

Land of opportunity

Martin Hodgson shares his experience of working as an optometrist in Australia

In 1999, my partner Stephanie and I decided we'd had enough of the crowds, pollution and gloomy climate of suburban north London and chose to leave the UK for Australia. We were both young optometrists and had little trouble obtaining residence visas and registering to practise in Australia.

Before we'd even booked our flights we received a telephone call from the owner of a small independent group of practices in Townsville, north Queensland. She offered us both jobs and paid for our flights. We'd never even heard of the place, but decided it was worth a try. Eight years later, after a little travelling, a couple of career moves and the arrival of two children we're still here, enjoying the tropical lifestyle and interesting careers in the Australian optical industry.

Optometry

The scope of practice of optometry in Australia is substantially similar to that in the UK. Optometry courses are available at Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane), The University of Melbourne and The University of New South Wales (Sydney). Courses are being extended from four to five years as states and territories have recently passed legislation to allow suitably qualified optometrists to prescribe ocular therapeutics. There is no pre-registration year, but students gain extensive clinical experience in busy university clinics during their final year of study.

Optometrists must register with the Optometrists Board for each state or territory in which they intend to practise. Membership of the Optometrists Association Australia (OAA) is not compulsory, but is highly recommended for several reasons.

The OAA effectively performs the roles performed by the UK's College of Optometrists and the AOP – it represents the profession to the general public, and lobbies on behalf of the profession in political and industry matters. Members receive monthly issues of *Australian Optometry* magazine and bi-monthly copies of *Clinical and Experimental Optometry*, a



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A young Perth resident prepares to dive into the sea at Cottesloe Beach in Perth

high quality journal containing clinical and research articles. Membership of the OAA is also a cost-effective way of receiving professional indemnity insurance.

UK optometrists wishing to register to work in Australia for the first time must sit examinations set by the Optometry Council of Australia and New Zealand (OCANZ). Several years ago it was possible for UK registered optometrists to register in New Zealand and thus obtain automatic recognition to register in Australia, so steps were taken to close this 'loophole'. Details of current application procedures are available on the OCANZ website.

Medicare, Australia's equivalent of the NHS, finances quite an impressive range of optometric service provisions. There are currently 26 different service 'item numbers' the optometrist can claim from Medicare. All Medicare card holders (this includes Australian citizens and permanent residents) are entitled to a comprehensive initial consultation every two years for which Medicare pays A\$53.35 (around £21.34). In addition to this, the optometrist may charge extra item numbers as appropriate for services including computerised perimetry, low-vision assessment and children's vision assessment. For patients with high refractive errors or appropriate medical conditions, contact lens fitting

fees up to around £67 can be claimed. Practitioners who charge higher private fees can offer the patient the option of claiming back a portion from Medicare.

Independent optometry is still strong in Australia, although the Luxottica-owned OPSM group, other multiples and joint-venture groups are an increasing presence. There are also interesting opportunities for optometrists working with ophthalmologists, particularly in refractive surgery and providing eye care to remote indigenous communities. Many independent optometrists enjoy the opportunity to build on specialities in contact lenses and paediatric or behavioural optometry. See the Australian College of Behavioural Optometrists' website for more information.

Legislation allowing suitably qualified optometrists to prescribe therapeutic drugs has been now been passed in most Australian states and territories. OAA branches have had a busy time negotiating prescribing rights in each jurisdiction, with varying levels of success. A significant number of suitably endorsed optometrists in Tasmania and Victoria have enjoyed prescribing rights for several years. In Queensland there continues to be political controversy over the issue following a threatened strike by 22

public ophthalmologists last year. The matter must be an embarrassment for the Queensland government in a state seven times the size of the UK – with a population of only 4 million – where prescribing rights for optometrists would significantly enhance eye care services in remote and rural areas.

CET is not currently compulsory for registration, but the OAA has a requirement for members to maintain a minimum level of continuing professional development (CPD). At the end of each calendar year, each member is required to have earned at least 80 CPD points over the preceding two years. Penalties apply for members who fail to do so. Most OAA members attend one of several large conferences held annually across Australia. Distance learning CPD is becoming increasingly popular and is available from several providers including OptomCPD which distributes *Optician* CET in Australia.

Dispensing

Optical dispensers are only required to be registered in New South Wales and South Australia. Dispensing is not regulated in other states, but many practices still prefer to employ qualified dispensers. Courses are available through several colleges of training and further education (TAFE) and through The Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). Dispensing courses are less comprehensive and rigorous as those in the UK and it is not possible for a qualified dispenser to undertake further study to become a contact lens practitioner.

Retail optics

If there were such a place as the average Australian town, then a brief look at *The Yellow Pages* would show that independent practices still significantly outnumber corporates and multiples. The current Australian retail optics scene almost looks like a snapshot of the UK scene 15 or 20 years ago and looks set to follow similar trends. The presence of corporate, multiple, franchise and joint-venture practices is on the rise.

Luxottica retail dominates the optical market with 747 outlets in Australia and New Zealand. Its brands include OPSM, Laubman & Pank, Budget Eyewear and Sunglass Hut and it is not unusual to find several of these outlets in a single shopping mall, each presumably marketing to a different demographic.

For several years rumours have been rife of the imminent arrival of the

**Noosa,
Queensland,
70 miles
north of
Brisbane**



Photo: Mpix

WEBSITES

- www.optom.unsw.edu.au
- www.optometry.unimelb.edu.au
- www.hlth.qut.edu.au/opt
- www.optometrists.asn.au
- www.ocanz.org
- www.acbo.org.au
- www.optomcpd.com
- www.oten.edu.au

Specsavers juggernaut to Australian shores and in the last few months it has been confirmed that the company has purchased a minority shareholding in buying group Optovision. It will be interesting to watch the progress of the company in the Australian market and to see if it can match its spectacular growth in Europe. The Specsavers joint-venture arrangement might appeal to Australian practitioners who want to own their own practice and have the presence and competitive edge of a corporate.

Many Australians have optical cover from their private health insurance. Health funds can pay a significant portion of the cost for spectacles and contact lenses and optical outlets with preferred provider arrangements offer

attractive deals for fund members.

Chains with a nationwide presence such as The Optical Superstore and the Luxottica practices benefit from promotional deals with health funds and some offer members of certain funds spectacles with 'no out-of-pocket expense' – in other words 100 per cent of the cost of basic spectacles is covered by the fund. Such offers are understandably very popular.

The OAA has campaigned against preferred provider arrangements as they work against the interests of independent practitioners who make up the majority of the OAA membership. However, it seems that such arrangements are here to stay and it will be interesting to see whether Specsavers pursues deals with the large health funds when its practices eventually arrive on Australian high streets.

It's an interesting and rewarding time to be an optometrist in Australia. The profession is highly regarded by the public and allied professionals. I would certainly recommend a working holiday here if you're brave enough to sit the exams. The only danger is that you might like it so much that you'll want to stay. ●