

Look to the future!

Chris French*

I have been involved with the teaching of undergraduate ophthalmic opticians since 1970 and actively with their recruitment since 1979. Throughout this time I have noted the young optometrist's concern for the future of her/his chosen profession. The first questions voiced by many a sixth former still uncertain which career they should take are "What are the job prospects? Does the profession have a future?" Unfortunately, my impression is that this concern with the future is one which is not always shared by the older members of the profession—those who are in positions of responsibility. If you are aged 50 your perspective may well be limited to a further 10 or 15 years, unless of course you have a daughter or son continuing the tradition. To-day's graduates might expect a professional working life of around 42 years. It is only natural that the young and old will see the future differently.

Predicting the future is difficult. One needs more than a computerised fortune-teller's sphere. There are many aspects of the future that are almost impossible to anticipate. For example, will work be the prerogative of a fortunate few or will the working week be radically shortened to facilitate job-sharing? I suspect it is such considerations which prompt many to shrug their shoulders and suggest that as planning is clearly fraught with problems we might as well not bother. It is my contention that such short-sightedness

in the past has contributed to the profession's current malaise.

When we looked at the future of the profession last year I formed the opinion that recruitment was about right (French and Loran, 1983). One would expect to see a continuation of the annual rise in demand for sight-testing up to the end of this century and a projection of optometric manpower suggested that this would lead to a small increase in eye-examination workload for the average OO, particularly over the next few years. This modest increase should, however, not be seen as an excuse for recruiting more students (French, 1984; McCaghrey, 1984). The work levels projected are well within the compass of today's average graduate optician (French *et al*, 1981).

The six UK teaching departments work hard to improve the training and education of optometry undergraduates, but this is not always easy in the present financial climate. Education is subject to unsympathetic pressures much like any other activity. If you want to improve teaching by appointing a new lecturer or expand the facilities of your department you may find you can only do this if you admit more Overseas students paying high fees, or more Home students so that your institution's A-level profile is improved.

In the short term such moves may be relatively harmless but the long-term consequence of a significant increase in Home student numbers should not be overlooked. One of the problems is that it is easy to turn the educational tap on but not so easy to turn it off. If we were to find there were too many OOs being produced, reducing the numbers would then be difficult. A consequence of one department's expansion might well eventually be pressures to close down a smaller department, because large departments are seen by some as more effective. To my mind this would represent a serious loss to the profession. One of the valuable features of the present arrangement is the variety within the educational system. It represents a healthy state of affairs that there are six independent departments with varied approaches to education and training, and everything should be done to sustain this.

Of course there is also room for a variety of opinions on recruitment policy. I would not wish to claim that our own work represented the last word. Certainly it made us particularly aware of the gaps that exist in our knowledge. There has been much dis-

cussion in recent years on the frequency with which one should visit one's dentist. Should it be twice a year or does this simply encourage the dentist to carry out dental work which might not be necessary? There seems to have been little discussion on sight-testing frequencies. Of course this is to some extent taken care of by reminders and individual advice given to patients by their practitioners. But what of those who do not visit opticians at all? In fact who are they? What is the present pattern of visits to the optometrist? How does it compare with the profession's aspiration? What is the profession's aspiration? The answer to such questions is often 'don't know'.

In our study we followed the Economist Intelligence Unit's 1974 report in arriving at the UK's annual capacity for sight testing (currently 50 per cent above to-day's 10 million per year). But this did not mean that we accepted its scenario uncritically and indeed I feel the assumptions have significant shortcomings. It is regrettable that relatively little attention appears to have been given to how often someone should in an ideal world visit their OO (presumably a function of factors such as age, refractive state and occupation). Such information would not only assist us in refining future manpower assessments but could also be of commercial value in pointing out which patients are presently neglecting their eyes.

References

- FRENCH, Do we require more recruits? *THE OPTICIAN*, August 10 1984, 23.
 FRENCH, ALLEN, BRADBURY, HARDWICK, SMITH and WORTHINGTON, Graduate opticians work and earnings, *The Ophthalmic Optician*, 1981, 21, 473.
 FRENCH and LORAN, Optometry manpower up to the year 2000 and beyond, *The Ophthalmic Optician*, 1983, 13, 421 and 449.
 McCAGHREY, No more OOs, *THE OPTICIAN*, August 10 1984, 25.

*Chris French MA, PhD, ABPsS, MBCS. is a Lecturer and Undergraduate Admissions Tutor in the Ophthalmic Optics Department at UMIST. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of his department.