

Submission to the 2025-26 Federal Budget

Purpose

The purpose of the Optometry Australia¹ Federal Budget Submission is to recommend immediate actions that the Federal Government can take to ensure that Australians with eye health conditions are diagnosed and managed in a timely manner. The recommended actions utilise the expertise of optometrists who, as primary eye care providers, work in close collaboration with ophthalmologists and other health professionals.

About Optometry

There are over 7,000 registered optometrists who undertake about 11 million eye examinations annually in more than 1,200 communities across Australia. Optometrists are qualified to examine the eyes and detect, diagnose and manage vision problems and eye diseases. As eye health is inherently linked to systemic disease, optometrists also play a key role in primary care. They work closely with ophthalmologists, who are medical specialists, and general practitioners. Most optometrists practise in the community, while others practise in hospitals, specialist clinics, universities, residential aged care facilities, and First Nations communities.

The State of Eye Health in Australia

It is estimated that over 13 million Australians have one or more long-term eye condition, and that chronic vision disorders affect 93% of people aged 65 and over. Across all age groups, 59% of women have a chronic eye condition compared with 51% of men. Eye diseases and vision problems are the most common long-term health condition reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Australia's Eye Health Challenges

An estimated 90% of blindness or vision loss is preventable or treatable, if detected early. Yet, Vision Australia estimates there are 453,000 people in Australia who are blind or have low vision and projects this number will grow to 564,000 by 2030.

Disturbingly, there has been a significant decline in the number of Australians aged under 65 receiving initial comprehensive eye examinations. Between 2017-18 and 2023-24, per capita initial eye examinations of people aged under 65 fell by 18.1%.

The prevalence of myopia is increasing significantly. An estimated 40% of Australians have myopia, up by 3% since 2020, and is predicted to rise to 50% by 2050. Typically, myopia first becomes detectable in late primary school and develops during adolescence after which it may stabilise. It is vital that children are diagnosed and commence treatment as early as possible to reduce the risk of serious eye conditions later in life.

¹ Optometry Australia is the national peak body for optometry. It was established in 1918 and represents around 90% of all Australian-based optometrists. Optometry Australia's focus is to lead and advance the profession of optometry by putting eye health front and centre in Australian healthcare.

The Way Forward

Australia's eye health challenges will not be effectively addressed without concerted action in two fundamental areas:

- Reinstating two-yearly Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations for Australians aged under 65 years, reversing a decision in the 2014 Federal Budget to make them three-yearly. This is required to address the serious decline in the number of asymptomatic Australians aged under 65 getting their eyes examined, putting them at greater risk of a range of serious eye conditions.
- A nationally consistent approach to childhood myopia, including a national campaign that alerts parents to its increasing prevalence, how the risks of myopia can be reduced, and the need for early detection at the late primary school age onwards.

The optometry sector is united in its support for these key drivers of better eye health outcomes. Optometrists stand ready to work in partnership with the Federal Government to ensure that Australians, particularly those on low incomes and in priority populations, are not impeded by a lack of timely and affordable access to professional eye care.

Theme 1 – Reinstating Two-Yearly Initial Comprehensive Eye Examinations

Australia is seeing an alarming increase in the incidence of a range of debilitating eye conditions which it is predicted will continue over the rest of this decade. Most vision loss can be averted if eye conditions are diagnosed and managed on a timely basis. However, in many cases, eye conditions are asymptomatic, making it critically important that Australians receive regular comprehensive eye examinations from an optometrist.

Analysis of Medicare data shows that fewer Australians aged under 65 are having comprehensive eye examinations once every three years, let alone every two years as clinically recommended. Between 2017-18 and 2023-24, there was an 18.1% reduction in initial comprehensive eye examinations nationally for people aged under 65 years. The number of Australians aged under 65 getting Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations fell from 2,234,228 in 2017-18 to 1,956,402 in 2023-24. If the 2017-18 per capita rate for under 65s had been maintained in 2023-24, there would have been an additional 424,101 eye examinations.

If this issue is not addressed as a matter of urgency, an increasing number of Australians will face the health, quality of life and economic consequences of unnecessary vision loss. There will also be significantly increased costs and pressures across the broader health system.

To prevent these outcomes, Optometry Australia is calling on the Federal Government to reinstate two-yearly Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations for Australians aged under 65. This would reverse a decision made in the 2014 Federal Budget.

All Australians aged under 65 stand to benefit from being able to access Medicare subsidised eye examinations once every two years rather than once every three years. As more than 90% of optometrists bulk bill, the vast majority of these more frequent eye examinations will be provided without an out-of-pocket patient cost.

This proposal will be particularly beneficial for low-income families who are less likely to have their eyes examined unless they are subsidised by Medicare due to cost-of-living pressures². It will assist priority populations who are more likely to have undiagnosed eye conditions, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds, people with disabilities, and residents of regional, rural and remote communities.

The proposal will also deliver significant benefits to the broader health system through the earlier identification and more timely and effective management of a range of eye conditions. This will reduce the need for expensive surgical and specialist interventions as well as the potential for falls and other accidents that can require significant follow-up care.

Required actions

Optometry Australia is calling on the Federal Government to reinstate two-yearly, Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations for Australians aged under 65 years³.

Assuming the same usage rate of the relevant MBS item 10910 in two years as currently occurs in three years, providing Australians aged under 65 with access to Medicare subsidised comprehensive eye examinations once every two years would cost an estimated \$64.3 million a year. This amount would increase gradually with MBS indexation and increases in the population aged under 65 years.

Theme 2 – Childhood Myopia

Myopia or short-sightedness is a common eye disease that usually begins in childhood and can continue to progress into adulthood. The prevalence of both myopia and high myopia has increased significantly in recent decades. In fact, experts predict it will affect 50% of the global population and 20 million Australians by 2050⁴.

Typically, myopia progresses from primary school age until late adolescence and then stabilises. Research suggests children should spend two hours a day outside to help prevent myopia from developing. Near work may not itself cause myopia but increased time spent on screens has been shown to contribute to the growing problem.

No level of myopia is considered safe, and even low to moderate amounts of myopia increase the risk of vision threatening eye disease two to ten-fold. While standard glasses and contact lenses correct the distance visual blur associated with myopic refractive errors, they do not reduce the abnormal axial elongation of the eye associated with myopia, which is the main driver of serious ocular conditions such as retinal detachment, myopic maculopathy, glaucoma, and cataract. There is substantial evidence that myopia management therapies

² Between 2022-23 and 2023-24, the national per capita rate of Australians under 65 years getting initial comprehensive eye examinations fell by 6.2%, suggesting that cost-of-living issues are have an adverse impact.

³ Medicare subsidised initial comprehensive eye examinations for Australians aged under 65 years were two yearly until a 2014 Federal Budget decision to make them three yearly. Medicare subsidised eye examinations for Australians aged 65 and over are every year.

⁴ Holden, B. A., Fricke, T. R., Wilson, D. A., Jong, M., Naidoo, K. S., Sankaridurg, P., ... & Resnikoff, S. (2016). Global prevalence of myopia and high myopia and temporal trends from 2000 through 2050. *Ophthalmology*, 123(5), 1036-1042.

reduce the rate of refractive error progression and abnormal eye growth associated with myopia, while simultaneously providing appropriate optical correction which fully corrects vision.

It is vital that children are diagnosed and commence treatment as early as possible to reduce the risk of serious eye conditions later in life. Patients and families should be educated on the causes of myopia; the environmental and other factors associated with myopia development; the risks and consequences of myopia progression; and evidence-based treatment options.

Myopia management has three main components:

- Mitigation – counselling children and their families, as part of early and regular eye examinations, about lifestyle and other factors to prevent or delay the onset of myopia.
- Measurement – regular and comprehensive eye health and vision examinations to evaluate ocular status through measurement of refractive error and ocular biometry.
- Management – addressing patients' needs through correcting myopic refractive error while also providing evidence-based interventions to slow myopia progression.

Required actions

Optometry Australia is calling on the Federal Government to partner with Optometry Australia to deliver a national multi-channel consumer awareness campaign. The campaign would increase public awareness of childhood myopia, the risk factors, and the importance of early diagnosis and treatment. It would be funded jointly by Optometry Australia, industry partners, Federal and State and Territory Governments at a cost to the Federal Government of \$1.5 million over 3 years.