

Comprehensive Eye Care

If a GP has a patient in need of comprehensive eye health care – who are they going to call?

This may not be an issue causing great debate within the GP community but it does merit some consideration when we consider the facts.

Visual impairment is a national and global health concern that has a negative impact on physical and mental health. Visually impaired individuals are at particularly high risk for chronic health conditions, accidents, social withdrawal, depression, and mortality. The number of people with visual impairment and blindness is increasing due to an overall aging population.

(American Academy of Ophthalmology <https://www.aao.org/eye-disease-statistics>)

While people can live an active life well into their 'golden years' without ever experiencing severe vision loss, as one ages there is higher risk of developing age-related eye diseases and conditions. These include: age-related macular degeneration, cataract, diabetic eye disease, glaucoma, low vision and dry eye. For this reason the US National Institutes of Health, Eye Institute recommends that everyone age 50 or older should visit an eye care professional for a comprehensive dilated eye exam.

Many eye diseases have no early warning signs or symptoms, but a dilated exam can detect eye diseases in their early stages before vision loss occurs. Early detection and treatment can help save sight, even if a person is not experiencing any vision problems. An eye care professional (ophthalmologist or optometrist) can advise on how often you need to have further eye exams depending on each person's specific risk factors.

(NIH, National Eye Institute https://nei.nih.gov/healthyeyes/aging_eye)

The WHO defines comprehensive eye care as the

provision of a continuum of health promotion, prevention, treatment and rehabilitation services that address the full spectrum of eye conditions to meet the patient's needs throughout their life course, while ensuring an integrated service delivery approach within and beyond the health sector. The comprehensive eye care team, comprised of ophthalmologists, optometrists and allied ophthalmic personnel, is essential to delivering comprehensive eye care. (Resnikoff S, et al. Br J Ophthalmol 2019;0:1–5. doi:10.1136/bjophthalmol-2019-314336)

Recently, the New Zealand Ministry of Health workforce and service demand modelling showed New Zealand's need for health services is projected to increase at a higher rate than the projected growth of the specialist workforce during the next 10 years. The modelling is conservative as it does not take into account current unmet health need. This means the current estimated workforce shortage of approximately 1000 specialists is projected to continue and indications are that for most specialties the gap between the specialist workforce capacity and health service need will widen by 2028. This 'service gap' may include longer waiting times for specialist assessments, longer waits for treatment, higher thresholds for accessing services.

Some specialties will be affected more than others. In two case studies using data on workforce and service use data produced by the Ministry of Health, the workload per orthopaedic surgeon will need to increase by 6% by 2028 to match current service levels. This does not take account of the already significant unmet need today. Workloads per ophthalmologist will need to increase by 20%, which again is likely to see a worsening of current levels of unmet need.

(Forecasting New Zealand's future medical specialist workforce needs, ASMS research update, Issue 15 | 2019, ISSN 2624-0335)

Members of the New Zealand Association of Optometrists are committed to supporting GPs by providing comprehensive eye health services to local communities throughout New Zealand. As authorised prescribers optometrists are able to diagnose and treat eye-disease. During COVID-19 optometrists were designated as essential health workers. They worked in communities around New Zealand providing acute and urgent eye care.

One of the important learnings of the past few pandemic months has been the value of collaborative care between community providers of necessary health care. Working together as a team has never been more important for health providers and our communities. We saw how networks of providers can work when co-location health services is not an option and different ways of working have to be found.

Another remarkable thing about the pandemic is how much the health system relied on and needed primary and community care. DHBs were not able to maintain their full complement of hospital services and regional organisation was not always consistent across the country. Despite this networks among clinicians were activated to ensure patients obtained all the help needed inside or outside of the hospitals. Optometry was no exception and in many regions community optometrists were able to assist with ophthalmology, paediatrics, general practice, and provide services directly to people needing acute care in their own practices. In one example a doctor turned to optometry for an urgent dilated eye exam of a sick child in order to rule out papilloedema.

Optometry has an important role in eye health care in New Zealand because they are the only health practitioners providing a full scope primary eye health service in the community. Under the HPCA Act 2003, the optometrist scope of practice has expanded and includes full diagnostic capability of eye disease, prescribing rights for eye preparations listed on the PHARMAC Schedule, glaucoma endorsement, and the ability to issue standing orders.

Optometry is much more than just glasses and there is ample scope for optometry to support general practice in the area of eye health. An optometrist assessment can provide a report with all the information needed for a patient to receive an appropriate level of prioritisation should they require a referral to a DHB eye department for publicly funded services. General practitioners might consider referring to an optometrist for investigation and treatment of an eye condition. For some people you may feel the cost of an eye examination could be a barrier and in this situation it is useful to consider the options offered by Enable for children and MSD for beneficiaries.

You can find an optometrist near you by using the search function on the NZAO website: www.nzao.co.nz 'find and optometrist'. Making contact and finding an optometrist that you feel comfortable in working with could be a good investment of time.