of course our customers.'

'We are trying to get more kids interested in engineering so that Ireland has that skill base in future. When you bring them into this environment they are very interested to find out more and this encourages them to learn more about maths, science and engineering. We also



Barry O'Sullivan (far left) and staff: continuously working to improve customer satisfaction

Focus on Ireland

partner with local schools and universities to encourage this.'

Accompanying a visit to the Vistakon Ireland plant is a run-through of the Johnson & Johnson principles steering its daily operations – its 'credo'. In addition to vision care, the group's products include baby care, skin and health care, oral health care and women's health – but it aims to apply the same principles each time.

'Our credo is a little bit different, it was written in 1943 in plain English by General Johnson and it simply says that firstly, you must look after your customers, secondly, your employees – as we count on each of them to look after our customers, thirdly, be a good neighbour in your community, then if you do all that well, our company will prosper long term.

'In my experience, Johnson & Johnson is a company that always thinks and manages for long-term – the level of investment in contact lenses by Johnson & Johnson is proof positive of that.

'I always speak to new starters about our credo – our only job is customer satisfaction – always working to ensure that each and every customer is delighted and comes back to us next month for another box of their Acuvue brand contact lenses.'

When Vistakon refers to its customers this includes contact lens wearers, but also practitioners dispensing the product on a daily basis on the high street. During its trip to Limerick, *Optician* dropped into Vision 2 Opticians in the city centre, where director and optometrist Orlaith Ryan also valued this relationship.

She says: 'It is worth forming a relationship with one supplier because the more business you do with that supplier the better value for money you can offer your clients. J&J lenses are excellent and they are a significant employer in the Limerick area and we are delighted to have a good working relationship with them.'

Green credentials

For such a large-scale manufacturer Vistakon must also pay close attention the 'be a good neighbour in your community' promise in its credo, and the figures suggest it is not falling short. There was a 33 per cent reduction in CO₂ emissions there between 2007 and 2012, and since 2007 it has saved thousands of tonnes of carbon dioxide through green investments including two natural gas



The plant pictured when building work (arrowed) was in progress to increase capacity of TruEye daily lenses

power generators and a geothermal cooling system (*Optician* 14.10.11).

O'Sullivan adds: 'Guided by the principles of the Johnson & Johnson credo, we continuously work to improve the environmental impact of our business – our packaging is recyclable and we have reduced our water and energy usage per lens significantly over the last five years.'

Furthermore, launches of new Johnson & Johnson services in the country this year should also go some way towards fulfilling the 'looking after customers' part of its credo.

Firstly, its Acuvue Home Delivery Service launched last November, with 'a high volume' of independent practices signing up.

The company said previous research had shown that more than half of contact lens wearers in Europe prefer having their contact lenses delivered to their home or office. The Acuvue service offered patients convenience to save them time peace of mind they would not run out of lenses, it said.

Benefits to the practice included building patient loyalty, encouraging better compliance and operational efficiencies. It is controlled by the practice but operated by Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, with the practice name and address appearing as the sender and each practice owning the patient data including name, address, prescription, product and wearing schedule. Changes can only be made by practice staff or at practice request, the company added.

Johnson & Johnson Vision Care also

confirmed that its Lenspal app will be launching in Ireland this month, reporting that approximately one in five new contact lens wearers drop out within the first month of wear.

It said difficulty in applying and removing lenses, discomfort, and dryness or red eyes were among the reasons most often cited by new wearers for giving up on contact lenses.

Contact lens wearers who download the free Lenspal app were given round-the-clock access to tips and instructional videos to help reinforce compliance, the company said, as well as reminders on when to replace contact lenses, change their contact lens case, and when to schedule an eye examination. 'The new tool is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, so where appropriate, new wearers are advised to contact their eye care practitioner if they have additional concerns,' it added.

The app was said to be compatible with most mobile devices and downloaded via the Apple App Store and Google Play.

The growth of contact lenses is having far-reaching effects, from the need for extra production lines to the development of new mobile apps. What is most important, however, is the tiny lens that makes its way through dozens of machines, global distribution hubs and high street practices onto the patient's eyes.

There is no question Vistakon Ireland knows it has to get the journey off to a smooth start without exception. ●