



Investing in comprehensive eye care for all Australians

Optometry Australia submission to the Federal Budget 2020 – 2021

Optometry Australia is the national peak professional body for optometry, representing 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.

Optometry Australia The influential voice for optometry

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All Australians deserve the best in primary eye health and vision care. Our mission is to lead, engage, unite and promote optometry and optometrists to ensure the sustainability and continuous evolution of this important sector for improved community eye health. Around 12 million Australians have reported long-term eye conditions yet 90% of all vision impairment is preventable or treatable.

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.

With an ageing population and increasing prevalence of chronic disease, the need for timely and affordable access to primary eye care is vital and we encourage all Australians to see their optometrist for regular eye examinations.

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 \$13.7 million in 2020-2021.

In short, 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 2020-2021
Ensure access to sustainable and timely outreach eye care through expanding the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS) to deliver an additional 31,500 outreach optometry services.	\$7.84 million over three years from 2020-2021
Match the one-off funding already committed by Optometry Australia to support 2020: The year of good vision for life.	\$460,000 in 2020-2021
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 2020-2021
Initiate a comprehensive, independent review of the Medicare fee schedule, to ensure alignment with the true cost of providing care.	
TOTAL	Approx. \$13.7 million in 2020-2021

Recommendation 1

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 45-65 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 to \$10 million in 2020-2021*.

Recommendation

Following the conclusion of the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) Review, Optometry Australia recommends that the Australian Government initiate a comprehensive, independent review of the Medicare fee schedule, to ensure alignment with the true cost of providing care.

Recommendation 2

Sustainable and timely outreach eye care for those who need it

Optometry Australia supports Vision 2020 Australia's [*Strong Eyes, Strong Communities – a five-year plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision 2019-2024*](#).

In particular, 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 2009-10, 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.

Injecting an additional \$7.84 million over three years from July 2020 will enable the delivery of an additional 31,500 optometry services, ensuring that all Australians have access to the eye care they need, when they need it.

Access to optometry services is key to the reduction of avoidable blindness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and rural and remote communities. The 2016 National Eye Health Survey found that 63% of vision impairment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is due to uncorrected refractive error – or, put simply, access to a clinically appropriate pair of prescription spectacles.

However, the eye health benefits brought by access to optometry extend 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.

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. Further, a review of outreach funding guidelines is needed to increase flexibility and tackle the existing barriers to effective local service provision.

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 \$7.84 million over three years from 2020-2021.



Recommendation 3

2020: The year of good vision for life

With 20/20 being a well-known term often attributed to perfect vision, and good vision a key factor for living a healthy, happy life, the year 2020 represents a significant one-off opportunity to deliver important eye health messages to Australian communities over an extended period.

Between October 2019 and December 2020, Optometry Australia will work with key sector partners to both leverage the success of the Good vision for life campaign, as detailed below and align with other current eye health campaigns led by organisations across the eye care sector – such as glaucoma, macular degeneration and diabetes. Good vision for life seeks to respond to the fact that despite 90% of vision loss being treatable or avoidable, as Australians, we can sometimes take our eyesight for granted until something goes wrong. Pleasingly, results show that Australians respond well to the campaign's positioning and it has had some positive impact on behavioural change.

2020: The year of good vision for life will seek to develop new creative approaches to highlight awareness of general eye health and the need to include regular comprehensive eye examinations as part of a normal health regime.

There is also opportunity to introduce new consumer eye health research designed to provide a greater understanding of Australians attitude to, and awareness of, their eye health.

Activity will be underpinned by a comprehensive PR and media strategy, comprising ongoing media relations, social media, ambassador and influencer engagement, sector partnerships and tools to engage and amplify content via our members. Dependent upon resources available, we have developed some creative extension concepts with the objective of driving mass media awareness.

It is Optometry Australia's strong desire to rally the extended eye health sector to support 2020: The year of good vision for life and to ensure that our community messages are cohesive and consistent.

Recommendation

Optometry Australia invites the Australian Government to match the funding Optometry Australia has already committed to support 2020: The year of good vision for life.

This will require an investment of \$460,000 in 2020-2021.

Recommendation 4

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 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 digital marketplace and clinical options to address refractive error will result in demand to purchase prescription glasses virtually disappear.

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 2020-2021.

Conclusion

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

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