

Transferring the skills

Simon Jones talks to Specsavers hearing aid dispenser Steve Powell about his transition from optics to audiology

Last month *Optician* looked at the training options available to practitioners who are considering retraining or adding hearing care qualifications to their CVs. But what is it like making the transition from optics to hearing care on a professional level?

Steve Powell of Specsavers in Camborne, Cornwall was a dispensing optician of five years but now practices as a hearing aid dispenser (HAD). Formerly a DO and store director of another practice, Powell sold his shares after deciding a career change was in order. Hearing aid manufacturer Amplifon was recruiting at the time and offered HAD training as part of the job packages. He was later offered shares in the Specsavers practice in Camborne and now handles the audiology side of the business. Powell says the audiology side of the business has been growing in recent years and that his dispensing optician days are long behind him, but he adds that he occasionally offers advice on tricky



frame adjustments when required.

Powell has had to make some major changes during his career transition. He believes the biggest has been the way hearing aid dispensers have to continue their professional development following the change of regulator.

'We (HADs) are now aligned more with sectors such as physiotherapy, and as such have to take on more reflective training and keep an eye on our own training and development,' he says.

Another major difference is the time the practitioner spends with patients

Steve Powell:
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in the consulting process. 'It's a lot more clinical in nature and invasive, so you have to be aware of that when dispensing,' says Powell. 'But you also end up spending a lot of time with the patient and you can build up a really good trusting relationship with them.'

Building a better relationship allows for more detailed case histories to be formed, says Powell. 'The volume of hearing aid dispenses isn't as high as when dispensing glasses, so you are able to spend a lot more time with the patient. In that time you have to find out what their lifestyle is like – as that is one of the main factors to consider when dispensing a hearing aid. What sort of environments the patient has difficulty hearing in is important to ascertain,' he says.

While the difference in sectors is clear, there are a number of ways in which they are similar and the skill sets of both professions can be utilised. 'Being a good problem-solver helps in both forms of dispensing,' says Powell. 'As a DO you will often get problems during dispensing and it's the same with hearing aid dispensing. You have to be able to work around issues that arise and work out a solution.'

Keeping abreast of technology in the audiology sector is another part of the HAD role. 'Processors in the current crop of hearing aids are highly sophisticated and the main cost differentiator in products,' he says. 'Picking out speech in an environment with lots of background noise is always the biggest challenge for hearing aids and the better the processor and the algorithms, the better the hearing aid will perform.'

According to Powell, learning about the technology should not be a daunting factor, as the hearing aid dispensing courses cover a lot more on the technology that will be used in practice than dispensing courses he completed in the past. He also benefits from attending regular seminars and is visited by a number of hearing aid manufacturers.

Powell says that, ultimately, being a HAD is more rewarding than being a DO. 'Hearing loss can be quite an isolating condition and people struggle with that. I get a great deal of satisfaction from helping patients cope with hearing loss.' ●



Hearing aid dispensing courses focus heavily on the technology

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