The ROYAL COLLEGE of OPHTHALMOLOGISTS

Will Quince MP
Minister for Health and Secondary Care
Department of Health and Social Care

Dear Minister, 15 August 2023

RE: Independent prescribing responsibilities for orthoptists

The Royal College of Ophthalmologists (RCOphth) is writing to express its support for the extension of independent prescribing responsibilities to orthoptists, as the British and Irish Orthoptic Society has advocated in a joint letter to the Secretary of State in February 2023.

Orthoptists have traditionally played a notable role in delivering eye care as part of a multidisciplinary team. This includes working with babies and children on the treatment of amblyopia ("lazy eye") and strabismus (squint), and with adults to manage conditions such as double vision. More recently orthoptists are able to broaden and extend their roles within eye departments by undertaking postgraduate qualifications such as the Ophthalmic Practitioner Training (OPT) Programme. In both of these areas there would be great benefit to patients and eye services if orthoptists were able to undertake independent prescribing, having achieved the appropriate qualification.

Independent prescribing is already undertaken by nurses and optometrists. RCOphth believes that these responsibilities could be extended to orthoptists using a similar framework. This would enable orthoptists, who are registered with their trust, to prescribe and administer drugs within their scope of practice. We also believe that the higher education institutions that are already providing independent prescriber training to nurses and optometrists would be able to deliver similar routes for orthoptists.

We believe such a change is made simpler in light of the Ophthalmic Practitioner Training Programme, where orthoptists, ophthalmic nurses and optometrists all follow a unified curriculum and assessment process to achieve the same level of clinical competence so their roles are interchangeable.

More broadly, given the long backlogs faced by ophthalmology services in England where there are over 645,000 patients waiting for an appointment with a consultant, efforts to increase the capacity of the existing workforce need to be a priority – alongside policies to expand the consultant ophthalmologist workforce and improve retention.

Extending independent prescribing responsibilities to orthoptists, with appropriate governance structures in place, can help to increase capacity in the eye care workforce and potentially free up time for ophthalmologists to manage more complex cases.

We would be happy to discuss this subject with you in more detail, at a time of your convenience.

Best wishes,

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The Royal College of Ophthalmologists

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