

Chris Purslow

MCOptom FBCLA FIACLE
AMHEA PhD BSc

The multi-skilled optometrist talks us through her career path, which spans academia, clinical practice and industry.



WHO?

Chris Purslow MCOptom

CURRENT JOB?

Head of Medical Affairs at Théa

WHERE?

Clermont-Ferrand and London

You practised as an optometrist for a long time. What influenced your move into academia?

Alongside working in practice, I supervised students at Aston University

one day a week and discovered a love for teaching. After 12 years in clinical roles, I decided to become a full-time lecturer so worked towards a PhD in ocular thermography and a teaching certificate. After qualifying in 2005, I worked at Cardiff University and then the University of Plymouth.

You are still involved in academia – how exactly?

I am proud to hold honorary professorships with three universities: Aston, Cardiff and Plymouth. Through these links, I am involved in research projects – covering dry-eye treatments, contact lens studies and tear film analysis – with Théa and PhD students.

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

Learning to work out what matters most each day is key to managing my workload. I give up a lot of

Describe your current role...

I'm Head of Medical Affairs (UK and Ireland) at Théa Pharmaceuticals, but in reality I split my time between the UK office and the head office for Théa Global, which is in France. My UK duties range from pharmacovigilance, to reviewing marketing materials, organising staff training, and planning research and education projects. My role in France draws on my clinical and research expertise.

I took the role as I wanted a new challenge; I also knew the company, as I had collaborated with them on research projects, and I felt comfortable that its ethical principles were in line with mine. My academic roles at Cardiff and Plymouth gave me management experience, which has helped me with my job at Théa.

You started out in retail management. How did that lead to a career in optometry?

I left sixth form with good A-levels but no clear idea of what I wanted to do. I had considered training to be a physiotherapist and then realised it wasn't for me, so I worked for John Lewis on its management training scheme while deciding what I wanted to do. At the time, I was in love with someone studying optometry, so I decided to join them as it sounded interesting. It wasn't the best reason to choose a course, but fortunately it all worked out.

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top tips for people coming into the profession today

1

Choose your pre-reg position and supervisor very carefully
They can have a lasting influence.

2

Be ethically strong
Keep your clinical principles, even when commercial pressures surround you.

3

Only stay in roles that make you happy to get up in the morning
Optometrists have many options, but you have to search them out.

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weekends and evenings to do work-related things beyond my working day, but I enjoy them.

Why did you choose to do your PhD when you did?

I enjoyed working in clinical practice, so it wasn't about being bored. I was in my mid-30s and ready for a new challenge; I saw it as the route towards an academic career at a top university. Initially, it was about teaching, but I found the research and supervision of PhD students gave me job satisfaction too.

Salaries in academia have improved over recent years. But when I made the move in 2002, it took a few years to achieve something similar to a high-street optometry salary.

What advice would you give optometry professionals who wish to enter academia?

They must make sure they are doing it for the right reasons – not because they are bored in practice. An academic role offers variety and stimulation, but you have to be passionate about optometry to teach it well.

What are the best elements of clinical practice, academia and industry?

In practice, you have to problem-solve constantly as you have lots of people coming to see you with their visual problems. Connecting with thousands of people every year is a privilege and something to be valued. On the other hand, academia brings camaraderie and mental stimulation like no other environment. In the pharmaceutical industry, the work is varied and you learn new skills.

What have you found most challenging about your various roles?

Time management can be a challenge in industry and academic roles, as you largely manage your own time – you need to make sure other people's priorities don't hijack your own.

What are your future career aims and goals?

To continue to be happy in what I do. We spend such a lot of our lives at work, it's important we enjoy our

What would people be surprised to learn about you?

That I qualified as a dance teacher.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I enjoy going on walks and reading.

What do you wish you'd known starting out in your career?

To take more risks and get more sleep.



What do you think is the most rewarding aspect of working in eye health?

It makes a difference to how people see and how they feel.

jobs. I'm working towards becoming fluent in French to help me with my role at Théa, and I would possibly like to return to supervising research students and projects of my own again.

What would be your advice to an optometrist looking to move into an industry role?

Value the generic skills you already have, such as communication, but be willing to learn new ones quickly. You also need to be flexible – working in industry requires some odd hours and lots of travel.

What has been your key to success?

Being conscientious in everything I do.

What do you think is the main challenge facing students entering the profession?

There are more graduates and more competition for jobs in some areas, so working hard to get the best degree and work experience is vital. ☺

MEMBER GUIDANCE

Find out more about an optometry career and the qualifications you might need in the College's 'Plan your career' resource at college-optometrists.org/plan-your-career

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