

COMMENTS ON THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE STUDY OF OPTOMETRY HISTORY

David A. Goss, O.D., Ph.D.

Emeritus Professor of Optometry
Indiana University

dgoss@indiana.edu

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ABSTRACT

An online search for articles on the history of optometry and other healthcare fields is reported and is compared to a similar search conducted in 2007. A possible explanation for comparatively fewer articles on the history of optometry is explored. Brief comments are made on the significance of optometry history, along with suggestions on ways to enhance its study.

KEYWORDS

History of healthcare; history of optometry; spectacles; historiography; history of medicine

Optometric services have contributed to the comfort and wellbeing of humankind since the invention of spectacles in the late thirteenth century. The evolution of the spectacle making craft learned by apprenticeship into the present-day scholarly profession, the many dedicated optometric practitioners over the years, and the numerous challenges along the way make optometry history a potentially rich area of study. Optometrists who understand their history may be more prepared for future changes, may take pride in the profession's achievements, may be better able to communicate the profession's contributions to society, and may gain a respect for the many persons who contributed to the profession. But is the optometric profession doing an adequate job of studying and communicating its history?

One potential method for assessing the current status of the study of optometry history may be to compare the numbers of articles published on optometry history with the number of articles on the history of other disciplines. A search was conducted for articles on the history of various healthcare professions and medical specialties using the following databases available online through the Indiana University Libraries: History of Science, Technology, and Medicine; CINAHL; History Reference Center; and MEDLINE. The number of articles retrieved for the period from 2007 to 2018 are given in Table 1.

Those findings can be compared to the results of a similar search reported in an article in the January 2007 issue of

Table 1. Numbers of articles on the history of various disciplines published 2007-2018*.

History of	Number of Articles
Optometry	80
Ophthalmology	290
Dentistry	766
Chiropractic	474
Pharmacy	874
Neurology	731
Audiology	67
Podiatry	59

**Retrieved from searching four databases available online through the Indiana University Libraries*

Hindsight. Table 2 summarizes the ratios of numbers of articles on the history of various disciplines to those on the history of optometry. Those ratios suggest that we have made some progress since 2007, but we could hope for further improvement. Although there are more dentists than optometrists (almost five times as many in the United States based on a quick internet search), that is unlikely to account completely for the difference between dentistry and optometry in numbers of history articles.

Table 2. Ratios of numbers of articles on the history of various disciplines to the number of articles on the history of optometry.

	1970s-2006	2007-2018
Ophthalmology: Optometry	11:1	3.6:1
Dentistry: Optometry	18:1	9.6:1
Pharmacy: Optometry	55:1	11.1
Neurology: Optometry	22:1	9:1

Another possible sign of progress in recent years is the increase in the number of authors in *Hindsight* since 2007, although this may be due in part to our change from a newsletter format to a journal format. In the 18 years from 1990 to 2007, there were 14 different authors of material in *Hindsight*. In the 12 years from 2007 to 2018, there have been 58 different persons who wrote for *Hindsight*. Again there is still room for improvement because we could hope for more than 58 different authors over 48 issues.

Why haven't optometrists been interested in their history?

One possible explanation for the seemingly apologetic attitude of some optometrists toward their history is the tendency for each generation to downplay or diminish the intellect, capabilities, and expertise of previous generations. Is this tendency somehow exaggerated among some optometrists due to the very rapid changes in optometry in the twentieth century and could it explain, in part, a lack of interest in optometry history?

A reasonable point for the conceptual origin of optometry is the invention of spectacles. Henry W Hofstetter wrote that when "just before the turn of the 14th century, a clever artisan fashioned a riveted frame out of wood, bone, leather, or other available material to support a pair of thin biconvex lenses which he or she had ground and polished and tested by trial and error on the nose of a presbyopic scribe, optometry was born. It was definitely a service to improve sight."¹

Writing in 1968, Hirsch and Wick² divided optometry history into two periods: (1) early optometry, beginning about 1300, just after the invention of spectacles, a 600 year period of time during which the craft of spectacle making developed, quality and knowledge of lenses improved, and rudimentary concepts of vision testing for proper lens application

evolved, and (2) modern optometry, beginning about 1890, a period of time during which the term optometry came into vogue, optometry schools and organizations were formed, optometry licensure laws were passed, optometric care became progressively more advanced, and optometry completed its remarkable transition from spectacle making trade to scholarly profession.

Now half a century after Hirsch and Wick's book was published, we could possibly recognize a third more recent period of optometry history, which we might call expanded-scope optometry, a period of time in which optometry has changed from a drugless profession and assimilated into its culture and practice models some aspects of care that previously had been exclusively the province of the medical profession.³ Optometric services have benefited humankind in each of these periods of our history and there is much to learn from each of them.

Spectacles as one of the world's greatest inventions

Henry Hofstetter quoted American Optometric Association librarian Maria Dablemont as saying: "The disavowal of optometrists' image as providers of eyeglasses has led the profession to dismiss its fine heritage."⁴ Yet when we consider the impact of eyeglasses on society, there are few more important objects in human history.

The Zeiss Company proclaims on their website that: "According to experts, glasses are the fifth most important invention since mankind discovered fire and invented the wheel. ...The invention of glasses is considered a crucial step forward in humanity's cultural history."⁵ Management consultant and author Peter Drucker wrote that: "The one major contribution to health care which the West made in the Middle Ages was the invention of spectacles."⁶ Historical research by librarian Robert Jordan⁷ led him to the conclusion that eyeglasses rank with the printing press as the most important technological aids to libraries. And surely every optometrist experiences on a regular basis the appreciation of patients for the benefits they gain through the use of properly prescribed spectacles.

If spectacles are such an important element of human civilization, why aren't we celebrating our heritage as the pioneers of spectacle lens prescription? Adding to that optometry's contributions in contact lenses, vision therapy, low vision, and other areas, there are many reasons to be proud.

Henry Hofstetter wrote that clinical optometry has “an honorable heritage, albeit under the rubrics of ophthalmic optician, sight-testing, spectacle maker, and other identities.”⁸ Barry Cole observed that optometry has a history “that spans 700 years and has as many intriguing stories as any other health profession.”⁹ We can do a better job of exploring that honorable heritage and telling those intriguing stories.

Suggestions

The mission of the Optometric Historical Society is to protect and promote the historical legacy of the profession of optometry. Moving forward, how do we better preserve, honor, study, and disseminate our history? The following may be some helpful steps:

1. Attempt to advance in our colleagues and students a correct knowledge, a pride, and an appreciation of the unique heritage of optometry.
2. Encourage optometrists, vision scientists, or other potentially interested persons to join the Optometric Historical Society or provide them with gift memberships. Encourage optometry and vision science libraries to subscribe to *Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History*.
3. Write your personal professional reminiscences for publication and/or write up findings of historical research that you have conducted for publication. We are always looking for good quality articles for *Hindsight*.
4. Encourage and support the maintenance of suitable archival collections by optometric institutions and organizations. Give items of historical interest to an appropriate archival repository.

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