INTRODUCTION
The word optometry has been in use since the 1860’s and 1870’s but the title optometrist was used much less frequently. However, until the legalization of the profession began, the term used most frequently was optician. For more than 50 years the profession of optometry was harassed with indecision and lack of uniformity in acquiring a title with which to designate its members. Originally the work of optometry represented a special phase of the field of opticianry, so those who performed refractions were already known as opticians. As the field of opticianry expanded, several groups of workers in the field began to call themselves “manufacturing opticians”, “dispensing opticians”, and “refracting opticians”.

As the qualifications for the “refracting opticians” were increased and rapidly differentiated from the requirements of those entering other branches of opticianry, the desirability of acquiring a separate title became apparent. The lack of adequate professional organization and cooperation left the problem of designation to the individual practitioner. From this dilemma arose a number of self-selected designations such as eye specialist, refractionist, optician, eye doctor, vision specialist, ophthalmic optician, eye consultant just to name some of the titles utilized. Obviously, such a variety of titles left the public confused.

MEDICAL ENCROACHMENT
Encroachment of Oculists
It is unclear when optometrists first used the title Doctor of Optometry. Clearly the opticians, during the 1860’s through the 1890’s, began to feel the competition from oculists as the oculists encroached on an area of care that was unregulated, but had been the optician’s area of expertise for 500 years. Physicians could take advantage of short courses offered by a variety of proprietary ophthalmology/ otology programs that began in the 1870’s for those wishing to learn about the eye and, more importantly, how to refract. Physicians could also take advantage of the all-encompassing allopathic title Doctor of Medicine, if indeed they had such a degree, and thus denigrate the ability of the optician/ optometrist.

THE TITLE “DOCTOR” AND DESIGNATIONS OTHER THAN “OPTOMETRIST”

Opticist
The first deliberate attempt to establish some uniformity with respect to what to call the “refracting optician” was made by Prentice in 1896. He defined the practice of optometry as follows: “The employment of subjective and objective means to determine the accommodative and refractive states of the eye and the scope of its functions in general, or the act of adapting glasses to the eye using such skilled means as will determine their choice.” He copyrighted the term opticist and wrote several articles in an attempt to get the word adopted as a uniform title. However, he was unable to bring about any reasonable degree of acceptance of the term. Nevertheless, it was perhaps the first indication that he was interested in the development of an independent profession. Hirsch and Wick mentioned in a footnote that in their opinion the choice of the word optometrist instead of opticist was an unfortunate one. They believed Prentice’s term was far the better one for the profession which was to develop.

Confusion by the Public
During the early years in the development of the profession as it moved from “refracting opticians” to optometry there was confusion in the public’s mind as to how to address the non-medical refractionist. As early as 1889, the Philadelphia Optical College started offering the Doctor of Optics degree to refracting opticians who completed a short course in refraction.
Physicians, especially oculists, were in many situations providing the same service as the optometrists. Thus, it was not uncommon for the optometrist to be addressed as “Doctor”. During this time in America there was developing a fairly indiscriminate use of the title “Doctor” to address anyone in any field of endeavor even remotely related to the health and healing arts. In this atmosphere most optometrists made little attempt to resist this form of address.1

**Background of John C. Eberhardt**

The Early Years. John C. Eberhardt was born in 1857 in Muhlhausen, Germany, and attended school there until the age of nine when his family emigrated to Dayton, Ohio. At age 16 he was gaining apprenticeship experience in a foot-powered optical shop while simultaneously continuing his education to become a civil engineer. After completion of his education, he spent two years as a civil engineer with the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, two more years as a U.S. Deputy Surveyor in several western states and territory, and another year as a city engineer for Pueblo, Colorado. In 1882, at age 25, he returned to Dayton to accept a position with a jewelry firm where he spent most of his time selling and fitting glasses.9

Disturbed by the crude methods in vogue in the optical business at that time, Eberhardt took short courses in Kansas City and Cleveland, and studied books such as Hartridge10 and other publications to improve his skills. He eventually enrolled in and completed, a Northern Illinois College of Ophthalmology and Otology (NICOO) correspondence course. This college began admitting non-medical candidates who had optical experience in 1898 some 26 years after its founding.6

Involvement in the AAO. Eberhardt joined the American Association of Opticians (AAO), the predecessor of the American Optometric Association (AOA) in 1899, he gave a paper on keratometry at the Chicago Convention in 1901 and was elected there to the first Board of Regents. During the ensuing year he successfully proposed the establishment of the Physiological Section and was elected its first President. In that connection he was instrumental in the establishment of the AAO’s library, which eventually evolved into the International Library, Archives and Museum of Optometry (ILAMO). In 1903, he was elected President of the AAO, at which time he had just completed a term as President of the Ohio Association.9

Eberhardt’s most recognized single accomplishment for the profession was his proposing, promoting, and piloting the adoption of the terms “optometrist” and “optometry” as the professional identity. This was accomplished almost single-handedly by him through lectures, published articles, correspondence, resolutions, legislative efforts, and even prevailing on the publishers of Webster’s Dictionary to include these new terms and their definitions.8

Eberhardt and the Title of Optometrist. Gregg credits Eberhardt as being responsible for the definition of the word optometry and the title optometrist. Eberhardt had joined the AAO in 1899 and four years later during the 1903 convention at Atlantic City, New Jersey he first suggested that the constitution be so amended to adopt the use of the word optometry as meaning, “The science which treats of the philosophy of light and sight and the art of determining the visual status of the human eye and the neutralization of abnormal conditions by lenses”. Optometrist then would be defined as “one skilled in the practice of optometry”.2 Eberhardt did not suggest the adoption of the term at once, but that it be discussed and considered for a year. The Nominating Committee idea was not in use in Atlantic City and there were many nominations from the floor but Eberhardt was, based on his many good works on behalf of the Association, also elected fourth president.2

Important Achievements. During the sixth annual AAO convention in 1904 at Milwaukee, Wisconsin the important matter of having a House of Delegates and state society affiliation was agreed on by those in attendance. The other significant achievement was the adoption of the word optometrist. Eberhardt had brought this matter up the prior year but there was still some disagreement, however, the resolution was passed in 1904. Gregg mentions that curiously some men were using the term optometrist but seemed to have a fear of its official acceptance.2 However, there was considerable discussion following the meeting in which it was now clear that this term applied to refracting opticians only.2

Response to Ongoing Debate. Having received both credit and blame for introducing the word optometrist to identify the refracting optician, Dr. Eberhardt responded to a letter published in the Optical Journal and Review of Optometry in 1920.11 In his response Dr. Eberhardt denied he had ever claimed the credit of having coined the word optometrist. In Ohio, during the winter of 1902, when preparing for introduction of an optometry measure, the Ohio Association Legislative Committee learned legislation could not be obtained for the regulation of optics which the courts had designated as a trade.11

John C. Eberhardt, president in 1903-04 of the American Association of Opticians, the organization that became the American Optometric Association, and the leading proponent for adoption of the term optometrist. (Image from the Archives and Museum of Optometry and The AOA Foundation)
The Ohio Legislative Committee, which he chaired, was of the opinion that optometry was the application of optical principles through technical devices and methods for ascertaining the visual status of the human eye, the adaptation of corrective lenses, making prerequisite an appreciation of the eye and its various associate functions, and a comprehensive knowledge of physics and mathematics so far as these entered into the optical aspects of human vision.\(^\text{11}\)

As a result of the foregoing, the committee was advised to determine a word to designate the practitioner of optometry, as defined by the committee. Optometrist seemed the logical derivative of the word optometry and this term was at the time submitted to a number of representative men in optometry, also to various authorities as was considered proper and acceptable.\(^\text{11}\)

Summary of Eberhardt's Career. Dr. Eberhardt was a role model of the pioneer professional optometrist. He was scholarly, forthright, scientific, and personable. He contributed frequently and constructively to the technical and professional optometric literature of his time. Not surprisingly he was widely accorded numerous honors in the U. S. and abroad. Likewise, he was active in his community by serving on the Dayton Board of the Education, Governor of the Aero Club of America, a 32°\(^\text{rd}\) degree Mason, and Chairman, of the Ohio State Board of Optometry. Dr. Eberhardt died in 1927 after suffering for five years with a terminal illness.\(^\text{9}\)

**Klein's 1941 recollection**

Emanuel Klein said he introduced the term optometrist in 1896, whereas A. G. Tellner believed S. B. Milliard coined the term sometime prior to 1907.\(^\text{11}\) In the 50th Anniversary issue of the Optical Journal and Review of Optometry were articles, announcements, and advertisements on a wide variety of topics from the years 1891 to 1941. One of the brief articles included in this anniversary issue was the recollection on the adoption of the term optometrist. By the time of this publication in 1941, Dr. Emanuel Klein was one of the few remaining charter members of the American Association of Opticians (AAO), the forerunner of the American Optometric Association (AOA).

Dr. Klein had pursued his studies in Vienna, Austria before moving to the U.S. in 1888. On moving to America he opened a practice in Cincinnati, Ohio in which he practiced until the age of 82. Dr. Klein and his colleague, Dr. John C. Eberhardt, who practiced in Dayton, Ohio, were early members of the AAO and active in the association.\(^\text{13}\)

**Adoption of the Title Optometrist**

According to this brief article, Klein and Eberhardt were chiefly responsible for adoption of the title "Optometrist". Prentice claimed the title optometrist originated with a state senator, the Honorable Benjamin M. Wilcox from Albany, New York who sponsored the Optometry Bill in the New York State Senate.\(^\text{13}\) However, it seems likely the term optometrist or, perhaps more rarely, optometrist was in use before this time.\(^\text{2}\)

Klein recalled that at the sixth annual convention of the AAO held at the Royal Palace Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1903 the following actions occurred. Dr. John Eberhardt introduced the terms "optometry" and "Opto-Metrist", previously suggested to him by Dr. Klein. Action on adoption of the titles was deferred until the sessions of the following year to be held at the Plankinton House in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.\(^\text{14}\)

According to Klein, Dr. Eberhardt, then President of the AAO, reintroduced the motion in 1904. After being seconded by Dr. Harry P. Holmes, and discussed by Drs. Peter Scholler and B. B. Clark among others, the term "Optometrist" was adopted with the definition "one skilled in the practice of physiological optometry."

Since Dr. Eberhardt had passed away in 1927, some 14 years before Dr. Klein's recollection, Klein's recall may not have been accurate or indeed things may have occurred as he recalled. Klein's recollection is the only time he is credited with suggesting the terms.

**Other Versions**

Hammon has stated that while the credit for naming the profession has been given to Andrew J. Cross, John Eberhardt and others, there is no question but the real credit for final adoption of the title "Op to’metrist", as it was then pronounced, later to become "Op tom’etrist" must be largely given to Boger.\(^\text{15}\) Boger reported in the Optical Journal of June 1904, "One of the points to be thoroughly discussed will be the best name to give to those who professionally test eyes for refractive errors. It is well to thoroughly discuss this question, but it seems to us that it is already settled. In those States (Minnesota, California, and North Dakota) which have laws governing this line of work the term is "Optometrist", also in those states where these laws are being agitated the same truth holds."\(^\text{15}\)

It is also equally likely that as Editor of the Optical Journal, Boger was simply reporting the discussions held at the annual AAO conference. Perhaps he was interpreting what he had heard through his own perceptions of what the future would hold related to this matter.

**Prentice’s View of Titles**

Even after the enactment of the New York Optometry Practice Act was passed in 1908, Prentice continued to use the title of Physical Eye Specialist instead of the title optometrist. Likewise, in his early career, he thought the clamor to be titled doctor or be associated with the category of doctorate was misplaced confidence.\(^\text{16}\)

**ADOPTION OF THE TITLE DOCTOR**

Many state associations drew up resolutions condemning the use of the title doctor by optometrists. Even until about 1915 the officials of the AOA regularly expressed their sentiments against its use. A few leaders persisted, however, in promoting its use and over a period of more than 25 years gradually gained enough support, especially from those who had received the title legitimately, from an acknowledged optometry college or school. This finally ended the embarrassment of optometrist themselves not knowing whether to call their own colleagues “Dr.” or “Mr.”\(^\text{1}\)

**Conferring the Doctor of Optometry Degree**

Dr. Albert Fitch had a remarkable and productive optometric career.\(^\text{17}\) In 1922 Dr. Fitch, President of the Pennsylvania State
College of Optometry (PSCO), began work to secure the power to bestow the doctorate degree on its graduates. In a meeting with an Assistant Attorney General, Dr. Fitch was told he was “up against a stone wall according to the law.” With this in mind, in early 1923, Fitch and his colleagues introduced a bill in the Pennsylvania State Legislature that would allow PSCO to confer the doctorate degree on its graduates.

![Albert Fitch, president of Pennsylvania State College of Optometry, the first school to grant a Doctor of Optometry degree approved by a state legislature. (Image courtesy Salus University)](image)

Fitch knew that the bill was opposed by some optometrists in the state and at the national level. Nevertheless, he took on this task almost single-handedly. Except on those occasions when he was accompanied by the College’s attorney, Fitch traveled to Harrisburg for three days each week the legislature was in session. As unbelievable as it may sound, the bill met with no opposition from either educational or medical circles and was passed by both houses. After two short letters and one telegram, Dr. Fitch met with Attorney General George W. Woodruff on April 24, 1923. The Attorney General must have been sufficiently impressed with Dr. Fitch’s arguments since he made a favorable recommendation to Governor Pinchot. Within a day or two the Governor had signed the bill into legislation.

Ironically, the Governor had on his desk at the time Fitch met with him, a bill the Governor had introduced into the legislature increasing the requirements for permitting educational institutions to confer such degrees. In Pennsylvania any educational institution desiring the power to confer degrees must make application to a college board composed of the leading educators of the State, selected from the leading educational institutions. Furthermore, before this board can consider a case, the institution making application must own property to the value of at least $500,000, equipment and endowments, not to mention other requirements that no new institution could often meet. Fortunately, the Governor signed the optometry bill before enacting the new more restrictive law.

On Thursday, June 7, 1923 the degree Doctor of Optometry was awarded to 36 members of the graduating class of the PSCO. The commencement exercises were held at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. It was the first time the Doctor of Optometry degree approved by a state legislature was conferred on graduating optometrists. This was a remarkable achievement in light of the fact the College began Monday, October 6, 1919.

**SUMMARY AND COMMENTS**

As the profession of optometry evolved over the decades from a trade to a business to a health care profession, it faced a number of challenges. One of these was the appropriate title the “refracting opticians” should utilize. Related to this issue was the question of what degree should be conferred on graduates. From these beginnings the profession has progressed to the point that nine state associations now have changed their title to include the words Optometric Physician since they are defined as physicians by such federal entitlement programs as Medicare and Medicaid.

This trend is further supported by the fact that optometrists are an important part of the American health care system and provide much of its primary eye care. Many optometrists now diagnose and treat a significant amount of eye disease as part of their daily practice.

**REFERENCES**


ARTICLE JOHN F. AMOS, O.D., M.S., D.O. S.

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