

MEDIA RELEASE

- **\$83 billion** - economic burden of long-term eye health conditions over next five years
- **13 million** – the number of Australians who have one or more long-term eye conditions
- **\$4.52 million** – the cost per year to commence removing hurdles to improve timely access to eye health services

A modest \$22.6 million Government investment will start to avert a looming eye health crisis

21 March 2022 : Optometry Australia is calling on the Australian Government to urgently invest in saving and improving the eyesight of millions of Australians.

The peak professional body for optometrists is asking for a relatively small \$22.6 million investment over five years which it says is needed to start deflecting a looming eye health crisis.

More than 13 million Australians are reported to have one or more long-term eye conditions – with many undiagnosed cases – imposing an annual \$16.6 billion economic burden on Australia.

From an economic perspective, over a five-year period, Optometry Australia's \$22.6 million financial ask represents only \$1.74 per person with a current long-term eye condition. It is a small cost to try and prevent vision loss costing Australia an estimated \$83 billion over this same period.

Optometry Australia's President, Murray Smith said that eye health in Australia was at increasing risk with many Australians unable to access the timely eye care they need which combined with our ageing population, was putting continued pressure on an already over-stretched tertiary eye care system.

'A key part of the solution to ensure Australians have timely, affordable access to safe eye care is to make the best possible use of our highly skilled optometric workforce.

'We can do this by ensuring Australians, and particularly those with chronic conditions like diabetes, are encouraged to access regular eye examinations so eye disease, often asymptomatic in its early days, can be detected early and managed effectively.

'We also need to ensure that the skills of our optometrists are being used for the best benefit of the community. In Australia for instance, optometrists are unable to prescribe oral medications despite their counterparts in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and elsewhere doing so safely for many years,' Mr Smith said.

He added that in other countries optometrists are also used to support treatment for vision threatening diseases such as macular degeneration and diabetic eye disease which require on-going monitoring and treatment.

'Conversely in many parts of Australia patients face significant issues accessing this type of ongoing care when more effective use of our skilled optometrists could help address this situation.

'Achieving this will require supportive funding and regulatory change,' Mr Smith implored.

Optometry Australia plans to spend the \$22.6 million cash injection

1. \$1 million over two years to pilot a collaborative care model involving optometry supporting the provision of ophthalmology-led care of patients with sight threatening age-related macular degeneration and diabetic macula odema. Although these patients require regular treatment often administered by intravitreal injection, access can be difficult if ophthalmic care is not readily available due to location or cost. It is understandable that there is a 20% drop out rate in intravitreal injection treatment. Optometry Australia is seeking Government support to establish a pilot that would allow patients in two locations – including a remote Indigenous community – to access this care through locally-based trained optometrists.
2. \$1 million over two years to increase payment to optometrists providing optometric domiciliary services in residential aged care. The current MBS rebate of \$24.20 per visit is grossly inadequate and requires an increase to \$85 per visit (note, this is per visit, not per patient). This would encourage more optometrists to provide domiciliary services for vulnerable older and immobile Australians.
3. \$1 million over two years to support the ongoing rollout of Optometry Australia's eye health awareness campaign, *Good vision for life*. Launched and in market since September 2016, this campaign has been instrumental in increasing public awareness of the importance of regular eye examinations.
4. \$1 million over two years to build broad health professional awareness of eye disease and the importance of timely eye examinations for patients with, or at risk of, chronic health conditions.
5. \$18.1 million over five years to better fund the Visiting Optometry Scheme (VOS) which delivers outreach services to remote and very remote locations and in particular, to First Nation People. VOS needs firmer financial support to allow for growth – Optometry Australia estimates over 21,000 additional VOS-supported eye examinations are needed per annum.

And while the following does not have a cost, Optometry Australia is also calling on the Australian Government to expediate a regulatory decision to allow optometrists the right to administer oral prescriptions for common eye conditions. Currently optometrists must refer patients to a medical practitioner or an ophthalmologist to administer the prescription resulting in the double-handling of patients through the health system and additional costs for the patient.

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Optometry Australia is the peak professional body for optometrists. Representing 85% of registered Australian optometrists, Optometry Australia's focus is to lead and advance the profession of optometry by putting eye-health front and centre of Australian health care.