

Watch out for the shooting specs!

Penny D'Ath shares some of the worst memories of her dispensing practical exam

It's that time of year again, the dreaded dispensing practicals. I remember it as if it were yesterday. I sat my exams a few years ago at the time when Nostradamus predicted the world would end. In an odd sort of way, that day one world did end, but a whole new exciting one took its place.

As I travelled to the exam I remembered my mother's comforting words to me when I told her I'd be very disappointed if I failed. 'Well there's no point in feeling disappointed tonight, you've the rest of the summer to feel disappointed.' I comforted myself with the thought I wouldn't be taking my sheet of 'Frame materials' to bed with me that night. Still, it had proved a useful cure for insomnia, as I always fell asleep the second I saw the words cellulose propionate.

My first patient needed bifocals. My plan was to use small Post-it notes to mark the position of her lower limbus as this would allow me to move my line up or down without drawing lots of marks all over the dummy lenses. Unfortunately, I hadn't reckoned on any interest at all from the patient.

'I've never seen that done before. Why are you doing it like that?' she asked.

I didn't really mind chatting except that I only had 20 minutes to fill in my form. The examiner soon arrived and started asking difficult questions. Finally, I heard those comforting words: 'we got there in the end'.

Patient two was relatively straightforward. Single-vision, hand-made frame, but I was slightly thrown by the prescription being over -5.00D. High-index lenses sprang to mind and just as quickly sprang out again at the thought of pantoscopic tilts and adjusting heights. 'Why have you dispensed CR39?' asked the examiner.

'Because it's an exam and I don't want to be adjusting heights.' Not the best answer in the world. I was inwardly dying at the horror of my dispensing abilities. Little did I know that the nightmare was just beginning.

My final patient was a small lad aged about 16 years masquerading as a middle-aged patient who required progressive power lenses. Desperately I searched through the uninspiring collection of frames



on offer looking for anything small. Nothing. With a sinking feeling I chose the smallest frame and put it on my patient only to see it shoot down to the end of his nose. Trying desperately to hold it in roughly the correct position I tried to mark his pupil centres. To my dismay I noticed a spasmodic, involuntary, lateral oscillatory movement of the eyes. The word nystagmus boomed at me. Tentatively, I asked him what was the matter with his eyes. 'I don't know. I'm under Moorfields Eye Hospital. I have problems with my eye muscles which makes my eyes wander.' This must surely be a wind up.

Frame materials next. I knew my sheet verbatim. After all, it had shared my bed for the last month. This was one section of the exam that I was looking forward to. Still, it wouldn't hurt to exchange comments with friends who had just finished that section. 'Watch out for the shooting specs! They're the ones with the small aperture which you wind up to get rid of aberrations.'

'Watch out for the surgeon's specs! They're the small, skinny pair', shouted somebody else. 'Don't forget the trigeminal specs!' shouted a third. Gulp, I thought as I entered the exam room.

I sat down and surveyed the tray of frames. 'Now, let's start with cellulose acetate,' said the examiner.

'Most commonly used material in frame manufacture. Frame produced by routing,' I replied confidently.

'What's routing?'
'Er, produced from sheets of acetate.'

'And what about the nose pads?'

'Er, I don't know,' I said, a little unhelpfully. 'Well, it's not good enough to say you don't know. Have a guess.'

My confidence was beginning to wane. We battled over this point for what felt like an eternity before he moved to the next question. 'Where does cellulose come from?'

I could feel the exam running away from me. I looked at him for a glimmer of inspiration. I didn't even understand the question. Did he mean what country do you find cellulose in? If I said Spain or Africa would he fall about laughing? Was he asking if it was a plant?

What did he mean? I couldn't face being ridiculed anymore so I gave what felt like my standard answer: 'I don't know.'

My blood pressure was beginning to soar as he took out a titanium frame.

'Hypoallergenic, expensive, very strong, very light, cannot be soldered.'

'Cannot be soldered? How do you fix it then?'

'You don't. I tell my patients that they need to buy a new frame.'

'How do you assemble the frame then?' I wasn't purposefully hiding the information from him, I genuinely didn't know.

'I've never seen a frame being made and I really don't know.'

'It's not good enough for you to keep saying you don't know.'

I closed my eyes and waited for the world to end. We finally reached the special optical appliances section. Triumphant, he pulled out what, if I hadn't had inside information, would have buried me.

'What's this?' he said with a smirk.

'Ah, that's a pair of shooting spectacles. You wind up the aperture to reduce aberrations.'

Imagine my surprise when the results came through and that was the section I did best in. Good luck to all those participating and, whatever happens, don't forget the shooting specs!

◆ Penny D'Ath has completed her third year of an optometry degree at City University