

If sitting in a darkened room for most of your working life is a daunting prospect, fear not. There are many ways to make your job interesting and varied while benefiting your patients and practice as well as yourself.

Broadening your horizons may mean a change of scene, through changing your working environment to a different type of practice or location – from multiple to independent (or vice versa), from high street to hospital, from urban to rural, or from UK to overseas. It may simply mean striving to do the same job but better. Or you may want to extend your skills to encompass new areas of practice.

But you can also find inspiration throughout your career by using your skills and knowledge beyond the consulting room or dispensing area and, at the same time, improve patient care.

In the coming year, *Optician* will be looking at ways to get more involved in your profession, to enhance your own status and career prospects. Our series will examine opportunities to promote eye care and eye health, and join in local co-management schemes. We'll also discuss how you can share your skills and knowledge with others, through presenting a paper, workshop or peer review session, or writing for a professional or lay audience. And we'll look at ways you can help advance your profession at a local or national level.

To set the scene, we talked to two practitioners at the top of their profession about their own experiences and how to make the most of opportunities as they arise, and to a practitioner just starting out about how he perceives his future career.

Thinking outside the box

Elaine Grisdale knows a thing or two about changing career direction and being in the right place at the right time. It was having contact lenses fitted at the age of 12 that led her to a summer job in a Manchester optical practice and the decision to study dispensing optics. Ultimately that decision was to result in a global position in one of the world's largest optical manufacturers and a leading role in her profession.

In the mid-1980s, Grisdale joined Essilor as a lens consultant covering an area from Birmingham to the north of Scotland. Moving to Paris, she took on a marketing role for Europe introducing new products before being given responsibility for professional relations worldwide. Running Essilor's global programmes brought her in

Finding inspiration in and out of practice

Optician introduces a new series on how to extend your skills and knowledge beyond everyday practice to increase job satisfaction and enhance patient care



Elaine Grisdale gives a lecture in Singapore

contact with universities, hospitals and leading authorities in lens design, which proved invaluable when she came to set up the company's Varilux University.

In 2001, Grisdale left Essilor and went back into practice before a second foray into industry with lens maker BBGR. Then four years ago she joined the Association of British Dispensing Opticians as head of professional services and has recently taken on responsibility for international development, introducing ABDO's

BEYOND THE CONSULTING ROOM WILL COVER:

- How to promote eye care and eye health outside the consulting room
- How to run a staff training session on clinical and technical topics
- How to get involved in local eye care and eye health schemes
- How to gain additional qualifications
- How to become an examiner or supervisor
- How to access and evaluate eye care resources
- How to be a clinical investigator
- How to prepare a presentation
- How to run a clinical workshop or peer review session
- How to put pen to paper to communicate with your peers
- How to write patient communications

In this series, *Optician* will talk to practitioners around the country about their experiences in and out of practice. If you have an interesting story to share, or are involved in any of the areas the series will cover, please contact alison.ewbank@rbi.co.uk

CET programme to countries such as India. Despite her high profile, demanding role, she continues to work in practice on Saturdays, not far from where she grew up.

For Grisdale, the key to her successful career was moving into industry but she acknowledges that this is not for everyone. 'Some people don't want to take the risk,' she observes. But working in practice offers DOs many opportunities to diversify and use their skills and knowledge to the full.

'It's really what you make of it. If you think "it's just a nine to five thirty job" you may lose interest or not find the work challenging. There are a lot of people who don't use their skills in practice. Think outside the box and look for opportunities. And come up with new ideas for what you could provide in your practice.' She cites school vision screening as one area where DOs could have a greater role.

Grisdale also argues that gaining additional qualifications can allow DOs to expand the scope of their work and take on new responsibilities without moving out of practice. Becoming a contact lens optician is the most obvious route but ABDO also offers courses in low vision and in spectacle lens design. Training in optical management, refraction or converting to optometry are among other options.

Giving something back to the profession can be very rewarding too, says Grisdale. Delivering lectures or workshops, supervising or examining students, becoming an ambassador for the Careers in Optics programme and passing on the passion to future generations, getting involved in peer review or being active in local optical committees are just some of the ways to make a difference.

There are also opportunities to get involved in optical politics at a regional or national level. ABDO's 13 Areas around the country organise regular meetings that are social as well as educational. Area committees feed into national strategy via the ABDO board and the association is also

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Optometrist Nadeem Rob (pictured) qualified just a year ago but has already achieved more than many practitioners experience in a lifetime. He joined the profession as a mature student, with a first degree in medical science and a Masters in infectious diseases and virology. Deciding that full-time research was not for him, he looked around for a more clinically based role and alighted on optometry.

On graduating from City University at the age of 28, he was fortunate to secure a pre-reg post at Nottingham University Hospitals under consultant optometrist Professor Martin Rubinstein. 'I've never looked back since. Martin was a great mentor and huge inspiration to me,' says Rob. He found hospital optometry much more diverse than the high street, although he continues to locum twice a month at a Boots franchise near his south London home.

Rob now splits his week between Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey, where he works in paediatric, low vision, glaucoma and AMD clinics, and London's Moorfields Eye Hospital which is mainly refraction and low vision work. Frimley Park also offers the opportunity to get involved in research, including trials of anti-VEGF therapies. He recently returned from a major European meeting in Belgium where most of the ophthalmology research groups across Europe were represented, and next year hopes to present a poster at the ARVO meeting in Florida.

Outside the consulting room, Rob is the newly qualified representative



on the AOP Council, attending meetings three or four times a year. 'It's given me a good idea of how things work in optometry and I've even met the Health Minister,' he says. Presenting to students on hospital optometry at the National Student Eye Opener conference is another role he enjoys. Last year he wrote four journal articles aimed at pre-reg students advising on training and exams.

Since qualifying Rob has also used his skills to work overseas. With a group of friends from university, he set up a charity to provide eye health assessment and spectacles in rural India. During a visit in September the group examined more than 1,200 people and next year plans to extend the project to Bangladesh.

So having experienced one major change in direction, does Rob envisage staying in optometry for the rest of his working life? 'I very much doubt that I'll have another change of career,' he says. 'Optometrists are increasingly extending their roles so I think I'll stay in the hospital eye service for a while and may consider a role in NHS management, although I haven't ruled out opening my own business.' He also plans to add to his qualifications by becoming an independent prescriber and is investigating other courses, in glaucoma and AMD management.

For Rob, a career in optometry is an attractive prospect with an array of opportunities available. 'It's a nice balance between using your science background and ability to communicate while still having a life for yourself. There's always something around for you to achieve that balance.'

represented on working groups across the profession.

Going that extra mile

Karen Sparrow is another practitioner whose varied and rewarding career eventually led to a senior position at the top of her field. Spending her pre-registration year in a practice that was strong on training encouraged her, once qualified, to volunteer to coach support staff, running training sessions and writing 'top tips' sheets. From there, she was offered a regional training role before moving into practice management.

When Vision Express was expanding its operation in the UK, Sparrow was approached to join its flagship Lakeside store in Essex, where she later became manager and learnt about all aspects of practice management from personnel and recruitment to sales. Moving back into the consulting room she also spent time as a mobile optometrist, in practices stretching from East Anglia to Dorset, and as a research assistant at two London hospitals.

When a job came up as VE's professional services manager, she applied. Over 10 years, often working long hours and travelling all week, Sparrow was responsible for training



Karen Sparrow: keen fundraiser and volunteer for VAO

more than 400 pre-reg students. After 'a rollercoaster ride' in that role, she took a year out to travel and looked for other opportunities both within and outside optics. 'Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith,' she observes. 'And if you have a professional qualification you can always come back to it.'

Since then Sparrow has developed a portfolio career, working part time as education adviser to the Association of Optometrists and doing locum work. She is closely involved in Careers in Optics, delivering workshops at schools

around the country. Sparrow has also combined her training experience and love of travel with volunteering for Vision Aid Overseas, for whom she has just completed her sixth project.

Her advice to those seeking to extend their skills outside the consulting room is to 'go that extra mile' and offer to take on responsibilities that will not only make work more interesting but may lead to a job offer or promotion. 'Life can be a bit boring if you just sit in your room all day. There are all sorts of options out there and the more you make of them the more you get out of your work.'

Networking with other practitioners through local optical committees, regional College meetings and CET days can also pay dividends. 'The more people you meet the better. You never know when it might be useful in future,' says Sparrow. ●

Useful resources

Association of British Dispensing Opticians
www.abdo.org.uk

Association of Optometrists
www.aop.org.uk

College of Optometrists (Continuing Professional Development)

www.college-optometrists.org

The Vision Care Institute

www.thevisioncareinstitute.co.uk