



Sustainability for optometry and primary eye health care

Federal Budget Submission 2019–2020

Optometry Australia is the national peak professional body for optometry, and represents over 80 per cent of optometrists registered to practice in Australia. Since 1918 we have united the sector to make Australia a world leader in vision and eye health services and patient care, and we continue to lead the profession of optometry, optometrists and community eye health.

More Australians visit an optometrist than any other non-medical health professional; and with over 12 million Australians reporting a long-term eye condition – combined with an ageing population and an increasing prevalence of chronic disease – the need for timely and affordable access to primary eye care is vital for all Australians.

Our members play a crucial role in reducing the heavy social and economic cost of avoidable blindness and vision loss, and preventing or slowing the development of ocular and systemic conditions that reduce productivity and require costly specialist care.

Overview

Optometry Australia welcomes the opportunity to detail sustainable and cost-effective measures to support comprehensive and timely access to primary eye care for all Australians.

With a prudent and relatively conservative investment, the Australian Government can generate a positive - and almost immediate - impact on the eye health of millions of Australians, while reducing the social and economic burden of vision impairment. Without action, these burdens will continue to place pressure on the health system and will impact substantially on productivity.

As the principal providers of primary eye health and vision care, optometrists play a key role in preventative care, early detection and treatment of eye and vision problems, and detection and referral of systemic conditions that affect the eye such as diabetes. The role of optometrists is critical to reducing the heavy social and economic costs of avoidable blindness and vision loss, and ocular and systemic conditions that can require costly specialist care.

Access to quality optometric care is a key component of an effective, efficient and sustainable eye care system and is an essential element in reducing the significant social and economic costs associated with preventable blindness and vision loss.

The measures outlined in this submission are vital to ensure access to quality eye care is maintained for all Australians, particularly for those who need it most.

Key steps towards these essential goals will be realised with an investment of \$11.56 million in 2019-2020.

Optometry Australia calls on the Australian Government to:

Recommendation	Cost
Reinstate biennial Medicare rebates for a comprehensive initial examination for Australians aged between 45 and 64 years, given the increased risk of developing ocular disease - most of which are more effectively managed on early detection.	\$9 million in 2019-2020
Ensure access to sustainable and timely outreach eye care through expanding the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS).	\$1.06 million in 2019-2020
Support ongoing access to sustainable eye care by investing in applied research into models to enhance integration of optometric care into primary care and facilitate collaboration with tertiary eye care services.	\$1.5 million in 2019-2020

Optometry and sustainable primary eye care

More Australians visit an optometrist than any other non-medical health professional, with more than 5,400 optometrists providing over 9.4 million primary eye and vision care services in 2017-2018.

With over 12 million Australians reporting a long-term eye condition – combined with an ageing population and an increasing prevalence of chronic disease – investing in timely and affordable access to primary eye care is crucial. The National Eye Health Survey 2016, the first nationwide population-based survey, identified unmet need for eye care services in Australia. The survey found more than 450,000 Australians were living with uncorrected vision impairment or blindness, and that refractive error was the cause of almost two thirds of vision impairment for Australians, which in most cases, can be treated with prescription glasses.

The role of optometrists, however, extends well beyond diagnosis and management of refractive error. Optometrists have a sophisticated clinical skill set which includes, (but is not limited to):

- detection of various, often asymptomatic, ocular diseases associated with ageing including cataracts, macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma
- detection and management of common acute eye complaints such as dry eye and conjunctivitis, often through eye drops
- management of emergency conditions such as removal of an ocular foreign body.

Timely eye care for middle-aged Australians

Optometry Australia recognises the recommendation of both the American Optometric Association and the Canadian Association of Optometrists, that adults between ages 45-64 have an eye examination every two years, regardless of whether they are experiencing obvious symptoms of eye or vision problems, as evidence-based population health policy.

Until 2015 all Australians were able to access a Medicare rebate for a comprehensive eye examination every two years. However, the 2014-2015 Budget extended the allowable time period to once every three years for

‘asymptomatic’ patients less than 65 years-of-age. There is no doubt that denying asymptomatic patients a Medicare rebate for regular two-yearly eye health examinations puts them at risk of preventable vision loss or blindness.

As undetected eye disease is relatively common in general populations, particularly in middle-aged and older people, regular eye examinations substantially reduce the incidence of visual impairment and blindness. Regular, comprehensive eye examinations enable the early detection of asymptomatic conditions such as diabetes-related vision loss, age-related macular degeneration, cataract and glaucoma; and offer a health promotion opportunity to address the lack of community understanding of insidious vision loss.

In 2009 there were 575,000 Australians over the age of 45 with some form of vision impairment or blindness. This is expected to increase to over 800,000 by 2020. Ninety per cent of vision impairment is avoidable or treatable and the rate of return on investment in primary eye health and vision care is significant.

Recommendation

Optometry Australia welcomes and is actively participating in the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) Review, the analysis of services provided under the Optometrical Services Schedule. As part of this, we call on the Australian Government to reinstate biennial Medicare rebates for a comprehensive initial examination for Australians aged between 45 and 64, given the increased risk of developing ocular disease.

We estimate that this requires an additional annual investment of approximately \$9 million in 2019-2020*.

Sustainable and timely outreach eye care for those who need it

Outreach funds play a vital role in supporting eye health professionals to deliver services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the nation. The Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS), established in 1975, supports optometrists to deliver outreach optometric services to locations and communities who do not have access to primary eye care services.

In 2009-2010, Optometry Australia strongly supported the expansion of the VOS to provide increased optometry services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

However, analysis of available data indicates that additional VOS-supported eye examinations per annum are needed and that the VOS funding pool must grow to achieve this.

To support the effective application of additional funds, continued collaboration between jurisdictional fund holders, eye sector stakeholders, and others involved in service planning and delivery will need to occur to ensure growth funds go to areas of greatest need.

A review of outreach funding guidelines is needed to increase flexibility and tackle the existing barriers to effective local service provision. The review must focus on how the guidelines support functions that can optimise the use of visiting practitioner time. This would include local patient support and liaison roles to link practitioners with local primary health care services; and enabling knowledge and skills exchange between visiting and local care providers to enhance treatment effectiveness and build local capacity to support people's needs between visits.

Evidence also indicates that some metropolitan and urban fringe areas are also under-served, so embedding practical flexibility in the guidelines to increase access in these areas is required.

Recommendation

Optometry Australia calls on the Australian Government to ensure access to sustainable and timely outreach eye care through expanding the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS).

This will require an additional estimated annual investment of \$1.06 million in 2019-2020, increasing to an additional \$4.7 million annually by 2023-2024.

Future-proofing the sustainability of primary eye care

As part of Optometry Australia's leadership and to remain at the vanguard of change, we undertook the Optometry 2040 project in 2018. In partnership with futures studies experts, Optometry Australia widely consulted optometrists and other key sector stakeholders and influencers such as ophthalmologists and peak industry bodies. As a result, we have identified a plausible and preferred future for optometry, optometrists, and community eye health and the pathway to get there.

Based on the trends shaping optometry and eye health, a preferred scenario for optometry in 2040 emerged. Optometry practices will undoubtedly need to adopt new funding and business strategies.

We anticipate the growth of 'partici-patients', supported by optometrists working in collaborative professional-patient relationships. To facilitate this, optometry services will no longer be solely offered through face-to-face interaction, but instead facilitated by technology and available to consumers in a range of different ways. This includes virtual consultations and digital health monitoring via wearables. Increased collaboration with other clinicians is expected to be common and care models will be more diverse.

It is likely that the traditional retail arm of many optometry practices will no longer exist. The demand for purchasing prescription glasses will virtually disappear as a result of both an expanding digital marketplace and innovative clinical methods for addressing refractive error.

Recommendation

To support ongoing access to sustainable eye care, investment in applied research into models to enhance integration of optometric care into primary care and facilitate collaboration with tertiary eye care services is required.

Optometry Australia calls on the Australian Government to support two applied research projects to explore this modelling.

We estimate this requires a one-off investment of \$1.5 million in 2019-2020.

Conclusion

Optometry Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide further information on these measures if required. Future-proofing optometry and enabling the profession to adapt to trends which are shaping the future of health care will ensure timely eye care for all Australians for years to come.

By implementing these measures, the Australian Government can generate a positive - and almost immediate - impact on the eye health of millions of Australians, while reducing the economic burden of vision impairment.

