

Eye patients to benefit from IT

New IT links between high street opticians and hospitals are set to be introduced across Scotland to improve services for patients.

The new system, which builds on the investment already made in enhanced free eye examinations will give enable optometrists to send images of patients who they suspect have serious eye problems directly to hospital eye doctors.

The consultant will then decide the same day whether or not a patient needs a hospital appointment.

The scheme, which is being rolled out following a successful pilot in Fife, will lead to reduced waiting times and fewer unnecessary hospital attendances.

It is expected to reduce the average time between patients going to an optometrist and being given a hospital eye service appointment from 15 to nine weeks. Another benefit is that optometrists do not have to refer patients back to their GP for a hospital appointment.

Among the patients to have already benefitted from the Fife pilot scheme is a 10-year-old boy who went for an eye test and was diagnosed as having optic disc swelling – papilloedema – after digital images of his eye were sent to hospital. He was transferred to Edinburgh Sick Children's Hospital for MRI scan within an hour, where he was diagnosed as having a tumour within his skull and operated on.

Under the old system, the child may have had to wait weeks for an appointment which could have resulted in his condition worsening.

A total of £6.6 million has been invested in the project, but it is expected to save £2.75 million through reduced waiting times and unnecessary appointments.

The number of patients with wet macular degeneration disease who can receive potentially sight saving injections within a 'golden' two week window is also expected to increase.

Minister for Public Health Shona Robison said:-“This is fantastic news for patients and optometrists. It means that patients can be seen and treated much more quickly and efficiently.

“It is a great example of what can be achieved under the NHS Quality Strategy, which is putting patients at the heart of everything the NHS does.

“It is also a reminder of how important it is to go for an eye test as they can pick up at an early stage problems that have the potential to become more serious if left untreated.”

Peter Carson, Chair of Optometry Scotland said:-“This development is an excellent outcome for all of us at Optometry Scotland as we have long realised the potential benefits this facility will bring in terms of enhanced patient care, to further enable Optometry to truly integrate itself into primary healthcare in Scotland, as well as providing improved referral workflow with our Ophthalmology colleagues in secondary care.”

John Legge, Director of RNIB Scotland said:-“This is a truly superb outcome for the hundreds of thousands of patients attending eyecare services across Scotland every year and consolidates Scotland's position as the world leader in this field.”

Dr John Olson, Chair of Eyecare Scotland said:-“This is indeed fantastic news. More importantly, it will enable us to move from a model of two, world class, but very separate, services

– optometry and the hospital eye service, towards a single, truly integrated, patient-centred national system of eyecare.”

This development forms part of the action plan for Delivering Quality in Primary Care launched by Nicola Sturgeon on August 19.

RNIB Scotland’s recent report ‘The Cost of Sight Loss Scotland: 2010-2020’ estimated that sight loss in Scotland is set to double to almost 400,000 over the next two decades, mainly due to our aging population.