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A Lifeboat in a Perfect Storm

As incoming chairman this spring, replacing the very able Ruth Cuthbert, I thought this was a good time to introduce myself and the work of the Optical Benevolent Fund, so that if you know of any practitioners that need our help, you can signpost them to us.

My optical career in brief:

- Benevolent Fund Trustee 5 years
- College of Optometrists Board member 5 years
- Specsavers JVP 25 years
- Sheffield LOC chairman 4 years
- Retired 2013 and took on pottery and a puppy

The Benevolent Fund was always a bit of a mystery to me until I was asked to serve as a Trustee and I am concerned that this is still the case for the majority of our profession. With this in mind I ask you all to access the <https://www.opticalbenfund.com/> website and wander through it for a few minutes. It shows what we do and who we can help. The Benevolent Fund remit is wide and we have a great deal of discretion in how we can assist.

The practitioners and their dependants who need our help fall broadly into two categories: those who suffer a catastrophic injury or life changing illness without the cushion of either insurance or employee benefits and those whose finances are already stretched and begin to sink under the weight of another crisis. For the majority, it is rarely one catastrophe that leaves people unable to cope but multiple issues and then it becomes the perfect storm.

Young, single locums without Critical Illness or Income Protection cover are particularly vulnerable. They may not have capital built up in housing nor a stable partnership to share the strain.

- 27% of GOC Optometrists are registered solely as locums
- Over 50% of people who approach us are self employed without cover

Critical Illness cover may seem a luxury but the consequences of illness and trauma can easily remove the ability to practice professionally. It would be an interesting exercise to see how many practitioners, especially the self-employed, could manage financially without income for just three months.

The Benevolent Fund not only helps financially but also signposts applicants to other organisations such as Manchester CAB, who can provide debt counselling and help people restructure their finances.

Most of our referrals come via the AOP but we would also like the LOCs to refer to us directly, as and when they become aware of any practitioners in difficulties.

To summarise, we ask for your assistance in the following ways:

- Refer members and former members of the optical profession and their dependants who need help to us
- Contribute as an organisation to our funds (we spend tens of thousands of pounds annually supporting beneficiaries)
- Contribute as individuals to our funds
- Remember us in your wills
- Help us promote Critical Illness and Income Protection cover to locums and the self employed
- Volunteer to help with visits - especially to applicants living in remote areas

Thank you

Sue Wilford

Chair of the Benevolent Fund of the College of Optometrists and Association of Optometrists

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