

## Introduction

First, let me thank Gillian Syme for those words of welcome - and Optometry Scotland and the Scottish Committee of Optometrists for inviting me to speak at this year's Scottish Optometric Conference.

I'm really pleased to be here this afternoon – to reflect on the journey made by optometrists in Scotland over the last few years and also to look ahead to the future.

## The free NHS eye examination

I think I can safely say that the profession of optometry in Scotland has come a very long way in a relatively short time. The new legislation introduced in April 2006 drove that – and represented the most significant advance in eye health care in Scotland in 60 years.

And I'm hugely encouraged and well aware that optometrists contributed so significantly to the details of the changes that were made. Because it's the detail of the free NHS eye examination that has helped set the standard and ensure that optometrists provide a consistent and quality service.

So all our people in Scotland can be confident that no matter where they live - city or town - remote or rural area - they'll receive the same level of care from their optometrist. This makes a really important contribution to one of our priorities areas - reducing health inequalities.

Let's look at what the numbers tell us. Over one and a half million NHS primary eye examinations in the year ending March 2008. Up on the same period in 2007 and that upward trend has continued in the first half of this year.

I'm delighted that the take up of the new examination is continuing to grow. This amply demonstrates that people in Scotland are increasingly taking on board the message on the importance of maintaining good eye health care.

And yes, there is a significant cost to Government attached to the provision of the universal eye examination. But the benefits are clear - patients can attend without the worry of having to pay for the examination and can be screened by their optometrist for a range of medical conditions. By preventing avoidable sight loss and intervening early on a range of other conditions I am clear that the benefits will outweigh the cost.

Now, two years on from the introduction of the new NHS examination, the standard has been set. Scotland is now recognised as providing world class eye health care services – and I'm pleased to say the envy of our near neighbours.

## The Optometry Profession

Let me reflect also on the standing of the profession of optometry in Scotland. You will be best placed to know if it has ever been higher, but let's look at some of the evidence. I can readily see that the profession has grasped the opportunity that was there to place themselves where they should perhaps have always been:

playing an increasingly full part in our NHS,  
using your training, skills and experience to best effect,  
acting as the first port of call for people with eye health care problems,  
working to reduce inappropriate referrals to hospitals,  
managing more eye conditions in the community; and,  
recognised as the principal provider of eye health care.

Look too at the funding of up to £1 million you've secured from the Scottish Government for continuing education and training to deliver the General Ophthalmic Services contract. Importantly, this will be recurring annual funding.

It's clearly important that the necessary education and training structures are put in place. I'm pleased that your work with NHS Education for Scotland has now led to their advertising for an optometrist to lead on educational research and development and has opened discussions with prospective training providers. These are important steps to putting you on a level footing with some of the other NHS contractors.

Your representatives in Optometry Scotland also had the foresight in securing a three year deal on examination fees – a very good move given the current economic climate.

The Scottish Government has also committed to progressing with you the N3 connection - linking optometrist practices with NHS networks that will lead to direct referrals and improved communication with the hospital eye service and GPs.

All of these indicate very positive progress by any measure, and properly recognise the comprehensive contribution that optometrists are making to patient care.

## Optometry Scotland

The profession is, of course, made up of many individuals and I recognise that you will all have made individual journeys to gear up to deliver the new NHS eye examination – the training, the new equipment and the changes to premises.

What is equally impressive is how the profession, all essentially competitors, have come together, worked through the issues, and appointed representatives so the profession speaks with a single voice to the Scottish Government.

I know too that your representatives recently crossed what I'll call the great divide and met with ophthalmologists with the aim of the whole of the eye health care community in Scotland speaking for the first time with a coordinated voice. Those meetings, with the help of RNIB Scotland, led to the formation of the Scottish Eyecare Group - an important and exciting development.

The Scottish Eyecare Group offers the prospect of optometrists and the hospital eye service community working together to deliver the excellent, coordinated care we want for patients. To underline our support, my Ministerial colleague Shona Robison met with the Scottish Eyecare Group last Monday and we both look forward to working closely with the Group in the future.

I'd like to thank you and your representatives for the sensible and pragmatic way that they've worked with the Scottish Government and set a blueprint for our relationship in the future. Through consultations and some tough negotiations, your representatives have never lost sight of the fact that by working with the Government we can both win – and that the most important thing is that patients win.

And while I can speak about investment, infrastructure, statistics and partnership, let's recognise that the real prize here is the difference optometrists can make to the lives of people in Scotland, helping them with their concerns about eye health care and working to prevent avoidable sight loss and other health conditions.

### Looking to the future

We now have two year's worth of data on the NHS eye examination. We can consider what has gone well and whether there are some things we can improve.

We've already had some discussions with your representatives about changes we might want make to further improve General Ophthalmic Services for patients.

And having established the good working relationship with Optometry Scotland I referred to earlier, we'll be making the journey together, consulting, listening, negotiating and implementing.

There are sessions at today's conference where you can hear more about what we've been discussing. Those sessions provide your representatives with the opportunity to gather the views of the profession and come back to Government.

### Closing Remarks

Before I close, I want to mention briefly the contribution that optometrists are making to implementing the recommendations of the Eyecare review. In particular, their involvement in the pump priming projects going on throughout Scotland – I know of the good work going on in Lanarkshire, Forth Valley, Fife and in other Health Board areas too.

Good work, helping to put the infrastructure in place to provide improved eye health care for the people of Scotland. And contributing to shifting the balance of care.

So it's a very positive picture - high street optometrists delivering high volume, high quality eye health care services in the community — I congratulate you all on delivering that fine achievement.

While I'm here I want to hear directly from you about the issues that concern the profession. I understand you've been asked to provide questions and look forward to hearing them shortly.

Thank you again for inviting me and let me wish you all the best for the remainder of the event.