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SETTING THE SCENE IN EYE CARE

FINN BURGUM PROVIDES AN INSIGHT INTO CAREERS IN ORTHOPTICS

Most people are familiar with optometrists, who are typically based in high street practices and perform sight tests, prescribe glasses and identify eye conditions. Dispensing opticians advise on frames and lenses.

Within hospitals, ophthalmologists (specialist doctors) diagnose and treat complex eye conditions, supported by ophthalmic nurses, technicians and clinical scientists. Orthoptists are a key part of the hospital eye care team and work closely with other professionals to ensure effective patient care.

What is an orthoptist?

One of fifteen Allied Health Professions, orthoptists specialise in the assessment and management of visual development and eye movement disorders. They work with patients of all ages, from newborn babies to older adults.

An orthoptist's schedule weaves together clinics, ward work and community outreach, resulting in a career that is diverse, stimulating and deeply rewarding. They lead busy outpatient clinics – one moment treating a child with reduced vision in one eye (amblyopia), the next assessing complex eye movement disorders, or preparing a patient for squint (strabismus) surgery. Using specialised techniques and tests, they diagnose issues, monitor progress and tailor treatments.

Orthoptists' work extends to hospital wards, supporting patients recovering from neurological events such as stroke and into the community, where they may be involved in school vision screening programmes. Orthoptists are able to identify issues early, positively impacting development, education and overall wellbeing.

Beyond their clinical responsibilities, experienced orthoptists play an important role in shaping the future workforce by supporting the education and training of students on clinical placements. This can open the door to a career in academia, where roles often combine teaching, research and clinical practice alongside leadership responsibilities.

Many orthoptists choose to remain in primarily patient-facing roles while also engaging in research, using their clinical insight to help drive improvements in practice and patient outcomes. This close link between research and day-to-day care ensures that the profession continues to evolve, with evidence-based practice at its core.

There are also opportunities within the NHS to progress into leadership and management roles, enabling orthoptists to influence service development, drive improvements in patient care and play an active role in shaping the future of healthcare delivery.

Demand for orthoptists

Demand for orthoptists is growing across the UK. Clinical demand is increasing, and advances in neonatal care mean that more premature babies are surviving than ever before. However, this is associated with a higher risk of lifelong eye conditions, requiring ongoing monitoring and management.

Improved healthcare has also contributed to an ageing population. Older adults are more likely to experience eye conditions related to neurological diseases such as stroke, as well as age-related decline. In addition, lifestyle factors are contributing to increased visual strain and associated problems.

Secondly, there is a recognised workforce shortage within hospital eye services. In response to rising demand, there has been an increasing reliance on non-medical professionals, including orthoptists, to take on roles traditionally performed by doctors. Consequently, the NHS has placed a strategic focus on the development of Allied Health Professionals to work in advanced and extended roles. Orthoptists are therefore increasingly managing more complex cases and helping to reduce pressure on other ophthalmology services.

Training routes into orthoptics
The most common route to becoming an orthoptist is through an undergraduate degree in orthoptics. This is offered at:

- Glasgow Caledonian University (four-year course; BCC at A-level, including two science subjects)
- University of Liverpool (three-year course; BBB at A-level, including a science subject)
- University of Sheffield (three-year course; BBB at A-level, including a science subject)

For graduates with a relevant background – such as biological sciences, psychology, chemistry, or nursing – there are also accelerated two-year Master's programmes available at University College London and the University of Liverpool.

Additionally, the University of Sheffield offers a foundation year for students who do not meet standard entry requirements, with particular support for international applicants.

An exciting development in the profession is the planned Level 6 orthoptic apprenticeship, expected to launch in September 2026. Delivered by the University of Sheffield, this route aims to widen access to the profession and diversify the workforce. Entry requirements are expected to include CCC at A-level (or equivalent experience, such as working as an orthoptic assistant).

Job prospects
Job prospects for newly qualified orthoptists are strong. Around 90-100% of graduates secure employment within six months of graduating, with the vast majority working within the NHS (BIOS, 2023).

Newly qualified orthoptists typically start at Band 5 (£32,073 to £39,043 per year) under the NHS Agenda for Change pay system and are supported through a structured preceptorship programme to consolidate their clinical skills and knowledge. The availability of Band 5 roles can vary by region, so graduates are often encouraged to be flexible in terms of location when seeking their first position.

With experience, most orthoptists progress to Band 6 roles (£39,959 to £48,117 per year), with further opportunities to advance to Band 7 (£49,387 to £56,515 per year) or 8 positions (£55,690 - £91,609 per year). There is also the option to train as an Advanced Clinical Practitioner (ACP), enabling orthoptists to take on extended responsibilities.

The UK Orthoptic degree is also widely accepted abroad, although local registration is required to practice, and this can require additional exams.

Orthoptic support worker
The orthoptic support workforce is rapidly expanding and plays an important role within eye care teams. They are typically trained locally to assist with clinical tasks, including carrying out specific vision tests and supporting patient care.

Depending on their level of responsibility, orthoptic support workers are usually employed at Band 3 (£25,760 - £27,476 per year), 4 (£27,485 to £30,162) or 5 (£32,073 to £39,043 per year). This is a rewarding career path that does not require a university degree. Entry requirements generally include GCSEs minimum grade 4 in English and Maths (or equivalent), along with relevant qualifications or experience in health or social care, such as an NVQ or BTEC at Level 2 or 3. Practical experience in a healthcare setting is also highly valued.

Summary
Orthoptics is a diverse, rewarding, and patient-centred career within healthcare. It offers the opportunity to work with people of all ages, to be part of a multidisciplinary team and to make a tangible difference to patients' eyesight and their quality of life.

Reference
BIOS (2023). *Orthoptist Career Profile.* orthoptics.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Orthoptist-Career-Profile-Aug-23.pdf (accessed 23/04/2026)

> "The UK Orthoptic degree is also widely accepted abroad, although local registration is required to practice, and this can require additional exams."

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