

# A week in the world of ophthalmology: A reflective journey at New Cross Hospital

BY NIKHIL SHARMA

Embarking on a taster week in ophthalmology at New Cross Hospital was a decision fuelled by the desire to delve into the intricacies of this unique specialty, which blends surgical and medical traits.

For foundation doctors, a taster week is built into the curriculum allowing individuals up to five days to experience a specialty they haven't had a rotation in. For many, it will be a deciding factor in their choice to pursue ophthalmology, which is undoubtedly getting more competitive. For some, it provides a unique insight into a specialty which is poorly represented in medical school training, often with only one week of placement exposure.

Additionally, as part of the current ST1 ophthalmology portfolio, one point is on offer in the 'Ophthalmology specialty links and commitment to date as a career' subsection as long as signed evidence is provided.

## My taster week experience

I was given a detailed and highly diverse timetable, providing exposure to multiple subspecialties. Due to early talks with the organiser of my taster week, I was able to get an Eyesi slot on my first morning after the induction and I would greatly recommend this addition.

My week started with the hands-on experience of the Eyesi – an ophthalmic simulator for trainees to practise surgical technique surgeries before broaching the operating table. Struggling on the Eyesi really puts the learning curve required to master intraocular surgery into perspective, and highlighted to me the dedication one must put into perfecting this art.

A memorable clinic during my taster week was my diabetic macular oedema (DMO) clinic offering a glimpse into the meticulous world of laser therapy. Observing the delivery of panretinal photocoagulation for progressive diabetic retinopathy showcased the precision required in adjusting laser spacing and power based on the patient's condition. The significance of steady hands and a patient-centred approach became evident in sessions lasting anywhere from 15–45 minutes.

Venturing into the subspecialty of oculoplastics introduced me to the rapid and impactful realm of Botulinum injections. Shadowing a specialist nurse administering these injections to patients with hemifacial spasms revealed the dramatic onset of relief within a mere five minutes, underscoring the rewarding nature of this treatment. This was a subspecialty I had no clinical experience of previously and was fascinated by the afternoon session I had.

Cataract surgery is widely recognised as the foundation of surgery within ophthalmology training programmes, where trainees receive early exposure and are motivated to enhance their proficiency. I witnessed surgery previously, however not one with a 3D visualisation system such as NGenuity. This immersive experience resembled a cinematic journey, providing a magnified, stereospecific view of the surgery. The insightful explanations from the consultant and registrar enhanced my understanding of the various stages of cataract surgery, as it progressed.

As the week unfolded, uncommon conditions that had previously only existed in my mind due to the Duke Elder Examination emerged before my eyes – bilateral vitelliform dystrophies, choroidal lymphomas, and pseudoexfoliation syndrome (just to name a few).

One aspect that surprised me was how multidisciplinary ophthalmology truly is. Shadowing members of the multidisciplinary team (MDT) provided valuable insights into the pre-clinic preparations conducted by specialty ophthalmic nurses, optometrists, and orthoptists. This exposure shed light on the comprehensive approach taken in assessing a patient from visual acuity, visual field testing, intraocular pressure, motility assessments and various scans before clinic appointments.

Moreover, the taster week proved to be an excellent opportunity to network within the department. Engaging with the research lead, often a specialty trainee or consultant, showcased a proactive approach to collaboration, laying the groundwork for potential research endeavours that may lead to publications, presentations, and posters – all essential for applications!

## My recommendation to those who are considering a taster week in ophthalmology

For those embarking on a taster week in ophthalmology, the minimal exposure to the field in medical school emphasises the importance of pre-clinic preparation. A preliminary understanding of common conditions, aided by resources such as the *Oxford Handbook of Ophthalmology* (2018), can significantly enhance the experience and prevent feeling lost in the clinic.

## Final thoughts

In conclusion, my ophthalmology taster week at New Cross Hospital was a fascinating journey into the diverse and dynamic world of eyecare. The experience not only broadened my understanding of ophthalmology but also highlighted the importance of early engagement, preparation, and networking required into attaining a highly competitive ST1 application spot.

Having a timetabled experience with diversity is key to a successful taster week and one that allowed me to truly enjoy my time at New Cross Hospital.

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**Declaration of competing interests:**  
None declared.