“20/20” on the Snellen chart has a special resonance for Doctors of Optometry—“normal acuity” is how we’ve explained it to countless numbers of our patients. For many of us in the profession, this is the perfect time for Hindsight: The Journal of Optometry History to continue a visionary approach and to launch the year 2020 by publishing two issues on women in optometry.

So, why is the title for this Guest Editorial, “Are Women Ruining Optometry?” In 1983, an article was published entitled “Will Women Ruin Optometry?” I was five years into my career at that time, and, as you might imagine, the article caught my attention, especially since my valued and accomplished colleague, Dr. Susan Oleszewski, was prominently featured in the publication. I’ve thought about the article many times over the years, but it had been some time since I had actually read it. Thanks to the efforts and interest of Kirsten Hébert, Heritage Services Specialist for the Archives & Museum of Optometry, I had the opportunity to carefully re-read the article very recently.

The subtitle of the article was “Experts ponder the impact of female doctors.” In short, the article describes the expected rise of women in the profession of optometry consistent with the emerging feminization of other health professions. I would say that that the article, while posing the question “Will Women Ruin Optometry?”, had already seemed to conclude that the answer was “yes,” not inconsistent with societal perspectives at the time. The article spoke of women “invading” the profession and the “emotional strain” that would result. It contained quotes from anonymous sources, including one colleague citing an anticipated “flak” in the profession.

Fast forward nearly 40 years. Although much has changed in society, our profession, and the health care arena, concerns remain about continuing gender differences in professional opportunities and advancement. Many articles have been published about women in optometry, including the increasing number of female optometry students and practitioners. Women have achieved, and are achieving, leadership positions in all arenas in organized and academic optometry as well as the ophthalmic industry. More recent publications even include an electronic newsletter issuance by the American Optometric Association titled “The Future is Female.” It is interesting to have seen the transition from “Ruin” to “Future” over the course of my career.

At the personal level, I was at the front end of the substantive shift toward gender diversity in our profession. In my graduating class, the Indiana University School of Optometry Class of 1978, women comprised 23% of the student cohort (15/65). Fortunately, I had wonderful support from family members and friends as I considered my goal of becoming a health care professional. As my career unfolded, I was fortunate to be part of optometry’s expanding scope into the use of therapeutic pharmaceutical agents, which was a very exciting time. As the demographics of our profession were changing, I had the opportunity to accomplish some “female firsts” in optometric education and in the profession. And I am truly fortunate to have wonderful male mentors and supporters: Dr. Daniel Gerstman, Dr. Louis J. Catania, Dr. John Amos, Dr. Murray Fingeret, the late Dr. David Sullins, the late Dr. Irwin Suchoff, and colleagues in the Indiana Optometric Association, to name just a few. Along the way, when I encountered obstacles that I felt were related to my gender? Definitely. Did this substantially discourage or dissuade me? No. Was I also the beneficiary of new opportunities because I was at the front end of changing demographics and male colleagues recognized the importance of broader inclusivity? Absolutely.

While I have personally not been one to focus on gender issues in optometry, and because, in many ways, I view the presence of more women in our profession to be a natural transition reflective of societal change, I came to realize that the issue of gender in optometry is noticed by many, especially more junior female colleagues. So, as I benefitted from having wonderful mentors, I also found myself, either consciously or subconsciously, having opportunities to serve as a mentor and role model to female optometry students and colleagues as a result of having completed one of the profession’s earliest residency programs, by successfully practicing medical optometric care, by visibly providing continuing education lectures, and by serving in organized optometry and academic leadership roles.

Now back to 2020. Are women ruining optometry? The answer, I believe, is a resounding “No.” The evidence is all around us and is especially apparent in the wonderful biographies and memoirs of female colleagues that comprise this issue and the coming April issue of Hindsight. The memoir submitted by Dr. Libby Sukoff is especially poignant because she was quoted in the 1983 article while serving as chair of the New York board of optometry.
at that time. These inspiring stories illustrate their dedication, perseverance, accomplishments, and many "firsts" as female optometry students, practitioners, and leaders despite encountering obstacles inherent in change and as mirrored in our profession. Their efforts and success leave a legacy from which we all benefit and that is contributed to by female colleagues every day.

The submission of this Guest Editorial has provided an opportunity for me to reflect on the issue of women in optometry. If demographic trends continue toward the feminization of entering optometry students and ultimately opticometric practitioners, it is interesting to consider that women have the potential of transitioning from the prospect of ruining optometry to the potential of continuing to raise optometry.

Much has been written over the years about the interpersonal styles and leadership attributes of men and women, yet each of us is different irrespective of our gender association. And, the expanding diversity of our profession beyond gender is vitally important. My hope / encouragement is that each current and future optometric student, resident, practitioner, and leader commit to, and actively demonstrate both individually and collectively, the following attributes to help ensure the vitality and stature of the profession of optometry:

- Actively embrace a caring, patient-centered approach
- Project confidence
- Practice strong communication skills, including active listening
- Model a dedication to excellence
- Tell and show who we are and what we do, and our role in the health care arena
- Commit to inclusivity
- Value constructive debate while fostering a culture of unity and civility
- Unlearn stereotypes that interfere with interpersonal skills and interactions
- Collaborate, both intra- and inter-professionally
- Serve as a mentor and positive role model who supports caring and leading
- Foster a sense of community
- Be action-oriented, especially in envisioning / articulating optometry's future
- Always be passionate about the profession
- Celebrate the contributions of the optometric profession throughout its history

If we consider the Snellen chart parallels with the coming calendar years in the 21st century, the risk is that our "acuity" may not improve chronologically since the year "2020" is ultimately followed by 2030, 2040, etc. Let us continue to set the clarity of "2020" in our individual and professional sights.

References

Letter to the Editor:

When I saw the photos of Dr. James S. Wahl and Dr. William C. Ezell on the cover of the July, 2019 issue of Hindsight, I just had to read it all, because I always looked up to and admired both when I was a young man and now as an old man! This wonderful issue of Hindsight made me realize that I am part of optometric history and so proud to have met and known so many of our leaders over the past 55 years that I have practiced optometry.

I graduated in 1964 from Southern College of Optometry (SCO) at age 26. My wife Michele and I arrived in Griffin, Georgia in the summer of my graduation year to do a three month “Internship” with Dr. W. Randolph Gilbert, a prominent optometrist and Georgia optometry board member who I had not known previously. I think the man who fostered my interest in optometry, Dr. Edward H. Shannon, Sr., from my hometown of Gainesville, Georgia, had something to do with it. Dr. Shannon will always be my original sponsor and a person whom I idolized.

I was excited about the internship, but scared, as my wife was pregnant with our first son who was to be born that November. Dr. Gilbert had many interns before me, most of them becoming leaders in our profession and sadly, most of them now deceased. Dr. Gilbert paid me only $50 per week, minus taxes! My wife and I rented a small apartment which cost more than I was being paid, but our parents were very generous, and we had saved money from Michele’s teaching third grade in Memphiis where she made a whopping $240 a month during my years at SCO.

Later in the summer of 1964, I had been seeing patients and learning from both Dr. Gilbert and his optician for several weeks. I must have been doing a pretty good job, because one day Dr. Gilbert asked me if I would like to go up to Spartanburg, South Carolina with him to take the South Carolina Board exam. He picked me up the next morning in his sleek Rolls Royce Silver Cloud.

South Carolina in 1964 had zero applicants to take their optometry board exam. This was surprising because it was common practice back then to take exams in adjoining states. Both Dr. Gilbert and I passed and shortly afterwards received our lovely signed certificates of licensure to practice in the state of South Carolina. I was the only new graduate to be licensed there in 1964 and my license number was 432. All of the members of South Carolina board at that time, including Dr. Bill Ezell, are now deceased. I paid my out-of-state dues for more than 30 years and left that framed license on my office wall the entire time.

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