

13 March 2025

The Hon Mark Butler MP
Federal Minister for Health
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
minister.butler@health.gov.au

Dear Minister

We wish to convey our disappointment in your response to our letter dated 14 February regarding the alarming drop in initial comprehensive eye examinations for people aged under 65 and urge you to commit a re-elected Labor Government to addressing this issue as a matter of priority.

Around Australia, optometrists are very concerned about the impact that the near 20% per capita drop in initial comprehensive eye examinations for under 65s is having on eye health. It is occurring at the same time as the prevalence of a range of chronic ocular conditions such as childhood myopia, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and age-related macular degeneration is increasing. These and other eye conditions are treatable if detected on a timely basis, but are often asymptomatic, emphasising the importance of regular comprehensive eye examinations.

It should be a matter of grave concern that the drop off in comprehensive eye examinations for under 65s is occurring in all age cohorts from 0-5 years to 55-64 years, and in all jurisdictions, with the Northern Territory having significantly lower levels than other States and Territories. The drop is more than 4% higher for women than for men. In one year, between 2022-23 and 2023-24, there was a 6.2% drop, indicating a likely link to cost-of-living pressures, with per capita rates of initial comprehensive eye examinations lower than they were during COVID.

Considering these stark statistics, we are greatly concerned by your perfunctory response to the profession's concerns. We understand the role of the Medical Services Advisory Committee (MSAC) in assessing and advising on the public funding of health services. Optometry Australia is currently undertaking the work required for an MSAC assessment at the earliest opportunity. However, we are very cognisant of the length of time it can take to progress through an MSAC assessment and Budget decision-making process. The point the profession is making is that we need to see this serious and urgent issue accorded the necessary level of priority it deserves.

The most galling aspect of this issue is the fact that access to Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations for under 65s was once every two years until it was made once every three years in the 2014 Federal Budget. Optometry Australia opposed this change at the time because of its impact on the timely detection of asymptomatic ocular conditions. No clear rationale or evidence was given for this savings measure in the same Budget that included other Medicare cuts which you have roundly criticised and taken action to rectify. The statistics clearly demonstrate the alarming drop in initial comprehensive eye examinations that has occurred subsequent to the 2014 Budget decision.

Your non-committal response sends a clear message to our profession and their patients about the relative lack of importance of preventive eye care. There seems to be a unity ticket between the major parties in this area of Medicare.

Optometrists are campaigning in local communities on this issue and will be deeply disappointed when they learn of your response to Optometry Australia's request that a re-elected Albanese Government take urgent action to address it as a matter of priority.

We would greatly appreciate your further consideration of our request to return to two yearly Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations. We will, of course, ensure that any commitment that you make is communicated to optometrists around Australia.

Yours sincerely

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'S. Cappuccio', enclosed within a light blue rectangular border.

Skye Cappuccio
Chief Executive Officer
Optometry Australia