

So you want to be ... an ophthalmologist

Ophthalmology deals with the diseases of the eye and their treatment. The word ophthalmology comes from the Greek root 'ophthalmos-' meaning 'eye'; ophthalmology literally means 'the science of eyes'.

Since systemic diseases have multiple manifestations in the eyes the ophthalmologist remains in close contact with a wide variety of medical conditions such as diabetes, vascular disease and autoimmune processes. This ensures a varied clinical practice and contact with several different subspecialties. One of the great attributes of ophthalmology is that the eye and its various components are readily visible and easily examined. It involves the direct visualization of the tissues and therefore the pathology.

Ophthalmology is considered to be a surgical speciality and falls into the microsurgical group with many procedures performed using a microscope. The 'bread and butter' surgical procedure is cataract surgery. Cataracts are opacities within the lens of the eye, which can severely affect visual function and thereby prevent the elderly from being independent. Cataract surgery is extremely satisfying since modern surgery is done as day cases under local anaesthesia with small incisions, no sutures and restoration of vision almost immediately. Of course there are also a large range of other surgical procedures within this complex speciality.

Specialities

Within the field of ophthalmology there is a large variety of subspecialist areas. The eye consists of multiple structures from the cornea at the front to the retina at the

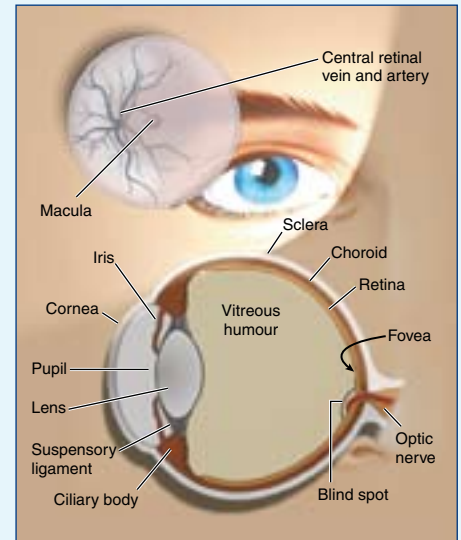
back. These different anatomical areas all have their own unique physiology and pathological processes producing subspecialization within the field. As well as anatomical subspecialization, ophthalmology encompasses a wide range of patient groups from paediatrics to the elderly.

What do you need?

Medical training in all areas is under going a major change at present with the Modernising Medical Careers agenda. The current preregistration house year is being replaced with a 2-year foundation programme. At the present time it is unclear as to whether ophthalmology will make up part of this, although it is envisaged that it will in some deaneries.

The current training arrangement in ophthalmology of senior house officer progressing to specialist registrar with competitive entry will be replaced by a run through grade, 'ophthalmic specialist training' (approximately 6 or 7 years). Entry to this grade will be highly competitive as places will be limited to around 80 trainees each year. Criteria for entry will include completion of the foundation programme but this does not need to have included ophthalmology.

The examination structure will be reduced to two parts, with the first part having to be gained by the end of year 2. Failure to gain this will prevent progression. The second part is proposed to be sat towards the end of year 4. At each stage trainees will have to demonstrate satisfac-



tory progress in obtaining competencies and the Rita (Record of in-training assessment) system will remain an important method of assessment.

Other qualities

As with all areas of medicine, the key to success is listening carefully to the history, performing a detailed examination and doing the best for your patient.

The field of research within ophthalmology is ever expanding as new treatments become available to treat sight-threatening diseases such as age-related macular degeneration. There is rapid expansion in the understanding of the genetics of retinal diseases such as retinitis pigmentosa and gene therapy may become reality within our lifetime.

Ophthalmologists also have a role in education, from medical students to junior doctors, and improving the knowledge within the community through optometrists. Ophthalmology is an expanding and exciting field with excellent opportunities. **BJHM**

KEY POINTS

- Ophthalmology is a speciality which encompasses both general medicine and microsurgery.
- Diagnosis may often be readily made on examination alone, allowing prompt instigation of treatment.
- There are major opportunities to develop multidisciplinary links with other specialities.
- There are many subspecialist areas within ophthalmology.
- The out of hours commitment in ophthalmology is low.

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