

BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL

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SATURDAY 5 FEBRUARY 1983

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We may return unduly long letters to the author for shortening so that we can offer readers as wide a selection as possible. We receive so many letters each week that we have to omit some of them. Letters should be typed with double spacing between lines and must be signed personally by all their authors, who should include their degrees. Letters critical of a paper may be sent to the authors of the paper so that their reply may appear in the same issue.

Correspondents should present their references in the Vancouver style (see examples in these columns). In particular, the names and initials of all authors must be given unless there are more than six, when only the first three should be given, followed by et al; and the first and last page numbers of articles and chapters should be included.

Competitive spectacles

SIR,—The Office of Fair Trading report *Opticians and Competition*¹ may seem, at first sight, to have no interest for members of the BMA. It does, however, recommend the deregistration of dispensing opticians and the repeal of the no advertising rule for opticians.

These proposals could have far reaching implications for ophthalmic medical practitioners. There are only about 900 doctors practising as ophthalmic medical practitioners, but we believe that we provide an important and valuable service for general practitioners and their patients. Ophthalmic medical practitioners rely on registered dispensing opticians to run the medical eye centres under the ethical rules of the National Ophthalmic Treatment Board Association. Deregistration of these opticians and allowing them to advertise, as proposed in the Office of Fair Trading report, could bring about the closure of medical eye centres and the end of the road for ophthalmic medical practitioners.

Selling reading glasses over the counter would set the clock back 25 years, but providing cheap glasses to the voters is politically attractive. Medical opinion may be divided, but in our view the lack of a proper eye examination at the age when presbyopia occurs could be potentially dangerous to the health of the patient.

Ophthalmic medical practitioners have no negotiating muscle and seem consistently to end up getting a poor result from the review body. We do a quiet, unsung service for general practitioners in helping to provide,

within a very short time, a medical opinion on ophthalmic problems which would otherwise take many months to obtain from outpatient clinics.

M F P MARSHALL

NOTB Association,
London WC1H 9HR

¹ Director General of Fair Trading. *Opticians and competition*. London: HMSO, 1983.

SIR,—Three years ago the high cost of spectacles provoked widespread complaint in the national press and media. This was attributed to lack of competition, largely the sequel to the opticians' monopoly, which no other country had seen fit to copy. Lord Rugby's motion to curtail the monopoly was then withdrawn pending a report by the Office of Fair Trading, which has now just been published (15 January, p 234).¹ This recommends legislation to limit the monopoly and permit the sale of simple reading glasses without prescription. An extensive investigation by the Consumers' Association, due to be published shortly in *Which?*, has reached the same conclusions.

The monopoly was justified by opticians primarily on the opportunity it gave for the diagnosis of damaging eye disease, which could otherwise have been missed. The essential question was whether this was really cost effective or whether, if such screening was indeed merited, it could be done more

effectively or cheaply as a planned professional exercise. Leading articles in the major medical journals argued against the monopoly,^{2,3} but the president of the faculty of ophthalmologists⁴ said that the majority of eye doctors believed that it should be retained because of the eye disease that might come to light by an optician's check. But now it seems that the faculty of ophthalmologists misconstrued the wishes of British ophthalmologists since a poll of the members of the Ophthalmological Society of the United Kingdom by the repeal committee of the House of Lords has shown a substantial majority agreeing with the Office of Fair Trading that simple reading glasses for adults should become once more available across the counter.

The arguments have been amply ventilated. The report of the Office of Fair Trading could hardly have been more comprehensive or its findings less equivocal. Now, backed by the support of most of our practising ophthalmologists, we can hope that the faculty will adopt a more compromising attitude towards the motion now tabled by Lord Rugby and leave no legitimate barrier to this overdue reform.

PATRICK TREVOR-ROPER

London NW1

¹ Director General of Fair Trading. *Opticians and competition*. London: HMSO, 1983.

² Anonymous. Spectacle problems. *Br Med J* 1980;**281**: 1586.

³ Anonymous. The opticians' monopoly. *Lancet* 1982;i: 432-3.

⁴ Fison L. Spectacle problems. *Br Med J* 1981;**282**:995.