

What is glaucoma?

Glaucoma is an eye disease which occurs when the optic nerve, which carries images from the eye to the brain, is damaged. This is usually caused by increased pressure in the eye ball. A person may not know they have glaucoma until they have lost a considerable part of their vision. Once lost, that vision cannot be regained. If it is detected early enough, it can be treated and sight loss prevented.

The UK context

The risk of developing the condition increases with age, and it affects about 2 per cent of people aged over 40¹. It is estimated that more than 600,000 people in the UK have glaucoma² and that only half have been diagnosed. The remaining 300,000 are, until detected, needlessly going blind.

Recent developments

The UK Government has recognised eye health and the prevention of avoidable sight loss as a national public health priority. A new eye health indicator will aim to track progress in tackling avoidable sight loss and visual impairment as a result of chronic glaucoma, where prevention, early diagnosis, prompt referral and ongoing community management by both opticians in the community and the hospital eye care service have key roles to play. Progress against the indicator is to be published annually.

Alongside this very welcome news, and to cope with this growing health need, community opticians are increasingly triaging and monitoring potential glaucoma suspects with raised eye pressures and managing stable glaucoma patients in the community within parameters agreed with hospital ophthalmologists. This can help consultants focus on new referrals and difficult cases, helping to meet the standards recommended by the NICE Clinical Guideline on glaucoma³.

1. Burr JM, Mowatt G, et al. The clinical effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of screening for open angle glaucoma. *Health Technol Assess*. 2007 Oct; 11(41):1-190.
2. Based on figures from the Office of National Statistics: Mid-1971 to Mid-2010 Population Estimates: Quinary age groups for Constituent Countries in the United Kingdom; estimated resident population.
3. *NICE Clinical Guideline 85: Diagnosis and management of chronic open angle glaucoma and ocular hypertension*, 2009.

Scotland is already well on the way towards adopting this model. However, in England and Wales, the picture is much more varied, with some areas taking a lead and others not ready yet to follow suit.

Next steps:

Glaucoma referral refinement and stable glaucoma management should be commissioned nationally by the NHS Commissioning Board like the sight test (i.e. under a single contract and fee structure, as in Scotland). This would maximise patient benefit, minimise risks and reduce NHS costs (as part of the Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention Agenda). As these services would be cost-per-intervention (like the current sight test), costs would be tightly controlled.

In our view the NHS Commissioning Board should: ideally agree national contracts and fees for these services to minimise transaction costs; failing that, agree national pathway and contracts and commend these to Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) (although this would be less cost-effective for the NHS).

Actions:

We would encourage you to act now to prevent avoidable sight loss by:

- writing to your PCT cluster/Clinical Commissioning Group(s) to encourage adoption of effective patient pathways for glaucoma patients
- meeting your Local Optical Committee/Regional Optical Lead to discuss the local enhanced eye care services in your area

- agreeing to visit a local optical practice to see first-hand how eye care services are delivered in the community
- writing to your Local Authority about ensuring that the eye health indicator, and glaucoma within that, is included in its joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and that a local eye health needs assessment is carried out.

We would be happy to assist with any of the actions above. For more information, please contact the Optical Confederation public affairs team at:

www.opticalconfederation.org.uk

About us:

The **International Glaucoma Association** is the charity for people with glaucoma. It raises awareness of glaucoma, supports patients and promotes research related to early diagnosis and treatment.

The **Optical Confederation** represents the 12,000 optometrists, 6,000 dispensing opticians, 7,000 optical businesses and 45,000 ancillary staff in the UK, who provide high quality and accessible eye care services to the whole population. The Confederation is a coalition of five optical representative bodies: the Association of British Dispensing Opticians (ABDO), the Association of Contact Lens Manufacturers (ACLM), the Association of Optometrists (AOP), the Federation of Manufacturing Opticians (FMO) and the Federation of (Ophthalmic and Dispensing) Opticians (FODO). As a confederation we work with others to improve eye health for the public good.