

# **ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS**

## **Revised Advice on Referrals by Optometrists**

**7 February 2007**

### **Introduction**

Referrals by optometrists are governed by the Opticians Act 1989 (as amended), the National Health Service Act 1977 as amended by the Health and Social Care Act 2001, statutory regulations, guidance by the Department of Health and the rules of the General Optical Council.

### **Whether or Not to Refer**

Section 26 of the Opticians Act gives optometrists discretion whether or not to refer a patient to a registered medical practitioner. This discretion is specified in more detail in the GOC's Rules Relating to Injury or Disease of the Eye 1999 and extends to referrals to non-medically qualified practitioners.

If an optometrist believes that a referral is clinically necessary, he or she must refer the patient, unless the optometrist is responding to a specific request or instruction of a medical practitioner when testing or dispensing to a patient; in those circumstances, the optometrist must nevertheless inform the medical practitioner of any findings of injury or disease.

If a patient appears to be suffering from injury or disease of the eye and refuses to be referred on grounds of conscience or other grounds, the optometrist must record the patient's refusal and the reason for the refusal. The optometrist must also give the patient a letter of referral, explaining the nature and necessity of the referral. The patient may wish to self-refer at a later stage. In so doing, the optometrist has discharged his duty of care.

If the optometrist does not refer, he must record the patient's condition, the reason for not referring and the advice and treatment (if any) given to the patient. If appropriate, and with the patient's consent, the optometrist may inform the patient's general medical practitioner.

## **Whom to Refer to**

An optometrist may refer a patient to:

- a general medical practitioner (GP)
- an ophthalmic hospital (eye departments of general hospitals and treatment centres) directly or via a referral centre
- another optometrist
- a non-medically qualified practitioner with the appropriate qualification or expertise.

Although 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 general medical practitioner. Regulations and the GOC's rules also allow patients to be referred via a referral centre.

## **How to Refer**

Normally, a referral should only be made with the patient's consent.

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'. Consequently, the optometrist should normally give the patient a copy of the letter of referral.

The referral must inform the person to whom the patient is referred of the optometrist's findings and the reasons for the referral, usually in writing. The reasons should include:

- the optometrist's grounds for thinking that the patient may be suffering from injury or disease of the eye
- an indication of the urgency of the case.

If the referral is to a non-medically qualified person, the referral should indicate the qualifications or expertise of that person.

## **Referring to an Ophthalmic Hospital or via a Referral Centre**

If the referral is made to an ophthalmic hospital or 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 tell the hospital or 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, his or her qualifications).

In addition, the optometrist should give the patient a copy of the referral letter and indicate the time, within which the patient should hear from the recipient of the referral (eg. the referral centre). The optometrist should recommend the patient to contact the recipient, if the recipient has not contacted the patient within that time. In urgent cases the optometrist may wish to verify that the referral has been received.

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 in respect of the matter referred.

If the optometrist refers the patient to an ophthalmic hospital or referral centre, the optometrist must send a copy of the referral to the patient's GP, since it is the GP who retains overall responsibility for patients in his or her care. (In the case of the patient not having a GP or the GP being unknown, the optometrist should advise the patient to show his or her copy of the referral letter to an appropriate medical practitioner.) The optometrist should not rely on the referral centre to fulfill his or her duty to inform the patient's GP.

## **Summary**

- \* Decide whether or not to refer.
- \* Refer if clinically necessary.
- \* Record the patient's symptoms if no referral is made; inform the patient.
- \* Record the fact and nature of the referral.
- \* Inform the patient of the referral.
- \* Give the patient a copy of the referral letter.
- \* Inform the patient's GP.
- \* Inform the recipient of the referral about the nature and urgency of the referral.
- \* Tell the patient when he or she should hear from the ophthalmic hospital or referral centre.
- \* In urgent cases, check that the hospital or referral centre has received your referral.

**E n d**

- 
- ii 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.