

Enquiry every ten years

SIR,

I would make the following points regarding the renewed controversy over recruitment to optometry (OPTICIAN, News, October 23, Nemo, November 6).

1. For many years the training institutions admitted around 300 students each year. In 1991 the entry figure was around 350 and this year around 400. This quarter increase over a two-year interval comes at a time when applications are well below previous levels. It is now three times easier to get into optometry than it was in 1979-1980 and the average A-levels of entrants are now down to those of 18 years ago. It is important too, to remember the four-year 'gestation period' for optometrists. It will be a while before the current changes impact the system and the consequences will depend upon whether or not these intakes are maintained.

2. Nemo (November 6) is out of date in his references to the Economist Intelligence Unit's manpower study. Although playing its part, the EIU provided a very limited insight, into the position at the time and failed to recalculate the Full-

Time-Equivalents put forward by Alpine in 1970. I carried out the last manpower study for the General Optical Council with additional support from optical companies and bodies five years ago.

The 200-page report based upon a 1986 survey was submitted to the GOC and virtually all of it was published in the professional press in late 1987 and early 1988. (OPTICIAN: June 12, 19; October 16; November 20; February 12, 26. *Optometry Today*: July 4. October 24, November 21. August 27.) It seemed proper to me to present the facts and let others draw the conclusions, but one conclusion which certainly could not be drawn was an "unequivocal prediction of inadequacy of ophthalmic opticians to meet anticipated demand in the foreseeable future.' This harks to studies back in the 1970s which have long since become irrelevant.

Amongst my 1987 recommendations were:

'The profession should not wait another 18 years before examining the Full Time Equivalent values of those on the Register. ...the GOC (should) include a brief questionnaire in its mailing every five years to keep track of changes and the developing role of older women.'

'A more extensive enquiry...

should be earned out every 10 years.

'Five' and '10' years were just meant to be indications of upper limits. One would have hoped that the GOC would have circulated a suitable questionnaire back in Spring 1991.

3. Nemo refers to the number of women among recruits. At first sight the pattern of these appears to have changed little since 1987. I would refer him to the above articles and one in *Equal Opportunity International* 11989, Volume 8, part 2, 21-31'. The career patterns of women are less 'uncertain' than he may realize, although I then felt the need for more information on women optometrists closer to retirement age (samples were small here making generalization difficult). The ageing UK population to which he also refers was very carefully taken into account by the 1987 report and is nothing new.

4. Gordon Heron (Glasgow's Assistant Head of Department) is quite correct in his assertion (OPTICIAN, October 23) that 'the training institutions have never received any guidance on intake numbers', although on their rather infrequent visits to departments the GOC visitors will certainly comment on staffing. In fact, sometimes departments of optometry are probably delighted that they have a free hand to do what they want between visits. In my report to the GOC I had recommended that decisions on increasing and decreasing numbers 'should not be left to the training institution alone'. Unfortunately, this appears to be what has happened.

If members of the profession are not happy with this situation, then it is up to them to get their organisations to do something about it! People get the representation they deserve!

Chris French

Cheadle,
Cheshire