

SA's optometry body calls on government to improve wait times for public outpatient eyecare

Optometry Victoria South Australia (OV/SA) is calling on the South Australian Government to fix long wait times for public outpatient eyecare. The peak body for the optometry sector says statistics show that South Australian semi or non-urgent patients are waiting longer to see an ophthalmologist than they would for nearly all other speciality medical services.

At one Adelaide hospital, patient wait times jumped from 11 months in July 2018, to 22 months in July 2021. At another, the current median wait time for semi and non-urgent patients is an astounding 48 months. During this time some patients are quite literally going blind, while others are suffering irreversible damage to both their long-term vision and quality of life.

While some of this rise can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, median wait times for non-urgent Category 2 and 3 patients have increased more than expected. And there's potential for further increases as South Australians who have put off having their eyes checked or known eye health issues addressed during the pandemic, make the decision to visit their GP or optometrist.

OV/SA President Elise Pocknee-Clem says the solution to this issue already exists, it just needs government funding and support.

'In 2020 OV/SA backed a joint ophthalmology and optometry pilot at Modbury Hospital and data from the pilot showed that 40-60% of the non-urgent waitlist could be effectively managed by optometrists in a collaborative care setting. All it cost was \$50,000 to operate - pocket change when you consider the significant benefit for so many South Australians' lives,' Elise Pocknee-Clem said.

'Employing optometrists in public ophthalmology outpatient clinics would further address the situation, where they could review ophthalmology wait lists, streamline care through patient work-ups for ophthalmologists, and provide eye care to patients on the wait list who do not require tertiary care or refer those patients back to community optometry.'

'We are also calling for government to prioritise the development of clinical prioritisation criteria (CPC) for public ophthalmology, which will ensure that only patients who need tertiary care are referred. The CPC should utilise the skills of community optometrists to ensure that patients referred to public ophthalmology have the appropriate work-up completed in the community, creating further efficiencies for ophthalmologists.'

Jacqueline Warren, the lead optometrist on the Modbury pilot, says that the pilot showed there is a solution.

'The Modbury pilot proved that wait times can be reduced with only a small amount of investment. It showed that by putting in place a system of collaborative care with optometrists, the number of patients unnecessarily waiting to see an ophthalmologist was reduced,' Jacqueline Warren said.

As South Australia opens up from the pandemic, government is being asked to work together with public hospitals, ophthalmologists, general practitioners, optometrists and patient groups to better manage non-urgent public ophthalmology outpatient waiting lists. This collaboration would in turn



reduce lengthy wait times, reduce the per patient cost of public eye care, and make more effective use of the clinical skills of eye care health professionals in the interests of better patient outcomes.

OV/SA represents 88 per cent of all optometrists in South Australia and many of these members have already contacted government to voice their concerns at the lack of action around these wait times. OV/SA representatives have also approached the Premier, Health Minister and Opposition Health Minister seeking a pre-election commitment to address this issue.

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