

Elaine Styles

FCOptom DipCLP BSc

This optometrist who set up a charity for homeless people thrives on managing a portfolio career.



Describe your current role...

I spend most of my week in an independent practice in Kensington, where I have been for 25 years. It is a fantastic place to work: I have the clinical freedom to practise in the way I want, and access to amazing equipment. I also work at Moorfields in the contact lens clinic one day a week. The rest of the time I work in a voluntary capacity for Vision Care for Homeless People, a charity I helped set up 15 years ago.

What influenced your choice in pursuing these career paths and routes?

I realised early on the difference good eye care can make to people's lives. It can be as simple as giving someone a pair of glasses to help them see clearly again or fitting a patient with a contact lens so they can get on with their life following an accident. It's made me passionate about the profession and what I do.

What qualifications do you have?

I took an optometry degree at City, University of London, before working towards a diploma in contact lenses.

What is your favourite part of your job?

I enjoy speaking to patients about their problems and coming up with solutions.

What inspired you to set up Vision Care for Homeless People?

I saw an advert asking for optometrists to volunteer with homeless charity Crisis. I went along for two days and was hooked. The following Christmas, I was

WHO?
Elaine Styles FCOptom
CURRENT JOB?
Independent practitioner
WHERE?
Private practice,
Vision Care for
Homeless People

asked to manage the eye care service – something I did for five years. In 2003, another optometrist approached me about setting up a year-round service as there was a huge demand for it. We set up at Crisis Skylight and eventually became a registered charity in 2007.

Have you found any specific challenges in working with those who are homeless?

Homeless people can be guarded because they feel vulnerable. They find it hard to trust others, which makes it difficult for them to open up. Sometimes they will not give you a name or any history, so you need to build a relationship with them and explain what you are doing and why.

How do you manage your time in different roles, and what challenges has this caused?

Juggling the demands of three jobs is like buses: everything comes up at once. I often spend mornings and evenings writing referral letters for patients as I don't have time in the day. Balancing work and family life can be difficult. You have to learn to switch off from work; otherwise you end up neglecting other areas of your life.

Fast facts: Conquering nerves for a good cause

Do you have any funny stories about your work?

A patient who reported problems with her vision turned out to be wearing three contact lenses in each eye. She had forgotten to take the first two pairs out at night.



Where would you like to be working in 10 years?

I would like to spend more time in my voluntary role and less time in my paid jobs.

How do you think technology will affect optometry?

Technology is fantastic. We have to embrace it and use it in our practice. Tools such as optical coherence tomography are invaluable in helping to detect diseases early.

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

I come across as a confident person, but I hate speaking in public. I find it nerve-racking. Before I became chair of the charity, I hid at the back of the room, but I can't do that any more.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being an optometrist?

The gift of sight.

What lessons have you learned from your experiences?

Not to be afraid to ask for help. I didn't have a business background when I became chair of the charity, so the former chair coached me. You need to accept that you are not an expert on everything.

What do you think are the challenges for those entering the profession?

There is a lot of choice for people coming into the profession, whether that is working in A&E or a retinal clinic. It can be overwhelming. We need to advise people about their options so they can explore different areas of optometry.

How did you come to be made a Life Fellow of the College at such a young age?

I am still blown away by this. It was an amazing honour to be awarded a Life Fellowship for my work with homeless people. The fellowship also recognised my fundraising efforts for the charity, including cycling 920 miles from Land's End to John O'Groats.

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

My work with Vision Care for Homeless People. The charity now has eight centres across the UK and a mobile unit in east London, and has given eye care provision to more than 14,000 homeless people since it was set up. We are also working with the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment to campaign for increased access to NHS eye examinations, as currently only 30 per cent of the people we see are eligible.

What are your own career development plans and ambitions?

I want to spend more time on Vision Care for Homeless People. My aim is to get to the stage where the charity doesn't need to exist any more, because homeless people are being integrated into NHS eye care provision.

Would you recommend a portfolio career?

Yes, absolutely. A portfolio career keeps things fresh. The main challenge is lack of time. I go to lectures and workshops to keep up with medical advancements, but it means working on evenings and weekends to fit everything in.

What has been the key to your success?

Being organised is important as it helps me to keep on top of my three roles. I also feel that things run more smoothly when you have a good team around you. 🍷

🕒 FURTHER GUIDANCE

For more information about Elaine's work, visit visioncarecharity.org

'Your patient, their health': take a College course to improve skills in managing public health issues at college-optometrists.org/your-patient-their-health

3
top tips
for people
coming
into the
profession
today

1
Try out
different areas
of optometry
Find out what you
enjoy doing.

2
Be a good
listener
You need to take
a full case history
from a patient
and come up
with answers.

3
Take an
interest
in people
– both patients
and colleagues.