POSITION STATEMENT

Primary Health Care and Optometry

Optometrists Association Australia has adopted the World Health Organisation Declaration of Alma-Ata definition of primary health care:

“It is the first level of contact of individuals, the family and community with the national health system bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work, and constitutes the first element of a continuing health care process.”

Optometry is an integral part of the primary health sector in Australia. Eye and vision care services are an important point of entry into the Australian health care system.

Poor eye health affects a significant proportion of Australians. Self-reported data on the prevalence of vision loss are available through the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) National Health Survey 2007-08. The survey indicates that about half (52%) of the Australian population have eyesight problems, including long- and short-sightedness (26% and 23%), as a long-term medical condition.

Optometry is an independent health care profession - patients attend optometrists without referral through medical practitioners or other intermediaries. Medicare benefits are paid for optometric services without the need for referral. It has been estimated that optometrists provide around 75 per cent of all primary eye care in Australia.

Optometrists are the largest eye care health workforce in Australia. There are 3,719 optometrists currently in clinical practice in Australia. This equates to one optometrist for every 5,882 people. This figure is the second highest optometrist to patient ratio in the world, with the United Kingdom having the highest ratio.

Optometrists not only examine eyes, and prescribe glasses or contact lenses to correct errors of refraction, optometrists play an important role in diagnosing and managing eye diseases such as glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy. Optometrists also perform an important role in the detection and monitoring of ocular conditions associated with systemic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes.

Optometrists with therapeutic qualifications and endorsement are able to prescribe certain topical ophthalmic medications in every state and territory, many of which are listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule. Optometry is included in many Australian Government programs which support the provision of health care. The optometry profession has direct access to the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule (PBS) and is able to refer to medical specialists in ophthalmology.

5 Optometrist Association Australia latest statistics, April 2010.
6 Optometrist Association Australia latest statistics, April 2010.
and directly to other medical specialists in emergencies. Optometrists also provide eye care services for war veterans under Department of Veterans’ Affairs programs.

Optometry is included in student and professional scholarship programs and since 1975, the Australian Government has supported visiting optometry services in rural and remote communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the Visiting Optometrist Scheme. Optometry is one of the ten health professions in Australia nationally regulated and registered.

**Optometry and Primary Care**

Optometrists Association Australia broadly supports the intention of the Australian Government to take funding and overall policy responsibility for primary health care in Australia. There is evidence that a well functioning and effective primary health care system can lead to improved health outcomes and reduce health inequalities. The United Kingdom and New Zealand have similarly adopted a national approach to primary health care.

Australian governments have announced their intention to evolve current Divisions of General Practice into Medicare Locals commencing in mid 2011. Medicare Locals are intended to improve access and integration of all primary health care services and provide an important local link between primary health care and Local Hospital Networks in a specified region. Each Medicare Local is to be administered by an independent board with a mix of people, including primary health care professionals, as directors.

Optometrists Association Australia supports the formation of Medicare Locals and their intended role to provide more integrated and accessible primary health care and improve the links between the primary health care and hospital systems. Optometrists Association Australia supports broad membership of Medicare Local boards, including membership by optometrists to ensure that cooperation between a range of primary health care providers is promoted and that better primary health care services are available to local communities.

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