

A vision in sight

Optometric Advisor Professor Nizar K Hirji describes the strategic thinking that is inspiring action to improve eyecare services at NHS Dudley...

Visual impairment (when the level of vision is below that which the individual requires for their everyday tasks) has a very significant impact on quality of life. It is strongly associated with falls, fractures and depression, and with a higher risk of suicide. The risk of having an accidental injury is higher for people who are visually impaired compared with the fully sighted population.

The evidence on falls suggests that people with visual impairment are 1.7 times more likely to have a fall and 1.9 times more likely to have multiple falls compared with people with no visual impairment, and the odds of a hip fracture are between 1.3 and 1.9 times greater. The Ethical Strategies study (2003) identified annual cost estimates associated with vision impairment in the elderly population of £4,980 per person, and suggested that if at least 50% of this cost is from falls treated on the NHS and from the cost of residential care, which is shared between the NHS and local authorities, then the estimated annual future savings are potentially £2,490 per person per year.

Ageing, obesity, alcohol consumption and smoking – the demographic and lifestyle characteristics identified in the population of Dudley – are known risk factors in one or more of the following eye conditions that cause visual impairment:

- Refractive errors;
- Cataracts;
- Age Related Macular Disease (ARMD);
- Glaucoma;
- Diabetic retinopathy.

Older people from deprived areas and poorer backgrounds tend to put off accessing eyecare services and often present with advanced disease and visual impairment, the consequence of not detecting and managing these conditions being permanent impairment and low vision.

Sight loss is a major health issue, and affects millions of people in the UK. The vast majority of these are older people, although an estimated 80,000 working age people and 25,000 children are affected by sight problems in the UK. Over 50% of sight loss is due to preventable or treatable causes and is most marked in the older population, where it is estimated to be between 50-70%.



Apart from health and social impacts, there are also significant economic impacts resulting from vision loss. RNIB estimates that total UK costs are in the region of £4.9bn a year. These are believed to be conservative estimates; however, more comprehensive Australian studies indicated that vision disorders cost an estimated 0.6% of GDP (Au\$9.85bn in 2004). Frick and Kymes (2006) have argued that these findings rank the absolute economic burden of sight loss with that of cancer, dementia and arthritis: 'The impact relative to [an] entire...economy also emphasises the non-trivial nature of the burden of visual impairment. The results should catch the attention of health policy-makers because they suggest that, even in a developed economy, visual impairment can limit economic development.'

Furthermore, people with visual impairment tend to have longer hospital stays, make greater use of health and

community services' care services and are more likely to be admitted to nursing homes.

Improving diagnosis and early intervention is key, because detecting eye disease at an earlier stage allows more to be done to delay disease progression, therefore strategies are most likely to be cost-effective. In this economic and political climate, there is a danger that frontline services such as sight testing are seen as potentially easy targets for cuts. But this is false economy.

Primary care optometry is a patient-centred service. Optometrists within NHS Dudley work mainly in community-based practices at primary care level, conducting routine eye examinations under mandatory General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) contracts on patients either self-referred or referred by GPs, and advising on the best course of action post eye examination, whether it be correction of refractive errors, early review or referral to other primary care practitioners, counselling or referral on to secondary care.

The priorities for improving eyecare services at NHS Dudley are:

- To improve access to regular eye examinations for the whole population;
- To improve the care pathways for specific eye conditions.

Access to regular eye examinations is to be improved by considering:

- Promoting the service and educating the public about who is eligible for NHS funded eye examinations including domiciliary eye exams;
- Recommending eye examinations to all older people who have had a fall;
- Promoting the benefits of eye examinations as part of the vascular risk assessment;
- Developing care pathways for specific eye conditions by:
 - Reducing the number of inaccurate referrals to secondary care;
 - Mapping and developing a low vision care pathway that is integrated across primary, secondary and social care;
 - Creating a fast track referral system into secondary care for people with wet ARMD;
 - Increasing the uptake of digital diabetic retinopathy screening.

At worst, an increased uptake of sight tests per se will have beneficial effects via a reduction of visual impairment amongst the population of NHS Dudley due to uncorrected refractive errors, undetected cataracts, ARMD, glaucoma, diabetes and vascular diseases.



Frontline services such as sight testing would potentially be easy targets for spending cuts

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