

Fifty years of independence

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After 50 years in optics, independent optometrist Michael Blackstone (pictured) has certainly made a name for himself. *OT*'s Nikki Withers heads to Beaconsfield to find out more

FEELING SLIGHTLY intimidated? Perhaps. This man is a bit of legend in the industry. From the development of contact lenses to running a multimillion-pound business, optometrist Michael Blackstone has seen vast changes since he started out in the profession. Now working part-time at self-named practice – Michael Blackstone Optometrists – *OT* paid him a visit to learn more about his impressive and enjoyable career.



conference. It was fascinating. Actually, at this conference we think there was a secret service agent staying in the adjacent room to us in our hotel. Three rooms, two for delegates and another for this mysterious gentleman, all sharing the same bathroom. This period of rapid worldwide contact lens development and experimentation was particularly exciting for those of us closely involved. Consequently I was invited to give lectures at UMIST, UWIST and the Barraquer Institute in Barcelona.

market. I didn't want to always fit simple straightforward contact lenses. The consequence of this was that I ended up fitting specialised contact lenses and later moved into behavioural optometry. I think one has to develop something special and cater for a certain part of the market in order to survive and be successful.

What made you decide to become an optometrist?

I come from an optical family; my father was an optician, and became a contact lens pioneer. His interest came about because my mother was a -13 dioptres myope. During the war he fitted her with haptic lenses made from Perspex and later multicurve corneal lenses

Both you and your father feature in Tim Bowden's book *History of Contact Lenses*. Was it your father who inspired your interest in contact lenses?

Yes, undoubtedly. I became involved with early contact lenses in 1963. In 1965 my father and I went to Prague, the home of professor Wichterle, for the world's first International Soft Contact Lens

Rumour has it you were quite a successful businessman...

[Laughs] When I took over the family group I made the decision to strip the company down, dispose of NuSyte contact lens manufacturers and rebuild the optician's group again. We reduced it to nine practices and then built it up to 25. It was then, in 1981, that we sold it to D&A. I started up a small group but I really didn't enjoy it and so sold it and opened up my independent practice in Beaconsfield in 1985, and that's where I've been ever since.

How did you make your business such a success?

I think independent practitioners have to decide which way to go and focus very clearly on their objective and

Do you own the practice now?

No, I sold the practice to Jon Nesbitt three years ago. I have just been working there on a part-time basis – 99 days a year.

What is behavioural optometry?

Behavioural optometry is about relating vision to how the body works. It is what gave me a new lease of professional life in my late 50s. I once again had the professional ability to improve and dramatically change people's lives. We train people to understand and overcome specific visual problems such as tracking and fixating. It is well known that problems like myopia and hypermetropia can result in poor performance in the classroom, but children can have many other visual problems, such as poor ability to change their focus from, for example, the board to a book and back again, poor accommodation, convergence insufficiency, poor tracking, that kind of

thing. These can result in the child having to make extra efforts to complete the task and subsequently interfere with their information processing. We give these children simple exercises and training which will enable them to overcome these visual and visual motor difficulties.

Have you had much success with this?

Oh yes. One of the biggest improvements I've seen was in a boy who played cricket for England under 16s. He stuck his distance charts up by the TV and every time the adverts came on he did his eye exercises. He improved his jump accommodation no end in about four weeks. And he wasn't wasting his time, well, I suppose he was by watching TV, but it really transformed his life. Unfortunately it has also meant when carrying out assessments, I often observed the shortcomings and neglect of fellow optometrists who had failed to perform basic test investigations.

What do you find most rewarding about your work now compared to running a multi-million pound business?

The rewards are very different. The staff had great relationships in all of the practices. We used to have conferences in wonderful places such as Florence, Jersey and the Lake District. But now I just like knowing that I can make a difference and also, personally, get to know my patients, some of whom have become friends. Just last week I visited a

lady in Leeds, and when she introduced me to her 35-year-old daughter, who I had not seen since she was young, she said: "You were the man that saved my Dad's life." That was something quite special.

"I didn't want to always fit simple straightforward contact lenses"

What changes have you seen in the profession?

When we used to fit contact lenses, we didn't have much of the equipment you see behind you like topographers or refined slit lamps. Computers along with OCT now give you a vast amount of information in order to make more appropriate professional decisions. It's also great to see soft lenses really developing into new products such as daily disposable astigmatism correcting and multifocal lenses. You know, it has always amazed me how present and future developments and production methods are often based on former designs of days gone by – for example, the current 'new' scleral and mini-scleral lens designs, manufactured to a much greater accuracy from vastly improved materials.

Where do you think the profession is heading?

I wouldn't like to say; I just know I get fed up with all of the paperwork and the derisory sight test fees [*laughs*]. Like I said earlier, I think independents will need to specialise more and more. You can liken it to restaurants competing with McDonalds

– but in optics. Optometrists and DOs have to specialise their practices, if they want to compete successfully both professionally and financially. But then the independent has to be in a place

that they can do or create that individual image. It's been fascinating to see the steady developments in the field. It is a whole new ball game. I think that what we are talking about today will be old hat in 10 to 20 years time.

What are your plans for the future?

[*Smiles*] I think that when I retire (March 22) I will do some weekly charity work; I already play golf three times a week, so I'll continue that. My wife and I go away a lot – she's an art dealer, so we go on holidays at different times to her exhibitions in London, Hong Kong, New York and Singapore. We also have three children and four grandchildren to keep us occupied. As to whether I'll continue my relationship with optics or not, I really don't know.

Any final comments?

Just that I am delighted that Jon Nesbitt and his wife Nikki are developing behavioural optometry to the next level in this practice, and hope that they will continue to be very successful.

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