

In the UK optical market, the phenomenon of Specsavers is so well-known that it can be easy to gloss over the remarkable way this company has expanded since being founded by Doug and Mary Perkins in 1984. From humble beginnings in the Perkins' spare room in Guernsey, Specsavers grabbed the opportunity presented by deregulation to sweep across Britain and, more latterly, beyond. Today the company has than 1,390 stores across the Channel Islands, UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Spain, Australia and New Zealand.

Specsavers began operations in Australia and New Zealand in 2008, opening the first stores in March of that year. 'Since then we have opened 219 new practices in Australia and 40 in New Zealand,' comments Peter Larsen, managing director of Specsavers Australia. 'This has effectively allowed us to become



Chance of a lifetime

the second largest group of optical practices in Australasia within two years.'

The high-street optical industry in Australia and New Zealand is less advanced than in the UK, meaning the Specsavers' partnership model has worked well in new stores while also proving attractive for practice owners to join. 'So far, competition levels have been lower than we experience in the UK, although this is changing of course, and volume levels are also generally lower,' says Larsen. 'It is really exciting to see the impact that the Specsavers approach is having on the market.'

While this rapid expansion continues, there are extensive opportunities for optical professionals in the UK to move out and pursue their careers in Australia and New Zealand with Specsavers. Positions are vacant in all areas of the profession and Larsen emphasises that those who can demonstrate 'solid experience in a modern, high volume optical retail environment' are particularly highly valued by the company for recruitment to Australia and New Zealand.

Clearly moving to the other side of the world is not to be taken lightly and Specsavers offers full assistance to those willing and able to take the opportunity of a new life.

Specsavers' optical revolution is sweeping across Australia and New Zealand. **Mike Hale** explains how optical professionals in the UK can join it



'Most of the barriers to working and living in Australia are in the mind,' comments Larsen. 'Certainly optometrists have to be aware of the need to be registered with OCANZ [the Optometry Council of Australia and New Zealand], and some individuals might encounter visa difficulties due to age or background, but in general moving to Australia or New Zealand is easier than most people think. The language is the same, the weather is generally better and it is only a plane ride away at the end of the day. For those individuals prepared to make the leap of faith, we will be

completely supportive and will provide comprehensive help and assistance in all key areas.'

To this end Specsavers has recently opened a new state-of-the-art Central Support office in Melbourne and now has 300 support staff working there all under one roof covering all the key functions of the company, including training. The company has also opened dedicated training centres in each of the states that it is operating in, with the aim of ensuring development opportunities are available to all staff working for the group.

Qualifications you will need

While Specsavers will do much to ease the professional transition from the UK to Australia or New Zealand, there are differences to be aware of. For a UK optometrist to practice in Australia, having first secured the appropriate visa, it is necessary to successfully complete the Optometry Council of Australia and New Zealand (OCANZ) competency based examination. This assessment is generally thought to be of a similar standard to the UK's

Professional Qualifying Examinations set by the College of Optometrists. The OCANZ website has full details of the examination process and includes examples of questions.

Once this barrier is out of the way, the Optometrists Association Australia (OAA) should be joined as it offers excellent support for the individual practitioner and the membership fee includes professional indemnity insurance. The OAA requires members to earn 80 continuing professional development (CPD) points over a two-year cycle. Regional conferences, held in most states, are the most popular way of gaining points and distance learning CPD is also available.

Dispensing opticians in Australia perform very similar roles to their UK counterparts and, while optical dispensing is not regulated in Australia, employers tend to favour qualified candidates. In fact holding qualifications from the UK is likely to prove highly advantageous in the Australian industry as there is currently a skill shortage in this area.

Dispensing opticians will need to adjust to Australian safety eyewear legislation and gain knowledge of the procedures for billing eye examinations to private health funds. This can be achieved through doing some background reading and learning on the job from experienced colleagues.

Beach life

Life in Australia is not quite the endless sequence of barbeques on the beach that many in the rain-swept UK like to think, but there is no doubt that moving to Australia or New Zealand offers a comparatively relaxed way of life. Australia's hotter and dryer climate lends itself to the outdoor life and sports (whether it is playing or watching) have a special place in the national consciousness. The much-heralded natural attractions of the country include beautiful beaches, the Great Barrier Reef and unique and iconic wildlife. New Zealand is famously home to some of the most breathtaking landscape on earth. Locating in either country can serve as an excellent base for exploring countries across Asia and the Pacific Islands.

Even if you do not care for sport and the outdoors, a move to Australia or New Zealand offers the chance to escape the overcooked UK housing market and buy property at more sustainable prices. Australia shares more than just a language with the UK, and many aspects of life there,



Specsavers has opened 219 new practices in Australia and 40 in New Zealand

including the banking and financial systems, are not significantly different from those in the UK. For those with children, the state education system is generally considered to be of a high standard but, like the UK, does vary considerably from school to school. While Australia does have a public health system, the government encourages individuals to take out private health insurance by offering tax incentives.

'In general the people who have moved out with Specsavers so far have found a different approach to life in Australia and New Zealand,' comments Larsen. 'Customers seem to be more affable and receptive and the pace of life is generally a little slower in most respects. I haven't heard of any of our partners missing the UK weather or traffic jams!'

Specsavers has come a long way since its inception; today it employs over 26,000 people worldwide, with over 500 in the Guernsey headquarters

USEFUL LINKS

- **General information on migrating to Australia and New Zealand:**
www.immi.gov.au/asri
www.immigration.govt.nz
- **Optometry Council of Australia and New Zealand:**
www.ocanz.org
- **Optometrists Association Australia:**
www.optometrists.asn.au/
- **Australian Dispensing Opticians Association:**
www.adoa.com.au/

alone, and according to Larsen this could be just the beginning.

'Specsavers future plans are to be number one in the market down under, with the obvious benefits to all our customers and partners,' he says. 'As far as other markets are concerned, our successes in Europe and Australia have led us to believe that there are many strong potential markets for Specsavers worldwide. Watch this space!' ●