Attitudes of optometrists towards their profession

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Part one

IN THE 1960s and early 1970s frequent concern was expressed over the profession's future; the number of ophthalmic opticians² was continuing to decrease, and new steps to remedy the situation by recruiting young people from the universities seemed to be slow in taking effect. Since then, the position has stabilised and recent studies (eg French and Loran, 1983) suggest that recruitment is now on course. It is estimated that the number of OOs will continue to rise to reach 7,500 by the end of this century, by which time we expect women will constitute around 45 per cent of the profession and the effective number of full-time optometrists will be a sixth

²We will be using the terms Ophthalmic Optician and Optometrist interchangeably.

greater than to-day. It is further anticipated that the annual number of sight tests will continue to rise to maintain an increasing sight-test load per optometrist (see Fig.l).

In the past the profession was dominated by older OOs. The top histogram in Figure 2 shows the age distribution of ophthalmic opticians back in 1965 with a strong peak for the 56 to 60 year olds. Today there is still a mode for optometrists close to the age of retirement but a new one has arisen at the age of the new intake to give what is in essence a bimodal distribution (middle part of Fig. 2). If recruitment continues as at present then we anticipate the age distribution will return to a unimodal pattern, but this time skewed towards the younger practitioners (lower part of Fig.2).



Figure 1 —Projected sight tests per week for a full-time optometrist. This figure summarises the likely increase in sight test loads according to French and Loran (1983). From the present until 2017 the sight test frequency is predicted to be within the triangular area bordered by three curves. The lower curve represents the expected development if United Kingdom sight tests increase linearly, the upper curve corresponds to an exponential increase and the third, declining curve corresponds to influence of an assumed theoretical limit to the number of sight tests that the UK can support. The increase after 2017 follows from an assumed, continuing rise in the UK population which may or may not occur. There are three overlapping triangles and three associated curves corresponding to three different ways of dividing sight tests between OOs and OMPs. (The graph is from a Sinclair Spectrum micro.)

It seems clear that younger optometrists (a good half of them women) will soon form the majority of the profession and hopefully will play an increasingly important role in the profession's development. We thought it would be of interest to see if we could find out whether younger OOs of either sex think any differently from their older colleagues. Have the radical changes in the way optometrists have been trained and recruited over the last quarter of a century (Mitchell, 1982) left their mark? Has the increased competition for places (French, 1982) on very much more intensive courses produced a different type of OO? Do the young share the attitudes and aspirations of the old or is there a generation gap? We have heard it argued that the present-day emphasis on A-level performance is leading to the recruitment of the wrong type of ophthalmic optician. Certainly it is helping to correct the sexual imbalance in numbers, although numerical equality might not be expected much before 2015 (French and Loran, 1983b), but is there any evidence of an increase in unsuitable optometry students? With these questions in mind we set out to see how age, sex and experience might play a role in shaping the attitudes of the ophthalmic optician; comparing the opinions of the new, male and female recruits with their older colleagues.

Sampling procedure

In August and September of 1982 we sent out questionnaires to every seventh UK optometrist listed in the 1981 GOC Register, and to a few others chosen at random. We also sent out around 50 questionnaires to recently qualified graduates whose names had yet to be published in the Register. Altogether 923 ophthalmic opticians (15 per cent of the profession) were sent a questionnaire. We received 510 replies (this was



before the publication of the recent Office of Fair Trading report), giving us quite a good response rate of 55 per cent. Unfortunately, not all questionnaires were fully completed. Age was sometimes omitted and as a consequence it is difficult to assess the response rate precisely from this viewpoint. Despite this, it is clear that younger OOs were more likely to reply than older ones. For those born before 1915 the response rate was greater than 25 per cent, for those born between 1915 and 1939 greater than 48 per cent and those born in 1940 or later it exceeded 63 per cent.

Is it, as one of our older respondents rather uncharitably put it, 'Older opticians are an apathetic bunch who, having made their pile, have little interest in the profession and are looking forward to retirement'? Or is it that older opticians have the wisdom of age which means that they are suspicious of questionnaires in general? Of course it is neither! It would be wrong to stereotype heterogeneous groups of people so simple-mindedly and is the antithesis of what we set out to do. Perhaps we should emphasise that the response rate of older OOs who have not yet reached retirement age is at 48 per cent plus not radically different from the 63 per cent plus of the youngest. The importance for us in these figures is that if we wish to make aggregate statements about the attitudes of the professional population then we must first weight our sample's responses in such a way that it compensates for any age or sex bias. The age and sex of our respondents are displayed in Figure 3. This histogram may be compared directly with the middle one in Figure 2. It is important continued on page 18

Figure 2—Age and sex of registered optometrists in the years 1965, 1982 and 2000. The frequency histograms show the ages and dates of birth for registered OOs according to GOC statistics for 1965 and 1982, and French and Loran's 1983 projection for the year 2000. The upper line in each histogram is for all optometrists in the given, five-year age band. The speckled area indicates the women while the white indicates the men. The 1965 histogram also distinguishes between non-chemist and chemist OOs. The latter are almost all male and are indicated by the striped areas.



Figure 3— Distribution of age and sex in the questionnaire sample. The frequency histogram shows the ages of the registered OOs who responded to our survey. Questionnaires were mainly completed in September and October 1982. The speckled region indicates the women in the sample.

continued from page 17

to note that the questionnaire was essentially unbiased in attitude and could be completed with anonymity. No names were requested, and a reply-paid envelope with a brief explanation of the motives behind the enquiry was included in the hope that this would encourage opticians' co-operation. The questions asked are detailed in the corresponding figure-captions.

We also sent the questionnaire to one in seven of pre-registration students (around 50), along with a modified version to all current undergraduates. Unfortunately, not all institutions were able to assist us in returning the last group of questionnaires, but we are particularly grateful to those who were able to help and provide us with a sample of 260 undergraduate responses, over 30 per cent of optometry students and an 83 per cent response rate from three institutions.

In processing our results we used analysis of variance, t-tests and chi-squared tests where we thought these would help us to distinguish between real effects and those simply due to sampling errors. In the following we will not always explicitly refer to the details of these analyses if we feel this would substantially reduce the report's readability. Reported differences may be taken as statistically significant

unless caution is urged or speculation invoked.

The qualified respondents

Over half the members of the registered sample described themselves as self-employed, owning or being a partner in their own practice, and as expected the probability of being so employed was found to increase with age. Approximately half of the under 25s were employed by a multiple or large group, the proportion diminishing for the older age groups. The relationship between age and the relative frequency of these two job groups is summarised in Fig 4 for male optometrists. There were too few female OOs over 35 years of age in our sample to produce an equivalent diagram for women, but what data there are show the same trend towards a declining proportion of optometrists working in multiples-very similar to men-and an increasing proportion of OOs with their own practices-but perhaps five years behind the men. The main difference appears to be a larger proportion of women employed in other ophthalmic spheres—particularly amongst the under 35s. Women in our sample were significantly more likely to be employed as locums, in a small group of practices and hospital clinics.

TO BE CONTINUED

The authors are both lecturers in the Ophthalmic Optics Department at UMIST. Any opinions expressed are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of their colleagues or the Department at UMIST. Preliminary findings were reported at a symposium to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the London Refraction Hospital on October 77, 1982.



Figure 4. — Employment of male optometrists in sample according to age. The relative proportion of male OOs in three categories of job for five age groups is shown above. The lower region indicates those who described themselves as self-employed, the upper indicates those working for a multiple/large group, and the rest are indicated by the speckled, middle area.