

Go west, young optom!

For aspiring optometrists and dispensing opticians qualifying is only the start of their lives in optics. Once they have negotiated four years of undergraduate study, a further year pre-registration, passed countless exams and most likely incurred crippling loans, the next step is to successfully apply for a job – and anyone thinking this is the easy part is behind the times. With eight universities in the UK offering degrees in optometry, entrants to the profession are predominantly based around these seats of learning and the competition is tough.

'Supply and demand of optometrists is polarised around the centres of education like London, Birmingham and Northern Ireland, where there are lots of people chasing the jobs,' notes Richard Edwards, head of professional resources and development at Boots Opticians. 'The situation has become more extreme in recent years with other areas of the UK, including the West Country, left short of applicants.'

Rules of attraction

So what can be done to attract people to this region? 'Recruiting candidates for vacancies in the West Country is constantly a challenge, the locations are isolated, meaning relocation for the majority, often without the temptation of a relocation package or a significantly higher salary,' comments Richard Lonsdale, managing director of the Open Recruitment Group. 'When we analyse geographically the optical placements we have made this year less than 5 per cent of our business has been made up of West Country locations. Clients need to be more creative in offering bespoke packages to attract candidates to these difficult to fill locations. Standard packages just don't cut it.'

This challenge is increasingly being met by companies keen to stress both the career benefits and quality of life on offer in the West Country. 'The first benefit of relocating to the area is the financial packages available,' says Edwards. 'There is a relative shortage of staff in the area so this is reflected in earnings due to inequity of supply and demand. We [Boots Opticians] invest



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Mike Hale examines the optical opportunities and life benefits offered by locating to the West Country

a great deal in order to attract quality staff to our practices in the area.

'The other main benefit is that career progression is faster: in an area with less competition you can gain promotions easier and also the financial benefits of promotion outweigh those offered in London. We are committed to increasing the proportion of our practices managed by optical professionals. So again, if you work in a region like the West Country, the opportunity to step into management can come much sooner. This, of course, increases remuneration but also offers greater satisfaction and potential autonomy for ambitious people looking to control every aspect of a practice.'

Moving doubts

Despite the financial attractions of relocation, for some the prospect of it is still off-putting. 'The key difficulty for recruiting people to the West Country is that the dominant demographic of young Asian women coming into optics at the moment is unwilling to

locate away from their families,' says Patrick Jones, managing director of Jones Optical recruitment service.

'However, there are schemes on offer, such as giving employees weekends off, that make relocation a possibility for everyone. Eventually something has to give because people need jobs and not everyone can work in north London. Optometry is often seen as a profession where there is good career progression to a high wage but this is not necessarily the case any longer. A move to an area like the West Country can lead to a better career path. If you are willing to go out there and stay you can get ahead and increase your salary much more rapidly.'

Jones also feels the prospect of management experience is attractive to people looking to run or own a practice. 'Lots of people going into optics see owning their own practice as the ultimate goal. In the West Country the chances of taking on responsibility earlier are good and staff are more likely to gain the skills that will eventu-

Recruitment

ally enable them to run an effective practice.'

People attracted at the prospect of an improved career path but put off by the stereotype of the West Country being cut off and devoid of significant culture and nightlife should consider a move to Bristol. Residents enjoy the benefits of living in a cultural centre, including one of the most vibrant music scenes in the UK, without the hassles and oppression sometimes associated with larger cities like London and Manchester. The cost of living compared to these cities is also very favourable, with house prices much lower too.

According to the latest figures from the Land Registry of England and Wales for the period January-March 2008, the average cost of a house in the West Country is £225,348. This compares to £358,500 in London and represents improved conditions for first time buyers or the potential of trading a flat in London for a more extensive property in the West Country. Of the towns and cities, Plymouth, with an average house price of £163,174, is the most affordable, with Bristol (£203,958) also much cheaper than Bath, which is the most expensive part of the region with an average price of £274,573.

So who would be best suited for a move to the West Country? 'To my mind there are two main potential groups of optical professionals that are particularly suited to being recruited to the West Country,' says Edwards.

'The first is recently qualified people or those still in the early stages of their career as the opportunities are excellent for achieving a good work/life balance and outdoor activities like surfing are to hand. The second demographic is people approaching the end of their careers. Devon and Cornwall, in particular, are very popular as retirement locations and people may want to consider moving to the region 10-15 years ahead of retirement to establish a retirement home and use the extra money they earn to fund their retirement.'

Natural beauty

The West Country contains numerous areas of outstanding natural beauty, many of which are accessible via the South West Coast Path. A firm favourite with walkers, this spans 630 miles of coastline between Poole Harbour in Dorset to Minehead on the edge of Exmoor National Park. Further to the east is the Jurassic Coast, which was the first area in England

The West Country has more than its fair share of areas of natural beauty



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to be designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). This status was achieved primarily because the coastline uniquely serves as a walk through the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous geologic periods with the rocks recording 185 million years of the Earth's history. Other places of interest include Bodmin Moor, Stonehenge and Dartmoor.

Max Halford, practice manager of Boots Opticians in Plymouth, moved to the West Country 13 years ago and was impressed by the beauty of the area. 'Thirteen years ago I was offered a position as a trainee DO with Dollond & Aitchison and they asked me to list my top three preferences for where I wanted to work. I actually put London down as my number one but, thankfully, I ended up at my second choice of the South West. That was the best thing that ever happened to me. The quality of life here is amazing – there are beaches on the doorstep.'

Plymouth is currently enjoying a

massive influx of money with both dentistry and medical schools recently locating there. 'House prices are very reasonable with respect to other areas of the UK and there are nice places like Yelverton within commutable distance,' says Halford. 'As a location it also offers good access to the Continent through France.'

'From a professional point of view the PCTs here are very forward thinking; we are involved with screening at the specialist local eye hospital and there are lots of cross referrals. The population is very diverse and you experience a wide range of patients. Professionally there really is the opportunity to follow your interests and broaden your horizons very quickly.'

Overall, Halford stresses the sheer enjoyment of life is the greatest benefit of the region. 'It really is all about the superior work/life balance because everything is compact and convenient. The standard of life is very high and the money you can earn in optics goes a long way down here as the cost of living is reasonable'. ●