



Ontario Association of Optometrists (OAO)

**Submission to the Standing Committee on
Finance and Economic Affairs**

2020 Pre-Budget Consultations

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About OAO

The Ontario Association of Optometrists (OAO) is the leading professional organization representing optometrists in Ontario for over 100 years. We are dedicated to helping our over 1,700 members provide the highest standard of eye health and vision care for Ontarians while driving the profession of optometry forward.

Introduction

Our eyesight is considered one of our most valued senses, providing us a window into the world like no other. It is no wonder, then, that people say they fear vision loss more than any other disability. Unfortunately, the likelihood that Ontarians will suffer vision loss or some form of visual impairment is very real. By age 65, **one out of every three** Ontarians will have some form of vision-reducing eye disease. The National Coalition for Vision Health goes on to say that **one in four people** will develop irreversible vision loss by age 75.

And vision loss has a substantial cost – not only for the individual, their families and their communities, but also for government and society at large. According to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), vision loss costs **\$7.3 billion** in direct and indirect costs in Ontario every year.

There is an urgency to act today.

As of 2014, more than **2 million** Ontarians have one of the four most prevalent eye diseases: age-related macular degeneration (ARMD), glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and cataracts. By 2031, the number of visually impaired Ontarians is anticipated to more than double. If current trends persist, it is projected that Ontario's publicly funded health system will need to spend nearly **\$1 billion** more each year by 2031 to treat the four most prevalent eye diseases.

Strong, accessible primary eye care is the key to improving eye health and vision care outcomes today, and to averting the downstream health, social and economic impacts of vision loss and eye disease.

If we fail to invest in Ontario's eye care system now, today's challenges will only get worse as the population ages and more of us live longer.

Ontario's Optometrists

Optometrists play an important role in primary care in the day-to-day delivery of vision care and eye health. Serving more than **4 million** Ontarians each year, optometrists have more contact with the public than any other eye care provider.

Located in over **200 communities** in every region of the province, optometrists are also the most accessible primary eye care professionals in Ontario's healthcare system. In fact, in many locations, optometrists are the only providers of comprehensive general eye care. Moreover, **90%** of optometrists can see patients with eye related emergencies on the same day, which helps take the pressure off emergency rooms and provides more appropriate health care access.

Through their skills and extensive training, optometrists can assess, diagnose and treat a variety of problems, not limited to prescribing a range of visual aids to correct blurry vision. For example, optometrists can prescribe medications to treat allergic, infectious and inflammatory eye conditions. They can also diagnose and treat primary open angle glaucoma, and they refer advanced medical, surgical, and laser treatments to the appropriate specialist. Indeed, optometrists deliver a first-rate patient experience.

Optometrists are Small Business Owners Too

Optometrists face the same cost pressures as other small businesses, such as hydro, rent, and property taxes. As these costs have increased, optometrists have had to absorb them without any relief from government.

At the same time, optometrists are expected to provide a higher level of patient care. For example:

- To better diagnose and treat patients they need to buy new technologies that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars;
- To deal with an increased burden of patient management;
- To look after patients who have more complex conditions with more co-morbidities (diabetes, glaucoma); and,
- To collect and analyze more and more data using expensive software.

The challenge for optometrists is that there has been no change in compensation since 2009. While other health care professions have seen fee increases, compensation for optometrists has not even kept pace with inflation. Since 1989, inflation in Ontario has increased by 78.8 per cent. During that same 30-year timeframe:

- The reimbursement rate for an eye exam for a child has increased by only 8.5 per cent;
- The reimbursement rate for an eye exam for an adult with diabetes has increased by only 11.9 per cent; and,

- The reimbursement rate for an eye exam for a senior has increased by only 19.8 per cent.

By not investing in eye care for so many years, the government has hindered the ability of optometrists to keep up with the mandated standards of practice. It has also jeopardized the viability of optometry practices. An OAO member who practices in Brampton indicated that it costs \$102 to perform a senior's eye exam. Another member who practices in Bayfield stated that it costs \$120 to perform an eye exam. Under OHIP, optometrists only receive \$47 for senior's eye exams. Continuing to provide eye care at a financial loss is not sustainable. The sad reality facing many optometrists is to either go bankrupt, move to another jurisdiction that provides adequate remuneration, or to only see patients that are not covered under OHIP. But, the Ontario Government can take action now to fix this situation and ensure an accessible and sustainable eye care system for patients across the province.

Recommendations

The OAO and its members are calling on government to implement the following measures in the 2020 Budget:

Reform OHIP

The OAO recognizes that the Ontario Government currently faces a deficit and that funds for increasing OHIP remuneration to a level that catches-up with inflation would be extremely difficult at this time, although 93% of Ontarians believe OHIP fees should keep pace with inflation.

Instead, the OAO recommends that the government de-insure medically unnecessary services in order to be able continue to provide care to those who need it most. This would ensure that all Ontarians who have certain medical conditions of the eye, regardless of age, are covered by OHIP. Moreover, it would ensure that vulnerable seniors who need eye care the most have access to that care.

Increase Scope of Practice

Optometrists appreciated the government's commitment contained in last year's budget and fall economic statement to expand the scope of practice for optometrists. And the move by the Minister of Health to seek changes to the current drug regulation is a positive first step. However, there is much more that the government can do to save money, reduce unnecessary referrals, and improve the quality of and access to care for patients.

To that end, the OAO has initiated discussions with the Ministry of Health on further scope expansion. To help inform these discussions, the OAO is working with members, the College of Optometrists of Ontario, and the University of Waterloo School of

Optometry. The intention is to present government with clinical and jurisdictional evidence that supports scope expansion such as:

- further changes to prescribing
- changes that are Controlled Act-related
- changes in areas such as referrals to specialists

The OAO is calling on the government to support these changes as they will not only maximize the current skills and training of optometrists, but will also improve the patient journey through the health care system.

Reduce Red Tape

There is an opportunity for the government to reduce medical red-tape and improve the patient-journey by eliminating certain forms, such as the Major Eye Exam Referral Form. The Major Eye Exam Referral Form is used by physicians and nurse practitioners to refer patients to optometrists for a perceived medical condition. Physicians receive a fee under OHIP every time they refer a patient. However, patients do not need a referral to see an optometrist. In fact, 90% of optometrists can see patients the same day for emergency eye issues. Moreover, this form gives patients access to OHIP-covered optometry services for a period of five years. This has resulted in abuse of the form with patients using it for a prescription check for glasses or contacts. OAO and its members are calling for the elimination of this form to reduce costs for the health care system and red tape for optometrists.

Conclusion

The modernization of Ontario's eye care system is long overdue. The OAO and its members feel that now is the time for government to develop a smarter, more efficient and fiscally responsible approach to delivering publicly funded eye care services, one that treats everyone fairly and ensures that patients get the most appropriate care in a system that works for them. In doing so, government will create the conditions for Ontario's optometrists to:

- Hire more staff;
- See more high-needs patients;
- Invest in leading-edge technology;
- Maintain and improve access in small, rural and remote communities; and,
- Work with family doctors to ensure they see patients in greatest need.

By bringing forward meaningful change today, government can ensure that there is a sustainable eye care system for generations to come.