

OFNC

Association of British Dispensing Opticians
Association of Optometrists
British Medical Association
Federation of Ophthalmic and Dispensing Opticians

Optometric Fees Negotiating Committee

199 Gloucester Terrace, London, W2 6LD Tel: 020 7298 5156 Email: ann@fodo.com
Chair: Trevor Warburton Secretary: Ann Blackmore

Carol Reece
Head of Dental & Optical Services Commissioning
Operations & Information Directorate
NHS England

8th March 2018

Dear Carol

I am contacting you to follow up our recent discussions about NHS IT connectivity for the optical sector, which led to your statement of 23 February about your plans to develop a more strategic case for change and investment in the coming year. I apologise for the lengthy nature of this letter but, as you will see below, the removal of fax as an option is causing great concern amongst practitioners.

I and my colleagues in the OFNC and the optical sector are of course very pleased that NHS England has now recognised the importance of this. I look forward to contributing via the new programme board you are setting up.

In the meantime, we need to confirm how the sector will work with NHS England and acute trusts to manage the potential risk posed by the move to paperless referral during 2018. Your statement said that:

"We know the profession has been concerned about the impact of the NHS National Contract in relation to sending electronic referrals to the acute sector. The requirement is specific to GP referrals and need not apply to optometrists' referrals after October 2018. This relieves the pressure on contract holders to have a proven IT infrastructure in place by the above date, and gives us more time to source a practical and cost effective solution that works for everybody."

And

"We will also be working with CCGs and acute trusts to ensure that there remain in place adequate enablers to continue to facilitate referral pathways for optometry, ensuring no compromise of patient access and quality of care."

This clear statement of NHS England's policy is very helpful. However, there are real concerns in the sector that it is not reflected 'on the ground' in Trusts and CCGs. In particular, as Trusts prepare for the October deadline we are starting to see them refuse to accept optometrist referrals by fax.

For instance, last week a practice requested an emergency appointment with Watford General Hospital (West Hertfordshire), using fax as usual, and followed up with a phone call to confirm the fax had been received. They were told the hospital would no longer accept faxed referrals, or confirm receipt on the phone. Instead the hospital provided three different email addresses for referrals (for wet AMD, other emergencies, and routine ophthalmology), and suggested the practice set up its emails to obtain an automatic read receipt.

This is impractical since most optical practices do not yet have NHS email addresses, and we remain to be convinced that automatic email receipts are a safe approach for confirming urgent referrals. More importantly, this approach doesn't fit the policy set out in your statement. We are concerned that unless NHS England ensures that trusts act in line with that policy, we will soon see many more examples. NHS Digital's [list of 'paper switch off' dates](#) shows that most trusts are due to go paperless well before the October deadline.

The only realistic current options for urgent referrals are phone and fax. Of course the established fax-based arrangements with many trusts are not ideal, and optometrists already take active steps to manage the risk that urgent fax referrals may not be acted on promptly – for instance by following up with the trust by phone, or advising the patient to do so. But if trusts start to reject fax referrals and/or phone contact, then the risk to patient safety will increase substantially – and the effort needed to manage that will have a severe impact both on optical practices and on acute trusts.

You mentioned when we spoke on the phone that there might be a simpler method of rolling out NHS Mail to the profession. This would be the practical solution to the urgent referral / fax issue and so can be an early goal of the project.

We are receiving more and more contacts from concerned practitioners and so I should be grateful for your assurance that NHS England is acting promptly to ensure that trusts continue to accept referral from optical practices via the established routes, both before and after October, to reduce the risk to patients' vision. In particular, it would be most helpful if:

- we could have sight of the messages NHS England is sending to trusts, so that practices can refer to these if they experience problems, and
- we can escalate matters to you if a trust remains unwilling to accept fax referrals after we raise this with them.

We will also be contacting NHS Digital to ensure they are aware of this issue and the policy you have set out – and will be working with Local Optical Committees to help them raise this proactively with their local trusts and CCGs.

Kind regards

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trevor', is written between two horizontal lines.

Trevor Warburton
Chair, OFNC