

ORTHOPTISTS – AN INVISIBLE PROFESSION?

This information is primarily aimed at service commissioners and workforce planners, however it is also an awareness raising tool for all in respect of a small profession that is often misunderstood and, in some cases, not fully recognised in terms of its importance.

Two key facts about the Orthoptist profession:

- they save lives and make a real and highly valuable difference to the patients they treat
- they offer value for money services and can make a significant contribution to cost savings and the QIPP agenda

For the majority of people, eye care is associated with Optician services and this is a familiar service, visible on the high street and increasingly in major supermarkets. Eye care services are significantly more extensive than the provision of vision tests and prescriptions for spectacles, and of course the fast-growing laser treatment services. However, the more specialised services often go unseen by the majority.

Within healthcare, there are highly-skilled teams of clinicians providing complex services to a range of patients with eye and eye-related disorders. Within those teams are Orthoptists, a very small profession in terms of numbers of practising clinicians, but a very important profession in respect of the specialist skills and knowledge they have and their unique contribution to eye care.

This hot topic paper is intended to raise the awareness of Orthoptics as a profession and demonstrate where the profession makes a huge difference to patients and to service delivery.



What is Orthoptics?

Its literal meaning is 'straight eyes', which essentially means the study of visual development, binocular vision (how the eyes work as a pair), eye movements and eye co-ordination.

The booklet on the website of The British and Irish Orthoptics Society provides further information:





What do orthoptists do?

Orthoptists diagnose and manage disorders of binocular vision and mainly work in the NHS. They assess and manage patients of all ages and work in various settings - independently and in multidisciplinary teams - and the work includes:

- Assessing babies and small children for defects of vision including children with special needs
- Treating adults with double vision associated with other conditions such as diabetes, thyroid disorders, neurological conditions e.g. multiple sclerosis
- Ensuring speedy rehabilitation of patients who have suffered stroke and acquired brain injuries and have vision problems
- Diagnosing and monitoring glaucoma - a long term eye condition
- Assessing patients before and after surgery for cataracts as well as visually impaired patients for low vision aids

Orthoptists are ideally placed to ensure effective services for patients. Their versatility provides exceptional value for money as part of the eye healthcare team.

The following case demonstrates the value to patients and the life-changing nature of the work of Orthoptists:-



The British and Irish Orthoptics Society published the information below in its professional journal.

"The patients we care for certainly know the difference we make. Take a six year old with a brain tumour; in her last year of life, double vision meant she lost co-ordination, couldn't play or watch television whilst undergoing gruelling treatments. After Orthoptic intervention, her double vision was joined so that she had an improved quality of life."

Mr P presented with double vision. Investigations suggested a more sinister cause for his symptoms and a diagnosis of lymphoma made.

Orthoptists matter: we improve lives and we save them as well."

Rima Gokani, Senior Specialist Orthoptist, University College Hospital, London.

How wonderful that a profession hardly anybody has heard of can improve the quality of people's lives. Orthoptists help people recover rapidly from strokes and brain injuries. They also detect neurological illnesses such as multiple sclerosis!

Welcome to the world of Orthoptists. They deal with all age groups, from premature babies who need visual assessment to the elderly with double vision due to macular degeneration. Orthoptists diagnose and manage vision and binocular vision problems. Many do screening, working in schools, while others work in stroke units to speed rehabilitation.

Orthoptists also work in glaucoma and cataract clinics, often undertaking work previously done by junior doctors, as well as electro diagnosis and medical photography. Others work alongside neuro-ophthalmologists in neurology units and in falls clinics. Many work with children and adults with learning difficulties.

Orthoptists provide highly effective services, being able to take direct referrals, diagnose, manage, treat and discharge patients - providing an efficient and cost effective service.

The Hard Facts – Orthoptists Provide VFM Services and Get People Back to Work Quicker

A course of treatment (one diagnostic test and three follow up appointments) with a Band 7 Orthoptist can cost as little as £800.

If you have double vision after stroke, your return to work could be almost immediate - saving six week's sick pay or benefits

(considerably more than £800) as well as hospital bed days!

Meriel Cross, Orthoptist, Royal Derby Hospital, and Chair of the Northern Branch, BIOS, says she is frequently asked: "What's an Orthoptist? Hmm...is that feet? Teeth?" In her words, *"We work within eye care, with a special expertise in binocular vision. This is currently a hot topic, with 3D films being very popular. But what happens when binocular vision goes wrong? You may see double, be unable to read, be unsafe to drive. We diagnose the problem and alleviate symptoms, showing how to refocus double images back to single. Orthoptists: highly skilled, treating patients of all ages with binocular vision disorders."*

Think before you cut or deskill

With fewer than 1,200 Orthoptists in the UK, it is an official 'shortage' profession. Down-banding, de-skilling and cutting senior Orthoptic staff may provide very short-term financial gains but will cost much more over time. A weakened, less skilled workforce is poorly equipped to get people back to work, out of a hospital bed, or provide early diagnoses of more sinister conditions.

The evidence is clear; Orthoptists make a real difference to patients and save lives.

For further information on the Orthoptist profession, please access the following weblinks:

<http://liv.ac.uk/orthoptics/careers/>

<http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/explore-by-career/allied-health-professions/careers-in-the-allied-health-professions/orthoptist/>

<http://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/nursing-and-allied-healthcare-professions/areas-of-work/orthoptics>

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