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Measurement of visual acuity by hospital physicians

Sir,
Ophthalmological disease is an important cause of morbidity in general practice and hospital in-patients. Assessment of visual health is therefore a vital part of patient care. It is particularly important when referring a patient with visual problems to an ophthalmologist that an assessment of visual acuity is included in the referral letter.¹ This aids the ophthalmologist in deciding the degree of urgency with which a patient needs to be seen.

We report the results of a study carried out to assess whether hospital physicians were able to measure visual acuity and accurately record this information. A group of hospital physicians was randomly selected from four hospitals in the West Midlands region. The ability to assess visual acuity was determined using a standard four-part questionnaire:

1. What is the name of the chart used to assess distance visual acuity?
2. What is the usual correct distance between the chart and the patient?
3. If the patient usually wears spectacles, but has forgotten them, how can you get a rough assessment of their corrected visual acuity?
4. How would you record the visual acuity of this patient's right eye? (Shown a Snellen chart with patient able to read line indicated).

One hundred and two doctors of all grades were questioned. Only 25 (24.5%) doctors questioned were able to answer all four questions correctly. Ninety-five (93%) answered question 1 correctly but the correct response rates were 70%, 56% and 63% for questions 2, 3 and 4, respectively.

It is clear from these results that, although most doctors in our study group know the name of the chart used to measure distance visual acuity, many are not familiar with the practicalities of actually measuring visual acuity using it. Only 60% of doctors questioned who were of registrar level or below could accurately measure and document a patient's visual acuity so that the information would be of value to an ophthalmologist reading a referral letter. Another finding to emerge from this study was that Snellen charts were only generally available in accident and emergency departments, ophthalmology clinics and diabetic clinics/wards.

We feel that it is important that adequate time is allocated to the study of ophthalmology in the undergraduate curriculum so that all doctors can learn the basic examination skills necessary to assess ophthalmic problems.

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FELLOWSHIP OF POSTGRADUATE MEDICINE

Grants for Research – 1993

The Fellowship of Postgraduate Medicine is offering grants for travel, or towards the cost of equipment, for young graduates entering careers in clinical research. Successful applicants will be expected to submit reports of their research for publication in the *Postgraduate Medical Journal*.

Further information may be obtained from Mrs J.M. Coops, Fellowship of Postgraduate Medicine, 6 St Andrew's Place, London NW1 4LB (Tel: 071-935 5556), to whom applications should be made, giving a concise summary of the research project, the sum requested and a curriculum vitae of the applicant.

Closing date for applications: 30 August 1993