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Suits you, Sir!

Employment options for today's optometrists

The face of optometric practice has changed perceptively during the past few decades. On top of the traditional High Street independent practice, a new breed of employment opportunities has emerged to entice optometrists. From laser surgery clinics to one-stop health centres and supermarkets, the choice is seemingly endless.

So what motivates optometrists when choosing the right practice environment for them? OT spoke to some pre-registration and newly qualified optometrists to find out why they took the path they did.

Team spirit

Penny J. D'Ath is a pre-registration optometrist at Moorfields Eye Hospital (MEH). When it came to choosing a pre-registration position, Penny was certain that the Hospital Eye Service (HES) was for her.

She said, "There was never any competition and I can only think myself extremely fortunate that Moorfields chose me.

"Having spent six most enjoyable years working for the NHS as a research psychologist, before training as a dispensing optician in private practice, I was fully confident that the HES was the career path I wished to pursue.

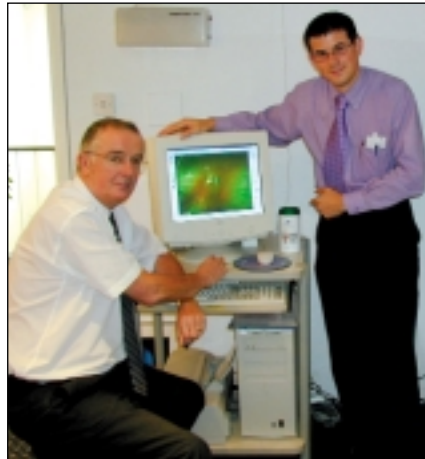
"In particular, I enjoy the team spirit which comes from working as part of a multi-disciplinary team, interacting with other health professionals, inter-disciplinary consultation, case conference audit, discussing patients with specialist colleagues, the opportunity for research and development as well as the general NHS ethos and camaraderie. In addition, hospital work offers a greater case mix, a broad spectrum of pathology and a more varied referral pattern ensuring an interesting environment to work in."

Penny added, "In the time that I have spent as part of the MEH optometry team, I can safely say that I have not been disappointed; the patients have been delightful and the team has been both helpful and supportive. I am looking forward to completing my pre-registration year at Moorfields and hope to continue to practise within the HES as a fully qualified optometrist."

Local ties

Simon Frackiewicz is undertaking his pre-registration training with Martin Hall Opticians in Southampton.

He said, "For me, the decision to choose a pre-registration post in an independent



Simon Frackiewicz with his supervisor, Martin Hall, in independent practice

practice was quite easy. Having previously qualified as an orthoptist and worked in the NHS, I felt that I had more to gain from a non-hospital position.

"My supervisor was the founder of the practice that bears his name, and has built up a large patient base over the past 25 years, and an equally strong rapport with local GPs and ophthalmologists. Many new patients are friends or family of existing patients who have given their recommendation – thus the majority of people who are examined remain loyal to the practice. Its proximity to the city centre and docks ensures a diverse mix of people passing by for eye examinations, making each day varied and unpredictable.

"The independent nature of the practice means that there is a wide range of products available from different manufacturers, allowing freedom of choice when selecting the optimum type of spectacles and contact lenses for individual patients. Furthermore, the use of my own consulting room and expensive equipment, and regular discussions with my supervisor, aid the learning experience."

Shared success

Michael Stokes and Wendy Murray graduated from UMIST's optometry degree course in September, 2000. They began working full-time at ASDA's Vision Centre in Eastlands, Manchester, in June – Michael four days a week and Wendy three days a week. Both have experience of working in other types of practice with Michael undertaking his pre-registration training with MJ Ryan Eyecare in Preston and Wendy at Specsavers' Salford practice. They have also both done locum work, which they believe gave them the chance to assess how different companies worked, including ASDA.

Michael explained, "We were both impressed with the high standard of optometric equipment which ASDA has available at each of its stores – as well as the friendliness of the staff.

"ASDA is one of the fastest growing retailers in the country and part of the Wal-Mart corporation – one of the biggest in the world. It's great to be part of such a massive team and to help develop the company's optical departments, which are still fairly new."

Along with generous salaries, Michael and Wendy have the opportunity to become shareholders of Wal-Mart under several different share plans. They also plan to sign up to ASDA's pension scheme, which they believe will offer great dividends.

"There are new stores opening as we speak, so this is clearly a success story and we are glad to be part of it," concluded Michael.

Strong support

Christine Messiter graduated from City University this Summer and recently took up her pre-registration position at Boots Opticians in Harlow, Essex.

"After listening to presentations from three multiples, I decided to apply to Boots Opticians and spent six weeks last Summer working in their store in Hertford. There was a combination of getting to know how the business functioned, helping wherever possible, but also having the freedom to learn

Specsavers offers strong support to its pre-registration optometrists



from the optometrists and dispensing opticians. It was invaluable to starting my pre-registration year with that broad knowledge of how the business is run. Last year, the national pass rate, that is passing all 10 PQEs first time, was 29% – the pass rate for Boots Opticians pre-registration optometrists was 50%.”

Christine tests sight three days a week, dispenses spectacles one day a week, fits contact lenses for half a day and spends the remaining half at the local hospital. She finds that there is plenty of pathology to be seen during eye examinations.

“I have found the most generous support from my supervisor, manager and the team in store to the tutor practitioners, lecturers and course directors. Already I have attended one of four courses designed to motivate me should I need it and have submitted the first of six pieces of coursework. It’s up to me now,” she concluded.

Job satisfaction

Nicholas Hagan is an optometrist at Specsavers’ Bury St Edmunds practice. He undertook his pre-registration training with the same practice and decided to continue with them once the year had finished.

“I found that Specsavers offered me a good programme of support throughout my pre-registration training, for example, through its Masterclass programme and revision courses,” said Nicholas. “I found that, from talking with friends from university, I went into the exams better prepared than some of them.”

Nicholas feels that the quality of supervision he received was excellent, and that part of the reason he wanted to stay on with this Specsavers practice was because of the good working relationship he had with his supervisor.

“It’s great not to have the extra pressure of building new relationships when you’re starting out as a newly registered optometrist. I’m feeling really settled where I am – there’s a good atmosphere in the practice and I’ve always been treated as one of the team.

“My main motivation when choosing the

Jon Bourton enjoys a broad patient base at the Institute of Optometry



type of practice environment I wanted to work in was patient care. I can safely say that I get real job satisfaction out of the one-to-one interaction I now have with my patients. Long-term I’d perhaps like to become a partner in a Specsavers practice, but I’ve got a long way to go yet in my career. I’m happy where I am for now.”

Broad spectrum

Jon Bourton qualified last Summer after completing his pre-registration year with Boots Opticians at its Poultry branch in the City of London. During that year, he attended the Monday evening clinic at the Institute of Optometry. He explains why he chose to go on to join the Institute’s optometric staff full-time.

“Once I had qualified, I felt that my learning curve was still very much in the upward direction. So when an offer to join the Institute in its Primary Eye Care Clinic was put forward, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to enhance the skills I had learned during my pre-registration year.

“I had enjoyed my time working in the City, but the range of patients I tested, with respect to their refractive and pathological conditions, was relatively small. At the Institute, I see a fairly broad and, at times, quite demanding range of patients. For me, this is the most interesting aspect of my work. It is also very inspiring to have the depth of knowledge and resources, which the Institute has to offer, behind me. This means that if I am ever in doubt with a patient’s pathology, I can fall back on other, far more experienced colleagues for advice and help.

“This last year at the Institute has been very rewarding and I hope to broaden my experience by becoming more involved in the specialised clinics which the Institute runs,” Jon concluded.

Learning new skills

After qualifying as a dispensing optician in 1991, Alan du Chemin went on to study optometry at City University. He joined refractive surgery provider, Maxivision, earlier this year, working part-time in its London clinic in Wimpole Street, whilst continuing in private practice.

Alan was originally unsure of exactly which area of optometry he wanted to work in so he practised as a locum for a while. It was during this time that he spent a few days at Maxivision’s London clinic and decided to apply for a permanent position with the company.

“Working in a refractive surgery clinic is quite different to High Street practice as I feel much more part of a clinical team. I have plenty of close contact with the refractive surgeon, which obviously provides a great opportunity to learn.

“One of the down sides of High Street practice is the length of time it takes to organise a referral to the Hospital Eye



Refractive surgery clinics like Maxivision can broaden optometrists’ professional horizons

Service,” Alan continued. “By the time the case is carried forward, you often have very little memory of it. As we do not prescribe spectacles at Maxivision, we have no prescribing targets and no pressure to issue prescriptions – something which is encountered regularly by optometrists.

“Working in refractive surgery also provides the opportunity to acquire skills not usually required in the High Street, such as using punctum plugs, interpreting topography results and practising ocular ultrasound.

“The environment is generally more clinical, which eliminates a lot of the conflicts often found in other practice environments, where an optometrist is expected to be part retailer, part clinician. This can make quite a difference in the attitude patients have towards you.

“Refractive surgery is a rapidly advancing field and so there is always new things to learn. Continuing education and training is vital in this respect, so I make sure I attend conferences and read the optometry journals.

“The downside of working in the refractive surgery arena is that there is less variety in the type of patients seen with no real opportunity to examine children and the elderly. There is also very little opportunity to keep up-to-date with the latest developments in contact lenses and spectacles. This is why many optometrists I know, myself included, work part-time in refractive surgery and part-time in private practice – so we experience the best of both worlds.”

Choosing the right practice environment comes down to personal preferences and aspirations in the end, but the increasingly wide variety of employment options now available can help you to find a satisfying career that suits you best.

For the latest job vacancies, see the advertisements in this section or visit the OT website at www.optometry.co.uk