

Bespoke training for returners to practice

A new hands-on contact lens fitting course offers professionals the confidence boost they may need when returning to practice after a career break. **Bernie Ursell** reports

As part of our series looking at the issues that women in the profession face, earlier this year we examined the support available for women returning to work following a career break. In that report Karen Sparrow, AOP education adviser, highlighted the low levels of confidence of this group and the need for a more coordinated approach to support returners. We also heard from optometrists who spoke about the importance of, but currently limited practical, hands-on training, particularly in the field of contact lenses.

Now a new course from CIBA Vision should go a long way to help resolve these issues. The CIBA Vision Soft Lens Masterclass is designed to help practitioners who wish to get back into contact lens work either because of a career break or from lack of opportunity. While the course is open to any practitioner wanting to improve or update their contact lens skills, the format and content of the course is flexible depending on the needs of the participants, which is very beneficial for women returners.

Numbers at the one-day sessions are kept small, no more than 10 delegates to ensure maximum interaction and that the individual needs are met. The small group size ensures that there is plenty of opportunity for attendees to hone the practical skills needed in everyday practice and also facilitates networking among the group. The courses are held at university teaching clinics around the country making it easier for delegates to find a course near to them. Furthermore, every practitioner who goes on the course will be followed up at one and six months to ensure that their confidence levels remain high and will be offered further training if needed.



Delegates are followed up at one and six months to ensure confidence levels remain high

Karen Sparrow welcomes this aspect of the course, commenting: 'Any course that helps to raise confidence levels and enable practitioners to re-enter the workplace smoothly is very welcome.'

While each course is bespoke, the core content covers updates in new contact lens technology, business and communications skills needed in a modern practice but with a significant part of the course focusing on practical skills.

Brains behind the project

The course was the brainchild of Dimple Shah, professional marketing manager at CIBA Vision, who approached optometrist Andrew Elder Smith and explains how the project evolved. 'I have a bit of an obsession about the fact that most education given to practitioners is theoretical and yet we do a very practical hands-on job! I had been in conversation with the professional services team at CIBA Vision about providing practical training to practitioners who have been

out of contact lenses for some time, either because of the style of practice they worked in or because of a career break. The company has a rich history of providing innovative education and is passionate about supporting independent practitioners so when Dimple suggested a course of this type I was keen to work with them on this.

'Furthermore, as a spectacle wearer whose life has been transformed by contact lenses I am also passionate that we should be giving all our patients the opportunity to experience clear vision without the encumbrance of glasses. I have run similar training sessions in people's practices, which works well if you have an employer who can spare a consulting room for a day's training. These proved to be very successful and CIBA Vision asked if I could provide something on a larger scale. We came up with the Soft Lens Masterclass.'

Elder Smith's experience in optometry practice and optometry training makes him ideal to develop such a contemporary course. He has

been in practice as both an employed optometrist and as a practice owner. For 18 years he ran his own practice in Harrogate, Yorkshire culminating in being awarded Contact Lens Practice of the Year 2008 in the *Optician Awards*. Throughout his time in optometry, almost 30 years, Elder Smith has been involved in organising and presenting training events developing a good feel for what does and doesn't work. He has also taught in the under-graduate clinics at the University of Bradford on a part-time basis for many years and sees the Soft Lens Masterclass as a continuation of that work. So it was a natural move when he sold his practice to set up Contact Solutions Consultants, a company offering training to eye care practitioners, their staff, pre-registration students and newly qualified optometrists as well as those returning to work following a career break.

Elder Smith explains the process of developing the course: 'The core concept of this training is that the days must be flexible so that they can meet the varied needs of the participants; this is definitely not a one-size-fits-all event. Having been involved in training for almost 30 years I have a very good idea of what people need in training terms. They want all the practical tips and tricks in carrying out the initial assessment, dealing with complex lenses as well as the aftercare routine and management. In terms of updates, practitioners want to hear about the latest contact lens technology, designs and materials. This is why half of the day is dedicated to hands-on training and I ensure that all the participants' requests are covered during these practical sessions. What we tend to find is that because the day is so interactive, the participants contribute a lot to the delivery themselves. This is especially so in the



Andrew Elder Smith: the flexible course meets the varied needs of participants

practical sessions when the participants are acting as "patients". This also means that requests for practice fitting very specific prescriptions can only be met if we have a participant with that particular refractive error!

Delegates' requirements

The course bookings are organised by CIBA Vision and Contact Solutions Consultants send out questionnaires to establish the individual needs of each delegate; the core content is then adapted, taking the responses into account. The first course was held in June this year at Aston University and the pre-training questionnaires highlighted a need among delegates to review record keeping and communicating the benefits of contact lenses to potential customers, so these topics were added to the agenda.

'When we held the first course the participants were much more varied than we expected,' explained Elder Smith. 'Two thirds of them were female, which was expected, but what was unexpected was that most were currently working in practice but had not had the opportunity to fit contact lenses in their recent roles and wanted to expand their skills base to improve their CVs.'

We asked Elder Smith how participants had responded to the first course. 'We got some great feedback, but because the delegates were wanting to update and improve their skills to enhance their CVs, our feedback is anonymous. However, they all praised the practical sessions and appreciated the small, informal group setting, making it very easy to ask whatever questions they wanted in a non-intimidating environment. Everyone agreed that they had gained the knowledge and practical skills that they had set out to learn and that their confidence had increased exponentially. The delegates liked the fact that the course was held at a university clinic because it meant we had excellent facilities to hand. Importantly, everyone who attended the day said they would recommend the course to a colleague and you can't ask for more than that.'

Ultimately, Elder Smith hopes that the course will provide participants with the skills and confidence to begin to proactively recommend and fit contact lenses and to look after wearers to ensure that they get many years of happy lens wear. 'From a business point of view,' says Elder Smith, 'we know that contact lens wearers bring far more value to the practice in the long term, not only in terms of contact lens and spectacle purchases but also in respect of recommendations of new patients.'

Future Soft Lens Masterclasses will be held in Bradford (Saturday September 24) Cardiff (Saturday October 8) and London (Sunday November 13). Visit www.cibavisionacademy.co.uk/soft-lens-masterclass.shtml for further information. ●

● **Bernie Ursell** is a medical writer and public relations consultant

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