



Who attends an outpatient eye clinic and how do they get there?

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In an environment of tight financial constraint, health funds must be wisely spent. This is especially important when substantial sums are involved in capital expenditure for new or remodelled premises. To facilitate planning for relocation of the Ophthalmology Department at Christchurch Hospital, this study examined the demands made of the present department waiting areas and parking facilities.

Methods

A questionnaire was given to all patients who attended the Christchurch Hospital Eye Clinic over a three-week period. The questionnaire covered demographic data and patients' means of transport to the department, (whether they drove themselves and where they parked their vehicle), and who attended with them. Survey figures were compared with end-of-year attendance figures for the department.

Results

Four hundred and seventy four patients completed the survey. Nine hundred and thirty one people attended with these patients over this time period. This equates to 1.96 people accompanying each patient. Of those accompanying, 161 (17.3%) were children, and 87 children attended appointments. In total, children made up 18.4% of those attending appointments. Patients over 64 years numbered 214 for the same period, making up 45% of patients.

The majority of patients (407 or 85.6%) arrived for their appointment by car and 328 (80.6%) of those parked in the adjacent eye-clinic car park. Only 13 (3.2%) parked in the multistorey car-park building 250 metres away. Several patients commented that they parked on the street due to lack of space in the eye-clinic car park. Only 36% of those travelling by car drove themselves, while the remainder used a friend or relative as a driver.

July 2002 end-of-year statistics indicate that 20 992 people attended outpatient appointments in the eye department during the year. Of these, 2983 (14.2%) were children and 9437 (45.0%) were older than 64 years.

Discussion

This survey showed that each patient attending this metropolitan eye department had on average two people accompanying them. Many patients wait one to two hours for pupil dilation, to complete pre-admission processes, to undertake investigations (retinal angiography, or visual fields), or for laser treatments, accentuating the demand on facilities. It is imperative that adequate facilities are provided for these patients while they are waiting. When planning the size and structure of the department, assessment rooms will need to cater for accompanying persons as well as patients.

In this survey the majority of patients attending the eye department were younger than 16 (18.4%) or older than 64 (45.1%). These figures are similar to the annual attendance figures for the department. Additional space is required for wheelchairs, walking frames or occasionally stretchers, as well as prams. For the safety of the children and the elderly, often visually impaired patients, dedicated areas for children are required in the waiting room.

Most patients (80.6 %) chose easily accessed car parking adjacent to the clinic over the adjacent multistorey car park (3.2 %). This finding was not surprising considering most patients were young children or elderly and many of the latter had some degree of visual impairment.

This survey confirms our suspicion that the heavy demands on the Christchurch eye-clinic waiting areas are in part due to the large number of accompanying people supporting young and elderly eye outpatients. The survey provides data for future planning.

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