

The opportunity of independent sector treatment sector treatment centres for cataract training

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Cataract surgery is the most performed surgical procedure in the NHS, with 486,212 procedures reported to NHS Digital from centres in England from April 2021 to March 2022¹. Since 2017 the proportion of NHS cataract surgeries performed in the independent sector has increased from approximately 20% to almost 50% in 2021, and the trend is showing no sign of reducing (figure 1).

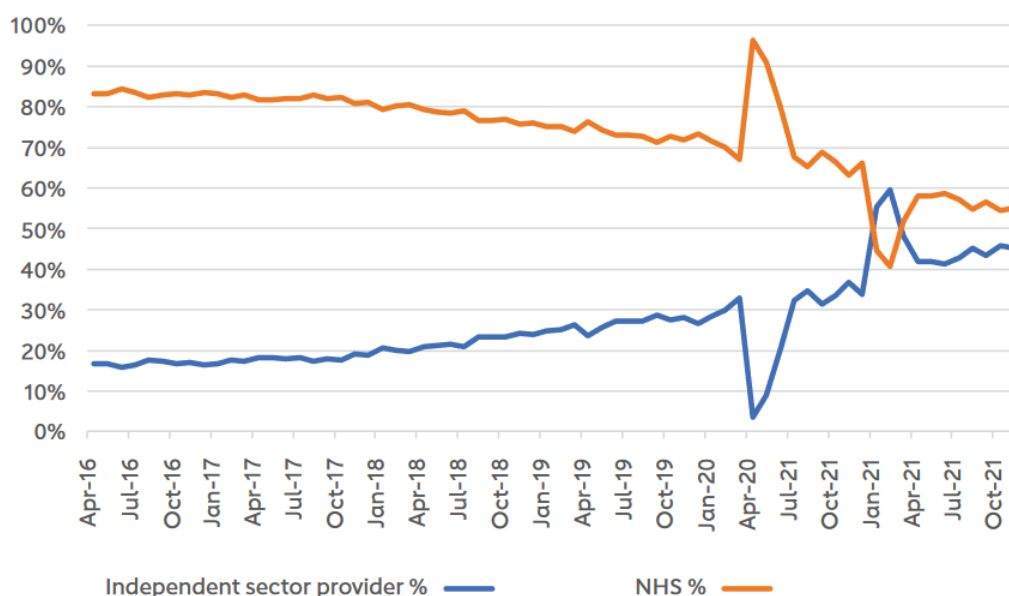


Figure 1: Proportion of NHS-funded cataract procedures delivered by ISPs and NHS hospitals.²

Being able to perform cataract surgery independently is a core requisite of Ophthalmology training, with Speciality Trainees (STs) required to complete a minimum of 350 cases by the end of their training³. The Royal College of Ophthalmologists National Ophthalmology database (NOD) performs national cataract audit, providing insight into changes in training provision with the recent shift towards NHS cataract surgery being performed in the independent sector (ISTCs) as well as traditional NHS hospital trusts.

Whilst the number of NHS England funded cataract surgeries provided by ISTCs has more than doubled since 2017^{1,4-6}, the mean case complexity index recorded on the NOD, which denotes the risk of surgical complication, has increased in NHS hospitals where STs are trained from 1.5 to 1.8, whilst remaining the same in the independent sector at 1.3,^{1,4-6} hence the lower-complexity cases, which are essential for training the most junior STs, are being predominantly handled in ISTCs.

Not only has the complexity of cases in training institutions risen, but there is evidence that the number of cases trainees are doing has dropped. The GMC's 2022 National Training Survey, completed by almost 600 STs, found that the proportion of trainees who had not completed 50 or more cases by end of their ST2 year has increased from 12% in 2019 to 35% in 2022,⁷ and the proportion of cataract surgeries performed by trainees recorded by the NOD has almost halved.^{1,4-6}

In 2022, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists published recommendations for cataract surgery training in the independent sector stating that every provider of NHS funded cataract surgery must be able to train STs on at least 11% of NHS cataracts within 2 years.⁸ In the 2021-2022 NOD audit, only 1/96 independent providers appear to have provided training opportunities, and this only for more experienced trainees, with 0.7% cases of their cases operated on by STs, with most independent providers offering no (0%) training opportunities for either experienced or less experienced trainees^{1,4-6}. Opportunities may be growing in the independent sector with 8% of trainees in the 2023 GMC training survey reporting that they were able to access cataract surgical training in the ISTCs, however this is well below the 60% of trainees who felt that this was needed⁹.

The ISTCs are an ideal training location for STs due to the high number of routine cataract surgery cases, whilst NHS hospitals are more suited to STs later in their training when exposure to more complex cases is required. Closer collaboration is needed between all NHS cataract surgery providers to deliver appropriate training for future generations of ophthalmic surgeons.

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