

# Returning to practice

**W**omen are significantly more likely than men to take a temporary break from their career (11 per cent vs 5 per cent). This was one of the findings from the recent Women of Vision survey, jointly conducted by *Optician* and CIBA Vision. It is probably not unsurprising given that the survey also revealed that childcare responsibilities tend to fall to women, the most common reason for taking a career break.

In the wider workforce, women today are better educated and have higher career expectations than previous generations. They often delay having children in order to sustain a full-time career and want to return to work post-motherhood, often with a significant number of years of previous professional experience.

But returning to work can be problematic. At a recent Women of Vision dinner, hosted by CIBA Vision, Rosie Gavzey, an optometric adviser and former chairman of the Association of Optometrists (AOP) highlighted the current uncoordinated support for optometrists and dispensing opticians returning to work. Her comments prompted strong feelings from the group about the need for a robust support system to be put in place. If you consider that women dominate the profession,<sup>1</sup> this lack of organised support for returners



Continuing our series on issues for women in the profession, **Bernie Ursell** looks at support for women returners

could impact negatively on staffing levels and recruitment.

Karen Sparrow, AOP education adviser, believes more needs to be done to support women returning to work after a career break. She describes this group of female practitioners as 'the hidden group'. 'Mums coming back to work are one of the most cautious groups of

optometrists and therefore are likely to be safe. They are unlikely to put patients at risk or take on cases if they're unsure. But they tend to have very low confidence levels and the process of getting back on the register can seem daunting, especially when there's no specific point of contact to approach to get the help they need,' she commented.

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So what is the current situation with regard to help for returners? What help is available and how can women wanting to return to work access this?

The AOP is often the starting point for many optometric returners. Karen Sparrow explains: 'We tend to get phone calls from members asking where they can acquire the skills needed to return. While the advice on how to get back on the GOC register is clear, there is little information about getting back on a primary care trust performance list, for example, often the trickiest thing to deal with. It can seem very daunting to returners who already have low confidence levels. Keeping up to date with changes in the NHS is intimidating enough for those currently in practice, let alone a practitioner who has been out of the profession for a couple of years.'

Part of Sparrow's role is to support returners which she does by providing information about relevant training courses and helping practitioners gain practical clinical experience through mentoring schemes, which help to boost confidence. Sparrow has worked closely with around 20 women wanting to return to work over the past few years so has seen first hand how difficult it can be.

## Coordinated approach

The AOP is looking to develop a more coordinated approach to support returners but, for now, as well as the role Sparrow offers, it has developed a PDF document which can be found under the student tab of its website that takes practitioners through the key steps of getting back into practice.

The first step, advises Sparrow, is to check if you are still on your local PCT list. Each PCT is different and requires different documentation so the AOP advises finding out exactly what your individual PCT requires. However, getting up-to-date competency documentation can be difficult if you have not worked for 12 months or more.

This is where Sparrow's mentoring scheme is extremely useful. She has organised many mentoring sessions for women who need to hone their skills in a supportive environment. 'Sometimes practitioners are so under-confident they simply want to watch the optometrist for a few sessions before attempting an examination themselves,' explained Sparrow. 'When put into the right environment, skills and confidence come back very quickly,

## PRACTITIONER'S COMMENTS

**Optometrist Susie Hill is currently preparing to return to work following a break in her career. Hill's situation is unusual in that she took career breaks when her family moved abroad with her husband's job. The family have moved three times, returning to the UK in between postings during which time she went back to work. With each career break Hill was extremely conscientious about remaining on the GOC register by reading journals, attending training courses and roadshows to ensure that she collected the appropriate number of CET points. She has also been kept on her local PCT list.**

**Hill and her family are now back in the UK for good and her children are older teenagers so the timing is right to focus on her career. Although she was up to date clinically, Hill felt she wanted a confidence boost before going back to work. She heard about The Vision Care Institute return to work course last year and attended the first one.**

'There were only 14 people in my group, which was the perfect number. The sessions were designed to encourage discussion and the lecturers were happy to deviate from the set topic to address our specific needs. The fact that the course was residential was invaluable. The group spent a lot of time in the evening sharing experiences and boosting each other's confidence.

'Although the number of training courses increased significantly with the introduction of compulsory CET, there are still not enough courses that focus on practical skills for returners. I think the more proactive you are about searching out the best courses for you the more you will get out of them. Having always kept up to date and having attended the course, I feel more than ready to get back into the workforce.'

allowing practitioners to obtain the documentation they need to get back on their PCT's list and back into work.' The AOP legal department helps practitioners with more protracted PCT cases.

If you have come off the GOC register then the next step is to get the 12 CET points necessary for re-registration. If your GOC number is not current, you can register with [www.cetoptics.com](http://www.cetoptics.com) to get a Vantage number. There are many institutions and companies offering free and paid for CET training.

The AOP is not the only organisation offering help and support. The Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO) has produced an excellent package for returners to help practitioners wade through the myriad of CET offerings, as well as providing guidance on managing CET points. The pack can be bought from the association for £7.50 and is called 'Into practice: a guide to those returning to or starting in the profession'. It includes a clinical article, which offers three CET points to help practitioners get started.

The pack includes advice on knowing your rights with regard to maternity leave and pay so is perhaps something female practitioners should be using prior to a maternity break. GOC member James Russell explains how to get the best out of acquiring CET points and how to make it fun! Suggestions include sharing a bottle of wine and going to live CET events as

opposed to doing it exclusively online. Getting out and meeting colleagues is both stimulating and builds confidence.

ABDO provides CET articles accessed via its website ([www.abdo.org.uk](http://www.abdo.org.uk)) and regularly holds local CET events which are often free to members. The ABDO guide also includes a step-by-step guide to setting up and managing your cetoptics registration.

There are many other places where practitioners can obtain free CET. The journals are an excellent source, providing topical modules written by experts.

## Specialist provision

Specialist CET providers are another source of training. Companies such as Replay Learning, Clearview Training, Innovative Optical Training and the Institute of Optometry are specialists in developing and delivering CET training programmes. All four have been set up by eye care professionals and charge a fee for attendance. They tend not to cover product-related topics but focus on practical skills and examination techniques. Replay Learning is among several providers offering virtual lectures online.

All of the key pharmaceutical companies offer CET training events in the form of roadshows and specific training courses designed to update clinical knowledge and skills. These attract CET points and are excellent for updating product knowledge and practical skills.

For some women returning to work

following childbirth, travel to training courses can be a constraint. The CIBA Vision Practice Academy provides CET-approved training and coaching delivered in the practice. The training, which is free of charge, can be tailored to individual needs and is therefore ideal for women who have just returned to work and need to update their clinical skills and product knowledge.

The Vision Care Institute also offers a free of charge, dedicated returners' course entitled Returning to Work – Confident and Refreshed. Worth 18 CET points this is a two-day, residential course designed to boost confidence and acquire hands-on skills. The institute uses practitioners who have had a career break themselves to deliver the lectures.

The course covers practical skills such as slit-lamp examination and confidence in fitting contact lenses as well as techniques such as Goldmann tonometry and indirect ophthalmoscopy. Attendees are also brought up to date on regulatory and legal changes. The course aims to help improve practitioners' confidence and does this by working on communication skills, both with patients and other staff.

CIBA Vision will be launching a bespoke return to work programme this summer. The course has been developed by practitioners with the emphasis on interaction and hands-on experience. What will be different about this course is the pre-course questionnaire which will be used to tailor the training to the specific needs of the participants. All attendees will be followed up at one and six months after the event. By monitoring the confidence levels of attendees the company hopes to be able to offer further educational events to ensure practitioners' confidence and knowledge remain high.

Wales Optometry Postgraduate Education Centre (WOPEC) is another useful source of skills training. Later this year the School of Optometry and Vision Sciences at Cardiff University will launch a Primary Care Optometry Update course (the format will be two part to include intensive practical training). The course forms part of a new flexible learning programme for postgraduate optometrists. The modules are specifically designed to bring an optometrist up to date on the latest clinical techniques, evidence-

based practice and legislative changes relevant to modern optometry,' explained course organiser Dr Christine Purslow.

While there are many resources available to returners there is no one place to access these; practitioners don't know where to start once the decision to return to work has been made. The CIBA Vision Women of Vision project was designed to increase awareness of challenges like these and support projects like its return to work course, to minimise these challenges. The AOP is also in the process of working hard to improve the situation for women returners. There is some way to go but with women increasingly dominating the profession the future looks bright. ●

#### References

1 General Ophthalmic Services workforce statistics for England and Wales, 2009. Published May 2010.

● **Bernie Ursell** is a medical writer and public relations officer. CIBA Vision's return to work courses will run at venues around the UK throughout 2011, starting on June 29 at Aston University

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