

# Eye disease patients have more opportunity than ever to take part in NHS research studies

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

A new report highlights how 76% of UK hospitals now offer patients the opportunity to take part in studies of eye disease to improve research and innovation.

'Ophthalmology research in the UK's National Health Service: the structure and performance of the NIHR's Ophthalmology research portfolio' published in *Eye*, the scientific journal of The Royal College of Ophthalmologists, shines a light on the work done by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to promote and foster a new wave of ophthalmic research.

The paper, authored by the NIHR Ophthalmology Specialty Group, also points to the need for a long-term strategy and greater financial support in the field of eye health.

Eye disease research only receives one per cent of the £2billion research spend in the UK but has delivered a growth in the number of eye and vision loss studies in the NHS's research portfolio. Both non-commercial and commercial investment has meant that an average of 15,500 patients per year are now being offered innovative treatments for the common but life-changing diseases of glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy.

Almost 2 million people live with sight loss in the UK and it costs the UK economy some £28billion per year. Ophthalmology remains the single busiest out-patient

specialty in hospitals in the UK, with a million out-patient visits for glaucoma per year.

Professor Rupert Bourne, lead author and the national specialty lead for ophthalmology at the National Institute for Health Research, said:

"Over the last eight years, the Ophthalmology community has been instrumental in putting eye research in the UK on the map, particularly in novel research areas such as gene therapies, drug delivery systems, robotic surgery and artificial intelligence. Many of these studies are international in scope and this report showcases the collaborative nature of eye research in the NHS.

"It's clear the UK continues to punch above its weight when it comes to innovative research for eye disease, but sadly eye health is not the research priority it should be. A long term strategy of investment and advocacy is crucial if we're to continue to transform prevention and treatment for patients with eye disease, and help ease the financial burden on the NHS."

The report also looked at the gender balance in lead researchers of NHS eye research studies and found this to be broadly similar to the ratio of male and female consultants in the UK. It also highlighted the importance of Trainee-led Research Networks in the UK.

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Mike Burdon, president of The Royal College of Ophthalmologists, said:

"In order to continue to innovate and bring about advancements in sight saving treatment, we must encourage trainees to participate in research early in their careers, such as Sarah Dawson and Emma Linton's contributions to this report.

"Preserving the sight of patients is what ophthalmologists do and by participating in research, they will ultimately benefit their generation and future generations to eradicate blindness."

The full article is available here: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41433-018-0251-8>