

# DRY EYE DIRECTORY GRABS GLOBAL ATTENTION

Google rankings of a dry eye directory introduced last year have been building worldwide, connecting patients to practices who have invested in treating dry eye.

An optometrist from a little-known Australian town is behind a new dry eye website that's helping connect sufferers with eyecare professionals here and abroad.

Mr Leigh Plowman, a dry eye sufferer himself who practises in Colac, Victoria, officially launched the Dry Eye Directory in November in response to a growing appetite among patients for dry eye information and treatment.

He says the website, which now includes practitioners from across Australia, Europe and the US, seeks to answer the perennial question: "Where do I go to get some relief?"

"Patients often talk to their pharmacist or friend about dry eyes. They may hear several eye drop recommendations and purchase them. Patients might try every available over-the-counter eye drop in search of relief. In the meantime, their dry eyes can worsen, leading to pain and reduced quality of life," he says.

"A Google search for dry eye treatment returns results about publications but not information directing patients to optometrists to get treatment, or relief."

With a general increase in screen time a well-known contributing factor, and dry eye affecting younger patient demographics than previously, Plowman says now is the time for optometry practices to be proactive about diagnosing and treating the disease.

"The main reason for creating the directory was to connect patients to practices. As eyecare practitioners, it is now within our scope to offer more than just eye drops and warm compresses. Intense pulsed light (IPL) has been a game-changer in relief and treating underlying causes," he says.

Plowman notes that dry eye treatments have become significantly more popular in journal articles and clinical literature.

"Now more than ever, practices are taking a serious interest in dry eye disease. This often involves a holistic approach to treatment, including general health and lifestyle interventions. Cosmetics and moisturisers ingredients are often discussed in a consultation," he says.

"Dr Laura Downie has a good analogy for dry eye – she says there are 2,000 components to



Optometrist Leigh Plowman examines a patient at Otway Optical, Colac.

tears. It's like Jenga – if a couple of components are missing, it can destabilise the whole thing."

Plowman, who also operates Optomly – a business that offers marketing services to help independent optometrists grow their practice – says he reached out to colleagues and associates, as well as to authors who have published related journal articles, to kickstart the directory.

"There isn't an official society of dry eye specialists but there are forums for dry eye practitioners, such as OSDocs [Ocular Surface] on Facebook that has 6,000 optometrists globally," he says.

"Forums like OSDocs allow discussion of new research, educational tools and clinical tips for managing dry eye patients."

This forum helped Plowman find optometrists who offer dry eye treatment to include in the directory. "To set up the directory, I was mainly looking for optometrists who have invested in dry eye equipment, products and techniques, like IPL, LipiFlow or Rexion-Eye," he says.

So far, some optometrists have expressed their appreciation for the directory, which is a free service that Plowman has developed with his own money to date. It has a range of supporters, including Dry Eye Diva, established by Ms Amy Sullivan, who co-founded the Tear Film & Ocular Surface Society (TFOS). Dry Eye Diva aims to "expose the toxic truth" behind beauty products and how they affect eye health.

"The directory is small but growing. Google rankings are building globally, with practitioners joining from Scotland, Italy, and the UK."

Currently Dry Eye Directory is ranked at number five on Google USA and number ten on Google Canada. Australia and New Zealand are rising too.

"This directory is a way for optometrists to get their name out there – as a profession, dry eye is within our scope. The directory can also work as a resource to refer to a passionate dry eye colleague."

According to Google Trends, searches for dry eye disease have doubled in the last 10 years. With more people working from home on digital devices, this trend is likely to continue, Plowman says. Plowman plans to add more resources for patients and eyecare professionals in future, including webinars and other online community activities. He hopes this will help encourage a sense of community amongst eyecare professionals.

"When I was an optometry student, I recall being a patient for another student. I still remember her putting fluorescein in and doing tear breakup time. She said: 'Wow, Leigh, your eyes are dry'. Fortunately, our access to treatments has expanded significantly since this time. We no longer have to wait for patients to try artificial tears and hope they are compliant. Australia has great treatments like IPL, LipiFlow and more. These can be a great way to differentiate your practice," he says.



**LEIGH  
PLOWMAN**

Leigh is an independent optometrist who founded the Dry Eye Directory and operates optometry marketing service, Optomly.