

OPTOMETRY IS A UNIQUE PROFESSION

A. M. Skeffington, OD, DOS., LLD. Written in August 1959.

Optometry has a unique place in the biosocial structure of our times. It is not like any other profession in its relation to the public it serves.

Optometry uses lenses to work its wonders. Today the evidence is clear that the most important thing any person operating in our culture can do is obtain the right pair of glasses for himself. Optometry's uniqueness lies in its knowledge and ability to know what the right and adequate lens is for each person, whether or not that lens power is indicated in the measurable refractive status.

Lenses must be held in a frame. Far from being a disadvantage this is a great advantage. This part of the vitally important lens use has alternately been regarded as a most unpleasant necessity and has been exaggerated into a profiteering extravaganza. Neither attitude expresses the true relationship of the professional man to his patient, and the uniqueness of the tools required by the profession.

There is nothing belittling in the fact that the knowledge required in the use, adaptation, and evaluation of the right and correct lens for each biosocial need takes time, thoughtful consideration, the maintenance of the place of operation, the need for constant self-improvement, and a relationship to the significance and need of the individual patient.

Optometry is a personal thing. There is no problem so close to the very physiological structuring of the person than the ability to see well; in all of the meaning of that term. Optometry, itself, cannot be relegated to a machine-like production line procedure such as one sees in certain clinics or offices where the patient is seen for a few moments, a prescription is written for pharmacological filling and all personal relations avoided.

Optometry does not occupy the same place as the practitioner sought with dread and apprehension.

Optometry is concerned with the whole organism. The mind as well as the more obvious external evidence. The discomforts are of the mind, not the body. Optometry works with the most intimate of all abilities, the abilities to absorb and retain information. Yet, optometry must use lenses and frames and these of many varieties. In considering the mind, optometry takes cognizance that pride in appearance, conformity with the social mores, are as much a part of mental health as is success in school and business.

This must not end in commercialism. It does force consideration of the unique "merchandising" problems of optometry - for the optometrist is faced with the vending of the most significant contribution to the development of the individual and the social order, the extension of the culture more than any other profession.

The factor of the value of knowledge demand prime consideration. The value of the lens is not alone that it is the right lens. Perhaps the greatest value is the assurance that it is not the wrong lens. There is honor and right and reason for pride in the use of the right lens and the right frame for each biosocial requirement. That this knowledge has value would seem to be a truism - yet it has not been adequately evaluated.

There must come to be a proper and realistic attitude towards the idea of profit. Profit is the pay the practitioner takes home to meet the needs of his biosocial world. Everything he handles must yield a profit, in one way or another, adequate to support him in a way that will permit him to give the best possible service to his clientele. Unless his head is held high in the community, he will not be enabled, from within himself, to give the best to his patients. The tools of the profession in the gainful performance of the persons in its care, include the use of lenses and the required frames to hold them. The one exception to this is the contact lens, but with them the applications of the functional philosophy of vision care are required of their value to the patient is diminished and the work of the optometrist sinks to the level of that provided by the ophthalmologist and the optician.

Optometry must set up its own "merchandising" of its own area of service in the community. It cannot ape or attempt to duplicate the realm of behavior of any other profession. It is different from and should operate differently from any other profession.

There are many analogues that could be drawn from other professions, but these are being avoided, for the burden of this paper is the thesis that optometry cannot effectively borrow from any other profession and when it does so, it limits itself and hampers its own growth.

Optometry has to emphasize the importance of vision. Optometry must form its own economic and ethical programs. These cannot be adapted from the economic programs or ethics of any other profession for no other profession is like optometry.

Ward Halstead, Ph.D. (neuro-physio-psychologist from the University of Chicago) said, "When you refract, you are not simply refracting the human eyes, you are refracting the human cortex." Granting that this is true, the optometrist is engaged in the most important functioning of every person. He should, therefore, be the most highly remunerated professional person in the community. That he is not seems likely to stem from the fact he has never formulated his own unique and peculiarly ethical and economic program. Too frequently, he has attempted to borrow from envy and subservient admiration of others. The matter has now become crucial! Optometry must construct its own profession. It must be derived from the uniqueness of optometric contribution to the biosocial demands, needs and welfare of the era and the intellectual times and climate.