Surveillance of sight loss due to COVID related delays

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the national lockdown in the UK from March 2020 forced hospital eye services across the country to stop all non urgent and routine eye care with cancellation of a significant number of appointments as well as temporary cessation of screening services. The aim was to reduce the transmission of the virus and preserve life, however, this resulted in sight loss due to delays in presentation and treatment of preventable eye conditions.

Thomas et al developed a model in an attempt to predict the likely result of significant vision loss based on the reduction in referrals to the macular service and estimated a treatment delay of 3 months could lead to a >50% relative increase in the number of eyes with vision ≤6/60 and 25% relative decrease in the number of eyes with driving vision at one year. *Pujari et al* used POEM to examine the results of COVID on glaucoma patients and found a high degree of anxiety from patients due to delays in accessing services and clinic appointments.

Within NHS Tayside we have setup a reporting tool in order to identify any vision loss related to COVID delays.

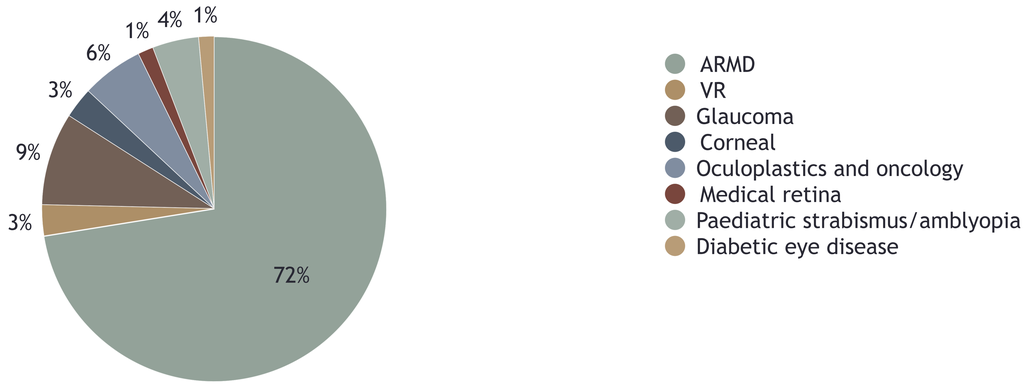
METHODS

- We asked clinical staff within NHS Tayside Ophthalmology services to report any patients who might have suffered from sight loss as a result of COVID delays via email. Data was collected prospectively between May 2020 and May 2021, but ongoing data collection is planned beyond this date to capture any longterm effects. We have defined sight loss according to the criteria listed below.

- **Definition of sight loss:**
  - Loss of at least 15 letters on ETDRS visual acuity (VA) chart OR
  - Loss of three or more lines on Snellen VA chart OR
  - Loss of 3dB MD or more of visual field.

RESULTS

- Between May 2020 and May 2021 69 patients were reported to the surveillance team in NHS Tayside. The majority of reported cases were from the macular service (72%). The chart below illustrates the breakdown of reported cases by subspecialty.
- Mean visual loss of 37 letters with the highest reported loss of 70 letters.



CONCLUSION

- The population of our region is 420,000 so we estimate the incidence of vision loss due to COVID related delays to be 1 in 7,000 for the first nine months of the COVID pandemic. The cancellation of ophthalmology clinics and surgery in our region resulted in irreversible sight loss for 69 patients during the first twelve months of the pandemic.The vast majority of reported patients had macular degeneration and subsequently suffered irreversible sight loss. Multiple factors contributed to delays in treatment, more notably, cancellation of appointments and patient related anxiety in attending appointments due to COVID-19. Going forward as we are in the process of recovering hospital eye services, it is vital to prioritise the most at risk group of patients.

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