



ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS

Advice on Referrals by Optometrists

December 2006

Although the regulations appear to restrict referrals to hospital only, the Department of Health's guidance makes it clear that referrals can still be made to a patient's GP. The regulations also allow patients to be referred via a referral centre.

In summary, the optometrist retains the discretion whether or not to refer a patient for medical attention. If they do not refer, they must record the patient's condition, advice and treatment given (if any), and the reason why they are not making a referral. If appropriate, they may inform the patient's general medical practitioner.

If a referral is made it should be with the patient's consent. If the referral is to a medical practitioner the optometrist must inform the doctor to whom the patient is referred of their findings and the reason for the referral, usually in writing. If the patient does not wish to be referred, the optometrist must record the fact and the reasons for the referral.

If the patient agrees to be referred, the optometrist must inform the patient of the contents of the referral. The regulations say that the optometrist "must give the patient a written statement that he has done so, with details of the referral".

What does this mean in practice? The necessity to present the patient with a written statement containing details of the referral can be satisfied if a copy of the optometrist's referral letter is handed to the patient.

If the referral is made via a referral centre, the optometrist must record the fact, the nature of the referral and the advice given to the patient. The optometrist must also indicate to the centre whether or not the referral is urgent and whether it is to a medical practitioner or a non-medical practitioner (and, if the latter, their qualifications).

An optometrist may refer appropriate cases to another optometrist or to a non-medically qualified practitioner with the appropriate expertise.

The AOP takes the view that once a patient has been referred, whether to a GP, ophthalmic hospital or referral centre, the optometrist's duty to that patient has been discharged. If the optometrist refers the patient to an ophthalmic hospital or referral centre, the optometrist should send a copy of the referral to the patient's GP since it is the GP who retains overall responsibility for patients in his/her care¹. In urgent cases the optometrist may wish to verify that the referral has been received.

In some cases the referral centre may undertake to inform the patient's GP of the referral. Practitioners should be aware that it is their duty to inform the GP of the referral and delegating this to a third party does not absolve them of this responsibility. Unless the referral centre is subject to very robust governance and protocols, and audit and feedback loops are in place to follow up patients who fail to attend appointments, the practitioner should not rely on the referral centre to fulfil their duty of informing the GP and should send notification of the referral direct to the GP as well.

The practitioner should give the patient a copy of the referral letter and may wish to indicate a timescale within which the patient should have heard from the recipient of the referral (eg. the referral centre), with the recommendation that the patient should contact the recipient if they do not.

If a patient declines to be referred to a third party for any reason, then the optometrist has discharged his duty of care, provided that the patient has been informed in writing of the necessity of such a referral and that a referral letter has been given to the patient, should the patient wish to self-refer at a later date.

End

¹ This procedure for referral is consistent with the requirement on the optometrist to notify the GP, as provided for by The NHS (GOS Supplementary List and GOS Amendment and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2005, amending Schedule 1, section 39(12)(b) of the General Ophthalmic Regulations 1986 as amended.