

OFNC

Association of British Dispensing Opticians
Association of Optometrists
British Medical Association
Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians

Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee

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Chairman: Mike George Secretary: Ann Blackmore

Peter Howitt
Deputy Director
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NHS Group
Department of Health
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Dear Peter Howitt

IT

Further to your letter of 11 March - to which Ann will be responding separately - we are writing to follow up on the revised national IT bid we submitted in November 2015, as requested, as a key part of our funding bid for 2016-17.

You will recall that the bid set how investment in connectivity to network community optical providers with the rest of the NHS and care system would contribute to NHS England's key strategic objectives in the following areas:

- facilitating the transformational shift required to deliver routine eye care outside hospital set out NHS England's *Five Year Forward View* (see also the plea for help from the Royal College of Ophthalmologists via the BBC on 16 March)
- facilitating the transformational shift required to deliver routine eye care outside hospital
- reducing pressure on GP practices
- reducing pressures and demand on secondary care (A&E, ophthalmology)
- improving patient experience and follow-up
- efficiency, probity and reduction in errors

In the bid we explained that financial support for optical practices and domiciliary providers to complete the NHS Information Governance Toolkit (IGT) for eye care services and demonstrate compliance with Level 2 is crucial to achieving the benefits described in the proposal.

We would like to bring to your attention the fact that the need for investment to support optical practices to complete the NHS IGT has become even more urgent due to the recent announcements by a growing number of NHS organisations that they plan to discontinue the use of fax machine communications in the near future.

We appreciate this action is in line with the Government's commitment for a paperless/paper light NHS by 2020, however, for optometrists, this will mean sending referrals by post which is contradictory to the NHS England's digital strategy and presents a clear risk to patient safety in the case of urgent referrals.

This is a significant issue as almost 1.8 million referrals are made to ophthalmology clinics per annum, accounting for 7% of first attendance hospital outpatient episodes, and over half of these referrals are made by optometrists.

Referral by NHS mail has been suggested as a solution to replace fax but, whilst we welcome the aim to remove/reduce the amount of paper and old technology in use, we are concerned about the fact that NHS mail requires completion of the NHS IGT which has not generally been funded for optical practices.

Clearly the removal of fax machines, which are commonly used to fast track Wet AMD referrals which are time critical, poses a significant risk of blindness and threat to patient safety if other methods of referral are not funded. Postal referral is not appropriate for urgent or emergency referrals, due to the delay that may be caused to time critical treatment.

We note with interest the recent announcement that NHS England has set aside £55 million to reward GPs and hospitals to switch to making referrals digitally by 2018 and would like to know that similar support will be made available for community optical practices to make the switch.

We urge NHS England to make national funding for NHS IGT compliance a priority so that universal adoption of NHS mail can be promoted.

It would be good to arrange an early meeting to see whether we can progress this issue which has now become acute.

Copies of this letter go to David Geddes, David Roberts and Andrew Laycock at NHS England.

Mike George
Chair