



Rural and Remote Optometry

The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is the national voice of optometrists in Canada. Optometrists are primary eye care providers and represent the front line of vision health. Canadians' eye health and vision care are the prime responsibilities of optometrists.

Policy Issue

Optometrists practising in rural and remote settingsⁱ may face a number of specific challenges. These include a broad patient demographic and wide-ranging patient needs, professional isolation, limited referral options to other ODs and healthcare providers, and lack of access to nearby onsite continuing education. Other challenges may include a lack of locum support, difficulty locating qualified employees and associate ODs, and difficulty with succession planning.

According to Statistics Canada, Canada's urban/rural population is an 80/20 split.ⁱⁱ Canada's rural population is older than the urban population, and Canada's rural population is aging faster than their urban counterparts in terms of the change in the share of the population that is senior.ⁱⁱⁱ Since visual impairment is correlated with age, providing optometric care in rural and remote regions of Canada can also be challenging because of the likelihood of eye disease, visual impairment, and blindness among elderly patients. The continued presence of a sustainable rural and remote optometry workforce is therefore essential to maintain appropriate levels of accessible primary eye care in rural and remote regions of Canada.

Policy Position

The Canadian Association of Optometrists supports activities to help maintain a sustainable optometry workforce in rural and remote areas of Canada, and that respond to the issues and challenges associated with practising in these settings. Activities may include initiatives to improve working conditions and work-life balance, support from other eye health professionals, and access to professional development opportunities and locum support. Initiatives to encourage new ODs to practice in rural and remote areas (and optometry students to do so in the future) should also be considered.

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ⁱ **Definitions:**

URBAN: Access to optometric services within 20km of home and access to secondary/tertiary care within 40km of home

URBAN/ADJACENT: Access to optometric services within 50km of home and access to secondary/tertiary care within 150 km of home

RURAL: Access to optometric services within 150km of home and access to secondary/tertiary care 150km+ from home

RURAL/REMOTE: Access to optometric services within 300km of home and access to secondary/tertiary care 300km+ from home

REMOTE: No year-round road access; or no permanent optometric services within 300km on year-round roads (except through specialized programs such as mobile clinics, telemedicine, etc.) and secondary/tertiary care 300km+ from home

Note 1: Secondary tertiary care means eye health and vision care outside the optometrist's scope of practice in their jurisdiction. This care usually, but not always, requires a referral.

Note 2: All the definitions above are to be used as guidelines to frame discussion regarding access to care. The definitions are not meant to be exhaustive.

ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada. 2011. Population, urban and rural, by province and territory. Accessed online July 26, 2016 at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo62a-eng.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Statistics Canada. 2008. Seniors in Rural Canada. Accessed online July 26, 2016 at <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/21-006-x/21-006-x2007008-eng.pdf>