

MEDIA RELEASE

Optometry Australia gets moving to highlight the importance of mental health within optometry

Wednesday 24 May 2023 – Optometry Australia is concerned about the [mental health and wellbeing](#) of its members, in light of recent findings from the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra), and studies conducted before and during COVID-19.

A [report](#) released earlier this year by Ahpra from an expert advisory group revealed that between January 2018 and December 2021, 16 practitioners tragically took their own lives while involved in regulatory processes or investigations, and an additional four practitioners attempted suicide or engaged in self-harming behaviours.

This report adds to data obtained in late 2019 when a team of researchers from QUT conducted a large, cross-sectional [survey](#) of Australian optometrists, using well established mental health scales. The results they found listed prevalence of depression and anxiety and moderate to severe psychological distress at 31%. Prevalence of high burnout was 56% and optometrists aged ≤ 30 years were 3.5 times more likely to report moderate to severe psychological distress compared to optometrists aged >30 years.

As the world entered an unprecedented global pandemic in 2020, many further [studies](#) demonstrated a profound and prolonged impact on healthcare workers. One [study](#) of over 9,000 Australian healthcare workers during 2020 found that 71% experienced moderate to severe burnout.

As we enter the 'recovery' phase of the pandemic we are faced with new challenges, with 2023 bringing high demands, economic uncertainty and for many, reduced energy. In March 2023, Lifeline advised its suicide prevention and general help lines had set [new records](#) for requests for help, with cost of living the latest problem eclipsing issues encountered during the pandemic.

The disturbing figures from these studies underscore the pressing need for increased mental health support within the Australian optometry sector, and Optometry Australia is determined to play an active role in promoting the mental health and wellbeing of its members.

Recognising the importance of fostering a sense of community and solidarity, and making a significant step toward raising awareness for mental health initiatives, Optometry Australia proudly announces its participation in the [Push Up Challenge](#) throughout June.

The peak professional body invites its members and staff to join the [“Eye opt to push up”](#) community, uniting with colleagues and peers within the eye health sector to contribute to raising awareness and money for Lifeline, by completing 3,144 push-ups during the month of June. Why 3,144 push-ups? Sadly, this is the number of Australians who lost their lives to suicide in 2021.

Optometry Australia's Chief Clinical Officer, Luke Arundel, said: “By joining the Push Up Challenge, Optometry Australia aims to raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing while actively supporting Lifeline's critical work. Its important to note the Push Up Challenge isn't just about 'push-ups'. Participants can complete any health-related activity (this might be squats, walking or minutes mediating) as we break down some of the stigma of talking about mental health.

“We encourage our members to come together as a community through this initiative, supporting one another and fostering an environment of compassion and understanding,” he said. “By collectively addressing mental health challenges, the optometry sector can work towards creating a resilient and supportive professional community.”

Optometry Australia firmly believes that the mental health and wellbeing of optometrists are of paramount importance. It is dedicated to supporting its members through challenging times and providing the necessary [resources and assistance](#) to maintain their mental wellness.

In line with this commitment and beyond the Push Up Challenge, the organisation provides a range of services to assist members in maintaining their mental health. These include a [Member Assistance Program](#), which is a free and confidential service for Optometry Australia members, enabling them access to up to three coaching and counselling sessions over a 12-month period, aimed at strengthening mental resilience and wellbeing.

There is also a suite of [tailored resources](#) available for members, including a series of webcasts and podcasts, as well as a curated bank of tools developed to address burnout and mental health. The resources also include a Mental Health First Aid Course, designed to help members recognise and appropriately triage patients suffering from mental health issues into appropriate care.

Finally, the [Optometry Advisor Help Desk](#) is available to support its members with complex issues – from Ahpra investigations to Medicare audits, medico issues to major sector change. The aim is to provide independent and unbiased advice, with complete confidentiality and without judgement, helping members navigate the challenging aspects of the job.

Optometry Australia invites the entire optometric sector to join in participating in the Push Up Challenge by joining the [“Eye opt to push up”](#) group, and help to raise funds for Lifeline, ensuring that crucial support services are available to those in need.

For more information about Optometry Australia’s commitment to mental health, [go to its website](#).

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