



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES OPTOMÉTRISTES

Canadian Association of Optometrists Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Better Vision for Seniors: A Public Health Imperative

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About CAO

The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is the national voice of optometry in Canada. Dedicated to collaboratively advancing the highest standard of primary eye care through the promotion of optimal vision and eye health, we represent more than 5,000 doctors of optometry (ODs) and 400 optometry students across the country.

Doctors of Optometry are independent primary health care specialists who provide nearly 90% of primary eye care in Canada.



Executive Summary

Better Vision for Seniors: A Public Health Imperative

Canada's rapidly aging population is contributing to an emerging vision crisis. According to the most recent population projections, the share of persons aged 65 years and older will account for 20 per cent of the Canadian population by 2024.ⁱ Age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and cataracts are the four major causes of vision loss in Canada today, and the occurrence of these diseases increases with age. Vision loss among seniors must be effectively addressed, both to support vulnerable seniors today and prepare for the growing seniors' population of tomorrow. Maintaining eye health, preventing avoidable vision loss, and managing age-related eye disease is a public health imperative and key to improving the overall quality of life and well-being of seniors, now and in the future.

Vision health is very important to Canadians,ⁱⁱ with vision loss being their most feared disability.ⁱⁱⁱ Vision loss is a significant health problem that affects an individual's health, social environment and economic well-being.

This is especially true for seniors for whom vision loss impedes healthy and independent aging. It doubles the difficulties of daily living, advances nursing home admissions by three years, doubles social dependence and the risks of falls, triples the risk of depression, quadruples the risk of hip fractures, and doubles the mortality rate.^{iv}

Vision loss has the highest health care costs of any disease category in Canada. The economic burden is already significant and will be staggering in the next decade. But despite this emerging crisis in chronic vision loss, eye health and vision care are largely absent from Canada's public health agenda.

Research shows the importance of comprehensive eye exams in the early detection of common vision problems and major eye diseases, many of which have no early warning signs, and for early signs of other major health conditions such as diabetes, thyroid disease, brain tumours, and high blood pressure.^v



As primary eye care providers, optometrists believe that eye health and vision care are essential to healthy aging and to facilitate the contributions seniors make to their families, communities, workplaces, and society. Preventive services are key to helping aging Canadians maintain healthy eyes and vision, and must include a yearly comprehensive eye exam for seniors and affordable access to corrective treatments, rehabilitation services and adaptive devices.

Our growing seniors' population present specific challenges. Vision loss has staggering economic costs. Canadians care deeply about their vision. Without action, the future is dim.

In response to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities examination on Advancing Inclusion and Quality of Life for Seniors, the Canadian Association of Optometrists has recommendations for how the Government can make eye health and vision care for seniors a public health priority.



Importance of Eye Health and Vision Care to Healthy Aging

There is an emerging vision crisis in Canada as our aging population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. In 2014–2015, the growth rate of the population aged 65 years and older was approximately four times the growth rate of the total population.^{vi} For the first time, the number of Canadians 65 and older exceeded the number aged 0–14.^{vii} The number of Canadians 65 and older is expected to double in the next 25 years to 9.2 million,^{viii} and the social and financial pressure this demographic shift places on health care makes better vision for seniors a public health imperative.

Prevalence of vision loss in seniors

As people age the normal function of the eye tissue deteriorates, leading to vision loss and eye disease.^{ix} More than 5.5 million Canadians have one of the four major eye diseases and are at serious risk of losing their vision.^x After age 40, the number of cases of vision loss doubles every decade. At age 75 it triples.^{xi} Over 800,000 Canadians are currently living with vision loss,^{xii} and the number affected will top one million in the next five years and continue escalating.^{xiii} By age 65, 1 in 9 Canadians develop irreversible vision loss, and by age 75 this increases to 1 in 4.^{xiv} As the population ages, the number of Canadians with vision loss will increase dramatically,^{xv,xvi} and Canada must address this growing crisis in vision health.

Age-related eye disease

The four most common eye diseases and leading causes of age-related vision loss in Canada are cataracts (opacity in the lens), glaucoma (optic nerve damage due in part to elevated intraocular pressure), macular degeneration (changes to central vision), and diabetic retinopathy (diabetes-related changes in the eye).^{xvii}

Since the majority of these eye problems are asymptomatic or ‘silent,’^{xviii} the best chance for early detection and treatment is through regular, comprehensive eye exams. If left untreated, most people with these diseases are at risk of blindness or significant vision loss.^{xix}

As the leading cause of blindness in Canada, diabetic retinopathy (DR) is largely preventable with early diagnosis and treatment.^{xx} Comprehensive eye examinations at



regular intervals can uncover DR at its earliest stages; the earlier treatment is received, the more likely it is to be effective."^{xxi,xxii}

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is an incurable eye disease and another leading cause of blindness in seniors. More Canadians have AMD than have breast cancer, prostate cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and Parkinson's disease combined.^{xxiii}

Vision impairment caused by AMD has been shown to interfere with a person's ability to care for themselves and others indicating the need for community and vision-related support. Vision loss from AMD has also been shown to be associated with depression.^{xxiv}

Impact of vision loss on seniors

Vision loss has a significant impact on the overall health status and quality of life of seniors. Hundreds of thousands of Canadian seniors are currently living with vision impairment and vision loss, and the risks to their personal well-being and quality of life are immense. Vision loss reduces quality of life, limits social interaction, imposes greater burdens on caregivers, including family, and increases other health risks. The picture this paints for Canada's aging population is quite alarming.

We know that vision loss is common among elderly Canadians and is associated with increased odds of institutionalization, frequent falls, difficulty with everyday activities, and poor health.^{xxv} Older people who suffer from vision loss are more likely to struggle with mobility, pain and discomfort and anxiety. Vision loss not only severely impairs one's ability to be independent and self-sufficient, but also has a snowball effect on the health and wellbeing of older people, families, caregivers, and society at large – the cumulative effect of which is considered to be severely underestimated.^{xxvi}

Seniors with vision loss face *twice the risk of falls, four times the risk of hip fractures and broken bones, three times the risk of depression, an increased risk of motor vehicle accidents, and more medication errors.*^{xxvii} They are admitted to nursing homes on average three years before those without vision loss, resulting in increased personal expense and a loss of independence. The majority of working seniors who lose eye sight also lose employment.^{xxviii}



For the thousands of Canadian seniors who experience falls as a result of vision loss,^{xxx} there is a wide-ranging physical and psychological impact on their quality of life, from issues of depression and chronic pain to a loss of independence or the ability to live at home, and financial hardship. Falls account for approximately half of all accident-related death in seniors,^{xxx} and contribute to 40% of nursing home admissions.^{xxx}

Vision loss also has a significant impact on *mental health and wellness*.^{xxxii} Loss of sight can be an isolating experience linked with depression and subsequent disabilities. For seniors in particular, the impact of vision loss and depression can be devastating.^{xxxiii} Seniors with vision loss are more restricted in their activities, have less social interaction, feel lonelier and are at risk of developing depressive symptoms.^{xxxiv,xxxv} They are three times more likely to experience clinical depression.^{xxxvi} Seniors with vision loss who are also depressed have significantly lower quality of life,^{xxxvii, xxxviii} and depression is positively associated with four times more risk of disability.^{xxxix} Early intervention to reduce vision loss can significantly improve mental health outcomes and quality of life for seniors.

Cost of vision loss

The cost of vision loss is staggering. It has the highest direct health care costs of any other disease in Canada – more than diabetes, cancer, mental disorders, respiratory diseases, arthritis, or cardiovascular disease.^{xl} With vision loss comes an increase in hospitalization and length of stay. Patients with visual loss tend to stay in hospital two-and-a-half times longer, and their hospital costs are higher due to comorbidities such as depression or fractured bones as a result of falls, or in many cases both.

The costs of vision loss will rise significantly in the coming years, in parallel with increases in the prevalence of eye disease among Canada's aging population. By 2032, it is estimated the total cost of vision loss in Canada could be as much as \$30 billion.^{xli} This includes direct costs to the healthcare system, as well as forgone taxation, welfare payments, visual aids, and more. Vision loss represents a large proportion of the economic burden of illness in Canada.



Primary eye care

Timely access to primary eye care, including a comprehensive eye exam, is important not only for seniors' eye health, but also for identifying other chronic conditions as we age. The eyes are the only part of the human body that provide a non-invasive view of blood vessels and nerve tissue, providing valuable information about an individual's overall health. Changes in the eye often precede or occur concurrently with various systemic conditions and can represent important prognostic indications of disease progression.

A comprehensive eye examination presents a unique opportunity to detect and monitor the impact chronic diseases and conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol have on the body and the eyes. It is an important component in the evaluation of an individual's overall health status, and is a cost-effective strategy for maintaining eye health and supporting healthy aging and independent living for older Canadians who are especially vulnerable to poor health and age-related disease.

Primary eye care services can make a real difference in the life of seniors. A fall prevention program in Manitoba saw decreases in minor and major injuries and an overall decrease in falls after clients were provided with vision screening and on-site optometry services.^{xlii}

Government needs to make primary eye care a public health priority so that seniors benefit from early diagnosis, appropriate treatments, and advances in research that help preserve or restore vision and manage or slow the progression of disease, allowing individuals to remain fully engaged and independent as they get older.



Better Vision for Seniors: A Public Health Imperative Recommendations

Canada needs a comprehensive eye health and vision care strategy that maximizes the health, independence, and economic participation of all its citizens – and most especially the growing number of seniors at greater risk of vision loss and blindness.

When Canada signed the World Health Organization’s VISION 2020 in 2003, we agreed to eliminate the main causes of all preventable and treatable blindness as a public health issue by the year 2020. The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) believes that eye health must be treated as a core component of overall health, supported by eye health promotion and disease prevention programs.

In order to appropriately respond to aging Canadians’ eye health and vision needs, Doctors of Optometry encourage collective, immediate leadership from government that will result in a future where every Canadian has the opportunity to fully participate in life, regardless of age.

Recommendation: A pan-Canadian Framework and Vision Desk

A pan-Canadian Framework for Action, coordinated by a Vision Desk at Health Canada or the Public Health Agency of Canada, will help address the underlying issues associated with eye disease and vision loss prevention in Canada. The Framework would approach eye health as a population health priority (encouraging integration into seniors’ preventive health care routine), and establish parameters to reduce the risk of eye disease, increase early detection, improve access to quality eye health care services and leverage a strong evidence base.

Recommendation: Public education

Enhancing public awareness about eye health is the first line of defense in reducing the risk of chronic eye disease, avoidable vision loss, and blindness among seniors. Canadians can take a more active role in their eye health and vision safety by better understanding that a comprehensive eye exam looks at the overall health of the eyes and visual system, as well as help identify underlying health conditions that show symptoms in the eyes.



The time has come to help Canadians seize control of their eye health and vision care by undertaking a wide-scale public information campaign based on population health strategies that influence individual behaviors. Eye health, vision care, and post-vision loss rehabilitation therapy should be a core component of overall health care, and the public should be encouraged to think about their eyes.

Recommendation: Research funding across the eye health continuum

There is currently no dedicated funding for vision health research at the national level, which means no overarching body to set priorities or coordinate vision research and translate scientific knowledge into health services that could benefit seniors with eye disease.

Funding needs to be provided for research on healthy aging and eye disease in seniors, including new treatments and preventive measures. Rehabilitation services also need to be addressed. The Canadian Association of Optometrists, along with other eye health, vision research and rehabilitation professionals wish to help shape the vision research agenda moving forward.

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^v All About Vision. 2016. Why are Eye Exams Important? Accessed April 19, 2017 at: <http://www.allaboutvision.com/eye-exam/importance.htm>

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^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} Ibid

^{xiv} The National Coalition for Vision Health. 2011. Vision Loss in Canada. http://www.cos-sco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/VisionLossinCanada_e.pdf

^{xv} CNIB. Fast Facts about Vision Loss. <http://www.cnib.ca/en/about/media/vision-loss/Pages/default.aspx>

^{xvi} Ibid

^{xvii} Ibid.

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