



# EXPLORING OPTOMETRY FROM NEW ANGLES



Learn about the latest challenges and opportunities for the soon-to-be and new optometrist.

BY EASY ANYAMA AND MARIE HUEGEL, OD, FAAO

**W**elcome to our column, where we aim to share our insights, experiences, and discoveries as we navigate the early stages of our journey in this dynamic profession. Whether you're a seasoned practitioner or just starting out, we hope our fresh perspectives on the ever-changing world of eye care leave you with some food for thought.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Optometry is constantly evolving, bringing new opportunities to enhance the care we provide. Although we remain the public's first line of defense

against blindness, the profession is expanding to introduce exciting new possibilities. We stand at the forefront of eye care, and with advances in treatment, the rich diversity of practice modalities, and our growing integration into the primary health care team, it is an exciting time to be at the beginning of our careers.

That said, the field is not without its challenges. Corporate and retail eye care giants are reshaping public perception, often undermining the importance of proper eye care. Issues such as student debt, high staff turnover, and changing values are affecting private practice. It is also

unclear how emerging technology, such as AI, will shape our profession. And vision insurance of course still makes us want to pull our hair out. These are just a few of the topics we will cover throughout this column, but first, we'll start with the aspects of optometry we know and love.

## THE JOYS

### The Modern Optometry Practice



My passion lies at the intersection of clinical practice, business strategy, and innovation in optometry. What

are the best practices for establishing clinics that excel both medically and financially? I am eager to explore various operational models within the field to identify what drives their success. Key factors such as great leadership, effective teamwork, and a service-oriented culture are well-known drivers of accomplishment, yet their application is evolving with changes in the health care landscape and the next generation of eye care providers.

### Technology and Innovation



The integration of AI, telehealth, and 3D printing is shaping an exciting future for our field. As doctors, we

have our favorite tools and those we'd rather avoid (manual keratometer, I'm looking at you). However, just as we've evolved from past instruments, I am thrilled to be entering the profession at a time when we might witness the introduction of revolutionary tools. Enhanced diagnostic capabilities, highly personalized patient care, and streamlined practice processes are just around the corner. Moreover, the role of optometry in the development of next-generation technology will be pivotal in determining whether we can effectively use these tools.

### Diverse Prospects



The beauty of our profession lies in a vast array of career pathways: primary care, specialty contact lenses,

ocular surface disease, low vision, industry, corporate settings, practice management, and beyond—these can be both invigorating and overwhelming. How does one discern the ideal trajectory? The overall acceptance to shift or adopt new directions and change concentrations is one of the great things about optometry. My aspiration to delve into private practice stemmed from a desire to

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broaden my expertise, cater to diverse age groups with different ocular conditions, and refine my areas of interest.

Completing a residency served as a pivotal step in this journey, not only significantly enhancing my clinical experience, but also promoting proficiency in interprofessional communication, comanagement with ophthalmologists, and exposure to industry dynamics.

### Beyond Multiple Exam Chairs



My passion for optometry is rooted in the number of ocular manifestations that arise from

systemic diseases, which can be identified during a standard comprehensive eye examination across all demographics. Many optometrists are the first line of detection for various systemic diseases, so collaboration among health care professions is crucial for comprehensive patient care. Pediatricians, primary care physicians, and specialists, such as rheumatologists, often play interconnected roles in managing conditions that may have ocular

manifestations or implications. By working together and sharing information, health care providers can ensure that patients receive the most effective and coordinated care.

### THE CHALLENGES

#### Staff Turnover and Insurance Coverage



As a newer optometrist in practice only 3 years, I find myself both enamored and frustrated with

the field of optometry—is it too early to feel this way? The challenges with insurance, staff turnover, and patient expectations are common in many health care professions, but seem to be increasing and provide ever-shifting difficulties. Insurance issues, such as decreasing coverage and growing prior authorization requests, can indeed be time-consuming and challenging for both staff members and providers managing their own insurance matters. Staff turnover can be disruptive as well, especially in a small practice, where every team member plays a vital role. Strategies to help reduce turnover,

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such as implementing a positive work environment, professional growth and development, and employee engagement initiatives, are more crucial than ever since the pandemic.

### Decline in Practice Ownership



There seems to be an increasing trend of new graduates who are avoiding even considering practice ownership.

“The business of optometry” seems to be outweighed by the flexibility and work-life balance that comes from employment. When you add the astronomical amount of debt students are taking on, at an average of \$230,000,<sup>1</sup> it is much harder for new doctors to justify additional financial risk associated with ownership in the short term. The trend toward employment

over ownership could have long-term implications on the entrepreneurial spirit within the field.

### THE ROAD AHEAD

It’s clear that optometry is a dynamic field filled with opportunities and challenges, and the conversation is just getting started. The road to a successful optometric career involves continuous learning and adaptation, and we are all up for the challenge. As emerging optometrists, we bring forth fresh perspectives, invigorating the discourse with innovation. Here’s to the synergy of experience and novelty as we navigate the ever-evolving field of optometric practice together!

Looking ahead, we invite you to read our next article on the modern practice, where we will explore the best methods for running and/or contributing to a thriving clinic, balancing clinical excellence with

effective business strategies. Join us as we discover what top professionals do to excel and how we, the new generation, can build on these successes. ■

1. Neufeld A. ODs on Finance 2024 Optometrist Income Report. February 5, 2024. Accessed July 15, 2024. <https://odsonfinance.com/2024-optometrist-income-report/>

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