



# OCCS Conference Addresses the Changing Demands of Consumer Complaints

Lively debate and open discussions were features of the recent conference held by OCCS in London. The scheduled programme had to be altered because keynote speaker Earl Howe, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Quality, Department of Health, was called away on urgent duties by Prime Minister David Cameron. This rearrangement opportunely allowed more time for a worthwhile open forum where delegates could shares views and express opinions on the major issues facing the sector.

David Burt, Chairman of OCCS, opened the conference and outlined its main areas of focus; to examine the role and performance of OCCS, to look at ways the industry needs to be aware of the aging population and to explore proposals for developing the complaints service.

After welcoming delegates from the principal practitioners, the major optical bodies and the trade press, as well as the OCCS Independent Committee of Management and its administrative team, David challenged them all to take the opportunity offered by the conference to share their experiences of the changing nature of complaints to help create effective strategies for change.



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OCCS Conference transcript (921 KB)



**Richard Wilshin, OCCS Administrator and Company Secretary presented an overview of the OCCS role and its performance.** Richard explained that the OCCS has been granted an extended mandate by the GOC until 2013, with a compulsory re-tender scheduled for the end of 2012. With other bodies from outside the industry (e.g. dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary) looking to compete in the tendering process, this is bound to be an extremely competitive process.

One of the key OCCS objectives is, therefore, to be certain it is offering real value in the complaints service and that it is seen to be doing so. It must be made clear that this value and expertise can only be offered by an organisation firmly rooted in the industry itself, together with backing and cooperation from the other major optical bodies. The need for better promotion of, and access to, the OCCS has never been greater. Richard went on to explain more about the day to day work of the OCCS. In particular, the general trends in complaints being received and the improvements made in their logging and analysis to enhance the statistics being produced. A full review of the statistics is available in the Annual Report. Richard reported that a typical complaint could arise out of a misunderstanding or lack of clarity between customer and practitioner during a sight test, particularly with 'special offers'. It is the precise terms of these offers that need to be clear from the outset to avoid later problems. 'Buy one, get one free' offers were cited as a typical source of confusion and, ultimately, complaint.

The commercial pressures facing the practitioner were highlighted, because businesses may not be viable if they rely solely on the sight test fee. It is seen as important for businesses to strike a balance between their role as practitioner and the necessity to make additional sales, otherwise this area can become a source for complaints.

The conference was reminded that the level of complaints received by OCCS was actually very small compared with the numbers of sight tests carried out annually. Business are usually adept at solving their own complaints in-house, realising that satisfied customers are likely to be repeat customers. Those businesses that view complaints as an opportunity to improve their systems and clarify their communications are likely to be the most successful in the long term. It was noted during discussion that there is a growing use of internet dispensing companies. This was seen as a possible source of complaints because the greater separation of testing from dispensing is more likely to cause confusion or misunderstanding than where the process is dealt with at the same time.

It was generally concluded that there was need for improved communication to the public, including promoting the quality of service.



**The aging population, with an increasing need for optical services, is not only an opportunity for our industry, but also a significant factor in many of the complaints received by the OCCS.** An improved understanding of the particular needs of this population would clearly be beneficial for our industry and our customers alike.

Margit Physant, Policy Adviser for Health and Wellbeing, Age UK, addressed the conference on just these issues. Whilst many of the issues she outlined are not particular to the optical industry, it is clear that practitioners are often perceived to be in a similar level of trust as doctors and dentists, a position which can imply additional responsibilities.

Regular eye tests are seen as critical because declining vision can be a factor in other problems, such as falls; they can also be used to screen for related medical problems such as glaucoma. It was stressed that whilst vision is important to the aging population, it is by no means their only concern as other functions such as hearing, cognition and mobility decline.

So, whilst the needs of older people are different, they still need to be treated as individuals. We need to be accommodating not condescending! Practitioners are urged to take a fresh look at their businesses and assess how age-friendly they are. For example, how easy is access? Is there parking close by, are there steps to be negotiated? Could domiciliary visits be considered? What about the premises themselves – somewhere to sit, a toilet? And the service being offered - is it unhurried, clear and understandable?

As Margit pointed out, these may seem obvious points, but offering a good service to this growing sector is key to a successful business by maintaining your reputation and ensuring repeat custom.

These points are seen as so important for the industry that it was agreed that Margit would prepare a schedule of issues that the OCCS, in conjunction with the principal optical bodies, could develop into information for their members.