

REPORT FOR OPTICAL (LOC) FUND

Project Title:

Development of an online Medical Retina course for Optometrists for worldwide delivery of expert training in all aspects of medical retina disease, diagnosis and treatment options.

Project Details

The aim of this project was to establish an online postgraduate course in Medical Retina which will equip optometrists and other appropriate individuals to be able to work in this area and deal with the increasing numbers of patients presenting with, and needing long term follow-up in the area of retinal disease.

The course enables optometrists to develop and expand their knowledge and understanding in assessing and managing patients with retinal disease, particularly those with macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. The course provides training and a recognized qualification to allow the graduating optometrist to play a more significant role in identifying and managing patients with retinal disease, with a major emphasis on OCT- providing the much needed additional manpower in the area of assessing and managing individuals with retinal disease both in hospital based ophthalmology and primary care optometry. This course provides knowledge and skills to allow optometrists to expand their role both within the NHS secondary and tertiary care (hospital ophthalmology) and primary care (community optometric practice).

To date 40 students are undertaking the course in Medical Retina and all those who pass will acquire a post-graduate qualification, accredited by the College of Optometrists (UK)- Graduate Certificate in Medical Retina. Armed with the Professional certificate in Medical Retina, these specialized personnel will be readily available for enhanced service provision; either in NHS funded optometric practice or NHS multidisciplinary teams within a hospital setting.

The course itself is accredited by the College of Optometrists under their higher qualifications framework.

How Central (LOC) Funding was used

The monies obtained from Central (LOC) Fund for this totally online course greatly facilitated an enhanced student learning experience through enabling an extensive face to face teaching weekend with a specialised OCT workshop and training day, lectures delivered by specialist consultants in the field of medical retina and exposure to significant examples of pathology. This funding facilitated availing of Cathedral Eye Clinic Belfast Campus facilities. Funds were used not only to hire Cathedral Eye Clinic teaching rooms, staff and facilities but also allowed for hire of 4 additional OCT machines from England. This allowed a workshop to be delivered by 7 staff for 40 students. Travel costs will also be reimbursed to patients and consultants who agreed to attend over the weekend for the purpose of demonstration assessments. A small incentive for patients was also offered.

Benefit of the Central (LOC) Fund

The University of Ulster is a not for profit institution and presently funding is restricted. The Medical Retinal Course team are delighted to receive the funding from Central (LOC) Fund and would like to extend their sincere gratitude.

The funding for Central (LOC) Fund has enabled us to hire a private Eye Clinic, lecture and teaching rooms and also a large space for the OCT machine stations. It also enabled hire of four additional OCT machines, which we would have been unable to do without this funding. We were also able to pay for expert consultation ophthalmologist to provide face-to-face lectures and OCT hands on training. In addition, this funding allowed an extensive workshop to be organised and delivered on OCT use in clinical practice.

This funding enhanced the overall student learning experience and understanding of OCT technology by enabling them to have hands on training on the machines, assess images, work in groups to discuss findings and use OCT technology on patients and peers.

Longer term the project will be evaluated by assessing how the course and qualification impacts upon current practice in the UK. We envisage that more optometrists will play a significant role in assessing and managing patients in primary and secondary care. We hope that individuals with our qualification will be best placed to avail of such opportunities which will ultimately cut waiting list times and reduce the burden of avoidable sight loss from retinal pathology.

Success will be also evaluated by feedback from the students one year after completion of the course in the form of a questionnaire asking the individuals how the course has impacted upon their clinical knowledge and skills, and their role within their mode of work. All successful students on the course will be asked to provide feedback on how their clinical skills and confidence have changed since undertaking the course eg. Have they invested in OCT technology or do they now use OCT more in managing patients? They will also be asked if the course has led to any increased role in assessing and managing patients with medical retina eg. Do they have telemedicine for OCT with local ophthalmologists, have they acquired new employment in the area of medical retina since the course, has their role developed in this area since the course, or have they been promoted, etc. Where an optometrist then becomes integrated within a service, the proposed number of extra patients seen can be examined. In addition, an audit of participants' future roles after the course will be examined along with the ability to effectively examine OCT images.