Optometry Australia Position Statement

Appropriate workplace conditions for clinical optometrists

February 2025

Introduction

A sustainable, ethical, and supportive work environment is essential for ensuring high-quality, patient-centred eye care. Optometrists must be provided with appropriate workplace conditions which not only uphold the baseline requirements under the Fair Work Act 2009, but which recognise the professional and clinical standards that guide best practice in optometry including an optometrist's right and responsibility to make autonomous clinical decisions.

Australian optometrists hold themselves, and their colleagues, to a high standard, recognising the imperative need to safeguard the vision and eye health of the community. The optometry sector must hold itself to equally high standards.

As the peak professional body for optometry, we are committed to advocating for workplace practices that protect the integrity of clinical decision-making, safeguard patient and practitioner well-being, and facilitate fulfilling professional experiences.

Providing Protected Clinical Support & Administrative Time (CSAT)

CSAT refers to designated, uninterrupted time within an optometrist's work schedule dedicated to essential professional responsibilities beyond direct patient consultations. These include:

- **Administrative Duties**:

  Managing essential professional tasks such as patient record-keeping, organising referrals and reports, and practice management responsibilities.

- **Teaching and Mentorship**:

  Contributing to the education and supervision of optometry students and less experienced colleagues, fostering the next generation of practitioners.

- **Clinical Governance**:

  Participating in quality assurance processes, including clinical audits, peer reviews, and the development of practice guidelines, to uphold and enhance care standards.

- **Research and Innovation**:

  Engaging in research activities to contribute to the evidence base of optometric practice and exploring innovative approaches to patient care.

To maintain the highest standards of care, we recommend that:

- Optometrists be allocated specified and protected CSAT on a regular (daily or weekly) basis. Whilst contexts vary, a minimum of 10% of weekly working hours as protected CSAT provides a guide.
- Employers recognise and integrate CSAT into standard scheduling without disrupting clinical services.
- Regular reviews are undertaken to evaluate the impact of CSAT approach being employed on practitioner well-being and patient care.

Supporting Professional Autonomy Managing KPIs

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are tools used to measure how effectively individuals or organisations achieve strategic goals and business objectives. KPIs not only measure performance but can also shape it, particularly when linked to professional advancement or reward. In optometry, KPIs are often used to assess and manage performance of employee optometrists.

To ensure ethical optometry practice, in the use of KPIs:

- Clinical autonomy must be upheld, aligning with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) Shared Code of Conduct (Code). It is the responsibility of the optometrist to uphold this standard and of their employer to provide an environment that readily facilitates this.
- Optometrists must be empowered to make clinical decisions based on their professional expertise and the best interests of their patients.
- Workplace models should prioritise patient-centred care and provide appropriate workplace resources to support this.

Whilst business viability is critical, this in no way justifies revenue-driven targets for health practitioners that may compromise ethical practice or are detrimental to practitioner health.

KPIs should only ever be one element of performance management. Effective performance management considers the breadth of the practitioners' clinical role and responsibilities and supports the practitioner to develop professionally with consideration of their aspirations.

Enhancing Workplace Conditions for Optometrists

Optometry Australia acknowledges the link between workplace conditions, practitioner well-being, and patient outcomes.

To foster a sustainable profession, we need:

- Fair remuneration and reasonable working hours that reflect the professional responsibilities of optometrists.
- Recognition of the clinical expertise of optometrists, appropriate use of optometrists' skills to allow full scope of practice, and the availability of tools and resources to support patient-centred care including access to learning and development opportunities.
- Sector-wide alignment with the baseline requirements under the Fair Work Act 2009, including as they relate to breaks and reasonable leave requests.
- Access to mental health resources, including confidential counselling, stress management programs, and professional support networks, across the profession.
- Best practice workplace guidelines, outlining expectations around career advancement, inclusivity, and employer responsibilities.
- Strategic workforce planning, addressing the growing oversupply of optometry graduates to ensure sustainable employment opportunities.
- Strategies to ensure the continued professional growth of optometry and optometrists.
- Sector-wide recognition of psychosocial hazards, in alignment with Safe Work Australia's guidelines, noting these can significantly impact mental health and well-being. These include excessive workloads, lack of autonomy, workplace bullying, and unrealistic performance expectations.

To positively influence employee performance and wellbeing, employers should:

- Provide a supportive leadership and organisational culture where employees can discuss challenges or make suggestions without fear of negative consequences.
- Ensure adequate appointment consultation times to accommodate differing patient needs and circumstances. Optometrists should not be routinely double-booked, and appointment schedules should allow for urgent or emergency cases.
- Where possible, provide flexible work arrangements and take into account the employee's wishes regarding leave scheduling, to promote work-life balance. Where requested leave is unable to be accommodated, managers should discuss alternative options that fulfill both business and employee needs.
- Offer the opportunity for ongoing training and opportunities to learn new skills.
- Actively promote teamwork, collaboration and knowledge-sharing activities that strengthen connections and interpersonal relationships, across the workplace.
- Provide well-designed workstations, suitable tools and resources, and clear guidelines for safe work practices.
- Encourage employees to take breaks, use their leave, and maintain healthy boundaries between work and personal life.

Next Steps

Optometry Australia will:

1. Publish and advocate for this position statement to drive awareness and industry-wide support.
2. Support and publish national-level research into workplace conditions and workforce supply/demand projections to strengthen advocacy efforts.
3. Engage with key stakeholders—including policymakers, educational institutions, employers, and optometrists—to identify and address systemic challenges.
4. Develop professional and personal resources and guidelines to guide and support implementation of the above.
5. Launch a consultation process with Optometry Australia members to gather insights and refine strategies for long-term change, commencing with the inaugural Optometry Leaders' Summit in April 2025.

Note: Optometry Australia offers free advice and support for members on human resources (HR) and workplace employment issues. For more complex matters, initial legal advice is free for members through OA's legal partner. Call (03) 9668 8500 or email OAhelpdesk@optometry.org.au