

HEALTH

DISPENSING WISDOM ROGER POPE ON THE VITAL WORK CARRIED OUT BY DISPENSING OPTICIANS

BY VIEL RICHARDSON

When Roger Pope opened the door to his independent opticians in 1987, he could just have been seen as another entrepreneur striking out on his own after several years of learning his trade. While there is an element of truth to this, it turns out that there was a little more behind Roger's decision than a desire for independence.

"I started Roger Pope when the family-run company I was working for in Marylebone was taken over by one of the high street chains," Roger recalls. "We would get a lot of consultants from the Harley Street area sending in prescriptions and they were getting worried that the large chains were not taking quite the necessary care to ensure that prescriptions were being accurately dispensed. It was just a question of time. We allow an hour for an eye test, and then there is the fitting of the frames which can take up to an hour and a half, while others can take only a few minutes.

Harley Street consultants had traditionally used around 10 independent opticians. It was about relationships—getting to know the dispensing opticians they used and the people behind them, and seeing the consistency of their work so they had confidence in sending their patients over. "The disappearance of these opticians was beginning to

concern some of the consultants and they actively encouraged me to set up as an independent because they knew my work," Roger continues.

The word 'dispensing' is important here. Dispensing opticians work in a different field to that of the optometrist, who carries out the eye tests and creates the prescriptions for the lenses a patient needs. "Dispensing opticians are trained in all aspects of lenses from the dispensing perspective," says Roger. "We look at the anatomy of the eye—not as deeply as an optometrist, but we have to understand the workings of the eye in relation to the lens placed in front of it. We also train to do practical things like make frames, repair frames. After the optometrist produces the prescription, it is our job to interpret that prescription and give you the right lenses in the most appropriate frames. The thing is that you can get a very good prescription from an optometrist, but if the glasses are such that you are not looking through the right part of the lens for the right task, then all their good work has been wasted."

Roger's point alludes to something that is often forgotten in the welter of styles and materials that wash in and out of fashion amid the "Do I look good in these?" debates taking place



in opticians up and down the land—that glasses' frames are first and foremost a structural device designed to hold a pair of lenses precisely where they need to be. If they don't do that, then all the technical excellence of the lenses and stylistic joie de vivre of the frames counts for very little. In fact looking through the wrong part of a lens for an extended period will not do your eyes any good at all.

"This is where the frame becomes very important. If you get a good frame fitting then the lens will sit in the right place. If the frame sits down, which is not uncommon, then you are looking through the wrong part of the lens. Not all frames suit all prescriptions—a style of frame that can take one prescription might not be able to take another," Roger explains. "But the look of their glasses is genuinely important for many people's self-esteem, so we want them to leave here with glasses they like. This is why we have frames that come with different bridge sizes, eye sizes, colours, styles, materials. We have nearly 1,000 different styles and types of frame here. But while the designer frames follow the brand's design principles, their structural design must be technically correct. This is why, even though you can see all the frames, our premises are not that easy for browsing. We always sit down with a client when choosing frames."

When it comes to changes in his field over the years Roger is very matter-of-fact about the biggest improvement. "The best change in the area isn't really sexy," Roger says smiling, "but it is the number of lenses that are now available. Years ago if your eyes needed a lot of help, your choice of lenses was really limited, and the frames even more so. Many people were stuck with whatever worked even if they disliked them. Today's lens technology means thinner and more accurately

machined lenses, which means many more people with very effective glasses they like the look and feel of."

Vari-focal lens are an example of this. These allow you to see distant, middle distance and near objects in one lens. In the 1980s, when vari-focals were becoming popular, the fashion was for large frames. Roger points out that unfortunately as the lenses were not as sophisticated as they are now, these large frames actually emphasised the distortion in the lens transition zones, leading to some people complaining about nausea and headaches.

"For vari-focals you have to measure the eyes' optical centres very precisely, the parameters are very narrow," he explains. "You also have to measure where the frame is going to sit very accurately. You have to be very sure that the person is looking through the right portion of the lenses at the right time. But they are a lot more sophisticated today. You can say that you want more reading, or more distance and they can specifically design them for that much more effectively than they could in the past."

What makes a good dispensing optician? For Roger it is part art, part science, part psychology. You need to know and understand lens and frame technology, you have to listen to what the client says, you have to be able to read their facial structure. There is also a certain awareness of style involved, as you have to be able to choose frames that will suit a person's features.

LINKS

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"Communication is vital," Roger tells me. "I have said to people, 'Take those off they look awful'—and people tell me I'm the first optician to say that. But I'm not going to let you go out with something that didn't fit and looked wrong, because that is our reputation."

The nature of that reputation can be seen in the royal warrant crest that sits above the Roger Pope logo. "We do have a royal warrant, but you never really know how it comes about, as you have to get referred by someone," Roger says. "One day you get a phone call from the palace asking for your services. You then have to be used regularly for at least several years before you can make an application. After supplying for several years it was suggested that we put in an application, so I did and it was accepted. Mine is for services to the Queen. Personally there is a sense of pride in being offered it and a feeling that you have reached a certain level of expertise and repute. It is a genuine honour."

So while they might be generally sold on their fashion merits, those specs are actually a very sophisticated piece of equipment, doing a hugely important job. Roger Pope and his team have understood this for years. If you want to know just how well they understand it, just take another look at the crest above the door.