

5 minutes with... an Optometrist

Alex Howard is an Optometrist at Specsavers Opticians Chesterfield.

Since July 2020, optometrists in the NHS Derby and Derbyshire CCG area have been able to use Photo Messaging Advice & Guidance via the Consultant Connect App to obtain specialist Advice & Guidance from ophthalmologists at their local Hospital Eye Service (HES) department on patient related queries.

Alex talks to us about his personal experience of getting Advice & Guidance through the service...

1 What would you say are the key benefits you've gained since using the Consultant Connect App?

"Since starting to use Consultant Connect, we've been able to get fast and helpful responses from our local Ophthalmology department about patients with possible pathology. This has helped us to decide which patients we do and don't need to refer. Receiving feedback via this service not only benefits the patient in front of you, but also helps you to learn for similar cases in the future. For example, I now feel much more confident about whether a case of vitreomacular traction/lamellar hole picked up by OCT will need to be referred to HES, and as a result I also feel more confident to decide which patients I can safely monitor in practice. It has also been very useful for communicating about patients already under secondary care. This has helped to build relationships between community optometry and our local HES department."

2 Have you found it easy to use?

"It's extremely easy to use. Having the App on my phone means I can send queries quickly during the working day, and I'm notified as soon as I receive a response. I love that I can send images at just a click of a button, and that the IG element is all taken care of; the images aren't stored on my phone, so I don't have to worry about that. It's intuitive – we didn't need any training. If you can use your phone to send messages, then you can easily use Consultant Connect!"

3 Do you have any feedback about information received regarding service and how to make the most of it?

"Grace is our account manager at Consultant Connect and she's been brilliant – she's very responsive and always there to provide any help we've needed. Before the service started we had a demo webinar, which allowed practitioners (HES and optometrists) to see clearly how the app would work from both sides...after we saw that I think we were all really eager to get started!"

4 How has it helped you with your response to COVID-19?

"Getting advice on potential referrals has been critical during COVID-19, as it's been more important than ever to only make referrals where they are clinically necessary. It has benefitted both the patients and the busy HES team! Patients have been reassured to know that they can get clinical input from ophthalmology without having to attend hospital. We have also seen quite a few anxious patients who have had their HES follow-ups delayed, and the Consultant Connect service enabled us to seek specialist advice about these patients. With the right funding it could pave the way for big improvements in shared care; patients could be seen safely in the community, with the optometrist able to seek HES guidance on the results of their assessments where necessary, which could help HES to risk-stratify their overdue caseload."

5 What do you see as the main benefits to patients?

"Patients definitely value the service. We probably underestimate how worrying it is for a patient to be waiting for a routine referral, and this is particularly true at present because of the combination of increased health anxiety within the general population and longer waiting times. The fact that I can get clinical advice so quickly is invaluable. For example, I recently saw an asymptomatic lady with a small macular hole but good vision. In the past I might have referred her for a routine opinion and she might have waited a couple of months to be seen in HES, worrying in the meantime. In the event, I was able to call her back later that same day to tell her the ophthalmologist had seen the scan and was happy for us to perform another OCT in the community in 6 months' time unless she noticed any visual change – a much better outcome for everyone involved."