

Free rein to ambition

Ask any female practitioner why she no longer works in practice and you are likely to hear that the endless opportunities elsewhere in the profession are just too tempting to resist.

'The key to an enjoyable career in optometry is variety,' says **Dr Christine Purslow**, senior lecturer and director of postgraduate taught courses for the Optometry and Vision Sciences department at Cardiff University. 'I am so thankful for working in optometry because of the flexibility and freedom to diversify,' she adds.

Of course, as with any profession, some women decide to leave practice altogether. The Women of Vision survey, carried out by *Optician* and CIBA Vision, found that around one in five female practitioners (18 per cent) intended to leave the profession altogether in the next five years.

Yet Purslow says there are plenty of reasons for women to stay, from setting up their own practice to studying for a PhD, from assisting final-year students at a university to supervising pre-registration students in practice.

'Optometry is a great career for wriggling around in, and it offers fresh

There are many enticing options open to female practitioners searching for a challenge beyond the duties of everyday practice. **Emma White** talks to five women about their rewarding career paths

challenges that other careers don't,' says Purslow. 'Some women work in practice for a few years and then change career completely because they feel stuck in a rut or they tire of the commercial pressures, but if you look for variety it is definitely out there.'

Teaching and academia

Surprisingly, Purslow started her own career working at John Lewis on the retail company's A level management training scheme, but a chance meeting with a trainee optometrist changed her track and she didn't look back.

'I had A levels in science and maths and I'd considered careers in physiotherapy and science, but I didn't like the idea of working in a laboratory, yet I did like the sound of optometry and at 19 years of age I dived into it,' she says.

With a first-class honours degree in ophthalmic optics from Aston University under her belt, Purslow secured one of just 40 pre-registration hospital places in the UK, which she

says gave her the opportunity to learn about a wider range of eye diseases than she ever would have seen in practice.

Over the next 10 years, Purslow split her time between working as a hospital optometrist, private practice optometrist and supervising students at Aston University as a clinical demonstrator – a sideline that later became her main focus.

'I was particularly drawn to teaching, perhaps because it was an extension of describing eye conditions to patients, but it felt like a greater challenge.'

After being awarded a PhD for her thesis on ocular thermography and completing a course in Teaching and Learning, which led to associate membership of the Higher Education Academy, Purslow took up a lectureship at Cardiff University.

In addition to lecturing and carrying out laboratory research on the effects of contact lens wear, cosmetics and ocular cross-infection, Purslow also tutors undergraduate students and regularly delivers CET presentations to

LENS DESIGN AND BRITISH STANDARDS

Alicia Thompson, director of professional examinations at the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO), took a rather different route away from practice and into teaching, which all began in the grimy environs of a prescription house manufacturing spectacles.

'As an apprentice optical technician at a very old-fashioned company back in 1987, the manager told me I'd never complete the course because I was a girl and that I might break a nail. That was like waving a red rag to a bull to me and I set about proving him wrong.

'It was a filthy job, grinding the lenses and at the end of each day I was covered from head to toe in grey polish, which was like sludge, but I had to prove to these men that I could do it. I even have the scars to prove it,' she says.

Undeterred by this less than glamorous entry into the optical industry, Thompson had the opportunity to split her time in the



prescription house as a technician, and in practice training on an FBDO distance learning course at Anglia Ruskin University.

She spent the final year of her dispensing course as practice branch manager and got involved with helping optometrists to pass the dispensing part of their exams. This led to a formal position at Aston University teaching optometrists how to run a clinic, where she remained for the next 11 years.

Thompson describes herself as a 'bit of an anorak when it comes to lens calculations', which inspired her to complete an honours degree in spectacle lens design on

an ABDO distance learning course and her interest in research led to a BSc in ophthalmic dispensing.

From here she secured her current role as director of examinations at ABDO College, with responsibility for the syllabus covering dispensing, contact lenses, low vision and spectacle lens design.

'The variety of my job is immense,' she says. 'We currently examine for seven weeks a year in the UK and due to international demand for ABDO's qualifications I am lucky to have travelled to Malaysia, Singapore, India, Europe, Canada and many more.'

Thompson finds the time to get involved with optical bodies, including the General Optical Council and British Standards. She also sits on the Optical Consumer Complaints Service management team.

'The optical profession offers fantastic careers for women as there is so much choice and it is definitely conducive to family life and children - I've had two and I started a course two weeks after the birth of the first,' she says.

optometrists and contact lens clinicians.

As a mother, Purslow understands the demands of balancing family life with a career but says that the flexibility of working in optometry enabled her to go down to three days a week while her children were young.

'I was also fortunate that my husband and I both had jobs with flexible working hours to share the child care, but now that my children are teenagers I am free to work entirely in academia,' she says.

As the director of the new postgraduate taught programmes at Cardiff, Purslow has ensured the inclusion of a 'back to work' module in the portfolio, that is available to all, but perhaps of special interest to those who have had a career break for family reasons.

Cardiff University's Optometry and Vision Sciences department has received a 'silver' rating from the Athena Swan Charter in recognition of its advancement of the careers of women working in science, engineering and technology in higher education and research.

Purslow also appreciates the Women in Universities Mentoring Scheme, which promotes professional development for women working in Welsh Universities by setting up inter-university mentoring partnerships.

'I have a senior mentor who advises me on how to work well in what is a traditionally male-dominated environment. It's a bit like having a pen pal except we meet up and talk,' she says.

Research and optical bodies

Like Purslow, **Dr Catharine Chisholm**, a lecturer at the Bradford School of Optometry and Vision Science, moved away from everyday practice to split her time between teaching, laboratory research and



Christine Purslow: drawn to teaching

supporting optical bodies and associations. Much of her research has an occupational vision theme and over the years, she has studied everything from the implications of refractive surgery for commercial airline pilots, to colour vision standards for railways and the effects of visual field loss on driving safety.

Chisholm has also been heavily involved for the past eight years with the Council of the British Contact Lens Association (BCLA) and is currently president elect. She supports the various education events it runs, including the annual clinical conference and she will give her presidential address next year, after which she will tour around the country.

While working in practice, Chisholm says she always felt more suited to clinical work, particularly the more medical side and she preferred working in an environment that charged a higher rate for clinical services rather than the commercial model.

'Working in practice can be repetitive and you often have to work at the weekend, but you can at least switch off at the end of the day and go home,' she says. 'There's a huge range of opportunities in academia and you occasionally get to travel to a conference in a nice location, although the job is never finished.'



Catharine Chisholm: felt more suited to the clinical services side of the profession

Somehow, within her hectic schedule, Chisholm also manages to raise two young children. When she gave birth to her first son in 2005, she was working as a lecturer at City University, but her husband's job was moved to Yorkshire and she was fortunate to find a part-time teaching job at Bradford University. Here she currently works three days a week – 'in between running from toddler activities to collect her second child and returning to my desk after their bedtimes'.

Ironically, after shying away from the commercial side of practice, Chisholm is now involved in marketing within the school, transferring knowledge from academia to business and increasing awareness of clinical services through leaflets, information events and website articles.

'I'm really enjoying developing a new string to my bow but I like to keep my hand in clinically by remaining involved with the university eye clinic,' she adds.

Industry attractions

Dimple Shah, professional services marketing manager for CIBA Vision, worked in multiple and independent practices for more than a decade before acting on her desire to study for an MBA at the Sir John Cass Business School at City University.

PERFECT 3D VISION.
polaroideyewear.com/3D

N8117A • WRAP

N8119A BLACK • OVERSPEC

FOR KIDS!

The Norville Group Limited, Magdala Road, Gloucester GL1 4DG Tel: 01452 510321 Fax: 01452 510331 Email: sales@norville.co.uk
Polaroid and Polaroid 3D are trademarks of P.L.R. IP Holdings, LLC, used under license.

Women of Vision

'I knew I wanted to build on my career as an optometrist from the outset, I like diversity and change and it was only a matter of time before I followed my desire to broaden my scope of professional experience to include business as well as clinical optometry,' she says.

Shah completed her MBA in a 'fascinating training environment', surrounded by professionals from all kinds of other industries ranging from pharmaceutical and engineering to the financial sector.

She worked at Boots Opticians as a practice manager. Soon after she leapt at the chance of applying for a professional marketing role at CIBA Vision. 'The job felt just right for me, providing the perfect combination of leveraging my experience in practice with what I'd learned at business school.'

'Today I do everything from delivering and designing business training modules for optometrists to helping to grow the contact lens market. Every day is a challenge and every day is different, which is just what I thrive on.'

Dispensing optician **Elaine Grisdale**, head of professional services and international development at ABDO, worked as a practice manager for just six months before choosing to enter an industry career.

'I recognised that it was a brilliant job for women and I always admired the medical, technical, business and fashion-focused aspects of working in practice, the regular working hours and the interaction with the general public, but I always somehow felt that my wings were clipped as there is only so far you can go in practice,' she says.

Grisdale was impressed by a lens consultant from Essilor who came to the practice to advise patients about their lenses and after attending some



Dimple Shah: lectures to find out more she applied for a job. Places were tight as there were only three lens consultants in the UK and no lens sales forces in 1985.

lectures to find out more she applied for a job. Places were tight as there were only three lens consultants in the UK and no lens sales forces in 1985.

She was initially rejected by an employee at Essilor who said working as a lens consultant 'was not a job for a woman', but after being called back following a change in management she went on to scoop the 'sales person of the year' award for the north of England and Northern Ireland. 'When someone says you can't do something it makes you dig in your heels and want to do it even more,' she says.

Soon after, she was headhunted by Essilor to work in the Paris head office, an opportunity she eagerly accepted to 'expand and explore new horizons'.

For more than a decade, Grisdale worked overseas in France and other European and English-speaking countries, including six months training and product launching in South Africa to persuade a local Essilor distributor to stay and set up a sales force.

'It was me, my Fiat Panda, a list of opticians and no air-conditioning. Mandela was still in jail and I lived in a risky area of Johannesburg with cockroaches and the sound of gunshots at night and yet I cried when I left as the people were such a joy,' she says.

Grisdale moved on to product development and she played a pivotal role in the set up and running of



Elaine Grisdale: learned so much by working in industry

Essilor's Varilux University in Paris.

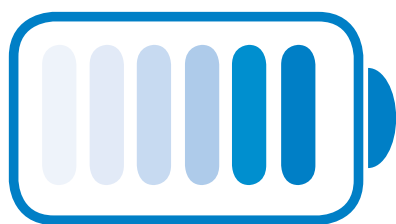
When Grisdale married and started a family in Paris, Essilor was enormously supportive, allowing her extra time to fly via Manchester so that her mother could care for her child and even paid for the extra air ticket.

'I spent half my time travelling with Essilor and went back to work when my daughter was six weeks old. Needless to say, I had a great nanny, but I did sometimes take her with me on trips away,' she says.

Grisdale returned to practice in the UK for three years from 2001 after her father died – a time she describes as a 'massive culture' shock. Then she joined the sales and marketing team of BBGR, a subsidiary of Essilor, where she 'felt much more at home'.

In her current role as head of professional services and international development at ABDO, Grisdale oversees CET, gets involved with professional conduct advice, coordinates ABDO activities in Asia and Europe, represents the association on various multi-disciplinary committees and runs the annual ABDO conference.

'I've done so much more and learned so much by working in industry,' she concludes. 'As a result of living in Paris, I can deliver lectures in fluent French and I even have a fellowship of the American Academy of Optometry.' ●



Still paying cash for your tax bill?

Recharge your Cash Flow with LDF Tax Funding

In the current financial climate making the most of your cash flow is nothing short of essential, but with bank lending approvals at an all time low and access to the HMRC's 'Time to pay' facility becoming increasingly scarce, many are now under pressure to evaluate their practice resources in order to achieve better cash flow management.

At LDF Professions, we have access to the most comprehensive network of funding solutions available and have set aside funding specifically for Tax, with additional facilities also available for Asset Finance and VAT.

The July 31st tax deadline is just around the corner, why utilise existing cash flow reserves or expensive overdraft and card facilities, when you can finance this annual liability and spread the cost of tax over 6, 10 or 12 months.

Recharge your cash flow with LDF Professions, contact us today on:

01244 527300

info@ldf.co.uk | www.ldf.co.uk/go/taxapply



Scan here to apply online

LDF Professions is a trading name of Leasedirect Finance Limited, part of the Investec group of companies | Est 1986 | Registered address: 2 Gresham Street, London EC2V 7QP | Registered in England & Wales

LDF
Professions

Optician 07/11