

Eye Care Service in Scotland: Did the Scots Get it Right?

In March 2004, the Scottish government announced a review of eye care services in Scotland, which culminated in the introduction of free eye examinations from 1st April 2006. This free eye examination is not just a sight test; it is a thorough examination to check the health of the patient's eyes and to look for signs of other health problems. The Scottish government commissioned private ophthalmic optician practices to perform these eye examinations. Consequently, since April 2006 individuals in Scotland could walk into any high street optometry practice and get a 'free' eye examination funded under the NHS.

The introduction of the free eye examinations was motivated by three factors.

i. Enhance efficient use of health care resources.

Prior to the free eye examinations, the first contact for most patients with an eye condition was their General Practitioner (GP). However, this limited the level of care provided to many people because often GPs do not have the necessary equipment, expertise or experience to adequately diagnose and manage complex eye conditions. Following referral from the GP, hospital eye departments and ophthalmologists were then responsible for the diagnosis and management of patients with complex eye and ophthalmic conditions. The increasing demands on the hospital eye services and the long waiting lists and waiting times for hospital clinics for eye care problems led to an acknowledgement that some patients' conditions could be managed within the community and better use could be made of primary care clinicians such as optometrists, who were viewed as being considerably underutilized (Scottish Executive, 2003). Given their numbers, and geographical spread, optometrists are a key group of clinicians in the primary care sector. Optometrists were granted supplementary prescribing rights, with independent prescribing rights to follow. This enhances their capability to manage anterior segment disease and chronic eye diseases in the community and in hospital settings.

ii. Deliver a range of benefits for patients.

The policy is designed to provide patients with an health assessment of their whole visual system and give optometrists the professional freedom to perform the tests

that are appropriate to patients' symptoms and needs, and allows a wide range of common conditions to be managed in the community (Scottish Executive 2006). A benefit for patients is the removal of out of pocket fees; prior to the free eye examinations, most patients paid out of pocket for sight tests with exemptions for some groups of patients based on age, income and employment and/or risk factors. The removal of fees was expected to encourage a wider use of optometry services and to ensure that the majority of the population benefitted from regular eye examinations. An additional benefit for patients who require referrals to hospital eye services would be the reduction in waiting times and lists due to more people being seen in the community, thereby reducing the risk of late diagnoses and ensuring quicker treatment.

iii. Contribute to the VISION 2020 global initiative to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020.

This initiative is a joint programme of the World Health Organization and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, and aims to have prevented 100 million people from becoming blind through the collaboration, at the national level, of Ministries of Health, NGOs, professional organizations and corporations to facilitate the development and implementation of effective and sustainable eye care plans.

The assessment of the relative success of the free eye care policy in Scotland is particularly timely given the current climate of fiscal austerity. The Scottish government is facing a £1.3 billion fall in public expenditure over the next year, and



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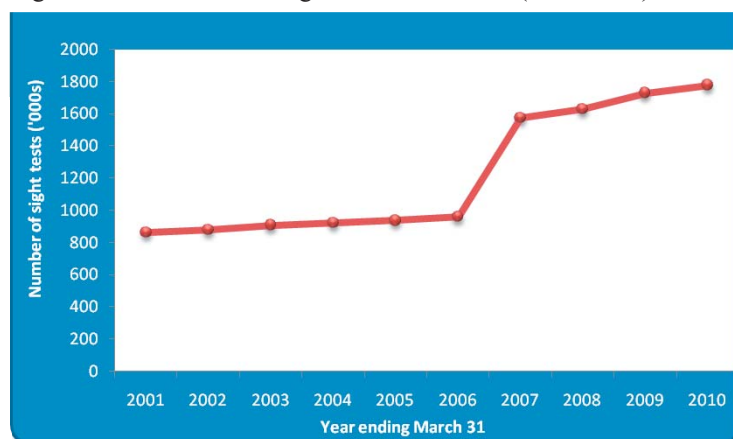
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Figure 1: total number of sight tests in Scotland (2001-2010)



the Scottish NHS will be under significant financial pressure in the coming few years, not only to freeze current levels of spending, but also to impose real cuts in services.

Exploratory Pilot Study

The researchers have conducted an exploratory pilot study that has investigated the effect of the policy on summary measures of eye test activity using data from the Information Services Division (ISD) of NHS Scotland, the British Household Panel Survey (BPHS) and data from a private ophthalmic optician company in Scotland. An outline of key preliminary findings is given below.

Summary data from ISD shows a 64 percent increase in tests following the introduction of free eye examinations (Figure 1). This overestimates the effect of the policy, because the ISD data prior to 2006 only records sight tests provided by the NHS, consequently these data refer only to those who were exempt from user charges. Since 2006, the data records all eye examinations and show that at least one third of the population of Scotland have had an eye examination and the proportion of the Scottish population having an eye examination increased from 31.5 percent in 2008 to 33.4 percent in 2009, and to 34.2 percent in 2010.

The British Household Panel Survey asks respondents if they had an eye test in the previous year. Between 1999 and 2008, the proportion of individuals living in

Scotland who reported having an eye test increased by 2.7 percentage points (from 37.7% to 40.4%). Furthermore, following the introduction of free eye examinations, the annual increase in reported eye tests was larger in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK. There was a 6.24 percentage points increase in reported eye tests in Scotland compared to a 1.54 percentage points' increase in the rest of the UK. Interestingly however, reported eye tests in Scotland fell thereafter (in 2006-2007 and in 2007-2008).

A first inspection of some data from the business records of a private ophthalmic optician company, currently operating various high street branches in the North East of Scotland, seems to suggest that in the year immediately after the policy was introduced (April 2006 to March 2007) the number of sight tests increased by around 5 percent and the number of contact lenses appointments by a 3 percent. In addition, the overall number testing days, where optometrists were available at the branches for sight testing, increased by 8.5 percent. Also the monthly average of new patients increased by 16.8 percent.

These statistics point to some interesting changes in the demand for (or utilisation of) eye tests after the policy was introduced in Scotland. The analysis proposed in this research will help identify the early effects of the new policy, as well as other factors that (may) affect individual's likelihood of having an eye test.

Project Aims

This research project aims to (1) assess to what degree the stated objectives of the policy of the free eye care policy in Scotland have been met; and (2) examine people's response to the policy both as eye care patients and consumers in the optician market. To meet the aims of this project, the study will consider three specific research questions:

- (i) The effect on the number of eye tests. Did more people have their eyes tested after the introduction of the policy? Specifically, did people who were not previously having eye examinations start to have eye examinations, and did existing patients have more frequent eye examinations (every two years) as recommended by the policy?
- (ii) Socioeconomic effects. Did individuals from some socioeconomic groups respond more to the policy? Related to this, did the profile of the average eye care patient change?
- (iii) Consumer reaction. How did individuals, as consumers in the ophthalmic optician market, react to the free eye examinations? Did their spending on related eye care goods (like spectacles) change?

NHS Implementation Potential

There are various policy reasons why this research project is important. In the face of the current fiscal tightening, it becomes even more important to ensure that resources are used more efficiently by targeting resources towards those who need it most (that is those for who the greatest benefit would accrue), or who are least likely to utilise services, thereby also reducing health inequalities. The results of this study are expected to help in prioritising government health expenditure in relation to free eye examinations in Scotland. In addition to generally providing research evidence for health service planning, through providing empirical evidence about the effects of key variables that can influence the demand for eye examinations, the results of this project (and its recommendations), no doubt, would have potential for generally improving eye care and potentially reducing the cost of treating eye diseases in the future, through early detection from eye examinations. Also, the research analysis will provide insights regarding consumers' behavior and may offer valuable information to the ophthalmic optician sector.

References

Scottish Executive. Review of Community Eyecare Services in Scotland. Final Report. Edinburgh 2006.

Scottish Executive. A Partnership For a Better Scotland. Document detailing the next four years of the Scottish Parliament. Edinburgh 2003.

Further Information

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