

## OPHTHALMIC SERVICES

COVID-19 UPDATE: No: 10

December 2020

### A BIG THANK YOU

As we move to the end of the truly unforgettable year of 2020, the Health and Social Care Board would like to take this opportunity to thank all Ophthalmic Contractors for their dedication and efforts in helping to maintain and provide eyecare services during the coronavirus pandemic.



It is acknowledged that team work requires a team effort and in the months since the onset of the pandemic that team effort was visible and tangible; visible to all partners involved in eyecare service provision and tangible by patients who needed your help and clinical skills. From the Department of Health to Optometry Northern Ireland, to the Ophthalmic Services in the Business Services Organisation (BSO), to Procurement and Logistic Services in the BSO, to the Public Health Agency, to collective groups of practices, to individual optometrists and the Ophthalmic Services team in the Health and Social Care Board, there are too many people to mention and thank – each organisation and every individual deserves thanks for their contribution and efforts in navigating the choppy waters which the pandemic generated. COVID-19 crafted unique stresses and pressures which we could not have envisaged and ophthalmic services as an integral part of the HSC system felt these.

The plan for the 'rebuilding' of Ophthalmic services which the DoH Regional Management Board have approved will be a continuum of work for 2021 and beyond, supported by the Northern Ireland Eyecare Network. It is more important than ever to innovate, integrate and improve and that this is done collaboratively. Much progress has been made in recent years towards our common goal to improve eyecare services and the reactive nature of the pandemic there is risk to losing sight of long term aims and therefore it is imperative that we maintain a clear focus.

As we look forward to 2021, we look back on 2020 and remember all those who have been affected by COVID-19, especially those who have lost their lives. The impact of coronavirus has extended beyond the physical and in looking forward to the New Year, the Health and Social Care Board hope that you and your families will be safe and well.

Thank you again for your continued support and efforts in providing valuable and essential eyecare for your patients.

*Ophthalmic Services, Health and Social Care Board*

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This Bulletin highlights some important points in relation to services which both contractors and individual optometrists will need to consider. Please take time to read this update and share with colleagues in your practice.



### COVID Restriction Period

Further to the email issued to contractors from HSCB Ophthalmic Services on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December advising of that, for now, Ophthalmic Services i.e. GOS and Enhanced Services would continue as normal during the next 6 week period of restrictions. There have been a number of queries about whether 'routine recalls' may be issued to patients. Continuation of normal services includes routine recall however practices are asked to consider vulnerable patients e.g. an elderly patient with underlying health problems who is more at risk of COVID exposure, and if they are due a routine sight test but have no concerns about their eyes. These patients may wish to defer their sight test for a few weeks until the COVID risk reduces. This would be for the practice to discuss with the patient at the time they contact the practice to make their appointment or, consideration may be given to including a line to this effect in the recall letter.

### Updated Operational Guidance for Optometry Practices

Please note that the operational guidance for Ophthalmic Contractors has been updated to include information on how to manage the situation where a member of staff tests positive for COVID-19. Please ensure that you read and implement this guidance to help support you in service provision. Section 3.3.1 (page 7) notes the updated advice in respect of COVID-19 positive staff – please [click here to read](#) the operational guidance.

Please ensure that you check the Optometry COVID-19 webpage regularly for all updates: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3120.htm>

### Your Practice - Readiness for the Holiday Period and continuity of patient care.

Contractors are asked to ensure that they make advance plans for communicating with their patients and the public in respect of **access to urgent eyecare** on the days when the practice is closed over the holiday period. These plans may include a notice on the practice door, information on social media platforms and websites and a message on the practice answer-phone service.

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Please ensure that you follow the guidance issued by to all contractor practices on 17<sup>th</sup> December in regards to the content **and** clarity of the message you provide to patients who may require urgent care whilst your practice is closed. This also provides information for practitioners on access to Eye Casualty services during the holiday period. This guidance can be accessed at the following link:

<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2485.htm>

### General Ophthalmic Services – Some Points to Remember

#### 1. GOS and 'Second Opinions' – a reminder of the guidance

Please ensure that you apply the guidance issued in Bulletin No 9 in relation to patients who are 'dissatisfied' with a previous sight test and may seek a second one from your practice. Please ensure that you and your staff are familiar with the guidance and that this guidance is also made clear to patients in the scenario where a 'second opinion' is being sought. Please click on the following link for a reminder of this guidance: [click here to read](#) (page 2)

#### 2. GOS and 'Top-up' Charges for additional services

Contractors and optometrists are reminded that a top-up fee cannot and should not be 'added' as supplement to a GOS ST. If a practice chooses to provide additional services, including but not exclusive to diagnostic tests, which require a fee to be paid by the patient, it must be explained to the patient that these are being provided in a private capacity separate to the HSC funded Sight Test so that the patient is clear as to the costs and detail of the services being provided. It is essential that the patient does not feel under obligation to undertake, and pay for, these additional tests as part of the provision of their GOS sight test or HSC funded Enhanced Service.

### HSCNI email, CCG and NIECR

- **Practice HSCNI email accounts**

As outlined in two previous Bulletins (No 7 & No 9) ([click here to access both](#)) contractors that are using the HSC Optometry portal for their claims must check their practice HSCNI email accounts daily. If you require a password reset for this account please contact the IT helpdesk on 028 9536 2400 or, email [supportteam@hscni.net](mailto:supportteam@hscni.net)

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- **eReferral via CCG and NIECR**

As stated in the previous Bulletins noted above, if you are not a user of CCG or NIECR you are strongly advised to arrange to have access to both of these applications. Please ensure that if you need your NIECR account password reset that you also contact the IT helpdesk using the contact details above.

**Please contact one of the HSCB advisers to discuss the use of eReferral via CCG and the NIECR if you do not have access to these applications/systems.**

### Optometry Contractors: Probity and Post Payment Verification

Post Payment Verification (PPV) visits to practices were suspended in March 2020 following the onset of the pandemic. Contractors are advised that the HSCB and BSO intend to recommence their probity and assurance work early in 2021. It is anticipated that this work will be undertaken virtually and not via physical practice visits. Probity Services are developing their processes and arrangements for the secure transfer and submission of information (records) to HSCB/BSO for probity review from practices that are due to have their PPV visit undertaken. Initially contractor practices that had been due a re-visit, those whose visits were cancelled in March and those practices where routine monitoring has indicated that a PPV visit is required will be prioritised. As with all probity work, assurance will be sought on a range of services provided.

\*Please note that separately there will be work ongoing in respect of gaining the assurances required for the Financial Support Scheme (FSS1) which was made available to contractors.

### Feedback from recent Acute Eyecare Practitioner Survey

Thank you to all 229 of you who took the time to complete the Acute Eyecare Survey in October. We really appreciate that high number of responses which has provided very useful information to assist in further improving and developing this important service.

As expected 72% of respondents have experienced an increase in the number of patients requiring an NIPEARS assessment. This is due to many factors including the increasing awareness of patients that their optometrist is their first point of contact if they have an eye problem, the increased use of NIPEARS by GPs, the move by BHSCT Eye Casualty to a referral-only service and, of course, COVID.

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It highlights the need to ensure that the interface between primary care optometry and secondary care ophthalmology is as clear and straightforward as possible. A development to support this has aim been the introduction of the Eye Casualty specific referral form and 60% of you indicated that you are already using it. We would encourage all practitioners to make use of it both to streamline referral information that you provide and enable you to receive feedback on your referral. The form may be accessed, in writeable PDF format, at:

<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/Optom%20Eye%20Casualty%20Ref%20and%20Feed%20back%20Form.pdf>

There were a significant number of comments on the BHSCT Eye Casualty clinical advice line, both very positive comments welcoming the direct contact with the clinicians but also comments highlighting the issue of the answer machine service and timely call back. These comments have been raised with Eye Casualty and the clinical advice line has been modified, removing the answering machine and increasing the number of admin staff answering the calls. Hopefully you will have found a positive effect from these changes.

In regards the increased number of patients being redirected for NIPEARS from GPs there were a significant number of comments about inappropriate advice being given to patients by the GP practice and the difficulty in managing patient expectation as a result. Guidance has been issued to all GP practices about NIPEARS and further information is due to be issued to GP practice staff shortly to try to further address these problems. It would be helpful, if you receive an inappropriate NIPEARS referral that, if you had time, you would contact the GP practice and explain to either the GP or the GP practice manager the issues and reinforce the NIPEARS referral criteria.

The feedback on the use of webinars, with local secondary care clinicians presenting, showed that this was a very welcome format for local CPD and as a result further Acute Eye webinars are planned for 2021.

Thank you very much to all of you who responded to the survey and for your commitment to acute eyecare provision. If you have further comments or issues at any time about the Acute Eyecare pathway and NIPEARS provision please contact any of the optometric advisers as it is only with your feedback and comments that we can further improve the service.

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### **Criminal Justice Health Care: Opportunity to tender for the Optometry Service in Northern Ireland Prisons**

Contractors are advised that the HSC will be issuing a new Tender for The Provision of Optometry Services to the NIP Population early January 2021. Please note that Tender Opportunities are advertised on: [eTendersNI.gov.uk](http://eTendersNI.gov.uk). Further information on how to complete the Supplier register can be found on [www.hscbusiness.hscni.net](http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net) = PaLS Procurement and Logistics Service, Supplier Information

### **Continued Professional Development: Access to Training and Webinars**

All health care professionals understand the vital importance of continued training and development as clinicians and Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians are no exception to this. Please ensure that you keep a check on the requirements for your continued registration with the GOC, especially as we enter the last year of the current cycle.

Please note the following opportunities for training:

- **Tuesday 26th January at 10am : Paediatric Dispensing**  
**Jessica Gowing Specialist Dispensing Optician, GOSH London** (Please note that Dispensing Opticians CET points also apply)

[Register now by clicking here!](#)

- **Tuesday 9th Feb at 12.15pm: Interpreting OCTs and How to Decide what to Refer**  
**Mr Stuart McGimpsey Consultant Ophthalmologist and Clinical Lead**  
**Macular Service, BHSCT**  
Note: Registration details will be provided in the New Year
- **DOCET:** Education and Training Resources: access at <https://docet.info/>

**Cataract:** Looking towards 2021 and opportunities for service developments in post-operative cataract care, you are recommended to access the DOCET training on this clinical area. Whilst you will perhaps have already undertaken the existing WOPEC training on Cataract, this new DOCET module will be an opportunity to review and revisit important learning in regard to clinical care for patients with cataract, including their post-operative care. Please visit the [DOCET website](#) for information on the range of training courses and literature to support your continued clinical and personal development – [click here](#).

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**Dry Eye:** Effective diagnosis and management of patients with dry eye is an important element of clinical practice. Clinicians with ability and skill to accurately assess and effectively manage dry eye are valuable assets in primary care. All optometrists are encouraged to optimise their knowledge in this field of clinical care so that more patients can be safely and effectively managed in primary care, thereby reducing demand on the hospital eye service. By enhancing and adding to your competence and capability to assess and manage dry eye, you will be in a position to provide care for many of your patients without the need to refer to secondary care, thus assisting in helping reduce demand on pressurised hospital eye services. There are many resources available to you to gain further training including the [DOCET series](#) “Dry Eye: The Complete Picture”.



To support you in managing patients with dry eye in practice the Northern Ireland Formulary provides advice on prescribing for dry eye and other helpful resources for patients. Please visit the formulary website at the following link: <https://niformulary.hscni.net/>

### One more word of thanks.....



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Ophthalmic Services would like to reiterate our message of thanks during what has been a year of unprecedented loss, worry, stress, change, uncertainty and fatigue. Through all of this it is abundantly clear that you have endeavoured, like all your health care colleagues to do your utmost to provide the best care possible and, for this, HSCB thank you. There is still some way to go as we refocus, rebuild and rejuvenate but in the meantime we wish you and your families a peaceful and restful time over the holiday season.

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\*\*\*\* Ophthalmic Advice and Support \*\*\*\*

If you have a query you can receive advice from the following HSC Staff:

- Janice McCrudden: [janice.mccrudden@hscni.net](mailto:janice.mccrudden@hscni.net)
- Fiona North: [fiona.north@hscni.net](mailto:fiona.north@hscni.net)
- Margaret McMullan: [margaret.mcullan@hscni.net](mailto:margaret.mcullan@hscni.net)
- Scott Drummond: [scott.drummond@hscni.net](mailto:scott.drummond@hscni.net)



### COVID-19 Pandemic Online Resources:

- HSC Optometry COVID-19 information:  
<http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/3120.htm>
- COVID-19 Public Health Agency Advice: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/>
- General Optical Council:  
[https://www.optical.org/en/news\\_publications/Publications/joint-statement-and-guidance-on-coronavirus-covid19.cfm](https://www.optical.org/en/news_publications/Publications/joint-statement-and-guidance-on-coronavirus-covid19.cfm)
- College of Optometrists: <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-college/media-hub/news-listing/coronavirus-2019-advice-for-optometrists.html>