

MEDIA RELEASE

Optometry Australia will urge Albanese Government to prioritise eye health within its health reform agenda

2 June 2022: With a looming eye health crisis on the horizon that has the potential to impact the eyesight of millions of Australians, Optometry Australia will appeal to the new Labor Government to escalate eye health reform as part of its overarching health agenda.

In its pre-election campaigning, Mr Albanese committed Labor to implementing primary care reforms costing almost \$1 billion over four years.

Optometry Australia's President, Murray Smith, said the peak professional body was delighted that Labor had such a focus on health.

Mr 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. Optometry Australia predicts that this will contribute to a looming eye health crisis.

'Long-term eye conditions place a \$16.6bn economic burden on the Australian economy annually yet successive governments have been slow to implement reforms that could reverse this.

'On behalf of the 13 million Australians who have one or more long-term eye conditions, and Australia's 6,300 highly skilled optometrists who are ready to provide the on-going care they need, we welcome working with Mr Albanese to change this trend.'

Optometry Australia will seek support from Mr Albanese's government, and the new Health Minister, Mark Butler, to release a relatively small \$22.6 million investmentⁱ over five years to initiate six projects which could have a significant impact in providing much needed access to eye care. Policy change will also be required so that:

- Optometrists can support ophthalmology-led care of patients with sight threatening eye diseases such as age-related macular degeneration and diabetic macula edema.
- Optometrists who provide optometric domiciliary services in residential aged care can be better paid to cover their own increasing out-of-pocket costs and through this, encourage more optometrists to provide these much needed aged-care services.
- The Visiting Optometry Scheme, which delivers outreach services to remote and very remote locations and in particular, to First Nation People, can be expanded.
- Optometrists are granted the right to administer oral prescriptions for common eye conditions. This would alleviate the need for them to 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.
- Awareness of the role of optometrists in managing eye health and the importance of timely eye examinations in the detection and treatment of eye health issues amongst health professionals as well as consumers is maintained through unbiased eye health marketing.

Mr Smith said that enabling these requires not just funding support but regulatory change.

'Optometry Australia has strong ties with the Labor Government and we will be seeking meetings as quickly as possible to provide an updated overview of the eye health of Australians and why this funding and policies changes are needed.'

>Ends<

For more information:

Jenna McGowan: j.mcgowan@optometry.org.au. Tel: 9668 8500

Kerry I'Anson: k.ianson@optometry.org.au. Tel: 9668 8500

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.

ⁱ Optometry Australia \$22.6 million cash injection ask

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 oedema. 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.