

Position statement on the need for climate action & sustainability in optometry

Introduction and policy context

The Australian Academy of Science warns that the rate of planetary heating due to greenhouse gas emissions continues to increase, and characterises national and international efforts to reverse this trend as inadequate.¹ As a result, environmental degradation, air pollution and climate change are having devastating impacts in all parts of the world, including on global health.

The Australian continent is particularly vulnerable to climate change, and warming has occurred faster in Australia, where the average temperature increased by 1.4 degrees since records began in 1910.^{2,3} If global emissions trends continue, risks to the population and natural ecosystems from drought, heatwaves, floods, fires, coastal erosion and poor air and water quality - all already serious issues in Australia - will worsen, leading to loss of life and livelihoods, and undermining the foundations for our health and wellbeing.^{4,5}

Climate change and eye health

The International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) tells us that eye health will be affected.

“Climate change is likely to increase the incidence of trachoma infections, vitamin A deficiency, cataracts, severe allergic eye diseases, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and eye injuries. It is also likely to disrupt eye health delivery through an increased frequency of extreme weather events. All countries – rich and poor – will experience the health impacts of climate change and experience shows us that those with visual impairment and disabilities are disproportionately impacted.”⁶

Simultaneously, health care is a substantial contributor to climate change, responsible for an estimated 4 to 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions.⁷

¹ Australian Academy of Science, 2021. *The risks to Australia of a 3°C warmer world.*

² Horsburgh, N., Armstrong, F., Mulvenna, V., 2017. *Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia*, Climate and Health Alliance

³ Australian Academy of Science, 2021. *The risks to Australia of a 3°C warmer world.*

⁴ Australian Academy of Science, 2021. *The risks to Australia of a 3°C warmer world.*

⁵ World Health Organisation, 2020. *COP26 Key Messages on Climate Change and Health.*

⁶ International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, 2021. *Guide for environmentally sustainable practices in the eye health sector*

⁷ Lenzen, M., Malik, A., et al, 2020. *The environmental footprint of health care: a global assessment*

The role of optometry

Australia's health sector, including optometry, has a role in both climate change mitigation and adaptation.

It is within our power to take action which seeks to both avoid and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to prevent the planet from warming to more extreme temperatures, and to alter our behaviour and systems to ensure we remain able to meet the needs of the communities we serve.

Optometry Australia's position

In its 2021-2024 Shared Strategic Plan, Optometry Australia committed to exploring and developing initiatives in response to emerging evidence on the impact of climate change specifically on eye health.

As a first step, Optometry Australia recognises a climate emergency. We accept the challenge to take action issued by the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), in its ***Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia***; and the IAPB, in its ***Call to Action for Environmentally Sustainable Practices in the Eye Health Sector***.

We agree that it is time for the healthcare sector, including the optometry profession, to show leadership and accelerate efforts to work towards mitigating the impact of climate change.

In order to achieve progress, we endorse the Key Areas of Action outlined by the IAPB Climate Action Working Group⁸ and are committed to identifying ways in which optometrists and the broader optometry sector can take effective climate action.

Over the 2021-2024 Shared Strategic Plan period, we will establish and implement a work plan which encapsulates:

- Raising awareness of existing initiatives related to environmental sustainability and climate change within optometry
- Establishing networks of interested members to share ideas, challenges, and successes
- Developing approaches and resources to promote and support greater environmental sustainability practices in optometry
- Contributing to the broader climate action movement through formal and informal engagement with key stakeholders across the eye health and environmental health sectors, including CAHA, RANZCO and the IAPB.
- Contribute to the growth of the evidence base around climate impact on optometry and eye health in Australia

⁸ International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, 2021. *Guide for environmentally sustainable practices in the eye health sector*

About Optometry Australia

Optometry Australia is the peak national organisation for optometrists, which has been representing and advocating on behalf of the profession for over 100 years.

Our vision is 'excellence in eye and vision care' and our mission 'to lead, engage and promote optometry, optometrists and community eye health'. Our members are professional optometrists who practice in a variety of community, hospital, clinic and outreach settings in the public and private health systems.

The vast majority of optometrists work in, manage or own practices in towns and suburbs around Australia, employing local staff and contributing to the wellbeing of their communities.

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