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Mr Stephen Childs
Chief Executive
Cumbria Clinical Commissioning Group

Dear Mr Childs

Improving the experience of people with eye conditions when attending eye clinics

I am writing to you to ask you to take account of the benefits of the role of Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) and include this role in the commissioning intentions for eye health. At the moment there is one available in south Cumbria but this role is coming to an end at the end of March 2017 and after that none will be available.

Context

Healthwatch Cumbria has recently been advised about the advantages of employing ECLOs. Patients attending specialist eye clinics have told us that the availability of ECLOs improves their experience. ECLOs are Eye Clinic Liaison Officers who offer both practical and emotional support to patients with eye conditions such as age related Wet Macular Degeneration (WMD), Macular Degeneration, Macular Oedema and Retinal Vein Occlusion.

In some places, including at Westmorland Hospital until end of March 2017, patients' attendance is supported by the appointment of Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLO's). The ECLO gives information and support on a wide range of topics, acts a first point of contact for referral to other agencies such as adult social care and local Blind societies as well as accompanying people to their appointment where appropriate. The ECLO is trained in the completion of Certificates of Visual Impairment (CVI), saving valuable time for Consultants who would only then need to sign off the certificate, therefore reducing their administration work load and speeding up the process for patients.. The completion of the CVI, which can only be issued by a consultant ophthalmologist, is the first stage of registration of visual impairment so it is important that patients understand the process and what happens next. This is a time consuming process for the consultant's to undertake with patients.

We have also been told that the role of the ECLO can contribute to the reduction of mental ill health by patients on diagnosis of sight loss. Over ¼ of patients diagnosed with sight loss suffer depression following diagnosis.



Background

HWC attended Barrow and Districts Blind Society's annual awareness raising event in October 2016 with an information stand. Views/concerns were shared with the attending HWC Representative by both members of the public and the Chief Executive of the Society that some services from the health and social care sector are not providing equality of service for those who are visually impaired.

The concerns shared were that people who are visually impaired are not receiving equality of service by the main 4 hospitals in the county by, for example;

- Not receiving written communication in large print.
- Not having the right practical and emotional support following diagnosis or treatment at all eye health clinics in hospitals.

Often, patients have difficulty in accessing continued support from the clinics between appointments. The ECLO would be able to offer ongoing support between clinic visits which for most patients are monthly. Those with macular eye health conditions dominate with 50% of patients, mainly those with WMD, needing to visit clinics on a monthly basis.

One third of outpatient appointments are for Eye health Clinics. The role of the ECLO is similar to that of the Macmillan nurse based at the hospitals.

The proposal

During the work currently undertaken by HWC with the Chair of the Blind Societies it was highlighted to HWC that the role of the ECLO has been recognised as valid by NCUHT/MBHT and features in the Success Regime proposed pathways and the view of HWC is that this model of service support would fit into the ethos of the Integrated Community Care model currently being rolled out in Cumbria.

I would therefore like to urge you to consider ways that this important role could be developed and sustained as a key part of the pathway with ECLOs being employed and available to support and enhance the experience of this group of patients in these specialist clinics.

I look forward to hearing from you

Kind Regards

Sue Stevenson
Chief Operating Officer
Healthwatch Cumbria

cc Edward Bebbington, Healthwatch Representative
cc Carl Hodge, Barrow and District Blind Society
cc Amy Pearman, Barrow and District Blind Society

