

The future of the lens manufacturing industry was the focus of the recent symposium organised by the Ophthalmic Lens Manufacturers', Assemblers' and Distributors' Association. In a bid to attract more members from around the country, OLMADA – a division of the Federation of Manufacturing Opticians – hosted the symposium at the Trent Bridge Cricket Ground in Nottingham. The decision clearly paid off, with around 50 members making the journey, some from as far as Scotland. 'We are looking to rejuvenate OLMADA,' said chair **John Conway**. 'One point raised was that it would be appreciated by some if one of the three meetings a year could be held outside of London and have a different format. We responded to this and chose Trent Bridge. It was good to see so many members reacted positively to this.'

Investment in training

The event began with **David Walker** from the Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (SMC), who made an appeal for the industry to become more involved with the work of the company. 'The company needs representatives from this industry,' he said. 'We do have reasonably good representation but we are looking for some heavy hitters. We need to get new people coming through.'

The goal of the SMC, he said, was for 'everyone in optics to be well trained and to have the right knowledge and skills to meet customer needs'. The SMC provides Level 2 and 3 training in Optical Practice Support, Level 2 and 3 training in Optical Production Processes and Level 4 training for Optical Technicians. These courses, said Walker, were designed to match the industry's needs. He noted that the government was currently very much focused on education and training, and was funding hundreds of schemes around the country. There was no reason why the optical industry couldn't access a share of this.

'There is a lot of money going into training at the moment, and the leading industry bodies – for example the FMO, the SMC and the Association of Contact Lens Manufacturers – should consider joining forces to develop some sort of central training programme. If we all sat down and worked out a way, I believe we could secure government funding for it,' he said.

Up next was **Keith Sheers**, managing director of Optisoft, who

Batting for industry

The Ophthalmic Lens Manufacturers', Assemblers' and Distributors' Association recently hosted its third education symposium for the year. **Shannon McKenzie** reports



FMO chairman **Andrew Actman**, **Chris Hunt**, OLMADA chairman **John Conway**, Optisoft managing director **Keith Sheers**, **David Walker** from the SMC

stressed the need for labs to invest in the new EDI technology. EDI – electronic data interchange – allows practices to order lenses and contact lenses electronically via websites or PC-based software. Sheers estimated that only 10 per cent of the labs in the UK were EDI enabled, however he predicted this would soon change. 'The whole world is going digital, our industry is going digital and those who take this technology on board will be the ones that survive,' he said.

EDI has the capacity to significantly streamline the ordering process – and would do away with the 'annual nightmare' of product catalogues and their endless updates. EDI, Sheers noted, could facilitate electronic catalogues which could be updated automatically. There were many benefits to this technology.

'EDI can be used to process and track orders, it can be used to automatically replenish stock when it falls below a certain level and it can produce electronic statements and invoices,' Sheers said. EDI would also put an end to the duplication of work, where orders were often taken down and entered into two different systems. The banks of administration staff tasked with deciphering and checking handwritten orders could also be reduced. EDI would also make remote edging a more viable option.

'The current system is an expensive system. There is the cost of the staff, telephone calls and the mailing to and fro of frames. There can be a lot of mistakes in this process, as a result of human error. And this also means longer turnaround times,' Sheers explained. 'What will EDI give us? Orders will be entered and validated only once, administration costs will be cut for everybody and turnaround times will speed up.'

Sheers noted that while there had been initial problems with EDI systems in the beginning, these had been resolved. The next step in the evolution of the technology – linking practice management systems to EDI and then to labs – was only months away.

Labs of the future

The last presentation of the day was from consultant **Chris Hunt**, who gave his vision on the 'Lab of the future'. He predicted that remote edging would become more and more popular, and that automated equipment would become even more crucial. This was in part due to the acute shortage of skilled equipment operators. 'Glazing technicians are extremely rare these days, and there are no apprenticeship schemes for them within our industry,' he noted.

Labs of the future, he said, would also have to start considering their carbon footprint. Consumers were becoming more aware of the environment and would seriously question the practice of manufacturing a lens in cheap factories in the East, and then flying it halfway around the world. 'Many of them will see this as a practice which can not be justified,' he said.

The growing demand for free-form lenses would also change the way labs operated in the future. 'Free-form technology has brought a plethora of products to the market, and all the major companies have worked hard to find a way to make their product unique in the eyes of the consumer,' he said. 'The data for free-form lenses is easily transmittable and it means labs can decrease their inventory. These changes will come.' ●