



THE COLLEGE
OF OPTOMETRISTS

Optical
Confederation
The voice of UK optics



supporting blind and
partially sighted people



The Royal College of Ophthalmologists



Ophthalmic Public Health: the invisible public health time bomb

We fully support the Government's proposed:

- new focus on public health, especially with regard to health inequalities and health prevention;
- establishment of Public Health England as an executive Agency of the Department of Health; and
- role of Health and Wellbeing Boards with a view to improving integration of health and social care, as well as tackling the causes of health inequalities.

Astonishingly, sight loss is set to double by 2050, despite half of this being avoidable through early intervention and diagnosis. We welcome the Government's further consideration on where the best place for commissioning responsibility should rest for campaigns around early diagnosis, as outlined in its recent Command Paper and hope we will be included in these discussions.

Even modest reductions in avoidable sight loss would result in significant health gains and savings in health expenditure by reducing physical frailty, lessening the impact of other illnesses and disabilities, reducing falls and preserving independence.

We would urge the Government therefore to include eye health as a major public health challenge by adopting an indicator in the Public Health Outcomes Framework that measures progress towards reducing avoidable blindness caused by glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and diabetic retinopathy. Failure to do so we fear will greatly exacerbate health inequalities.

Key Facts:

- Around 100 people start to lose their sight every day, approximately 50% of which is avoidable.
- According to RNIB, it is predicted that the numbers of people with sight loss in the UK will double to nearly four million by 2050.
- Sight loss is a major contributor to loss of independence, depression, social isolation and falls in old age and is acknowledged by people of all ages as being the sense they fear losing the most.
- The costs of sight loss are anticipated to grow to £7.64 billion in 2013 if no action is taken.

Fortunately, approximately half of all sight loss is avoidable, through early detection and intervention. Such action now will save significant NHS and social care resources in the future. One way we believe this can be achieved is through an eye health indicator in the public health outcomes framework. We propose the outcome measure should be a reduction in the level of avoidable or modifiable visual impairment resulting from glaucoma, AMD and diabetic retinopathy.

- All three eye conditions are amenable to prevention, treatment and amelioration.
- The costs to society of blindness were estimated at £22 billion in 2008 ¹.
- Assessing a patient's eyesight needs to be an integral part of a falls prevention service. Studies have shown that falls can be reduced by as much as 14% by treating visual impairment as part of a falls reduction plan.
- In 2008, over 37,000 falls requiring hospital treatment occurred in individuals with visual impairment at an estimated cost to the NHS of £25.1 million². Reducing the number of falls attributable to visual impairment will also help more people to stay active, independent and less reliant on social services.

¹ Access Economics (2009) *Future sight loss UK (1): The economic impact of partial sight and blindness in the UK adult population*

² Access Economics (2009)