

LOCSU News Flash 27th March 2020

Coronavirus/COVID-19: Patient Care at Growing Risk as NHS England Ignores Optics

NHS England's failure to act is forcing hundreds of optical practices to close, with a direct and dangerous impact on the eye healthcare of patients in England during the COVID-19 crisis, the OFNC warned today.

Optical practices in other parts of the UK, as well as pharmacists and dentists, have already been offered emergency NHS funding to enable them to continue providing urgent and essential care during the COVID-19 crisis. But NHS England has given no guidance to practices in England on their role during the crisis, despite constant pressure from the OFNC.

The OFNC and its member bodies, along with others in the optical sector across the UK, have stepped in to fill the gap where we can, issuing guidance on what services practices should provide during the crisis. However, we cannot fill the void the NHS has left on the problem of funding.

Optical practices have had to stop routine sight testing in line with public health guidance. That means the vast majority of their income has vanished overnight. Like other NHS providers, they need a financial lifeline to help patients and the public – who will otherwise be forced down higher-risk pathways to A&E.

The NHS in all parts of the UK except England has recognised the vital role optical practices can play in providing urgent and essential eye care to patients during this crisis, and keeping patients away from overstretched GPs and hospitals. This is even more vital now that the Royal College of Ophthalmologists has recommended hospital eye departments reduce their clinical activity by 80-90%.

With no certainty of NHS funding during the crisis, hundreds of optical practices have already closed their doors and many more will follow in the next few days. On Wednesday OFNC wrote to Ministers and NHS England warning that “many optical practices in England are now in complete despair”. [A copy of that letter can be viewed here.](#)

Today OFNC Chair Paul Carroll said “Eye care patients are now at serious risk because of blockages somewhere in the NHS England system. We are now asking Ministers to intervene urgently to sort this out, so we can help the public with eye and vision problems during this national crisis.”

The Optical Fees Negotiating Committee (OFNC) is the national negotiating body for eye care in the UK and England with the Westminster Parliament, the Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England-NHS Improvement. It comprises the leaders of the UK representative bodies: ABDO, AOP, FODO and BMA (for OMPs) and works in partnerships with the College of Optometrists and the General Optical Council.