

Evaluation of a new care model "Optometry First" to help meet Ophthalmology demand

TOPIC - Transformation

Traditional models for eyecare in England can no longer keep up with demand; by broadening the scope of care delivered within optometric practice, utilising the capability already available within practice teams, can release capacity within hospitals for more complex care.

CONTENT

In England, Ophthalmology accounts for almost 10% of the NHS backlog, with 1 in every 100 people waiting for a first ophthalmology appointment, often experiencing lengthy waits. Approximately, 30% of patients are discharged following their first attendance indicating low complexity care suitable for optometric management.

Following the success of CUES - a COVID-19 response urgent eyecare service delivered from local optometry practices – Bassetlaw were selected to test a new care model, developed by wide stakeholder engagement and promoted by NHS England, "Optometry First".

In Bassetlaw, June 2021, capacity pressures within the local Hospital Eye Service were acute with COVID-19 protocols and staff vacancies exacerbating an already difficult situation. 4,378 patients were waiting for a first appointment, with an average wait of 50 weeks.

Initiatives aimed to reduce hospital service demand and better understand referral activity with a view to exploring new pathways utilising primary care capacity and capability.

An audit of backlogged referrals identified referrals suitable for optometric management. Working within the published Optometry First framework, new pathways were commissioned to start to build a comprehensive optometry service to receive the redirected activity and better manage low risk activity within first contact care.

RESULTS

Referrals were redirected for management in primary care optometry, resulting in a reduction in demand for ophthalmology services with a corresponding reduction in waiting times.

56% of paediatric referrals were considered suitable for optometry, with 75% fully managed, whilst 23% of adult referrals were redirected optometry, with 87% fully managed, resulting in a reduction in demand for ophthalmology services.

CONCLUSIONS

These results confirm that optometry can be utilised to help meet demands in ophthalmology and reduce waiting times. To meet growing demand in England, the transformation of eyecare services must involve managing more patients in primary care, making better use of the available workforce.

Referral audit should be a first stage for eyecare transformation.

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