The basic high street sight testing service

CCGs will not commission General Ophthalmic Services (GOS) from 1 April 2013. The NHS Commissioning Board will take over responsibility but how basic will this nationally commissioned service be? Optical contractors are commissioned to carry out a sight test for a fee of £20.70. This includes an examination of the external surface of the eye and its immediate vicinity, an intra-ocular examination usually either by means of an ophthalmoscope or a slit lamp and any additional examinations the optometrist believes are clinically necessary. A prescription for glasses is issued at the end of the sight test and, for some eligible patients, an NHS optical voucher towards the cost of glasses.

Patient referrals

Unlike GPs and dentists, optical contractors are not normally responsible for screening or refining their own referrals under the GOS. They are neither paid nor allowed to manage patients in their own practices within the limits of their clinical competency. Instead they must refer all patients who show signs of injury, disease or abnormality in the eye, or elsewhere, and require medical treatment or are unlikely to see satisfactorily with corrective lenses. This is required by their GOS contract and it demonstrates the very narrow compass of the nationally commissioned service.

Locally commissioned services

Normally, optometrist referrals would go straight to ophthalmology outpatient departments but unrefined referrals can clutter these clinics unnecessarily. Referral refinement services and other locally commissioned or enhanced services provided in high street optometrist practices can prevent or greatly reduce this. PCTs used to commission these services locally but CCG commissioners will now have to consider whether they are to continue.

Patients in all PCTs areas will have eye care needs beyond the scope of the nationally commissioned services. In future, CCGs will need to commission local eye care services to meet these additional needs using the most appropriate procurement methods and locally identified funding.

These service types should include:

- Referral refinement and/or assessment especially to eliminate false positive glaucoma suspects
- Cataract monitoring – pre and post extraction
- Low vision services including low vision aids
- Stable glaucoma monitoring
• Red eye/acute anterior segment
• Children’s eye care services, eg screening at school entry.

CCGs may also want to consider transferring secondary care based diabetic retinopathy screening services into primary care.

Hospital eye services

This approach could increase the capacity of hospital ophthalmologists, enabling them to provide eye health services beyond the capacity of GOS contractors and GPs. These services could include ophthalmic surgery, especially cataract day surgery, ophthalmology outpatient services particularly Lucentis injections for patients with exudating (wet) age-related macular degeneration.

The domiciliary sight testing service

Patients who are unable to leave home unaccompanied because of a physical or mental illness or disability may receive a GOS sight test in their own home or in a nursing home or care home where they normally live. Optical contractors are paid £20.70 for the sight test plus a domiciliary fee of £36.46 for the first and second patient resident at the same address and a domiciliary fee of £9.13 for the third patient onwards.

Only a few high street practices provide a domiciliary service. In recent years specialist domiciliary optical contractors have grown in number and include three large national contractors who between them account for most domiciliary sight tests nowadays.

NHS optical vouchers

NHS glasses have not been available since 1986 but around one third of the patients who qualify for a GOS sight test also qualify for an NHS optical voucher. The qualifying criteria are different – over 60s who are not on a low income get a GOS sight test but not an NHS optical voucher.

Vouchers are issued with eight different value bandings corresponding to eight different letter codes ranging from code A at £37.10 to code H at £205.10. Codes A to D are for glasses with single vision lenses. Codes E to H are for bifocal or varifocal lenses. Voucher values increase broadly in line with the power of the lenses dispensed.

NHS optical vouchers are not strictly speaking part of the GOS and the supply of glasses is always a private transaction even if a NHS optical voucher is used in full or part payment. Suppliers who only provide optical appliances, and do not perform sight tests, do not have to hold a contract with the PCT – they may also be GOS contractors but do not have to be. They do not even have to be professionally qualified unless they dispense to children (aged under 16) or to registered blind or partially sighted patients. Patients usually get their vouchers dispensed at the same practice where they received their sight test but they have the freedom to take their voucher to any high street supplier of their choice for dispensing.