

Oh , Now Eye See!

Healthcare professional knowledge and attitudes towards eye donation

Dr Ruth Yates¹, Dr Julie Ashworth², Dr Libby Ferguson³
1.Specialty trainee 2.Specialty doctor 3.Consultant Marie Curie Hospice, Glasgow



Introduction

Eye donations are vital for restoring sight, yet the UK faces an annual shortfall of 6000 eye donations with approximately 150 of those affected in Scotland. Each eye donated has the potential to help 5 individuals by corneal transplant as well as scleral grafting.

In April 2024, a corneal donation project was initiated in Marie Curie Hospice Glasgow, in partnership with the Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS) to offer eye donation, alongside a training programme for medical staff.

Four months after initiating this service, an online questionnaire was distributed to healthcare professionals in the IPU with both qualitative and quantitative questions. 23 responses were received (5 consultant/specialty doctors, 11 resident doctors, and 7 nurses) which represents all the medical staff working during the period of the project and a small proportion of senior nursing staff.

Eye Donation Project so far...

In first 6 months 18 eyes have been donated from 75 deaths in the hospice (currently matching GG&C so far this year)

Of the 132 patients admitted to the hospice since the project started, only 23% (30) patients have had contraindications to eye donation

48% of eligible patients were able to discuss their wishes about eye donation during admission, for 48% it was considered inappropriate to discuss given distress or confusion and only 4% were missed due to clinical pressure

Corneal donation conversations during hospice admissions

Outcome	Percentage
Discussed during admission	48%
Inappropriate to discuss due to distress/confusion	48%
Missed due to clinical pressure	4%

Project Reservations

Prior to the project starting, 39% (9) of staff expressed reservations about offering eye donation. These reservations fell into two themes: concern about causing distress by raising the issue, and the practicalities of the process. All respondents felt their initial reservations had resolved once involved in the project.

“Worried patients wouldn’t be interested, or it would cause upset. Now realise that patients and families find comfort in being able to donate, to have something good come from difficult circumstances”

“People often have quite strong feelings about their eyes and the emotional and spiritual sentiment they hold which may put them off donation but without discussing it you’ll never know”

Level of Knowledge

Prior to the project starting, 65% of staff felt that they had either no or minimal knowledge of eye donation but after the project started, only 8.7% staff felt minimally knowledgeable and 78% felt they had adequate or good knowledge. This was following education sessions about eye donation from SNBTS and training sessions about the process within the hospice, as well as day-to-day involvement with the project.

Change in Level of Knowledge

Level of Knowledge	Before Project	After Project Starting
Adequate Knowledge	21.7%	47.8%
Good Knowledge	34.8%	30.4%
Basic Knowledge	43.5%	13%
Minimal Knowledge	0%	8.7%
No Knowledge	0%	0%

Conversations about Eye Donation

Eye donation conversations are currently initiated by medical staff only who approach patients and or families during admission or after a patient’s death. 81% (13) doctors reported having had these conversations. Initially, all of them felt nervous during their first discussions, but they found that subsequent conversations became easier with experience.

“After the first few conversations it felt very natural. It often came as a nice surprise to patients, who didn’t realise it was an option. If they said no, it was easy to acknowledge and move past to further questions”

Some doctors also noted that positive interactions with patients and families encouraged them to bring up eye donation more frequently.

“I felt awkward prior to speaking to them but afterwards felt it was much more painless and felt motivated to speak to patients and their family more often”

Witnessing Retrieval

Eye Retrievers from SNBTS attending the hospice were open to staff witnessing the process and sharing their knowledge. 61%(14) staff had watched an eye retrieval take place and 93%(13) of them felt it had positively changed their perception of eye donation. When asked about their feelings of the process, the main themes raised were that it was **interesting** to watch, it **reassured** them that it was **respectful** and not ‘gory’. In some cases, the experience made them more likely to want to donate their own eyes.

“it made me reflect on my personal choice and I would now donate. it was amazing to see how quick and respectful the process is”

All staff who had witnessed eye retrieval felt it would change their clinical practice to be more willing to talk to patients and families about eye donation.

“Having a deeper understanding and also witnessing the retrieval process has enabled me to communicate better with families about the process”

Celebrating Conversations

To celebrate conversations about eye donation, staff were encouraged to place a ping-pong ball (with optional decoration) in the ‘eye’ or ‘naw’ jar depending on the preference of their patients.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that implementing eye donation services in healthcare settings can positively shift healthcare professionals' attitudes and knowledge. Initial reservations, mainly related to emotional and practical concerns, diminished with hands-on experience and education. Observing retrievals fostered a more positive, respectful view of the process. Ongoing training and real-life exposure appear essential for sustaining comfort and proficiency in eye donation conversations.