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To: All Chief Executives of the Strategic Health Authorities

Dear Colleague

First Report of the National Eye Care Services Steering Group

I am writing to seek your views on the draft first report of the Eye Care Services Steering Group, which is enclosed with this letter. We are aiming to submit to Ministers in September.

The report brings together summaries of the four sub-group reports, and highlights key national and local action for delivery of modernised eye care services. Further work needs to be done on the national resource implications (cost and staff) of the report and this will be informed by the consultation now taking place with you and colleagues in DoH.

Background

The Eye Care Services Steering Group was set up by Ministers in December 2002 to develop proposals for the modernisation of NHS eyecare services. The membership of the group is listed at the end of the draft report.

As a first priority the Steering Group established sub-groups to develop model care pathways for cataract, glaucoma, low vision and ARMD (Age Related Macular Degeneration). These care pathways have been discussed and refined in recent Steering Group meetings, and have now been formally signed off by the group.

We will circulate the four care pathways in draft form shortly in order to allow PCTs to prepare proposals for pilot projects for which we have central funds available (see below).

The main areas of change in the pathways are at the interface between primary and secondary care, with recommendations for a greater role for optometrists in the community with appropriate training, audit and clinical governance to reduce pressure on secondary care and improve the service available to patients. The design principles for the care pathways were to:

- make best use of available resources;
- have fewer steps for the user;
- make more effective use of professional resource; and
- show a high standard of clinical care with good outcomes.

For pathways to be fully implemented there are national measures which would need to be decided and acted upon e.g. national protocols, extending prescribing responsibilities to optometrists and funding issues. These issues will be scoped through some of the pilot projects, but progress can be made to enhance services in advance of these using existing systems.

On 21st May 2003, we announced that an extra £52 million was being allocated to PCTs to reduce maximum cataract waiting times to three months by December 2004. This increased to £53m plus the £20m already allocated to the South Cataract Choice Project so there is a total of £73m being allocated to reducing cataract waiting times. PCTs were notified of their allocations on 15 August and have been asked to adopt the pathway once the 3 months maximum wait has been achieved locally.

In addition to the cataract funding, we also announced that £4 million would be provided to fund innovative pilot projects in chronic eye disease management. This reinforces a commitment to tackle all chronic eye disease, not just cataracts, and supplements the advice given to SHAs to link improvements in cataracts with the delivery of other eye care services. Bids will be invited shortly for pilot projects, and SHAs should be involved in co-ordinating the submission of bids in their area.

Action

I would be very grateful if you would consider the draft report and let me have your views to help us finalise and then put to Ministers by **Friday 3 October**. I am sure that there will be a number of issues which SHAs will be able to identify that need to be clear so that the report can be completed and recommended as a practical document which Ministers might support.

As I have indicated resource issues (both funds and staff) and protocols are among the matters that we think need further work. Once cleared our intention is that the report be issued to PCTs as commissioning guidance in respect of eye care services with some matters requiring further work from stakeholders.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'B. Ricketts', written over a horizontal line.

Bob Ricketts
Head of Capacity & Choice