

Registrant Survey 2016

Volume Two: Challenges faced by registrants in the
workplace

The General Optical Council

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Enventure Research, an independent research agency, was commissioned by the General Optical Council (GOC) to undertake a registrant survey as part of its commitment to gain an up-to-date understanding of the views of its registrants in order to continue to support them in protecting patients and the public.

The survey which was carried out in the summer of 2016 focused on registrants' perceptions of the GOC - in terms of the services that they deliver and the role that they play in regulating the optical professions - as well as the experience of registrants in the workplace, looking at the challenges that they face and their views on the future of the optical professions.

In total, **4,139 survey responses** were received from 25,929 registrants who were invited to take part, representing a 16% response rate. The returned data was weighted to be representative of the GOC registrant population.

Following the survey, five focus groups and 23 in depth interviews were conducted as part of the qualitative research in order to explore some topics and issues in greater depth. The qualitative research was stratified across the UK to ensure representation, including both urban and rural locations. In total 57 participants took part in the qualitative research.

This report (Volume Two) covers challenges in practice, such as commercial pressure and raising concerns about poor practice, looking at questions related to these topics asked in the survey and the related feedback from the focus groups and in depth interviews. The other two volumes cover the future of the optical professions (Volume One) and the GOC's role and regulatory performance (Volume Three). These three volumes also make up a full report which is also available.

Commercial pressures

The GOC wanted to explore registrants' views on the challenges they faced as part of their day to day practice in the workplace. Of those surveyed, four in ten survey respondents (41%) said that they had felt under pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient and 45% said they had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care. This leaves just under six in ten respondents who said they had not experienced pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed (57%) and to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care (53%). Optometrists, however, were more likely than dispensing opticians to have felt these sorts of pressures, as were those from younger age groups, those working for chains and locums.

The focus group and interview participants discussed in more depth the types of challenges faced by registrants in the workplace and the effect these had on patients and the profession. Overall, participants agreed that there are some pressures to meet commercial targets and to sell certain products in the workplace and they had either experienced these directly or knew a colleague who had. Participants shared anecdotes of registrants losing their jobs for

not meeting targets, bonuses being affected and locums not being recalled. However, all participants who mentioned they had experienced commercial pressure were keen to stress that they had not bowed to it and always maintained their professional integrity.

There was also a perception that many registrants were leaving the profession soon after qualifying due to the commercial pressures they felt at work. Participants felt that students were not being adequately prepared for the commercial side of their role whilst at university. Almost all participants knew of someone who had left the profession due to commercial pressure and a few had themselves left roles because of this.

One area identified by participants as having an effect on patients was the length of the sight test. Some participants explained that employers and businesses can put pressure on registrants to conduct as many eye tests as they can in a day. This can result in registrants not being able to always spend enough time with patients. Participants also mentioned that they were under pressure to achieve certain “conversion rate” targets (i.e. to ensure that an eye test with a patient leads to the patient then buying glasses or contact lenses within the store).

We have conversion rates. You are assessed by how many people buy glasses or contact lenses after seeing you. The pressure is on you. (Optometrist from Ipswich)

Focus group and interview participants felt that the commercial pressure had worsened in the last few years and would continue to get worse. They suggested there were a number of reasons why they felt that commercial pressures had worsened. These included larger optical chains gaining more market share, the rise of online sales which squeeze the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists coming into the profession which puts pressure on jobs and drives down wages.

There are loads of optometrists coming in, trying to crowd onto a very small market and this puts us under pressure. It's supply and demand, there are too many of us. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Raising concerns about poor practice

The GOC was interested in finding out about registrants' views about raising concerns with the GOC and their employer in relation to poor practice in the workplace.

Four in ten (40%) survey respondents said they would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to their employer and 45% would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to the GOC.

I wouldn't feel comfortable about going to the GOC. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that myself. (Optometrist from London)

In terms of raising a concern with an employer, there was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that this was largely dependent on the employer-employee relationship. Some feared that if they did raise a concern this could damage working relationships and they could potentially lose their job.

In terms of raising a concern with the GOC, most participants said that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, such as putting a patient at risk, and every other means of resolution would have to have been explored first. However, they would not feel comfortable raising a concern with the GOC because of the consequences it could have for the registrant about whom the complaint had been raised.

When I was studying for my dispensing course the GOC were made out to be a big scary entity. They have the power to strip you of all of your qualifications and leave you destitute if you put a foot wrong. The fear is really ingrained in you when you are studying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

The survey found that almost three in ten respondents (31%) would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern. A fifth said they did not know (19%), and therefore could not answer the question.

The majority of focus group and interview participants also did not feel confident that their identity and interests would be protected by the GOC. This was largely due to a lack of awareness about how the GOC's fitness to practise process works. However, like reporting a concern to an employer, participants worried that reporting a concern to the GOC could lead to difficult working relationships and job loss if they were identified as the one raising it in the first place, particularly if the concern was about their employer.

1. Introduction: About This Research

The GOC commissioned Enventure Research to carry out the registrant survey in 2016. The research had two objectives. Firstly, to gain a better understanding of registrants' views and experiences of the GOC. This will help the GOC to assess its performance so that it can make improvements to how they operate and their customer service. Secondly, to understand the day to day experiences and challenges faced by GOC registrants working in clinical practice. This will enable the GOC to better engage with the profession and to gain more information about their needs for education and training and any pressures they may be under which may prevent them from meeting the standards set by the GOC.

This volume comprises the following topics covered in the survey, focus groups and in depth interviews:

- Commercial pressures
- Raising concerns about poor practice

Volume One covers the future of the optical professions and Volume Three covers the GOC's role and regulatory performance.

For information about the methodology, interpretation of the findings and the profile of survey respondents and qualitative research participants please refer to the full report.

2. Challenges in the workplace

Key findings

- Overall, four in ten (41%) survey respondents said that they had 'definitely' or 'to some extent' felt under pressure by an employer or business to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient
- Almost half of respondents (47%) from Northern Ireland said that they had felt under pressure to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by patients. By comparison, only 35% in Wales said they had experienced this
- 46% of those who worked for a chain said they had felt under some pressure in the past to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient, whilst 40% of those who worked for an independent business said they had felt this kind of pressure in the past
- 63% of those who worked as a locum said they had felt under some pressure in the past to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by patients, compared to 38% of those who worked full-time
- A separate question was asked with regard to the impact of commercial pressures on patient care. In response, more than four in ten (45%) survey respondents had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care
- 49% of those who worked for a chain said that they had felt under pressure at some point in the past to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care compared to 43% of those who worked for an independent business
- 66% of those who worked as a locum had felt this kind of pressure compared to 42% of those working full-time
- Optometrists (52%) were more likely to have felt this sort of pressure than dispensing opticians (35%)
- All focus group and interview participants at least knew of a fellow registrant who had had experienced commercial pressure and recognised it as an issue in the profession, with some having direct experience of it themselves. Pressure included having employment terminated, being reprimanded for not meeting targets, bonuses being affected and locums not being asked back to work
- Almost all participants who had experienced the commercial pressure to meet targets said that they had not bowed to the pressure and had always maintained their professional integrity
- Amongst participants there was a perception that many registrants are leaving the profession due to the commercial pressure that businesses and employers put them under, particularly those who are newly qualified. All participants knew at least one person who had left the industry and some had themselves left jobs for these reasons

Key findings (continued)

- There was a perception amongst focus group and interview participants that the commercial pressure to sell had worsened lately and will continue to get worse. Reasons for this included the increasing prevalence of large chains and the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists driving up competition for jobs
- Some participants felt the public was wise to the existence of this commercial pressure and therefore shopped around to get the best value for money. However, participants felt patients were perhaps most affected in regards to eye tests as employers put them under pressure to carry out a certain amount of eye tests in a day. This leads to registrants not being able to spend enough time with patients to carry out eye tests in the correct manner

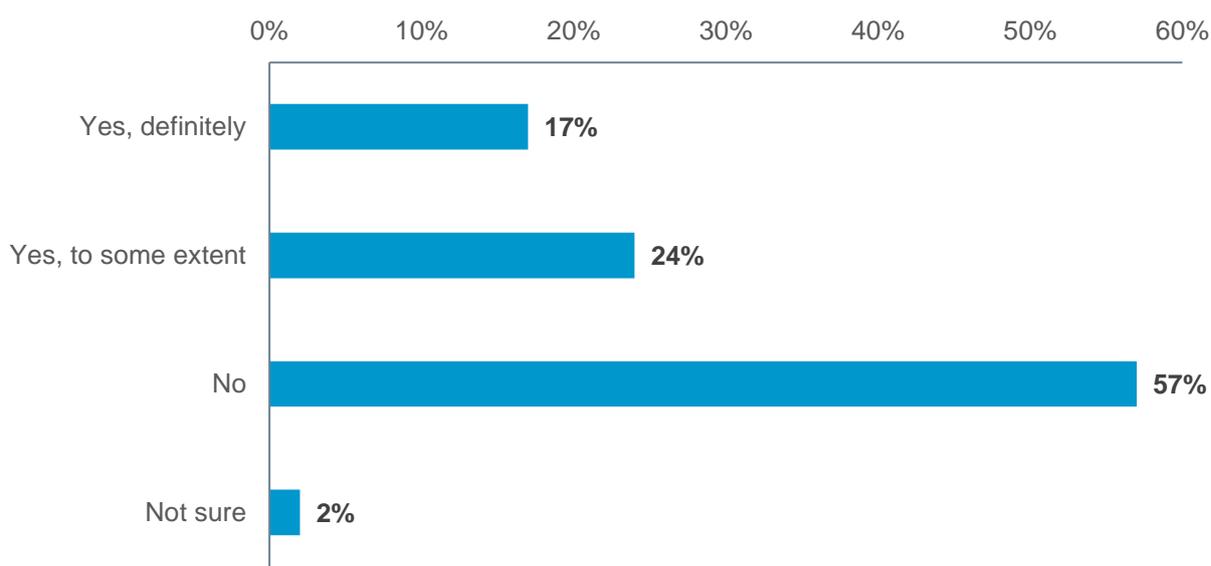
2.1 Pressure to sell products or provide services not needed by patients

The GOC was keen to find out whether its registrants had ever felt under pressure to sell a product or to provide a service that was not needed by patients and whether they had ever felt under pressure to meet targets at the expense of patient care. These findings will help support future GOC policy.

Four in ten (41%) respondents said that they had experienced pressure from an employer or business they worked for to sell a product or provide a service which was not needed by a patient. One in six (17%) said they had ‘definitely’ felt under pressure and a quarter (24%) to ‘some extent’. Almost three in five (57%), however, said they had not felt under pressure in this way.

Figure 24 – Have you ever felt under pressure by an employer or business you have worked for to sell a product or provide a service which you know is not needed by the patient?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they **had ‘definitely’ or ‘to some extent’ felt under pressure from an employer or business to sell a product or provide a service that was not needed by a patient** (41% overall) included those who:

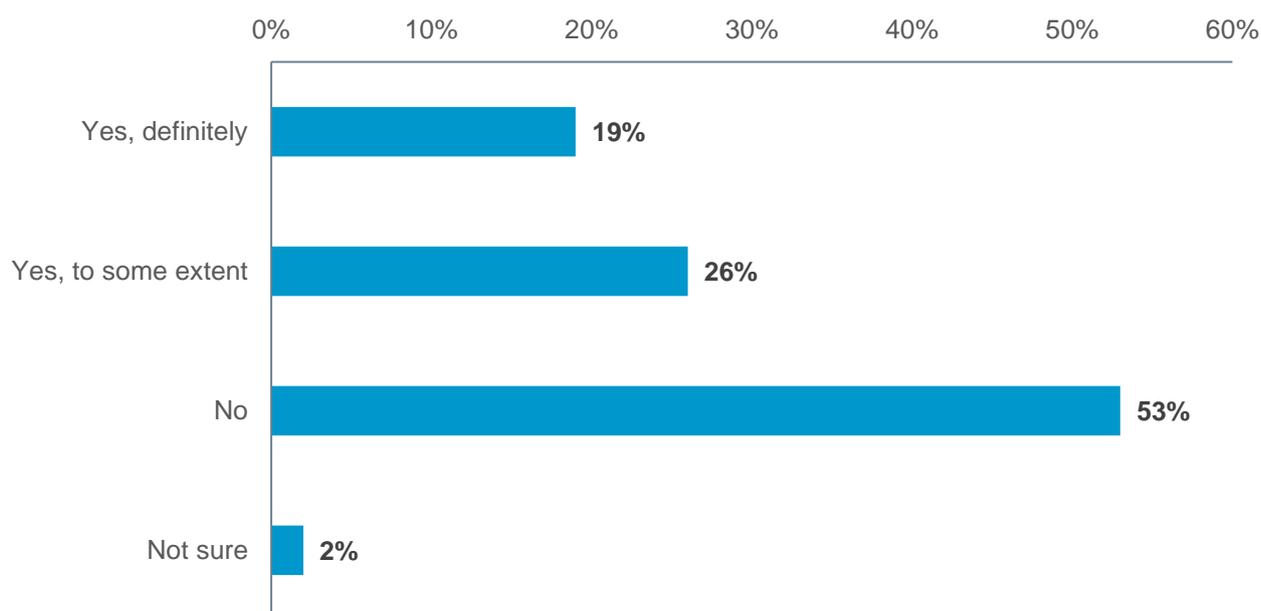
- Were optometrists (47%) compared to dispensing opticians (32%)
- Were aged 16-34 (43%) and 35-54 (43%) compared to those aged 55 and above (30%)
- Were from Northern Ireland (47%), particularly compared to Wales (35%)
- Worked for a chain (46%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (40%)
- Worked as a locum (63%), particularly compared to those working full-time (38%)

2.2 Pressure to meet commercial targets at expense of patient care

Over four in ten respondents (45%) said that they had felt under pressure from an employer or business that they had worked for to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care (19% ‘definitely’, 26% ‘to some extent’). Over half (53%) said that they had not experienced this type of pressure.

Figure 25 – Have you ever felt under pressure by an employer or business you have worked for to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that they **had ‘definitely’ or ‘to some extent’ felt under pressure from an employer or business to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care** (45% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (52%) compared to dispensing opticians (35%), student dispensing opticians (37%) and student optometrists (37%)
- Were aged 16-34 (46%) and 35-54 (48%) compared to those aged 55 and above (31%)
- Worked for a chain (49%) compared to those who worked for an independent business (43%)
- Worked as a locum (66%), particularly compared to those working full-time (42%)

Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Pressure to meet targets

Amongst focus group and interview participants there was an almost even split between those who had experienced pressure to meet targets (including selling products that are not always needed by patients) and those who had not, although all participants at least knew of someone who had had this experience and were aware of the prevalence of pressure in the profession.

There was a widely held view that many employers are often primarily concerned with the commercial aspect of sales of glasses and lenses, rather than providing a healthcare service to patients and that registrants are sometimes put under pressure to compromise their professional responsibilities. However, the majority of participants were keen to stress that they had never given in to this pressure, taking pride in the service they provide to patients and putting them first ahead of sales targets.

We have conversion rates. You are assessed by how many people buy glasses or contact lenses after seeing you. The pressure is on you. (Optometrist from Ipswich)

I've certainly experienced that kind of pressure. I will not compromise and I've upset a few people by standing my ground. But I can sleep at night and haven't compromised my own integrity. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

Opinion was divided on whether or not there was more pressure to meet targets (such as conversion rates) when working for a chain or an independent business and some participants who had experience of working for both noted that independent businesses are often just as commercially focused as chains.

It was also noted that the majority of chains were franchises and therefore the commercial pressure put on employees would vary from store to store. However, those working for chains reported that they were often held accountable for meeting their targets by sales managers who were not qualified optical professionals and often saw patients simply as customers.

Can I just make the point that this is not just a multiple problem? Individual practices can be just as bad. (Dispensing Optician from Glasgow)

These targets come from non-registrants. My boss is not a GOC registrant. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Amongst participants there were stories of registrants being reprimanded if they did not meet their targets, not receiving their salary bonus and losing their jobs. Locums also felt under pressure to meet targets such as conversion rates or conduct a certain number of eye tests so they are re-hired.

My wife used to work for [name taken out] and if they didn't hit their goals at the end of the week, they were ready to go at the end of the month. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

You are always worrying that you want to have decent figures or good enough figures to be asked back to the stores you've been working in because you know there will be competition between the locums. (Optometrist from Coleraine, Northern Ireland)

However, some participants pointed out that the industry is dependent on the sale of glasses, frames and contact lenses as optical businesses often make a loss on eye examinations and it was felt that this was, in part, due to patients' expectations that the eye test should be low value or even free in some cases. Cheap and free eye tests often leave registrants feeling that their time is of little or no value.

You do not make your income from the professional services you are offering. You only make it from products you are selling. (Dispensing Optician from Glasgow)

It's so dispiriting. Sometimes you run over, you spend 40 minutes with a patient and then you've referred them, you've taken photographs, you've done repeat measures and then they hand you a voucher which is on the back of a bus ticket or something. (Optometrist from Birmingham)

When asked about whether they had raised the issue of pressure with their employer, a few registrants mentioned that they had done so in the past. However, they felt they were largely ignored and their concerns were not taken seriously. Other participants mentioned that in some cases registrants may be reluctant to raise an issue through fear of losing their job.

I brought it up so many times, but it falls on deaf ears. (Optometrist from Edinburgh)

If you stick your head above the parapet, you are a target. You are almost bullied into submission into leaving for ease of your sanity. (Dispensing Optician from London)

Some participants mentioned that they had left jobs because of the pressure to meet targets. There was also a perception that many newly qualified registrants leave their job or the profession altogether as their university courses and training do not prepare them adequately for the pressure of working in a retail environment.

I left a high-street practice because of the pressure to sell. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Undergraduate students don't really have an awareness of that side of the profession so it can be quite a shock sometimes whenever they finish their training and pre-registration year...There's quite a few from my year who very quickly left the profession. (Optometrist from Coleraine)

The impact on patients

Some participants mentioned that as a result of targets, they are not able to spend enough time with patients to be able to carry out a full eye test in the correct manner. Others spoke of constantly being interrupted by colleagues during appointments to sign forms linked to dispensing lenses and frames, and make decisions, which meant there were constant distractions. This would then lead to spending even less time with patients which could pose a risk for the patient that something important might be missed. Some participants suggested that the GOC could introduce a minimum eye testing time which would help ensure the quality

of eye tests for patients and stop employers putting pressure on registrants to see as many patients as possible during a day.

They are reducing testing times to fit more people in...We are trying to rush our eye tests. (Optometrist from Newry, Northern Ireland)

The GOC should say the test should be x amount of time as a minimum. (Dispensing Optician from Birmingham)

When asked, participants thought that not all patients were necessarily aware of the commercial targets a store may have in place and others are wise to it. Some patients may have an eye test at one particular store and then go to another store or go online to buy lenses and frames in order to get a perceived value for money. There is a perception that more and more patients think of themselves as customers rather than patients and if they have a bad experience, rather than complain to the store or the GOC, they will simply take their custom elsewhere which is easy to do given the choice available in the market.

Patients' perception of money and value for money varies... I'll get my eye test there and then get my cheap glasses there. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

They are more concerned that they have spent a lot of money on a pair of glasses, rather than the quality of care they have received. It's a sad indictment on the profession's ability to communicate the importance of eye care to patients. (Optometrist from Newcastle)

Pressure to meet targets in the future

Some participants pointed out that there has always been commercial pressure to sell in the industry since de-regulation around 30 years ago. However, there is the perception that it has increased somewhat recently and will get worse in the future. A number of reasons for this were put forward, which included the increased prevalence of large chains and the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of retaining customers and the ever increasing number of optometrists driving up the competition for jobs.

It's the worst it's ever been. I am seriously contemplating de-registering...I think it's the corporates. They have devalued eye care to the point where it is almost a disposable thing. (Optometrist from Newcastle)

There are loads of optometrists coming in, trying to crowd onto a very small market and this puts us under pressure. It's supply and demand, there are too many of us. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

It was also suggested that the GOC could support them more in terms of representing their interests when their professionalism is compromised by employers' targets.

The GOC needs to start talking to the employers, as well as registrants. It is the big thing that is missing. Employers have to take on board that the Code of Conduct has to happen. (Dispensing Optician from Birmingham)

3. Raising concerns about poor practice

The GOC was interested in registrants' views about raising concerns about poor practice in the workplace to determine how best to support registrants to raise concerns in the future.

Key findings

- Four in ten (40%) survey respondents would not feel confident with raising a concern to their employer
- A higher proportion of survey respondents would feel confident about reporting a concern to their employer (52%) than to the GOC (47%)
- Dispensing opticians were more likely to feel comfortable about raising concerns with their employer than optometrists (58% compared to 48%), as were those in full-time employment compared to locums (56% compared to 43%)
- There was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that comfort with raising a concern with an employer was dependent on the employer-employee relationship, but some people would be fearful that raising a concern could lead to difficult working relationships and losing their job, particularly in independent businesses
- Only 47% said they would feel comfortable with raising a concern with the GOC
- Three in ten (31%) survey respondents said they would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they did report a concern and a fifth (19%) said they did not know
- Student optometrists (59%) and student dispensing opticians (69%) were more likely to say that they would feel more comfortable raising a concern with the GOC than fully qualified dispensing opticians (54%) and optometrists (39%)
- Most participants would only report a concern to the GOC if it was very serious and only if the concern had not been resolved any other way, but would not feel comfortable doing so given the consequences it might have for those involved
- Most participants would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern, but this was mostly due to a lack of awareness about how the fitness to practise process works. However, like reporting a concern to an employer, participants had the same worries about it leading to difficult working relationships and job security if they were identified
- Respondents who worked for a chain (50%) were more likely to be confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests than those working for an independent business (46%), and so were those who worked full-time (52%) compared to locums (39%)
- Just over half of survey respondents (51%) said they were aware of the role of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS). Those most likely to be aware included those aged 55 and above (72%), and those who worked full-time (54%)

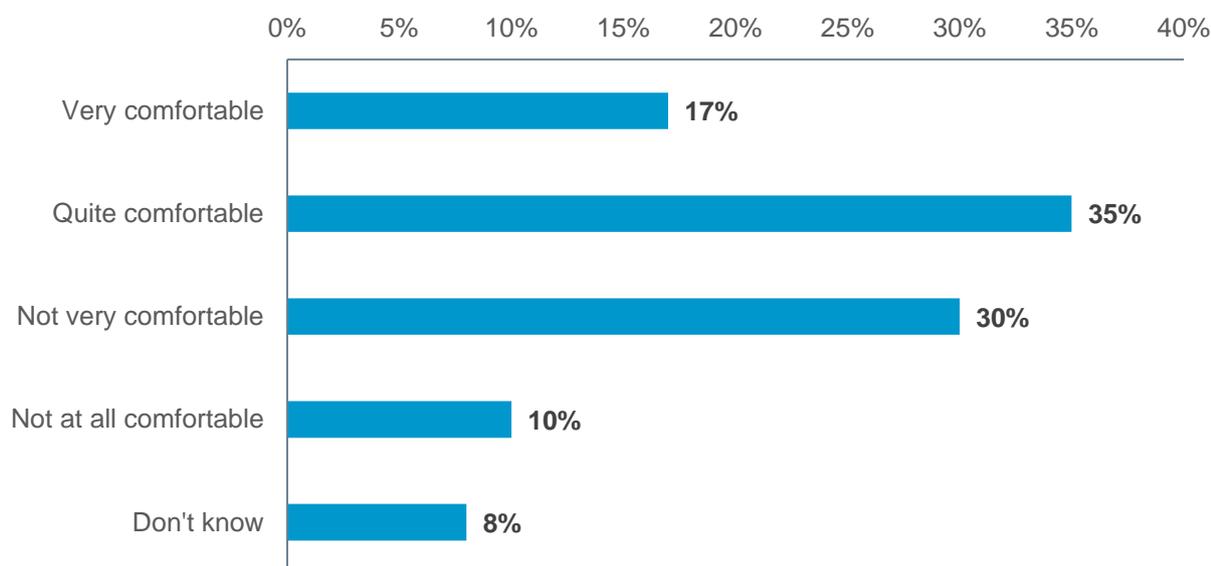
3.1 Raising fitness to practise concerns with employer and the GOC

Respondents were asked to state how comfortable they were with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer and with the GOC. A larger proportion of respondents said that they would feel comfortable with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer (52%) than with the GOC (47%).

One in six (17%) respondents said that they would feel ‘very’ comfortable with raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer and a further third (35%) would feel ‘quite’ comfortable. However, this leaves four in ten respondents (40%) who would feel ‘not very’ comfortable (30%) or ‘not at all’ comfortable (10%) about raising a concern with their employer.

Figure 26 – How comfortable would you feel about raising a fitness to practise concern with your employer?

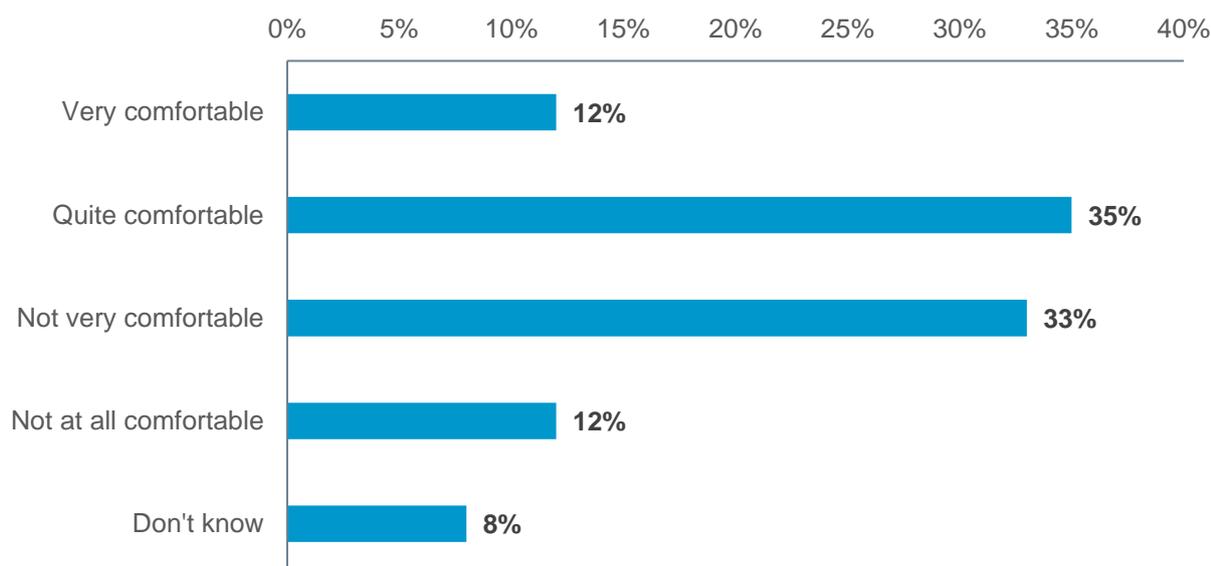
Base: All respondents (4,139)



Only one in eight respondents (12%) said that they would feel ‘very’ comfortable about raising a concern with the GOC and a further third (35%) would feel ‘quite’ comfortable. Over two in five (45%) said that they would feel ‘not very’ comfortable (33%) or ‘not at all comfortable’ (12%) with raising a concern with the GOC.

Figure 27 – How comfortable would you feel about raising a fitness to practise concern with the GOC?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say that **they felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ comfortable about raising a fitness to practise concern with their employer** (52% overall) included those who:

- Were dispensing opticians (58%) and student dispensing opticians (60%) compared to optometrists (48%), and student optometrists (51%)
- Were male (56%) compared to female (50%)
- Worked full-time (56%), particularly compared to those working part-time (47%) and as a locum (43%)

Subgroups more likely to say that **they felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ comfortable about raising a fitness to practise concern with the GOC** (47% overall) included those who:

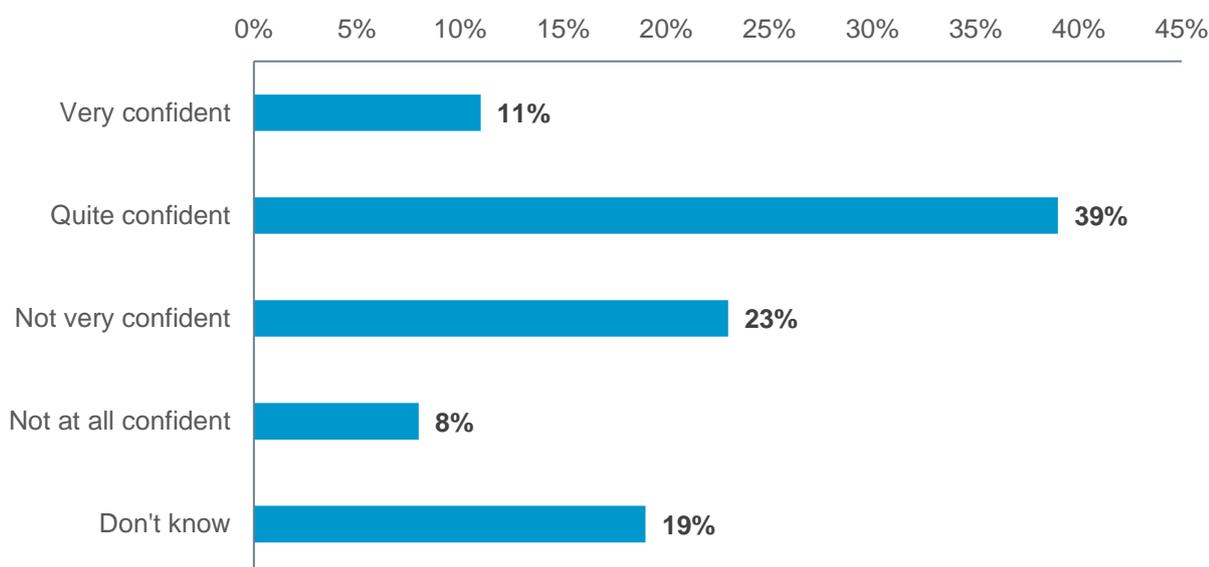
- Were student optometrists (59%), student dispensing opticians (69%) and dispensing opticians (54%) compared to optometrists (39%)
- Were aged 16-34 (50%), particularly compared to those aged 55 and above (40%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (57%), compared to those who had been on the register for 6-20 years (44%) and for more than 21 years (41%)

3.2 Confidence in GOC protecting identities and interests when raising a concern

All respondents were asked how confident they would feel that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they raised a concern about another registrant or business. One in ten (11%) respondents felt ‘very’ confident and a further four in ten (39%) felt ‘quite’ confident. A quarter (23%) did not feel very confident and one in ten (8%) did not feel confident at all. It should also be noted that a fifth (19%) of respondents said they did not know in relation to this question, perhaps indicating a low level of awareness amongst registrants as to how the GOC acts when a concern has been raised.

Figure 28 – If you were to raise a concern about another registrant or optical business in the future, how confident would you be that the GOC would protect your identity and interests?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely say they would **feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they raised a concern** (50% overall) included those who:

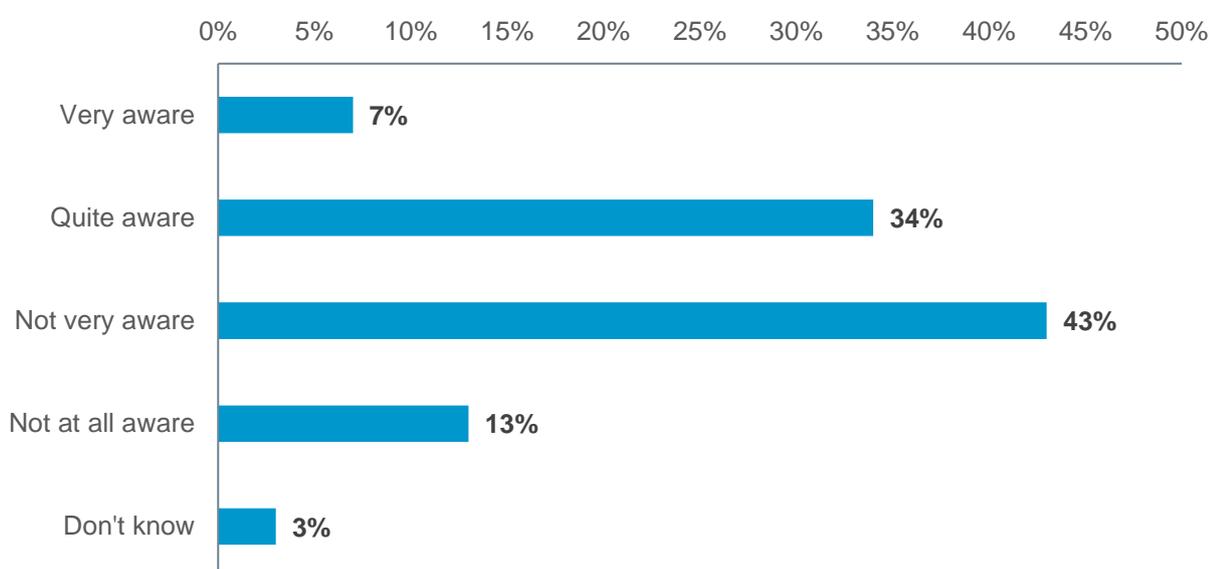
- Were student optometrists (66%) and student dispensing opticians (72%) compared to dispensing opticians (52%) and optometrists (43%)
- Were aged 16-34 (56%) compared to 35-54 and 55+ (both 46%)
- Had been on the GOC register for less than five years (62%) compared to 6-20 years (45%) and 21+ years (43%)
- Worked for a chain (50%) compared to an independent business (46%)
- Worked full-time (52%), particularly compared to those who worked as locums (39%)

3.3 Awareness of the ‘Raising Concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)’ policy

The GOC has recently introduced a new policy called ‘Raising Concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)’ and was keen to understand how many registrants were aware of the new policy. Almost three in five (56%) respondents said that they were ‘not very’ (43%) or ‘not at all’ (13%) aware of the new policy. Four in ten (41%), however, said that they were either ‘very’ (7%) or ‘quite’ (34%) aware of it.

Figure 29 – How aware are you of the GOC’s new policy ‘Raising concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing)?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

Subgroups more likely to say they were **aware of the new ‘Raising concerns with the GOC (Whistleblowing) policy** (41% overall) included those who:

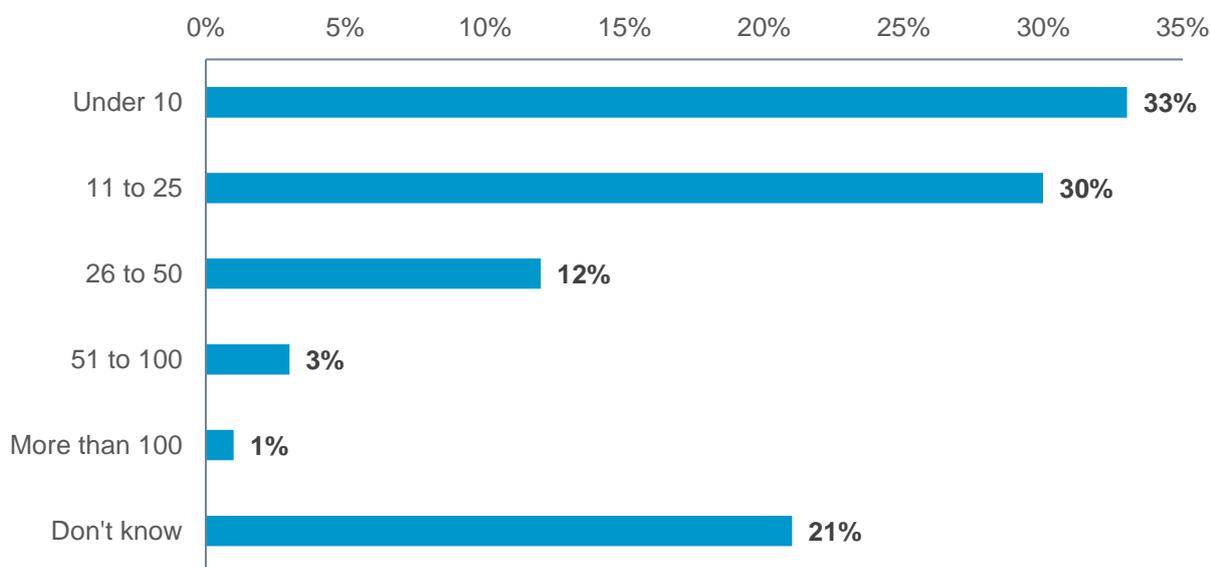
- Were aged 55 and above (51%), particularly compared to 16-34 year olds (33%)
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (51%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (35%)
- Worked full-time (42%), particularly compared to those who worked part-time (38%)

3.4 Removing registrants from the register

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of registrants that the GOC removes each year from the register due to fitness to practise proceedings. One third (33%) estimated that the number was under 10, and three in ten (30%) thought the number was between 11 and 25. Only 16% believed the number was above 26 and a fifth (21%) of respondents said they did not know the answer, again highlighting low levels of awareness of the fitness to practise process.

Figure 30 – How many registrants do you think the GOC removes from the register each year due to fitness to practise proceedings?

Base: All respondents (4,139)



Subgroup analysis

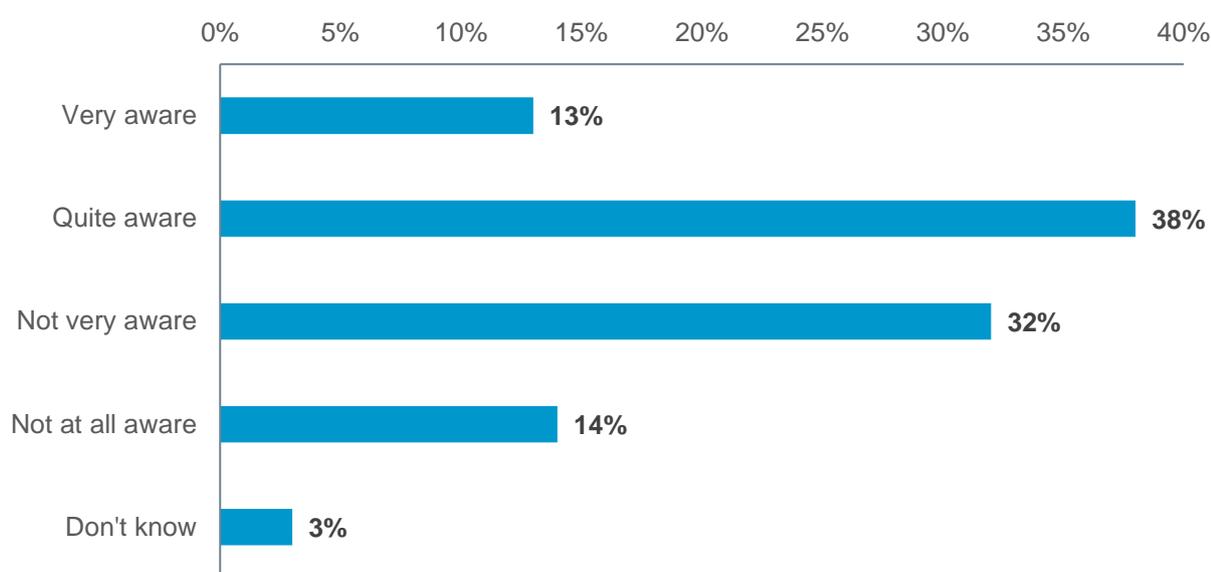
Subgroups more likely say they thought the **GOC removed 25 or fewer registrants from the register each year due to fitness to practise proceedings** (62% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (72%), particularly compared to dispensing opticians (50%)
- Were male (67%) compared to female respondents (60%)
- Were aged 55 and above (68%), particularly compared to 16-34 year olds (59%)
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (69%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (56%)
- Worked for an independent business (65%), particularly compared to those who worked for a chain (61%)
- Worked as a locum (68%), particularly compared to those who worked full-time (62%)

3.5 Awareness of the role of the OCCS

All respondents were asked how aware they were of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) in providing a free mediation service to help resolve consumer complaints. Just over half (51%) of respondents said they were aware, either ‘very’ (13%) or ‘quite’ aware (38%). However, more than four in ten (46%) said that they were ‘not very’ (32%) or ‘not at all’ (14%) aware of the service.

**Figure 31 – How aware are you of the role of the Optical Consumer Complaints Service (OCCS) in providing a free mediation service to help resolve consumer complaints?
Base: All respondents (4,139)**



Subgroups more likely to say that they were **aware of the role of the OCCS** (51% overall) included those who:

- Were optometrists (58%), particularly when compared to student optometrists (28%)
- Were male (63%) compared to female (44%)
- Were aged 55 and above (72%) compared to other age groups
- Had been on the GOC register for more than 21 years (71%), particularly compared to those who had been on the register for less than five years (34%)
- Were from a White ethnic background (56%) compared to those from a non-White ethnic background (38%)
- Worked full-time (54%), particularly compared to those who worked part-time (47%)

Focus group and in depth interview feedback

Encountering an issue or concern about the practice of a fellow registrant or the way a business is run

When asked what they would do in the first instance if they encountered an issue or concern about the practice of a fellow registrant or the way an organisation was run, most participants said that it would depend on the circumstances and that it would be a 'judgement call'. If it was a concern about a fellow registrant, the majority would speak to the person directly to find a resolution or speak to someone else within their practice such as a colleague or a line manager. In some cases, some participants would speak to the Association of Optometrists or the Association of Dispensing Opticians for advice, particularly if it related to the way an organisation was run.

It depends on the severity of the case. If I saw a one-off, something minor I might just have a word with the registrant to further clarify. (Optometrist from Swansea)

I would talk to the AOP for guidance... They can give you legal advice or just discuss it with you. (Optometrist from Belfast)

Raising a concern or issue with an employer

Some participants said they would feel comfortable about raising a concern or issue with an employer and others said they would not. It seemed that this was often dependent on the nature of the relationship between the employee and the employer. There were some participants who said they would be scared of raising concerns as this may affect their job security. There were a few participants who had had experience of raising concerns with their employer and they reported satisfactory outcomes.

I was working with someone who appeared to be doing all the right tests, but he wasn't. But he was my boss, I was his employee. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

I took advice from a friend and brought it to the attention of the store director and then it was sorted out with the supervisor of the pre-reg and no further problem occurred. (Dispensing Optician from Oadby)

There was a suggestion that it is perhaps easier to raise a concern in a large chain of opticians in comparison to an independent business. Chains often have a dedicated channel, such as an HR department, or a fellow employee whose job it is to deal with these sorts of issues. It may be harder, on the other hand, to raise a concern within an independent business as it could lead to a breakdown in trust amongst employees that would affect working relationships. However, some participants pointed out that concerns may not always be dealt with as they should by chains as there may be a desire to protect the brand.

In a multiple you're quite lucky as there are specific colleagues who are there to deal with that kind of work. (Dispensing Optician from Cardiff)

The person would be able to work out very easily who had raised it if it was a very small practice. You'd be quite vulnerable. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

Something was raised to an employer but they didn't take it to the GOC... they pretty much did nothing about it... there was an element of them protecting their name. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

Raising a concern or issue with the GOC

Most participants felt that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, with all other means of resolution exhausted before they raised it with the GOC and even then they would need to be sure of all of the facts. Although most could come up with examples of when it would be appropriate to raise a concern with the GOC, there were a few participants who struggled to think of scenarios of when it would be appropriate and a few also admitted that they would not know how to raise a concern.

When it's out of your hands and is serious enough, you have to go to the GOC... I wouldn't feel comfortable but if it's got to be done, it's got to be done. (Dispensing Optician from Port Glasgow)

If I was to raise something with the GOC, I would have to be 100% sure with the situation. There would be no comeback from it. (Dispensing Optician from Nottingham)

I'm struggling to think of anything I would go to the GOC about. I can't think of a scenario. (Optometrist from Cardiff)

On the whole, very few participants said they would feel comfortable about raising a concern with the GOC. Some said they were scared of the GOC, having heard stories of the fitness to practise process and the impact that it can have on registrants concerned, in terms of the stress it can put them under. For these participants, this would put them off approaching the GOC if they had a concern as they know one of the consequences of reporting the concern could be the loss of a fellow registrant's livelihood. Some also speculated that some employers actively discourage registrants from raising concerns with the GOC given the consequences this may have for the business and the individuals concerned.

I wouldn't feel comfortable about going to the GOC. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that myself. (Optometrist from London)

When I was studying for my dispensing course the GOC were made out to be a big scary entity. They have the power to strip you of all of your qualifications and leave you destitute if you put a foot wrong. The fear is really ingrained in you when you are studying. (Dispensing Optician from High Wycombe)

Employers maybe feel they don't want to go down that route and destroy that person's career. (Dispensing Optician from Manchester)

When asked if they felt the GOC would protect their identity and interests if they were to raise a concern, a few said they would be confident that this would happen. However, for most they would not feel confident, although this is largely due to a lack of awareness about how the fitness to practise process works. There was also speculation that safeguarding people's identity would be difficult in small stores once a complaint had been reported and this could

lead to difficult working relationships. A few participants even said they would fear losing their own job and this would be enough to put them off raising a concern with the GOC.

The other opticians are going to hate you...No-one would trust you. (Optometrist from Wrexham)

The consequence may be that you lose your job. (Optometrist from Glasgow)

4. Key findings

Commercial pressures

Four in ten survey respondents said they had experienced pressure from an employer in the past to provide a service or sell a product that was not needed by a patient and had felt under pressure to meet commercial targets at the expense of patient care.

Focus group and interview participants discussed in more depth the types of challenges registrants faced in the workplace and the effect these had on patients and the profession. Overall, participants agreed that there was some pressure to meet commercial targets and to sell certain products and many had either experienced this themselves or knew someone else in the profession that had. However, all participants were keen to stress that they had not bowed to the pressure and had always maintained their professional integrity.

Some focus group and interview participants held the perception that many registrants were leaving the profession within a few years of qualifying due to commercial pressures they faced at work. They thought students were perhaps not being adequately prepared for the commercial side of their role whilst at university. Almost all participants knew of someone who had left the profession due to these commercial pressures and a few themselves had left roles in the past because of this.

Some participants felt that these industry pressures particularly affected patients in relation to sight tests, explaining that employers and businesses can put pressure on registrants to conduct as many sight tests as possible during a day and this can result in not being able to spend enough time with patients. Participants also mentioned that often they are under pressure to achieve certain “conversion rate” targets (i.e. to ensure that a sight test leads to a sale of glasses or lenses in the store).

Participants felt that the commercial pressure had worsened in the last few years and would continue to get worse. Reasons for this included larger optical chains gaining more market share, the rise of online sales squeezing the market, the increased difficulty of customer retention and the ever increasing number of optometrists coming into the profession.

Raising concerns about poor practice

Four in ten survey respondents said they would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to their employer and a slightly larger proportion would not feel comfortable reporting a concern to the GOC.

In terms of raising a concern with an employer, there was a consensus amongst focus group and interview participants that comfort with raising a concern was largely dependent on the employer-employee relationship. Some feared that if they raised a concern, however, this could damage working relationships and lead to them losing their job.

In relation to raising a concern with the GOC, most participants said that the concern would have to be of a very serious nature, such as putting a patient at risk, and every other means

of resolution explored before they would consider it. However, they would not feel comfortable with raising a concern with the GOC given the consequences it would have for the registrant about whom the complaint was made.

In the survey three in ten would not feel confident that the GOC would protect their identity and their interests if they raised a concern and this lack of confidence was also seen amongst focus group and interview participants. However, this seemed to be largely due to a lack of awareness about how the GOC's fitness to practise process works.

The future of the optical professions

Overall, six in ten respondents were optimistic about the future of the profession. Respondents from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were more optimistic than those from England, as were those who worked for a chain compared to an independent business.

Nine in ten thought their role would change significantly in the next five years. A larger proportion of optometrists thought their role would change than dispensing opticians and respondents from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland were more likely to think it would change than those from England.

The most popular reason for expecting a change in role was technological changes in the industry, followed by a higher expectation from the government and regulators. Over half also felt that an ageing population and changes in consumer behaviour would also cause changes in their role.

Registrants' views on providing NHS "enhanced services"

The majority of survey respondents were aware of NHS plans for more enhanced optical services to be delivered in the community rather than hospitals and four in ten said they were currently involved in providing these services. A much larger proportion of respondents from Wales said they were involved than those from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The majority of survey respondents were supportive of the plans for enhanced optical services to be provided in the community, however there were lower levels of support amongst respondents from England in comparison to those from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Focus group and interview participants were also supportive of these plans, particularly optometrists who thought it could lead to more interesting and varied work. However, some participants did have concerns and reservations, such as fragmentation across the UK with different regions doing different things and the difficulty of communicating with hospitals.

Of those who did not play a role in the provision of enhanced services, six in ten respondents thought they would in the future. Of those that said they did not see themselves playing a role, the most popular reasons given were that it was not cost effective to gain the qualifications, that it was difficult to access the right training, and that their employer was not interested in providing these services.

Six in ten respondents who said they were optometrists said they had considered gaining additional qualifications to prescribe medicines or assist in the delivery of enhanced services. Focus group and interview participants who had gained additional qualifications explained that they had done so because their employer was involved in the delivery of enhanced services or they wanted to be prepared for the future.

Survey respondents who had not considered gaining additional qualifications most commonly said this was because they did not have the time to study, that there was a lack of opportunity to use it in practice, that it was not part of their long-term career plan, or because they could not afford the training. This was confirmed by focus group and interview participants, who said they had not gained additional qualifications mostly because of the expense of gaining these qualifications and the time involved to study for them.