



Optometrist of the Year

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Alex Thomas visits Aine Higgins, Optometrist of the Year, in the West of Ireland and hears about her efforts to extend the scope of practice

A prolific and persistent campaigner determined to develop the scope of practice for optometry in her region; Aine Higgins' achievements were recognised with the award of Optometrist of the Year 2010.

Blushing when questioned if she wants to help positively change the optometric profession in the Republic of Ireland, she reveals that her colleagues and fellow professionals did amicably tease her about her campaigning. 'They're always joking with me, saying what are you trying to change now,' she says.

Higgins explains she was shocked to win, given how developed the profession is in the UK in comparison to the Republic of Ireland. 'We've no shared care schemes, we've no paediatric schemes, there's no such thing as a hospital optometrist, it's all very ophthalmology led,' she explains. Outlining her hopes for optometry in the country she says: 'I'd love optometrists in Ireland to have more of a role. Irish optometrists are highly skilled clinicians and they should be utilised in hospitals.'

While working as an optometrist in Northern Ireland and in the UK, Higgins says that she took part in various optometry-led referral systems which she felt could be replicated in the Republic of Ireland. In 2005 she took over Mongey Opticians with her partner and fellow optometrist, Damien Brehony, in Castlebar in the West of Ireland. Practising in a rural area of the country, with the closest ophthalmology clinic in Galway, a two-hour drive away, she realised attending appointments could be quite an ordeal for some patients, while waiting times were long. 'Waiting times were ridiculous; people were waiting 18 months for a simple cataract operation,' she says.

However, it was clear that emailing fundus photography allowed the ophthalmology clinic to assess the urgency of referrals and in some cases eliminate unnecessary referrals. She says that the positive impact on the waiting times mean that this system has been adopted by the majority of



Aine Higgins: improving the patient experience

local practices. Her previous experience in a red eye shared care scheme in Northern Ireland proved invaluable in setting up her scheme and many elderly patients with minor conditions were managed on a local level in practice. Higgins also highlights other areas of eye care in Ireland in which she feels optometrists can help make a difference: 'Children under eight are waiting up to 18 months for an appointment, if optometrists were involved the waiting time could be significantly reduced.'

Higgins has also been running a private diabetic shared-care scheme with the local private ophthalmologist and says the Association of Optometrists Ireland will now take on its own shared care scheme. 'It's exciting going ahead with the scheme in the hope of being able to present positive results to the Irish government in a few years. It's all about getting people on board,' she explains.

She adds that the publicity she has received in becoming Optometrist of the Year has been hugely beneficial to her ambitions to improve services

for patients in her area. 'The local public ophthalmologist rang me to congratulate me about it, and we are hoping to set up a paediatric screening programme here,' she says.

Attempting to provide the best possible treatment and the best services to all her patients has also seen the adoption of a 45-minute eye examination in Mongey Opticians, one of the first changes she implemented at the practice. 'I'm a little pedantic and like the extra time the 45 minute sight test affords you. Unlike many practices we do not have a separate pre-test and test procedure. All patients have fundus photography and fields as standard. While this may appear less productive, we feel it allows us to gain a better perspective of the patient and it definitely does help with the examination and the subsequent dispensing,' she explains.

Much of Higgins' work and campaigning is clearly done through a love of the profession, with no commercial benefit. Her time spent with the Special Olympics is one such example, however she doesn't wish to discuss her involvement, explaining that the ethical code of the Special Olympics is that those involved do not use their participation to promote their business. She does however wholeheartedly encourage other practitioners to become involved with the project.

As well as writing a newspaper column about eye health issues, answering readers' concerns, Higgins also conducts talks at local schools and retirement groups, while participating in health and safety days at local factories. She and Brehony have also been quick to embrace social networking, finding Facebook and Twitter useful tools for communicating with their younger patients.

Higgins was disappointed not to be present at the 2010 *Optician* Awards to hear that she'd won, as although she was due to attend, she was forced to remain at home due to the volcanic ash cloud. She also insists that the award does not simply reflect her own work, but that of Brehony and the practice's other staff who together strove to improve the patient experience from first contact onwards. ●

OPTOMETRIST OF THE YEAR

● **Winner** Aine Higgins, Mongey Opticians

● Shortlisted

Stuart Humfrey, Williams Optometrists
David Corry, Corry & Christie Optometrists
Colin Moulson, Black & Lizars Opticians
Alisdair Buchanan, Buchanan Optometrists