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History of ophthalmology

Feuds between opticians and ophthalmologists

Ophthalmologists have always relied on accessory trades to ply their practice, never having shown any inclination to grind their own lenses. Yet when the spectacle makers' charter was granted by Charles I in 1629, the science of refraction was unknown. As it developed in the late nineteenth century, both craftsman and ophthalmologist began to step into the new field. Unsurprisingly, they soon clashed, and the optician/ophthalmologist feud was reported in the medical press in more colourful terms than we would venture today!

The editor of the *Ophthalmologist* reported with distaste that a Kent optician was advertising 'such elaborate apparatus in his "consulting rooms" that he was able to give the best advice in every respect of the visual organs.' It is reported that this 'optician evidently desires to set up as an ophthalmic surgeon.' The editor hopes that his 'surgical proclivities will not lead him into the clutches of the law'.

The opticians' use of private sight testing rooms, to 'ape the consulting rooms of the medics' was widely criticised in medical journals. At more than one point, the 'audacity of baser members of the optical trade' is described as astonishing.

Nevertheless, it was clear that legislation on these new 'opticians' would be necessary, and Britain, France, and the United States began deciding on terms. On 27 May 1908, New York state legally recognised 'sight testing opticians', a fact which was reported in the *Ophthalmoscope* with the comment – 'more's the pity!'

This sarcasm may have been prompted by an epidemic of exuberant publicity by 'opticians', such that even *The Opticians' Trade Journal* promised to check up on 'unfortunate advertising'. The ophthalmologists took to reporting more fraudulent examples themselves. For example, the (large) poster 'Does your child complain of headache? It is probably eye defect. Consult us – we are opticians!' probably raised the blood pressure of a good number of medics.

To their credit, the 'Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers' undertook to curb this, although they threatened that having done so, they would deal harshly with 'people who maliciously slander the optical profession'. No

names were mentioned, but the phrase 'malignant medical groups' was.

By 1911, 24 states in the United States permitted 'optometry'. This situation did not please ophthalmologists, who commented in the journals that 'optometrists would fail to diagnose grave disease', that 'they were not subject to the ethical standards of a learned profession' (ouch!), and that 'their purely commercial outlook prevented them from protecting the public when their own pockets were in question'.

That year, the American Ophthalmological Committee recommended that every medical student be urgently taught to refract, presumably in anticipation of a future scourge of opticians. The French, however, took the medics' side, amending their act of 1892 such that prescribing spectacles by refraction, or indeed selling spectacles at all without a medical doctor's prescription was illegal.

In Britain there was confusion about the opticians' role for a long time, and court cases resulted. A good example from 1911 was that against Richard Thomas, a Manchester optician, who treated a lady with various spectacles over a period of 2 years. On finally consulting an ophthalmologist, the diagnosis of 'conical cornea' was made, and the lady was advised that earlier diagnosis would have helped. The prosecution held that unless an optician could detect disease of the eye, he should not be allowed to prescribe spectacles. The defence asserted that opticians did not profess to diagnose and cure disease, but merely to sell spectacles, and that this fact was widely known to the general public – *caveat emptor!*

As Thomas was advertising as an 'eye specialist' with designated 'consulting hours' this is debatable! The defence further countered that as doctors unanimously regarded opticians as undesirable aliens, all the medical evidence would be biased. Obviously the judge disagreed, fining the unhappy 'eye specialist' £25, presumably to the great delight of the medics.

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