

Thirty years ago this summer, David Bowie topped the charts with *Ashes to Ashes*, Borg beat McEnroe in the Wimbledon men's final and Ronald Reagan would soon become US President. More momentous still, the Glasgow College of Technology class of 1980 was about to be unleashed on the ophthalmic optical profession.

Thirty-three students eager to join the register graduated that year from Glasgow and 20 of them met again last month to celebrate their 30-year reunion, at the inaugural Optometry Reunited event.

Hosted by The Vision Care Institute of Johnson & Johnson Medical, the two-day meeting was the first event to a new format that brings together classmates from student days for a combined reunion and CET programme, provided free of charge by the Institute.

For the former Glasgow students, the chance to catch up with old friends was an opportunity not to be missed, while TVCI was able to share its state-of-the-art facilities with a group of optometrists with varied skills and interests from work settings of all types. After the event, participants could then access class-specific notes on the Institute's website, join an online forum and continue their learning with virtual lectures and research news.

TVCI Faculty member Peter Ivins, a Glasgow graduate from 1980, was the mastermind behind the event and master of ceremonies for what turned out to be a very enjoyable and relaxed two days.

Catching up

Most delegates arrived in Berkshire the previous night and met up at their hotel, close to J&J's Pinewood campus. For some, it was the first meeting in 30 years while others were still in regular touch. Like any reunion, there was a great deal of catching up to do so the classmates spent the morning of the first day describing their careers since qualifying, as each presented a potted personal history of the past three decades.

It was a fascinating and sometimes moving session. Success in business and personal achievements were set against life-changing experiences, many positive but some not so welcome. A high proportion of the classmates were still living



Optometry reunited

Take 20 students from the Glasgow College class of 1980 and turn the clock forward 30 years. The result was an unusual mix of nostalgia and education, as Alison Ewbank reports

and working in Scotland, where recognition and remuneration for optometry was the envy of those based south of the border. Others had settled further afield and several had spent some of their working lives overseas.

Although there were the usual frustrations with patients (the 'pain and pleasure' of being in practice) and with the profession in general, many still had a passion for the job and few, if any, voiced regrets about their chosen career. Several had children who had followed them into the profession. It was noticeable that many of the group were active,

either at a local or national level, in representing their peers and gave up their time to try to bring about change.

While some in the profession may bemoan the lack of career progression and opportunities for optometrists, it was impressive to hear the wide range of interests and experience among the group. Many of the classmates had opened several practices and regrettably there were some that had closed. Those working as employed optometrists and locums saw the positive side to their working practices. Others had worked in hospital eye departments, industry and in the prison service, to bring interest and variety to the job.

Equally revealing were the stories of those who were absent. Several had left the profession and only four of the eight women who graduated that year attended. One remained at home while her husband attended the meeting and another would have come along but had only recently given birth for the first time, to twins!

Three things...

Leading skilfully into the educational element of the meeting, Ivins posed two questions to set the scene: 'What are the three things you know now



Time to catch up on the past three decades

about contact lenses you wish you'd known 30 years ago?' and 'What three things drive you nuts about contact lenses?'

Answers to the first question were mostly how easy contact lenses were to fit and how successful they could be – not surprising given that in 1980 thick HEMA lenses lasting up to two years or more were considered the norm and disposable lenses were yet to be invented. Common responses to the second question, alongside the usual comments about sales reps and marketing hype, were frustration with patients' lack of compliance and failure to listen, and a desire for better astigmatic and presbyopic designs, lens materials and, in particular, solutions.

Coming from a generation used to fitting rigid lenses and changing parameters around, several delegates cited not being able to get the particular power or fit of lens the patient needed, as a source of irritation. There was concern that the drop-out rate from contact lens wear had still not been reduced. Contact lens sales lost to the internet were also a common complaint, although not everyone saw online supply as a threat.

Hands-on experience

It was no coincidence that the remainder of the day, and the second day of the meeting, went on to examine some of these issues in depth. Communication skills and contact lens-eye interaction were good choices for the opening session as TVCI Faculty members joined Ivins to provide small-group teaching and hands-on experience in the Institute's six examination suites.

Although learning alongside their



Class of 1980: Many of the classmates are still living and working in Scotland

classmates may have recalled clinics at Glasgow College 30 years ago, the resemblance stopped there as they made good use of the Institute's high-tech equipment and video facilities.

There was more reminiscing that evening over an 1980s-themed dinner where the surprise guest was Dr Ronnie Stevenson, contact lens lecturer at Glasgow at that time, and more impromptu speeches before classmates headed for the bar.

No doubt there were a few sore heads for the start of the second day's proceedings as attention turned to ocular physiology and lens fitting, again with a strong interactive and hands-on element. 'A healthy approach to contact lenses' and 'Modern designs in astigmatism and

presbyopia' were the topics covered.

For the final session, TVCI's Ian Davies presented some of the contact lens developments in prospect for the near future, including new designs and materials that might eventually lead to the ultimate contact lens, a fitting end to two days that had been as concerned with moving forward as looking back.

The familiarity of the group and free exchange of ideas was the crucial element in the success of a meeting where peer-to-peer interaction was key. Gavin Galloway, who practises in his home town in Fife, summed up the feelings of many of those present: 'It was nice seeing everyone again and easy to fall back into friendships. I get nervous at similar things sometimes but it's easier in front of my former classmates.'

Galloway had already visited the Institute and appreciated the learning format and facilities it provides: 'You learn something new every time you come that you can put into practice the next day. The clinics are very well equipped and there are nice small groups to work in: you learn so much more with the interactive element. The technology at TVCI is fantastic, too, and gives you something to take back to your colleagues.'

If you would like to arrange a similar Optometry Reunited meeting at The Vision Care Institute please contact Rebecca Ward at rward1@its.jnj.com or 01344 864000. The first meeting was approved for six CET points and some travel and accommodation costs were met by TVCI



The CET programme was provided by The Vision Care Institute