

System leaders roundtable on the future of eye health and vision services in the UK

On Friday 10 November 2017 we brought together a range of sectoral and health service system leaders to discuss the future of eye health and vision services across the UK. We convened the roundtable event as part of our Education Strategic Review. The event considered how changing patient need, technological advances and service re-design are changing the way services are provided and what this means for the professions we regulate.

Two major themes of the event were: the importance of **developing increased collaboration, cooperation and integration** between eye health and vision services and wider health systems; and **equipping future optical professionals** with the skills and knowledge to practise safely and competently in new and different ways. The roundtable event highlighted a range of timely issues including:

Optometrists, dispensing opticians, ophthalmologists, orthoptists, ophthalmic nurses and the range of related roles in the health systems in the UK are increasingly working together across organisational boundaries.

“The Health and Care system faces significant challenges if it is to address the health needs of an aging population. This round table event helps to align the priorities of commissioners, providers and regulators to deliver the wider range of eye health services we will wish to see available in our communities.” *David Geddes, Head of Primary Care, NHS England*

Where needed, more operational and technological integration would develop clearer, quicker and more consistent patient pathways across the range of eye health and vision services – from the high street and community, to specialised hospital care. While further developing patient-centred care, clinical governance and increasing understanding of practitioner roles would support more integrated and accessible services.

Some practitioners may not always feel confident in meeting the needs of vulnerable patients and those with complex and long term conditions and they must be supported to develop these skills and aptitudes in response to increasing patient need.

“We know some vulnerable groups currently struggle to access good eye care. Further training and accreditation for practitioners would allow them to best meet the eye care needs of those members of society with the most complex needs.” *Lisa Donaldson, Head of Eye Health, SeeAbility*

Where hospital eye health services are under severe pressure, high street and community based services are a resource to help alleviate the burden on hospital-based services through well established, new and innovative service provision.

“With hospital eye services under increasing pressure, expanding the role of primary care optometry is essential to build much needed capacity to ensure the NHS can meet current and future demand for monitoring of low- to medium-risk eye conditions.” *Katrina Venerus, Clinical Director, LOCSU*

Our review of the existing system of Continuing Education and Training for optometrists and dispensing opticians, and the periodic revalidation of their skills and experience, could contribute to further building confidence in the new services these practitioners may provide.

Decisions about the provision and commissioning of eye health and vision services need to ensure sufficient critical mass to avoid fragmentation and geographic variation of service availability, as well as to optimise the skills available in high street and community services to respond to long-term eye health conditions.

“We recognise the crucial role that optometrists play in maintaining good vision and screening for ophthalmic disease and the potential for enhancing delivery of eye care through greater integration of primary and secondary care. We look forward to working with the GOC to bring about changes in optometry education and training, and with others to enable changes in service provision to develop.” *Mike Burdon, President, Royal College of Ophthalmologists*

International Research

Since the roundtable event, we have separately published our international research into patterns and trends in optical and other health professional education and regulation, conducted by *Collaborate Research*. The findings identify some common challenges, changes and new priorities in optical and wider health practice in a number of different countries and health professions that chime with the roundtable discussions.

Our international research found:
Common challenges



Demographic change and, in particular, an ageing population, is leading to greater demand for health services, and more complex and long-term health needs. This is placing increased pressure on healthcare systems which are already subject to funding constraints. Hospital services are particularly affected, which is providing a strong policy impetus for more care to be delivered in the community. Another contributing factor to this development is an increased policy focus on 'person-centred care'."

Changes in practice



...developments have led to changes in practice such as both more multi-professional team and autonomous working, and an expansion of scopes of practice within a number of health professions including optics."

New priorities



...health professionals have always required a mix of knowledge, skills and behaviour, including both scientific knowledge and clinical skills, and both practice-specific skills and transferable professional qualities. However, what is needed is evolving in line with the changing practice environment. Within optometry, additional skill development has been required in those jurisdictions where practitioners now diagnose and manage eye health conditions."

Research quotes taken from: Patterns and trends in optical and other health professional initial education and its regulation, Collaborate Research November 201, p18

From the UK perspective, GOC Chair, Gareth Hadley reflects that:



“ A strong message from our event was much more collaboration needs to happen within the optical sector, and with the wider health systems, to ensure future practitioners - and the services they deliver - are equipped to respond to changing patient need.

The UK optical sector has been evolving for some years in response to changing patient need and expectations and our latest research shows this is happening in other jurisdictions too. We know throughout the UK more optical services are being delivered in new and innovative ways, including in community settings – and where this works well for patients and service providers surely it should be enabled.

Our role at the GOC is to ensure practitioners are equipped to practise safely and competently in this evolving landscape. But all relevant parts of the optical and wider health sector must pursue a joined up and collaborative approach that can help ensure the delivery of safe and cost effective eye health and vision services that patients have confidence in and can navigate easily.”

The GOC is the regulator for the optical professions in the UK. Its purpose is to protect the public by promoting high standards of education, performance and conduct amongst opticians. The Council currently registers around 30,000 optometrists, dispensing opticians, student opticians and optical businesses. *For more information about: the GOC's Education Strategic Review see:*

<https://www.optical.org/en/Education/education-strategic-review/index.cfm>