

Quite an experience

Brian Tompkins gives his view of why all practitioners, young and old, should make the effort to attend this year's BCLA conference

As one of my patients kindly remarked this week, I am 'an experienced contact lens practitioner'. Others might say that I have just been around for a long time.

In that time, I have used a large variety of contact lenses and types, for a large variety of eye and vision-related problems. One of the advantages of being my own boss (in practice, if not at home) is that I have total freedom of choice to use any lens from any company that seems to fit the needs of my patients – a luxury that not every contact lens practitioner has.

Having that freedom, over the past few months I have noticed a return of some of the 'classics'. Just as in fashion everything seems to come round again, so it is in optometry and contact lens practice, and some of the latest lenses are based on principles from years ago.

What a fantastic chance to take another look at old skills for those of us who have forgotten them, and what an opportunity for younger practitioners and those starting out in contact lenses to learn some exciting new skills.

One of the joys of this constant and ever-more extensive increase in technology is that contact lens practice always presents new and different challenges, so there is never a chance to get bored. I am guilty of loving my job more than 30 years into it, and that partly comes from dealing with grateful people, especially when you have given them the gift of vision, maybe for the first time.

Trying new things

A key point is that if you don't try a new lens, or advanced technique, then you will never progress. My patients expect to be given something new on a regular basis, since that is what they have always had. Whenever a new lens hits my desk I am itching to find a perfect match in my patients that day. When I find that patient I am full of enthusiasm for the fun that we can have experimenting.

Some may say that surely that is



Tompkins: 'an opportunity for younger practitioners to learn exciting new skills'

going to cost you more to do and it's easier not to change anything.

I switched to fee-based charges for all contact lens patients – and many of my spectacle patients – two years ago. I am fortunate to be paid a realistic fee for my time in the consulting room so I can afford to experiment.

But if the new lens proves to be more comfortable, gives better vision or longer wearing time than before then I have a happier patient who becomes a brilliant ambassador to drive more patients through the door. This builds my business and, in turn, allows me to try new and different lenses.

So what's exciting in new developments at the moment? Well, one of the old classics is a modern take on a semi-scleral lens, a comfortable RGP lens that bridges the cornea so it can mask any number of corneal issues and has so far given brilliant vision to a number of difficult cases, from post-graft 8.50D cyls to diseased and distorted corneas.

In silicone hydrogel lenses there are a number of very high Rx options,

outside the usual power range, that are lathe cut – another old style of manufacture re-applied to the latest materials.

New generation

But lens developments don't have to be 'specialist' designs in order to move forward. There is a new, third generation of silicone hydrogels which will give ever more success, particularly for reducing lid problems. And daily disposables are increasingly complex in design and material, each delivering different benefits to wearers.

For the future, there is the promise of antibacterial lens surfaces and improved care products, as well as new clinical techniques for assessing the anterior eye for use in tomorrow's consulting room.

It is no coincidence that all these developments, and more, will be on show at the British Contact Lens Association's annual Clinical Conference and Exhibition, which takes place in Manchester at the end of May. Increasingly, the UK is the test market for new products worldwide and the BCLA conference is often where they are first revealed.

The manufacturers will have their say at their stands and in their product presentations, but if you prefer to hear independent advice from the world's leading authorities, and get hands-on experience of the very latest developments, then this is the event for you.

And don't forget the social side of things. It is often said that some of the best 'pearls' of information are collected in the bar with informal, but informed, chats with some of the best contact lens practitioners from all over the world.

So whether you are just starting out on your career, or are an old-timer like me, come along for a day or two or four. You might just return to your consulting room with renewed enthusiasm and more skills to extend the scope of your contact lens practice. ●

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