

bulletin

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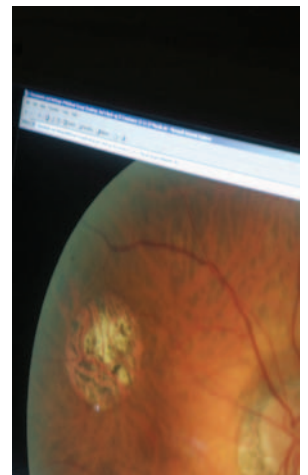
General Optical Council
41 Harley Street, London W1G 8DJ
Telephone 020 7580 3898
Fax 020 7436 3525
www.optical.org

Optometrists win new prescribing rights

by Kate Fielding

Optometrists have joined the ranks of healthcare professionals who will be able to prescribe medicines independently. The decision, announced by the Department of Health this summer, means that practitioners will be able to train for a new Independent Prescribing specialty. Registered specialists will be able to write prescriptions if they diagnose a problem needing treatment, saving patients from having to make a separate visit to their doctor.

Roger Buckley, chairman of the GOC's Standards Committee, said: "This move has the potential to transform the public's perception of optometrists, as well as the ways in which the country's eye care services are delivered. Optometrists are well qualified clinicians but they remain a largely untapped resource in healthcare, with the capacity to provide good quality, convenient services for patients with a wide range of common and long term eye conditions. → *continues on page 2*



No increase to registration fees for 2008/9



The registration team

As *Bulletin* went to press, it was announced that the full registration fee for 2008/9 will remain the same. This is the fourth consecutive year in which there has been no overall increase in the registration fee. Members agreed the proposal at the November meeting of Council.

Full registrants will continue to pay £169 for registration or retention. Student registration will stay at £20, and restoration £239.

The registration fee is currently made up of three components; the core fee, CET levy and Consumer Complaints Mediation Service (CCMS) levy. As CET is a core element of the GOC's work, the CET levy and core registration fee will in future be amalgamated into one component. The CCMS levy will remain a 'stand alone' component of the overall fee.

Full registrants will need to renew their registration and pay the retention fee by the deadline of 15 March 2008. Retention packs have been sent out with this issue of *Bulletin*. Registrants must complete, sign and return their retention form by the deadline – including those who pay by direct debit. Anyone failing to return both the form and payment by the deadline will be removed from the registers on 1 April 2008.

Anyone who has not received their forms should contact the GOC to make sure their address details are up to date. Call the registration team on 020 7580 3898 (option 1) or email superinfo@optical.org. Registrants can also check their personal profile and download retention forms from the GOC website, www.optical.org.

Students joining the full registers for the first time from 1 April 2008 will pay a pro-rata fee of £42.25 per quarter.

In this issue

CET – plans for the next cycle

Take a tour of the new GOC website

New EU law – what it means for you

Regulation reform update

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“The GOC will play a key role in ensuring that optometrists who want to become independent prescribers receive robust training and can practise safely within their competence”

Optometrists win new prescribing rights

“GPs are likely to welcome the option of referring patients to a local prescribing optometrist, particularly where access to a hospital ophthalmology department is difficult or where there is a long waiting time for non-urgent appointments.”

Registrants who wish to become independent prescribers will need to complete further GOC-approved training and assessment, and apply for entry of their specialty in the register. Once trained they will have to keep their skills up to date, by complying with the additional CET requirement for specialists. It is hoped that training courses may be available from autumn 2008.

The legislation will allow optometrists to prescribe any licensed medicine for ocular conditions affecting the eye and the tissues surrounding the eye. In practice, optometrist prescribers will only work with conditions within their area of expertise, and will be supported by clear professional guidelines. Clinical management guidelines being developed by the College of Optometrists will determine the scope of competence and practice. No optometrist will prescribe a medicine for other than an ocular condition, and none will prescribe controlled drugs.

GOC chairman Rosie Varley said: “Independent prescribing is a significant development for optometrists, which builds on their existing clinical skills and experience. The move reflects high levels of public confidence in optometrists and optical regulation. For patients, it should mean that they get quality care faster, and more conveniently, than ever before.”

“The GOC will play a key role in ensuring that optometrists who want to become independent prescribers receive robust training and can practise safely within their competence, so that patients and the public can be confident about their care.”

All optometrists are currently able to use therapeutic drugs to manage common, non-sight-threatening eye conditions, such as conjunctivitis, blepharitis, minor trauma and dry eye. Since July 2005, optometrists on the Additional Supply and Supplementary Prescribing registers can carry out some additional roles in supplying and administering medicines or prescribing them in partnership with a doctor. There are currently around 30 practitioners with a registered therapeutics specialty.

Message from the Editor

In the run-up to the festive season, most of us have plenty on our minds. However, don't forget to put the GOC on your Christmas list – we'd like to get your retention applications in early this year. And once it's done, you'll be able to enjoy some peace of mind with your mince pies.

In return, we've filled our *Bulletin* stocking with lots of really useful information and updates. You can find out the latest on independent prescribing for optometrists, what's happening with the Government's health regulation reforms, and future plans for CET.

Elsewhere, Anita Bhalla might inspire you to give a different kind of gift this year, as she recounts her experiences with Vision Aid Overseas. If you'd like to give your perspective on any subject in our next issue, drop us a line.

Whatever you're celebrating this festive season, have a good one, and we'll be back in 2008.

Kate Fielding, Editor

Anticipated independent prescribing timetable

Changes to legislation go through Parliament	Spring 2008
Changes to GOC Registration Rules	Spring 2008
Training and assessment criteria agreed	Summer 2008
First trainees could be recruited	Autumn 2008
First registrants gain specialty registration	Summer 2010



Rosie Varley

Message from the Chairman

As the Council approaches its fiftieth anniversary in 2008, and I approach my final year as chairman, we are once again preparing for a very significant period of change. In 12 months' time, the GOC is likely to

be a very different organisation. The Government's White Paper on healthcare regulation, published in February, has set the scene for a smaller Council with revised governance structures, and a separate adjudication body. You can read about some of the planned changes in this issue of *Bulletin*. As we develop our detailed plans, there will be opportunities to give your views through consultations and other events.

Whatever structures we put in place, we will not achieve our goals to deliver better, safer healthcare to patients and the public unless we can also change the culture of regulation. We need to offer support to all practitioners to advance and continuously improve their practice, as well as deal with the minority who fall below minimum standards in performance or behaviour.

The GOC continues to lead the way in reforming regulation. I am confident that with the support of our

optical body colleagues and other stakeholders we will be able to achieve real benefits for both the professions and the public.

I am particularly sorry at this juncture to be losing three experienced and well-respected members of Council. Bob Chappell, Roger Buckley and James Dunne have each been instrumental in driving forward developments in optics and optical regulation. Roger Buckley has chaired the GOC's Standards Committee since its inception in 1999. His legacy includes independent prescribing rights for optometrists, which he championed, and the achievement of which is reported in this issue. Like Roger, Bob Chappell has led many significant projects for the Council, and has brought a breadth of experience of optometric politics to the GOC, from his stints at the helm of the College of Optometrists and both the European and World Councils of Optometry. James Dunne has served on Council for over ten years, latterly as deputy chair of the Investigation Committee, where he has employed clinical knowledge and good sense in equal measure.

They will be greatly missed.

Rosie Varley

CET – are you on target?

Keep earning points regularly

If you are on the register for the whole cycle, you will need 36 general points by 31 December 2009, and specialists will need 18 specialty points for each specialty. You should aim to earn points evenly throughout the cycle – so you should have around a third of your total requirement by this stage.

Make sure CET is approved for your target group

You will only be credited with points for events which have been approved for your 'target group' (whether optometrist, dispensing optician or specialist). Check the logos on the publicity material, or if these are not available, on the CET directory at www.cetoptics.com.

Confirm your points

Only confirmed points count. You should check your record periodically to make sure it is correct – it will be much easier to resolve any disputes now than in December 2009.

Get approval in advance for overseas courses

If you want to do CET overseas, you must inform the CET administrator in advance of attending the CET event – even if the event is part of an 'approved scheme'. Visit the overseas users page on www.cetoptics.com for more information.



CET post 2010: reaching the future

Practitioners and other stakeholders will be able to have their say on the future for opticians' Continuing Education and Training. The Council will launch a consultation next month to discuss ideas for changes to the CET scheme, which would come into effect from the start of the next cycle on 1 January 2010.

The CET Policy and Development Group has been exploring ideas for evolving the scheme, looking at suggestions received as part of the last consultation in November 2005 when nearly 500 registrants responded to an online questionnaire about key principles of the scheme. The Group has also discussed ideas with representatives of the four optical bodies (ABDO, AOP, FODO and the College of Optometrists).

The consultation will set out the principles which should continue to inform the CET scheme, as well as some suggested new principles. At the time of going to press, the consultation document was still to be agreed by Council. However, it is likely to include discussion of a 'rolling' three year cycle, and the possibility of introducing different points requirements for optometrists and dispensing opticians, to reflect different levels of risk.

A requirement for registrants to gain points across a spread of competency areas, and a limit to the number of points which can be gained by distance learning are also set to be key questions in the consultation.

Details of the consultation will be available from the GOC website in the next few weeks, and practitioners will be alerted via announcements in the optical press. Don't miss out on the chance to have your say!



"A requirement for registrants to gain points across a spread of competency areas, and a limit to the number of points which can be gained by distance learning are also set to be key questions in the consultation."

Celebrating 55 years of service

Nick Rumney pays tribute to three long-standing GOC members



This year sees the retirement of three stalwarts of the General Optical Council. Together, Bob Chappell, Roger Buckley and James Dunne have served 55 years on Council, and helped to bring about significant developments in optics.

Bob Chappell could be described as the consummate optical politician. He has fought the corner of the profession, and argued convincingly against deregulation of optometry. Born into a famous optical family, he has remained in optometric practice where he specialises in the assessment and treatment of specific learning difficulties. Part of his visionary approach derives from his experience of the world stage. He is past president of both the College of Optometrists and the

European Council of Optometry and Optics, and president elect of the World Council of Optometry. Bob Chappell is one of the profession's truly inspirational leaders. Certainly if he saw a fence in optometry he never sat on it!

James Dunne is ophthalmologist representative on the Investigation Committee, where he has employed an eminently sensible and down-to-earth approach. As a consultant in Lancashire, James knows the foibles of the real live patient, and is able to assess cases with an empathy that belies his personal qualifications and experience. The respect he has won from peers is evident in appointments to bodies including the Oxford Ophthalmological Congress, North of England Ophthalmic Society and Royal College of Ophthalmology. We will be hard put to replace the high quality, unbiased medical input into fitness to practise cases that James has brought over his ten years on Council.

Roger Buckley will retire from the GOC having created a legacy of immense vision. Going against the received wisdom of political ophthalmology (although not of all ophthalmologists) he has championed the advancement of optometry into therapeutics, providing academic rigour and unrivalled clinical skills to influence the debate. He will be greatly missed on Council, where he has chaired the Standards Committee since it was created in 1999. Although departing the GOC, it is clear that Roger's influence will continue through his involvement with multidisciplinary bodies such as the British Contact Lens Association, of which he is past president.

GOC launches new website

Clare Millington takes a tour of the new features...



After a year in the making, we launched our new website in October. The old site has been overhauled as part of the Council's mission to promote good eye care and protect the public.

Features and functionality

Extra functionality has been added to make the site informative and user-friendly for registrants and other users. Key new features include:

- A registrants' area where optometrists and dispensing opticians can log in and update their personal details. Registrants can also update and add practice addresses to their profile.
- Search the site function.
- Dedicated hearings section with explanations of the hearings process, plus details on sanctions and outcomes from past hearings.
- Glossary explaining key terms.
- Updated and revised FAQs section, including option to filter by category.
- History section exploring the origins of statutory regulation within the optical professions.
- Search for a practice results can be limited by distance from postcode.

Popular features from the original site, such as Council papers and legislation still exist, but should now be much easier to find thanks to a new site structure. Content has been grouped into

three areas: About us, Our work and News/publications. Audience homepages alert users to content and news that is relevant to them.

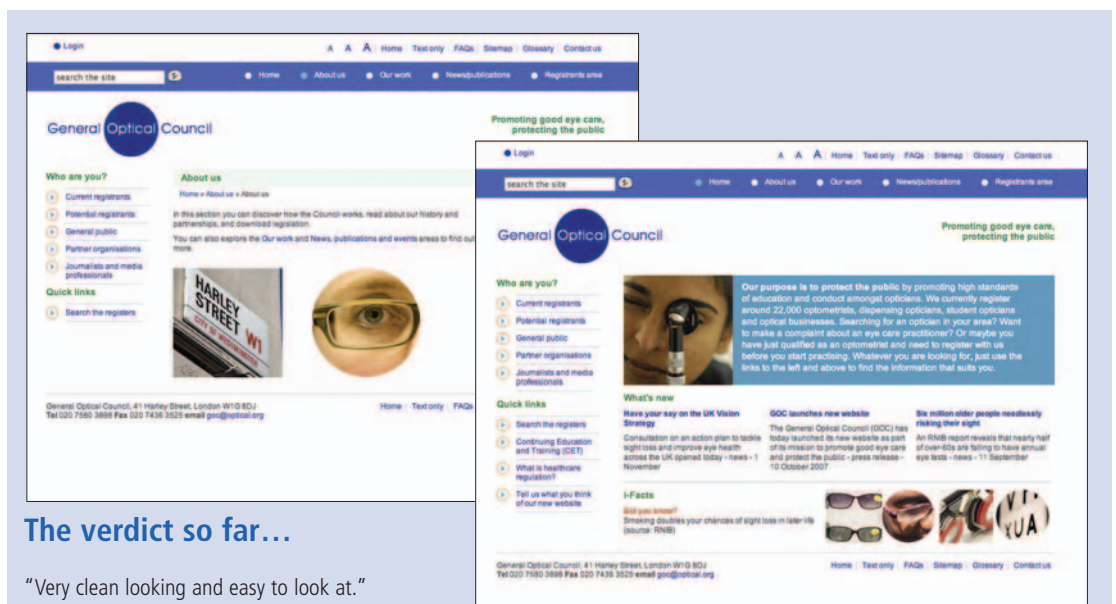
Accessibility

The new site meets internationally-recognised standards for website accessibility (WC3) and is AAA compliant. Standardised document download formats have also been introduced, so that information can be accessed quickly and conveniently.

Design agency L&Co were commissioned to produce modern, clean and spacious concepts for the site. The GOC appointed Pixl8 Interactive to develop the site based on a content management system which supports the website's new functionality and content.

User consultation

The website relaunch is the result of a 12-month user consultation involving members of the public, registrants and partner organisations. Participants completed questionnaires, one-to-one research and user testing sessions. Almost 300 people took part by providing comments and suggestions on the design, structure and content of the new site – and research is ongoing. To have your say on the new site, fill in the online questionnaire at www.optical.org. The GOC are reviewing all suggestions to ensure the website continues to develop and offer improved services to all users.



How to log in

- Click on login box in the top left corner of the homepage.
- Enter your username and password.
- Your username is your GOC number (eg 01-1234). If you do not know your registration number, call the registration team on **020 7580 3898** (option 1).
- Your password is your date of birth ie dd/mm/yy.
- Once you are logged in, you can change your password to keep your details secure.

The verdict so far...

"Very clean looking and easy to look at."

"Much better than the other regulators."

"I like the 'current registrants' section – better laid out and there seems to be more information."

"There should be a way to find registered opticians by name...within a radius of your postcode."

"...it is far more sophisticated..."

"I'd like to see clearer guidance on the use of protected titles and the implications of not abiding by the rules."

"The login area should be focused on the basic user requirements. Every registered optometrist wants to know about their registration status, CET points and the latest changes in our profession."

"I wasted lots of time because of [a] new username [and] password."

New EU law

What does it mean for you?

A European law designed to make it easier for qualified professionals to move around Europe came into force in October. The European Directive on the recognition of professional qualifications means that healthcare professionals, including optometrists and dispensing opticians, can register to work in other European countries on a temporary and occasional basis with minimum 'red tape'.

Registrants with UK qualifications wanting to provide temporary and occasional services abroad

As a GOC registrant, you can apply to provide services on a temporary and occasional basis in other European countries by contacting the relevant 'competent body' (the equivalent body to the GOC in that country, responsible for registration). You may have to complete a declaration, and provide supporting documents including evidence of appropriate indemnity insurance. The GOC will supply you with a certificate of current professional status, if this is required by the host state, and will share information with the host country about any relevant disciplinary history if this is requested.

If your training and experience is not judged to be equivalent to that in the host country, you may have to pass an aptitude test. If you satisfy the requirements, you will be free to provide services on a temporary and occasional basis and are likely to be given 'temporary registration'. This will have to be renewed on a yearly basis by providing an updated declaration.

You will be subject to the professional rules which apply in the host country, and subject to any relevant disciplinary procedure. However, you won't have to participate in the host country's CET scheme if they have one, as you will be doing CET to maintain your GOC registration.

If you want to work permanently in another EU state, whether full-time or part-time, you must apply to the relevant regulator for 'full' registration.

Potential employers of temporary and occasional EU professionals

Anyone using the titles 'optometrist' or 'dispensing optician' or carrying out restricted functions in the UK will still need to be registered with the GOC. We will continue to ensure that practitioners registered on a temporary and occasional basis are competent by assessing their qualifications and experience, and if necessary we will carry out aptitude tests. The GOC must give a decision or offer a date for a test within one month of application, otherwise the individual will be deemed registered and legally entitled to practise.

The GOC will ask the relevant competent authority for information about any relevant disciplinary or criminal sanctions. However, such enquiries cannot delay registration. Therefore, employers are advised to carry out their own criminal records checks and obtain evidence of good health. You will also need to take up references and ensure applicants can communicate effectively in English.

"Anyone using the titles 'optometrist' or 'dispensing optician' or carrying out restricted functions in the UK will still need to be registered with the GOC."

New students meet the GOC

This autumn the GOC teamed up with the College of Optometrists to deliver a series of fresher roadshows for new students studying optometry and dispensing optics.

The GOC visited every university and college offering approved training courses. Students were given a presentation on the registration process, and the functions of the GOC. Staff were on hand to process applications and offer help with completing registration forms.

Students now receive registration cards which university staff can use to check the registration status of those enrolled on their training programme.

Frank Eperjesi, Acting Head of Optometry at Aston University commented: "The GOC roadshows have become a valuable part of the induction process, and give our students an understanding of why they have to register. Issuing trainees with registration cards enables us to keep track of anyone who isn't registered."

As *Bulletin* went to press, 1,102 first year students had enrolled to study optometry or dispensing optics at one of the 11 GOC-approved universities and colleges. Of this total, 16 per cent had not registered on the Council's student registers.

The GOC have warned that unregistered trainees will be suspended from practical clinics and disqualified from sitting future exams. Students may not have their final qualifications recognised when applying for full registration, if they have not been registered throughout their course.



Students at Glasgow Caledonian University

Hearings report

Director of Legal and Fitness to Practise, *Philip Grey*, reports on the recent cases before the GOC's FTP panel.



In May, optometrists **Sasha Macken** and **Wilfred Phillips** faced charges relating to allegedly inadequate examinations. The factual allegations were found not proven, save that it was proved that Ms Macken had not measured the patient's intra-ocular pressures and should have done so, and that Mr Phillips had not adequately recorded his examination of the patient. Though these failures were found to constitute deficient professional performance, the Committee did not find that these isolated instances amounted to impairment of either practitioner's fitness to practise. The Committee noted that Mr Phillips had retired from practice and that Ms Macken had learned "a salutary lesson" from her appearance at the hearing.

In September, dispensing optician **Leo Threlfall** was erased from the register following his conviction before the Crown Court at Liverpool for offences including two counts of sexual assault on a female by penetration.

Also in September, optometrist **Arthur Taylor** admitted allegations of deficient professional performance, for failure to maintain adequate patient records and failure to conduct assessments of intra-ocular pressures while providing domiciliary care to 122 patients. The patients were elderly and therefore at increased risk of glaucoma. The Committee erased Mr Taylor

from the register, describing the case as "serious and troubling" and stating that "elderly and infirm patients are particularly dependent on professionals and trust that they will perform their duties competently."

In October, the Committee heard the case of optometrist **Shafqat Zaman**. Mr Zaman admitted allegations that he had not measured visual acuity or performed a refraction on a patient. A third allegation, that Mr Zaman had made an inadequate referral, was contested and found not proved. Although there were errors within the referral letter, the Committee did not consider that these rendered the referral inadequate. Mr Zaman's actions were not found to amount to deficient professional performance.

Finally, also in October, **Robert Randal Davies** was found guilty of misconduct for practising whilst unregistered. He was suspended for six months and fined £1,600. Mr Davies had been removed from the register in 1998 for non-payment of his registration fees and was not restored until 2006. He admitted testing the sight of 1,812 patients whilst unregistered, though he disputed that this amounted to misconduct, maintaining that he had written to the GOC on several occasions, and on some occasions enclosing a cheque for £50. The Council's registration manager gave evidence that if received, such correspondence would have been returned to Mr Davies with a restoration form. Mr Davies admitted that the cheques he claimed to have sent had not been cashed and that he had been aware of this. The Committee strongly emphasised that maintaining registration with the GOC is solely the registrant's responsibility.

The Committee also heard some cases relating to interim and conditional registration orders.

An application for an interim order against optometrist **Malcolm Coates** was not successful. A full hearing into the allegations against Mr Coates will take place in due course.

A conditional registration order imposed on optometrist **Neil Carter** in February of this year (see Issue 8 of *Bulletin*) was lifted in September, as the Committee accepted that Mr Carter had complied with conditions to address performance deficiencies. The Committee emphasised the importance of continuing education and training.

The Committee ordered the interim suspension of student optometrist **Nathan Hill**, initially imposed in May, should continue following his conviction for an offence under the Public Order Act. There will be a further review within six months unless the substantive hearing takes place before then.



Philip Grey, Director of Legal and FTP

New legal director

Philip Grey has been appointed as the GOC's new Director of Legal and Fitness to Practise. Philip started in the role at the end of July. He oversees the investigation and prosecution of allegations against registrants and advises the Council on other legal matters.

A barrister called in 1996, Philip previously held the post of in-house advocate and legal advisor to the General Medical Council (GMC). Prior to joining the GMC, he worked in private practice. He is also an approved advocacy trainer with Gray's Inn.

Commenting on his new job, Philip said: "This is a demanding role, with a variety of responsibilities to juggle.

I play a part in preparing new complaints to go before the Investigation Committee. Once cases have been referred, I instruct our external solicitors and advocates and assist in their hearing preparation. I have a background in advocacy having been a criminal barrister for ten years and intend to conduct some future hearings myself. I am also helping with the work that has followed the Government's White Paper on healthcare regulation, reviewing a number of our fitness to practise procedures, and reviewing potential criminal prosecutions for offences relating to the unlawful sale of optical appliances."

Regulation reform update

by Jon Levett, Director of Standards

The Government is pushing ahead with its programme for reform of healthcare regulation in the UK outlined in the White Paper, *Trust, Assurance and Safety – The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century*.

The Health and Social Care Bill, announced in the Queen's Speech, sets out provisions for the establishment of a new independent adjudication body to adjudicate on fitness to practise allegations.

Although initially being established to hear allegations against doctors referred to it by the General Medical Council, the General Optical Council agreed in June this year to support transferring its hearings to the new body.

The GOC will retain its powers to investigate fitness to practise allegations. If there is a case to answer, it will be referred to the new body to decide whether the registrant's fitness to practise is impaired. Currently such cases are referred to the GOC's independent Fitness to Practise Committee.

It is anticipated that the new body could be hearing GOC fitness to practise cases from 2010.

The Bill will also require fitness to practise panels to apply the civil standard of proof (the 'balance of probabilities') when considering the facts of a case. Currently, GOC fitness to

practise panels apply the criminal standard of proof ('beyond reasonable doubt'). This legislation will come into force in the autumn of next year.

"The White Paper directs that regulators' governing bodies should be smaller and more board-like."

The Government is also consulting on changes to the future constitution of the GOC and other regulators. The White Paper directs that regulators' governing bodies should be smaller and more board-like, that there should be at least parity of membership between lay and professional members, and that all members should be independently appointed. Amendments to the Opticians Act 1989 will make it easier for changes to be made to the governing structure.

The GOC decided in March this year that the Council should be no larger than 13 members including a lay appointed chairman. It is anticipated that the relevant legislative reforms will be made for a newly constituted Council to be in place by the spring of 2009.

Promoting equality and diversity

From November, the GOC will introduce a new scheme to promote equal opportunities and diversity in optical regulation. Whilst signalling the GOC's commitment to equality in all its activities, the scheme identifies a number of strategic priorities. These cover the GOC's role in ensuring that certain key areas are free from discrimination, namely: access to optometry and dispensing optics training; registration as an optometrist or dispensing optician; access to the registers and other public meetings and information; complaints and fitness to practise processes, and; employment with or appointment to the GOC.

The scheme is supported by an action plan, which sets out a programme of work over the next three years to help the

Council identify and begin to tackle any key opportunities or areas for concern. Amongst the actions identified is the need to collect data from registrants to inform this work.

GOC registrar Peter Coe commented: "We've always had a clear commitment to equality and diversity within the Council. We want to make sure that our policies and approaches are fair to everyone, and that we can make a positive contribution in respect of these issues. Hopefully the new scheme and action plan will give us a strong framework to take forward our work in this area."

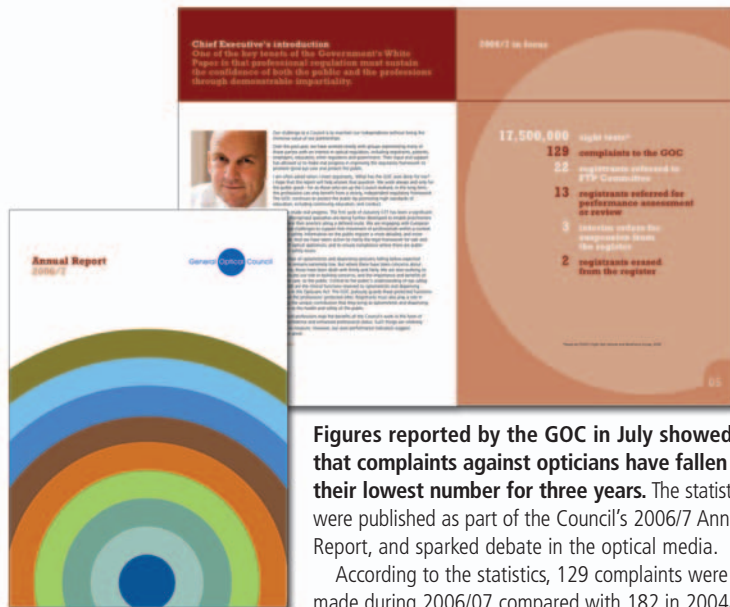
A copy of the equality and diversity scheme is available to download from the GOC website.

"We've always had a clear commitment to equality and diversity within the Council."



Complaints figures spark debate

by Clare Millington



Figures reported by the GOC in July showed that complaints against opticians have fallen to their lowest number for three years. The statistics were published as part of the Council's 2006/7 Annual Report, and sparked debate in the optical media.

According to the statistics, 129 complaints were made during 2006/07 compared with 182 in 2004/5, representing a decrease of 29 per cent. Just two registrants were erased from the GOC registers as a result of GOC fitness to practise proceedings.

GOC chairman, Rosie Varley commented: "These figures confirm that the majority of optometrists and dispensing opticians are practising safely and competently. Fair and effective procedures for dealing with the small minority who experience problems mean that the public can have confidence in eye care professionals."

The GOC cited falling complaints in its response to a *Which?* report on the quality of eye examinations.

Whilst the likelihood of being the subject of a FTP investigation remains extremely low, a much higher proportion of registrants are removed from the registers for other reasons. Of around

20,000 full registrants and students, 890 were removed for failure to either apply for retention or meet CET requirements.

The Report also featured an overview of the year's registration figures. The number of full registrants has increased by just over two per cent to 16,002. Optometrist numbers have risen by almost three per cent to 10,699. There are now 5,303 dispensing opticians on the registers – an increase of one-and-a-half per cent.

Download the full 2006/7 Annual Report at www.optical.org

Fitness to Practise figures 2006/7

17,500,000* sight tests
129 complaints to the GOC
22 registrants referred to FTP Committee
13 registrants referred for performance assessment or review
3 interim orders for suspension from the register
2 registrants erased from the register
* Based on Sight Tests Volume and Workforce Survey, Great Britain, 2005/06, The Information Centre for Health and Social Care, October 2006.

Investigation Committee outcomes

No further action	56
Withdrawn	18
Performance review	4
Performance assessment	9
Fitness to Practise referral	22
Under investigation	18
No jurisdiction	2

Practitioner perspective

Anita Bhalla is a qualified optometrist from Bradford, and a Vision Aid Overseas volunteer.

I qualified in 2003 and have worked with Vision Aid Overseas for two years as a volunteer. In August 2007, I went on my first overseas project to Zambia. This was an exciting experience – and a great opportunity for me to use my professional skills to help people in one of the world's poorest countries. I had always wanted to work in the developing world, partly because I knew it would be a real personal challenge; but when I discovered that over 300 million people only need a pair of glasses to live an ordinary life I became seriously motivated!

On the project, the VAO team set up clinics in a number of different villages and towns. At each location, the optometrists set up refracting rooms and areas to test visual acuity, and the dispensing opticians would manage the queues and organise an area where they can help the patients choose a pair of specs. At the beginning of the day there would already be a big queue of patients – and quite often by midday, there would already be too many patients for us to see.

Some of the patients we helped were really poor – subsistence farmers with very few possessions and children dressed in tattered clothing – but it gave everyone in the team an enormous sense of satisfaction when we could help people

who desperately needed us. It reminded me of how lucky we are to have almost universal access to high quality eyecare. In the UK there are several optical practices on every high street, but in Zambia there are virtually none.

I'm hoping I can go on another project soon and I would strongly encourage anyone who has ever considered working with Vision Aid Overseas to take the plunge and give it a go. It is definitely worth it.



Got a view?

Have your say by emailing us at bulletin@optical.org or writing to:

**The Editor,
GOC Bulletin,
41 Harley Street,
London W1G 8DJ**