

# Ways to go for women

It's an old cliché that there's more to optometry and optics than meets the eye, especially when it comes to exploring career choices. Combining different types of practice can provide variety to the working week and enhance job satisfaction.

'I had about 10 years in a dark room,' says independent optometrist Rosie Gavzey, 'and decided I couldn't do this for the rest of my life. So I applied for one of the first optometric adviser's posts in the NHS.' Since that step-change in the 1990s, Gavzey has combined practice work with other posts to build a portfolio working life – it's a mix and match approach that should appeal to many female optometrists, especially if they want to help others.

Another option is supervising a pre-registration student which offers practitioners the chance to expand their horizons beyond everyday practice. Gavzey comments: 'If you've been on the clinical side, are a good clinician and know what you're doing, you can look at being a pre-registration supervisor. It's a way into a lot of other things. Supervisors can do a lot of lecturing part time, for example at the universities that offer optometry.'

Pre-reg supervisors get a grant that is now £3,166 a year from the Department of Health which they claim via the primary care trust through which they work. In some practices the grant will go towards the pre-registration student's salary. In the multiples, payments to supervisors vary and some companies pay an honorarium.

Importantly for women, the supervisory role can be covered by two people. This gives scope for part-time optometrists to take one up. The same applies to DO supervision, although no grant is available. Under the Association of British Dispensing Opticians' pre-qualification scheme, optometrists, DOs and ophthalmic medical practitioners can supervise a trainee dispensing optician, with either one or two named supervisors. Trainees who need to work outside their registered practice to gain experience for certain case record categories, such as paediatrics and low vision, may also have a specialist clinic supervisor, a role which can be

Optometry and dispensing optics offers opportunities for female practitioners to develop their careers and work in diverse practice settings, as **John Charlton** reports



**Joanne Boyd: 'not stopping work when my children arrived was a good move'**

on a part-time basis or for a limited period.

Optometrist Elaine Styles used her own pre-reg year as a springboard to broadening her career and exploring another option for a change of working environment: hospital practice. 'I started with my pre-registration post working in Moorfields Eye Hospital with a day swap into practice, so saw lots of other optometrists mixing hospital work with high-street practice.'

Styles qualified as an optometrist in 1993 and currently has three jobs: practitioner at an independent; a sessional at Moorfields Eye Hospital and chairing a charity, Vision Care for Homeless People, which she founded. She says there are many working options open to optometrists, while remaining in practice, including:

- Hospital optometry – which offers opportunities to work in glaucoma, retinal, macular, A&E and paediatric clinics, as well as the traditional low vision aids (LVA), refraction and contact lenses
- Refractive surgery clinics – providing pre- and postoperative checks
- Clinical research – through hospital, universities or independent organisations

- Charity work – either paid or voluntary
- Industry consultancy – such as for contact lens or spectacle lens manufacturers
- Optometry work at local primary care trusts.

In dispensing optics, there are similar opportunities to work in different practice environments and for career development. Practice management tends to be the primary role for DOs to develop their careers. Training to be a contact lens optician and studying for a diploma in low vision are options likely to be attractive to female DOs. ABDO also offers a diploma in spectacle lens design.

The College of Optometrists is reviewing its higher qualifications and offers various opportunities for further study, including a route to becoming a registered supplementary or independent prescriber.

## Local involvement

In optical practice, as in life, one thing can lead to another. Optometrist Joanne Boyd, who runs an independent practice in Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, sits on the Kingston

Eye Network Board. This was formed by a group of local GPs to help monitor stable glaucoma patients.

'Now it takes a few hours every month but it took much longer at the beginning. Luckily the board meets on my day off, so the impact on my practice work has been minimal with the exception of taking the odd phone call.'

Boyd took on this role thanks to her involvement with the local optical committee. She says apart from attending board meetings, related work is done in the evenings and out of practice hours.

One thing also led to another for Rosie Gavzey, whose portfolio working life includes work as an optical counter fraud adviser to the NHS. She took this opportunity at a time when, according to a Healthcare Financial Management Association report, concern was rising about fraudulent NHS claims.

'I was a consultant for the Association of Optometrists at the start of the 1990s. In the late 90s the NHS Counter Fraud Service started. I went to a conference when I was chairman of the AOP and I was interested. The NHS had courses in counter fraud, so I took one and qualified. It was one of the hardest courses I've ever done.

'I was then invited to be adviser for London. Typically it occupies half a day a week but the work tends to come in flurries.'

## Work life balance

Of course women with children are perhaps more used than most to having to balance various and perhaps conflicting priorities and obligations. The Women of Vision survey, conducted by *Optician* and CIBA Vision, found that female respondents were far likelier than male ones to have child care responsibilities while at work – some 13 per cent of females polled said their partner was the key carer, compared to 37 per cent of males surveyed.

This means striking a manageable work life balance, as Joanne Boyd explains: 'It's always difficult to get the work life balance right. My children are all at school now and we use after-school clubs and holiday clubs.

'I think not stopping work when my children arrived was a good move as I never felt disconnected or sidelined in my career. Although it's very tempting – and enjoyable and fulfilling as a mum – to have a few

## What women want from a career in optics

The 2010 Women of Vision (WoV) survey, carried out by *Optician* and CIBA Vision, found 41 per cent of 737 respondents said the opportunity to help others was a primary motivation in choosing optometry or dispensing optics as a career. This option ranked third in the list of primary motivations, behind, firstly, the opportunity to work in a healthcare profession, nominated by 58 per cent of female respondents compared to 46 per cent of males. Ranked second was professional status, which was given as a primary motivation by 50 per cent of respondents.

That helping others perhaps matters more to female practitioners is evidenced by the reasons given for enjoying their work: 76 per cent of female respondents, as opposed to 67 per cent of males, said they found fulfilment in helping others. Some 73 per cent of women who responded – compared to an overall average of 69 per cent – said being able to build rapport with patients brought them enjoyment.

Also, monetary rewards, according to the survey results, seem less important to female respondents. That factor ranked six in the reasons for enjoyment list. It was nominated by 15 per cent of male practitioners surveyed, but

only 5 per cent of female ones. In terms of a primary motivation for choosing the profession as a career, just 32 per cent of women polled cited salary compared to 42 per cent of male respondents.

Of course, progressing through the profession, or branching into related fields, may well require further study. That it matters to most practitioners is indicated by the 63 per cent of those surveyed who agreed that 'my professional development is important to me', with 65 per cent and 60 per cent of female and male respondents respectively agreeing with that aspiration.

The survey also found that almost a third of female respondents – 31 per cent compared to 27 per cent of males – plan to study for a further qualification in the next five years. Some 14 per cent of females polled said they planned to study to become a supplementary or independent prescriber, while the same percentage said they planned to undertake management training.

However, according to the Women of Vision survey, only 28 per cent of female practitioners, compared to 41 per cent of male ones, surveyed said they enjoyed managing the business. Even so, management of the business ranked as the third most enjoyed element of work with, overall, 31 per cent of optometrists and 43 per cent of DOs polled nominating it.

years away from work, I feel it's easy to become detached from work. I would never suggest the way I did it was perfect but it did allow me to remain totally involved with my practice and to enjoy my children.'

For Styles, flexibility of working days is important. 'We're very lucky to have a career that can be carried out part time. It's very flexible for women so you can choose the days you wish to work.' That this matters to female optometrists especially was confirmed by the Women of Vision survey which found the opportunity to work part time was a primary motivation in choosing optometry or dispensing optics as a career for 20 per cent of female respondents, compared to just 2 per cent of their male counterparts.

However, the ability to balance the demands of more than one job requires considerable self-discipline and time management skills especially with regard to prioritisation, flexibility, and goal and objective setting. As Styles says: 'I am rarely in the same place two days in a row. You do have to be organised. But there is only one day in 17 years that I haven't

turned up at the right place at the right time!'

Boyd too has advice for female optometrists considering broadening their career path. 'My advice would just be to prioritise what you do and to be efficient in the way you work. I sometimes feel people need to be seen to be busy rather than actually achieving anything worthwhile.

'I do feel it probably is still harder for mums as they generally are the ones rushing away from work or fitting around family life more than dads but I think we are the lucky ones! Being self-employed has allowed me flexibility that I could never have had as an employee, such as coming to work half an hour late if I need to see one of the kids' teachers or attend a school assembly.'

Styles says female optometrists who want a portfolio career should 'explore the options around you – talking to other optometrists or via reading journals'.

In short, optometry and dispensing optics offers female practitioners plenty of opportunities to broaden their horizons and use their skills to the full. ●