

# How can care homes “look out” for eye health?

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust

September 2013

## **A pilot study to test the value of ambassadors delivering sight loss training directly to care home staff.**

This paper summarises the findings of a pilot study funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust and carried out by Words&Pictures (a communications agency) and City University, London. The study forms part of Pocklington’s ongoing search for practical solutions to a widespread problem within care homes – the neglect of residents’ vision, eye health and sight tests.

A short, interactive workshop was developed to improve awareness among care home staff, increase their understanding of the importance of good vision and help them recognise and react to common eye problems, for example by making small changes in care practice or arranging a specialist eye test. This workshop was delivered by Sight Loss ‘Ambassadors’, providing an opportunity to test the potential value of this role and the skills needed to fulfil it. The role was envisaged as offering the knowledge, skills and enthusiasm to support others to address sight loss, and was modelled on Careers in Optometry Ambassadors in schools.

The pilot study was small - carried out in six care homes with 33 members of staff - but revealed important insights for those seeking to improve the vision of residents in care homes and ensure that their eye health is addressed.

Staff welcomed the workshop, saying it was a good use of their time, and the results of questionnaires showed that it was successful in raising awareness and knowledge of sight loss. It opened doors to allow issues of sight loss to be promoted in care homes and fostered a useful debate between eye care professionals and care home staff.

It also revealed concerns and logistical challenges that need to be resolved if such a scheme is to be developed on a larger scale.



As a result of the pilot study and subsequent round table discussions, Thomas Pocklington Trust is now working with researchers, sight loss professionals and organisations to consider ways of extending use of the workshop – possibly by incorporating it into routine induction training for care home staff.

## Background

Approximately half a million people live in 18,000 care homes in the UK. RNIB estimates that 50% of them have undetected sight loss – much of which could be prevented or corrected if residents had regular access to proper eye tests.

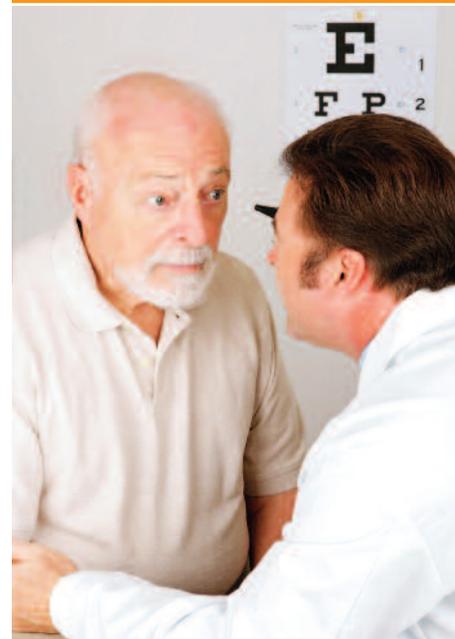
In research, some studies have found that sight testing care home residents has not brought any benefits, but others have reported significant improvements. One study, (Jessa et al 2007), which also stated that 20% – 50% of the older population as a whole has preventable/correctable forms of visual defects, found that eye tests could lead to improvements in older people's quality of life. Other studies show increased visual function, better quality of life and lower rates of depression among people who were immediately provided with spectacles.

There is however currently no routine eye health or vision screening carried out in all care homes. Staff have a limited awareness of the prevalence of sight loss in their homes or how to make the most of people's sight. They lack understanding of the problems caused by vision defects, the vital role regular eye tests can play in the prevention and treatment of common eye problems and simple steps that can improve people's vision.

Older people, for their part, often do not actively seek an eye test because many mistakenly believe that poor sight is inevitable with age and therefore not treatable. Many do not realise that domiciliary eye tests are available for free to anyone who is not able to get to a high street optometrist (RNIB 2007).

When neither staff nor residents realise the importance of regular eye examinations and steps which can be taken to improve vision, it becomes clear why so many care home residents are not receiving the tests they need and care practices are not responding to sight loss.

Among people with dementia (estimated by the Alzheimer's Society to be three quarters of care home residents) the situation is likely to be worse, as their sight loss may receive



even less attention than in the wider care home population. (McKeefery and Bartlett 2010).

However, raising awareness of sight loss could make a difference. For example, when Friedman et al (2005) looked at cataract surgery amongst care home residents, they found that only 2% of residents in standard care homes underwent the surgery, compared to 31% of residents in homes which actively helped residents.

Care home residents are more likely to have a visual impairment than older adults living in the community, and so it is even more important to ensure that staff in care homes understand the effects of sight loss, how to make the most of people's vision and the importance of helping them access regular eye tests.

## **A Workshop Aimed at Care Home Staff**

In the small pilot study Pocklington, Words&Pictures and City University, London, tested the concept of **Sight Loss Ambassadors** delivering training directly to care home staff. A short, interactive workshop was developed that would fit easily into the busy care home routine as well as being fun and conveying the key messages about eye health and the effects of sight loss on daily life. Just thirty minutes long, it combines role-play with questionnaires and discussion and the study assessed how useful care homes found this approach.

The project used three types of Ambassadors: an independent optometrist, a lay person from Words&Pictures and a person from a local sight loss charity who had some experience of eye conditions but was not a trained optometrist. This range was useful because it allowed the researchers to see if the scheme could be successful if non-optometrists were used. Training for the role of Ambassador was facilitated by Words&Pictures, with the optometrist also on hand.

When piloted in six care homes the approach revealed important insights to inform the work to tackle neglect of eye care in care homes:

### **The format of the workshop and its delivery by an external Ambassador was a success:**

- 97% of participating staff found the workshop fun and engaging. 100% thought it was a valuable use of their time with the Ambassador being easy to understand. They all said they would participate in a similar activity in the future.



- Staff members’ knowledge of eye health increased dramatically. Following the workshop the scores achieved in a questionnaire were almost 2.5 times higher than the scores achieved before the workshop.
- 100% of participants also said that the session had made them think differently and 94% said they had learnt new skills.
- By using different skillsets for the role of Ambassador (an optometrist, a lay person and someone from a local sight loss charity with some specialist knowledge) the pilot revealed that, although there were clear benefits from using an optometrist, after some Ambassador training the workshop could be delivered effectively by a lay person or someone from a local sight loss organisation.

**The pilot also revealed the challenges that might be involved in future attempts to roll out the Ambassador approach on a far larger scale:**

- Optometrists were concerned that such a scheme might reduce their visits to care homes to provide domiciliary eye examinations.
- Logistically and financially it would be challenging to develop the Ambassador scheme to cover all 18,000 care homes in the UK.

**How the workshop worked:**

A questionnaire to gauge staff perceptions of residents’ vision and their general knowledge of eye health was filled out both before and after the workshop. A second questionnaire, completed after the workshop, gathered staff’s views of the workshop itself.

Some results from the “before” questionnaire were surprising:

- Only 78.8% of participants “were aware of residents’ visual status”, implying that almost a quarter of care home staff were not aware of residents’ eye problems and eye health needs. This is despite the fact that just over three quarters of care home staff (75.8%) reported that “residents complained of not being able to see properly”.
- Less than 40% of staff “thought that if a resident has more than one pair of glasses, there were mechanisms in place to ensure that they were wearing the correct pair”. This was despite the fact that such mechanisms, i.e. labelling, did

---

**National minimum standards for care homes for older people (2003) state that:**

“the registered person promotes and maintains service users’ health and ensures access to health care services to meet assessed needs” (standard 8)

“service users have access to hearing and sight tests and appropriate aids, according to need” (para 8.12)

---

actually exist in many of the care homes and that the majority of participating staff felt that “residents interacted better with staff if they were wearing their glasses”.

Part of the workshop involved experience-based learning. Participants were asked to enter a room they were familiar with – a kitchen or lounge area – and to perform a particular task – make a cold drink, eat, tell the time, watch TV or read to each other. Before entering the room they were given a pair of simulation or sim-spectacles which create the illusion of having sight loss. An obstacle was created in the room – perhaps objects or furniture moved to unfamiliar places. This allowed participants to experience a sight loss scenario and to think about sight loss from the residents’ point of view. The ambassador encouraged the participants to describe what they were feeling as they tried to carry out the tasks.

This was followed by descriptions and basic facts about common causes of sight loss, ways to recognise sight loss and tips on good practice that can make life easier for residents with sight loss. For example, carers discussed how to recognise signs of sight loss such as a resident eating from only one side of their plate, or not appearing engaged even though looking at a TV programme. Staff were shown small changes that can make a difference, such as using coloured plates that contrast with food colours, lighting at tables and marking different kinds of spectacles with coded labels (eg. distance, TV or reading).

An overview of the workshop, showing timings and content of each section, along with supporting materials, will be available on Pocklington’s website from late 2013:  
[www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk)

## **Ideas and Discussion Points Arising from the Pilot Study**

### **Follow-up after the workshop:**

- Further visits to care homes that use the workshop may be necessary to reinforce the workshop messages and could maintain contact between staff and the Ambassador. It was suggested that further materials might be taken to the care home at a later date to keep awareness high, although it was acknowledged that providing too many written materials risks them being filed rather than read.



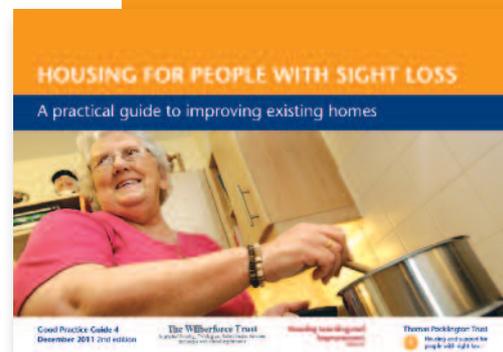
- Ideally, there should be a workshop toolkit in every care home but this has obvious cost implications. One suggestion was to house learning materials in one widely accessible place such as Social Care TV.
- The possibility of adapting the materials to develop accredited training modules specific to eye care could be investigated.
- Ideas for providing a back-up service for workshop participants included:
  - providing an 'ask the optom' section on a professional optometry website
  - tapping into the knowledge of RNIB's health and care professionals' networks.

### Improving the workshop:

- Providing the pre-workshop questionnaires for completion before the workshop would save time and find out how the care home is supporting residents with sight loss.
- Information about the impact of using colour and contrast in care homes, as well as good lighting, could be added to the workshop, especially if time is saved with questionnaires, as it was felt that care homes could find these easy to implement and they have all been shown to dramatically improve the lives of older people with sight loss.

### The role of optometrists:

- Since Ambassadors need to have knowledge about eye health and sight loss, optometrists are ideal candidates. However, there was concern that optometrists may naturally want to promote their own services and that this might be off-putting to residents. Suggestions to solve this problem included:
  - A workshop contract requiring that optometrists do not promote their own services.
  - Management of Ambassadors through the Local Optical Committee, making them representatives of the LOC rather than their own business.
  - The Ambassador providing a list of local optometrists and domiciliary providers so that the care home and residents can choose who to contact.



- Further investigation is needed to determine whether optometrists would accept an Ambassador role with no clear commercial incentive, or whether other people who already visit care homes, such as GPs and care workers, might take up the role.

### **A success story:**

- RNIB Scotland has a similar approach to the use of Ambassadors, but trains nurses and senior care staff as Vision Champions in care homes. They understand sight loss and the workings of optometrists, and work within the care home to share information and look out for eye problems.
- Vision Champions use a toolkit to monitor four main aspects of residents' lives: eyes, meal times, behaviours, mobility. They spot indicators of possible sight loss (eg residents not engaging, not watching tv, etc,) and highlight the risk as red, amber or green.
- They use a "pre-sight test" form to note eye conditions, use of spectacles, any actions taken, etc. and accompany residents to their sight test. The optometrist completes the form and the Vision Champion then writes a 'Vision Passport' for care reports/plans. This also ensures that Champions feel more involved in their work with residents.
- Ideally such a Vision Champion would exist in every care home. Their training could form part of standard career development or be incorporated into staff inductions.

"The better the knowledge and skills of the workforce, the better the quality of life of those for whom they care... working with older people with high support needs in any setting requires a broad set of skills. This should, for example include: understanding dementia, mental health and learning disability, working with diverse people and communicating with those who have cognitive and/or sensory impairments. Training linked to an agreed set of competencies is important but learning must be supported by good management, partnership working and strong leadership if it is to be embedded."

*From Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Better Life'*

## Conclusions

The workshop was a success and a viable aid to promoting awareness of sight loss and eye health in care homes. The short interactive format was popular with staff who felt it was a good use of their hard-pressed time. The project opened a dialogue between eye health professionals and care homes about the need to be alert to sight loss and eye health and ensure regular take-up of eye examinations. It allowed questions on eye health to be properly answered and established relationships between the Ambassadors and the care home.

Solving the problem of the widespread neglect of eye health and eye tests in care homes is unlikely to be a case of finding one solution. However, piloting the idea of Ambassadors and interactive workshops has provided one more useful tool to contribute to a possible solution.

As a result of the pilot study and subsequent round table discussions, Thomas Pocklington Trust is now considering ways to extend use of the workshop, including the possibility of incorporating it into routine staff induction training.

### Author

Sue Cooper

Media/PR consultant

**This Research Discussion Paper is drawn from  
“The importance of good vision in care homes:  
An ambassador approach to improving care home staff’s  
understanding” – a pilot study conducted by:  
Dr. Penny D’Ath: City University London, Northampton  
Square, London, EC1V 0HB; Prof David Thomson:  
City University London, Northampton Square, London,  
EC1V 0HB; Words & Pictures: The Editorial Design Centre,  
Wharfebank House, Ilkley Road, Otley, Leeds, LS21 3JP.**

Words&Pictures is a communications agency, specialising in issue-based engagement programmes. They have collaborated with City University on a number of national campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of eye health.

## Background on Pocklington

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a voluntary sector organisation providing services across England which assist and enable people with sight loss to reach their potential. Our five strategic aims are:

**Knowledge:** we increase understanding of how to prevent avoidable sight loss, how to provide the most effective support to alleviate sight loss and how to apply this knowledge.

**Empowerment:** we enable people with sight loss to have control over their lives and their services.

**Services:** we provide services that people with sight loss need.  
**Housing:** we help people with sight loss to get and keep a home that meets their needs.

**Sustainability:** we will be there for the long term future.

Research is a keystone of our 'knowledge' strategic aim. We manage a programme of research to identify and promote practical ways in which Pocklington and others can improve the lives of people with sight loss.

Our research team works with a range of partners who are recognised across the sight loss sector and in the academic world. We welcome collaborative opportunities and research proposals related to our main themes and priorities. You can find out more about Pocklington and its research programme at [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk).

*In this publication, the terms 'visually impaired people', 'blind and partially sighted people' and 'people with sight loss' all refer to people who are blind or have partial sight.*

Thomas Pocklington Trust



Housing and support for  
people with sight loss

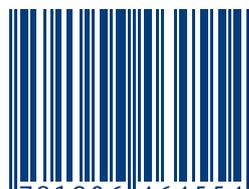
Pier House  
90 Strand on the Green  
London  
W4 3NN

Tel: 020 8995 0880

Email: [research@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:research@pocklington-trust.org.uk)

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust  
Registered Charity No. 1113729  
Company Registered No. 5359336

ISBN 978-1-906464-55-4



9 781906 464554

---

[www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk)