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Health and Ambulance Services Committee
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RE: Inquiry into the establishment of a Queensland Health Promotion Commission

Optometry Queensland Northern Territory, the peak professional body representing approximately 900 optometrists (85% of practising optometrists throughout Queensland), welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above inquiry. As the cornerstone of primary eye care in Queensland, optometry plays a central role in the early detection, prevention and management of visual anomalies, eye disease and vision loss. The following submission outlines the views and evidence based recommendations of our organisation in relation to the inquiry.

The key points of our submission are as follows:

1. A comprehensive eye examination is often the only means of detecting the early stages of an ocular disease or vision anomaly in both children and adults.
2. Early detection and ongoing review by highly skilled eye care professionals is essential in the management of such conditions, and has significant social and economic benefits.
3. Health promotion strategies that both increase public awareness of ocular health and enhance inter-professional relationships with primary health care providers (GPs) are essential to increase the number of Queenslanders accessing comprehensive eye care.

a) The potential role, scope and strategic directions of a Queensland Health Promotion Commission

Vision impairment is a significant health condition for Queenslanders. Vision loss increases morbidity amongst older people, leading to a greater risk of depression, falls, hospital admissions and demands on welfare services. Therefore, eye health promotion should be a priority of the Commission given the significant economic burden and reduction in quality of life associated with vision loss. With regard to eye health, the strategic direction of the commission should align with the *National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Avoidable Blindness and Vision Loss*.¹

b) Population groups disproportionately affected by chronic disease

Age-related chronic eye disease

In Australia, the main cause of blindness and vision impairment is age-related eye disease including macular degeneration, cataract, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Some chronic conditions, such as glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy, are initially asymptomatic and can only be detected by examination of the posterior eye as part of a thorough examination.

Age-related Macular Degeneration

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in Australia, accounting for approximately 50% of cases.² Some forms of macular degeneration can be treated and vision can be preserved with early detection, highlighting the importance of public education and the need for regular comprehensive eye examinations.

Cataract

Cataract is a leading cause of vision impairment in Australia, second only to uncorrected refractive error.² Optometrists diagnose, educate and review patients with cataract and triage these patients to tertiary care when clinically appropriate.

Glaucoma

Approximately 300,000 Australians have glaucoma; however, as many as half of these cases³ remain undetected. Chronic or primary open angle glaucoma is typically asymptomatic until substantial irreversible vision loss has occurred. Optometrists are able to detect signs of glaucoma by assessing the health of internal eye structures and measuring the internal eye pressure. In Queensland, optometrists can also initiate medical therapy for primary open angle glaucoma.

Diabetic Retinopathy

People with diabetes (6.8% of female and 8% of male Australians) are at risk of developing a number of eye conditions, most notably diabetic retinopathy, which is sight-threatening in approximately 7-15% of Australian diabetic patients.⁴ Early diagnosis and treatment can prevent up to 98% of severe vision loss in people with diabetes.⁵ The importance of eye health must be integrated into diabetes education regarding the risk of developing eye complications and the need to for regular examinations to screen for diabetic retinopathy.

Optometrists play an important role in the detection, treatment, patient education and ongoing review in relation to chronic eye disease. Health promotion strategies to increase public awareness about the importance of comprehensive eye examinations to screen for and treat asymptomatic age-related eye disease are essential.

Indigenous Australians

There is a significant disparity between the eye health of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Over 30% of indigenous adults have never had a comprehensive eye examination and vision impairment is six times more prevalent within indigenous compared to non-indigenous communities.⁶ Australia is the only developed nation in the world yet to eradicate trachoma,⁷ an infectious eye condition, and a leading cause of blindness in some remote indigenous communities.

Increased public awareness of the importance of early detection and intervention is critical in preventing vision impairment and reducing the social and economic impact of vision loss. Culturally appropriate methods should be developed to promote eye health within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in consultation with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.

c) Economic and social benefits of strategies to improve health and wellbeing

In 2009, the total economic burden of vision disorders in Australia was estimated to be almost \$17 billion per annum.² Direct and indirect costs associated with age-related eye disease include hospitalisation, surgical and medical costs, earlier entry into aged care facilities, greater reliance on home and community care and social welfare systems, carer costs, reduced community participation (including employment); as well as individual costs such as mobility devices, transport, and reduced employment.

A substantial proportion of Australian school aged children (20%) also suffer from a range of ocular disorders including refractive errors (short sightedness, long sightedness, and astigmatism), and binocular vision or accommodation anomalies.⁸ Recent simulation studies have shown that relatively mild refractive errors can influence academic related-performance in children.⁹⁻¹¹ These low level focussing errors are typically only detected through a comprehensive eye examination. Consequently, the early detection and treatment of vision disorders in children has significant long-term social and economic implications for Queensland with regard to optimal child development, education and future employment. The importance of comprehensive eye examinations for children should be promoted to the public, parents and educators.

d) Emerging approaches and strategies that show significant potential

Few studies have rigorously evaluated the effectiveness of eye health promotion in Australia. In 2005, The Vision Initiative (Victoria) in partnership with Vision 2020 Australia, launched a public health programme to increase public awareness of eye care and reduce vision loss and blindness.¹² This involved a range of initiatives including television, radio, newspaper messages and numerous publications.

This campaign specifically targeted groups at risk of eye disease and vision loss such as those aged 50 years and over, those with diabetes, or a family history of glaucoma or age-related macular degeneration. Other health professionals and their organisations were also a focus, aiming to increase their involvement in promoting eye health messages and services. The key message promoted was: *"If you're experiencing vision changes, are over 50 or have a family*

history of eye disease, regular eye tests will help detect any problems early and allow the best treatment” with the call to action of: “Get tested. Visit your optometrist or ophthalmologist or speak to your doctor.” This campaign resulted in a significant improvement in the utilisation of eye care services; the percentage of elderly Victorians accessing eye care increased by 9% and diabetic eye examinations increased by almost 20%.

Significant advances in internet communication over the last decade (i.e. social media) may be a cost effective method to modify public behavior through eye health promotion and education.¹³ Such an approach may be advantageous in reaching populations in rural or more remote Queensland locations. While promotional campaigns appear to positively influence eye care utilisation, the effectiveness of health campaigns through social media, potentially in conjunction with traditional media, require further research to optimise implementation and achieve desired outcomes.

Key recommendation

Innovative and culturally appropriate strategies that promote increased public awareness of the importance of eye health from childhood to older age and enhance inter-professional collaborations between primary health care providers (GPs) and optometrists are essential to increase the number of people accessing comprehensive eye examinations by highly qualified eye care professionals.

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