

**ABC Radio 612 interview by presenter Madonna King with Optometrists Association Australia Qld/NT Div Vice-President Mr Adam Lusk and ophthalmologist Dr Glen Gole on the subject of children and spectacles. Monday, 27 March 2006.**

**MADONNA KING:** Now, to quite an alarming piece of research, which would concern any parent or grandparent who has a child or a grandchild wearing glasses: a third of primary school children who wear them may not have real vision problems. The research was done by senior eye specialists at Westmead Hospital, in Sydney, and involved almost 1800 six year-olds.

Dr Glen Gole is an ophthalmologist, or eye doctor, at Wesley Hospital, and joins me.

Doctor, well before we look at what it says, can you give me some idea of the calibre of the research? Has it been peer reviewed?

**DR GLEN GOLE:** Yes, the research has been. Morning. Madonna, yes, the research has been peer reviewed.

Professor Mitchell's credentials are impeccable; he's published in the best international journals.

**KING:** So someone-- I'm a parent, lots of people listening are parents or grandparents: you would have to be scared that 34% of those who wear glasses might not need them. Why would they be prescribed?

**DR GOLE:** I'm not sure. The study didn't address that.

**KING:** So--

**DR GOLE:** All it said was that a third of the children wearing glasses were not wearing them for a visual need.

**KING:** So what would be other reasons you would wear glasses, surely not for aesthetic?

**DR GOLE:** Possibly for aesthetic. A lot of these children had learning difficulties, some had headaches; but there's no good medical, established reasons why children with learning difficulties need spectacles.

**KING:** Could wearing glasses you don't need damage your eyesight?

**DR GOLE:** If they wear glasses, I don't think they're going to damage their eyesight.

**KING:** Dr Gole, does this suggest over-servicing, in terms of prescriptions for glasses, by optometrists?

**DR GOLE:** That's a difficult question to answer.

**KING:** Is that because you don't want to answer it? [Laughs]

**DR GOLE:** Possibly.

**KING:** So let me come back-- Does your--

**DR GOLE:** I think there's a different culture in optometry as to a prescription to wear glasses; and they believe they do help children with headaches, they believe they do help children with some learning disabilities, but I don't think there's any good research evidence that supports that.

**KING:** OK. And you're an ophthalmologist, ...

**DR GOLE:** Yes.

**KING:** ... and we're talking about optometrists: can you just explain to me the difference in training for those two?

**DR GOLE:** An ophthalmologist does six years of medical school, several years of hospital practice, and five years of specialist training in hospital, which involves about 10,000 hours of clinical practice.

**KING:** And an optometrist?

**DR GOLE:** Does a four-year Science Degree.

**KING:** Right. So, based on that, ophthalmologists are the most experienced. If my child needs glasses, do I take them to an ophthalmologist or an optometrist?

**DR GOLE:** I think children with simple glasses could probably go to an optometrist. I mean the simple facts of the matter are that most children who need glasses complain they can't see the blackboard and things like that; and those, they're short-sighted children who can't see who need glasses, most of them, and the vast percentage of those can probably be dealt with by an optometrist.

The younger the child gets, the more we get into serious eye disorders and whatever, so the younger the child, the more likely it is that they probably should go and see an ophthalmologist.

**KING:** OK. Do optometrists have a monopoly on prescribing glasses?

**DR GOLE:** Not prescribing. They have a monopoly on the dispensing of glasses.

**KING:** This study--

**DR GOLE:** Oh no, sorry. They have a monopoly on the provision of glasses.

**KING:** Should that be widened, in your view?

**DR GOLE:** That's getting into an area that I wouldn't care to comment on.

**KING:** Because you don't want to?

**DR GOLE:** Possibly.

**KING:** Because it'd create a fight with optometrists?

**DR GOLE:** No, I think-- Look, I think there are optical dispensers who do provide glasses, but they do it on the directions of an optometrist, basically.

**KING:** OK. So this--

**DR GOLE:** They can't-- They're not an independently practising profession.

**KING:** This piece of research, done by experts at Westmead Hospital, did, I think, 1900 six year-olds,  
...

**DR GOLE:** No, actually it is 1738.

**KING:** ... and 34% of them were found not to have real vision problems.

**DR GOLE:** Well, the 77 children who were wearing glasses, 34% of them were found not to have a visual reason for having glasses - in other words the glasses were very weak and not at a level that would correct any vision defects.

**KING:** And who prescribed those?

**DR GOLE:** They were all prescribed by optometrists.

**KING:** So anyone listening who has a six year-old who they think might need glasses - a parent or a grandparent - what is your advice?

**DR GOLE:** If a child needs glasses?

**KING:** You think they do.

**DR GOLE:** If they-- Well, they can be-- They need to be checked by somebody, an eye professional. If the glasses that are tried on improve the vision, then clearly the glasses are indicated.

**KING:** But to be a bit wary?

**DR GOLE:** I'd be sceptical of giving weak glasses.

**KING:** OK. I thank you for your--

**DR GOLE:** There's a little issue here. It's a lot of the weak glasses given for so-called focusing defects in children, ...

**KING:** Yes.

**DR GOLE:** ... there's very little evidence that that's a very common problem.

**KING:** Dr Glen Gole, thanks for your time this morning.

**DR GOLE:** My pleasure.

**KING:** That's Dr Glen Gole, an ophthalmologist at Wesley Hospital.

Adam Lusk is the Vice-President of the Optometrists Association.

Adam Lusk, why would 34% of children not needing glasses be prescribed them?

**ADAM LUSK:** Good morning, Madonna. Well, the conclusion that's drawn from this study is, I think, quite a misleading one, based on fairly flawed research and fairly overly simplistic criteria set by the writers of the paper.

**KING:** But we were just told it had been peer assessed, produced overseas, that they were extremely high-calibre researchers.

**LUSK:** OK.

**KING:** That's something you disagree with?

**LUSK:** Well, basically, the criteria that they took, a child having a vision problem, was based solely on distance vision, ...

**KING:** Yes.

**LUSK:** ... so how well they see on a chart at six metres away, and also refractive error; it doesn't take into account the vast majority of reasons that spectacles can be prescribed for children, including, like, near vision function, reading up close, how the eyes coordinate, and how they-- the ability of the eyes to quickly and accurately aim at the same point in space and focus on that point.

**KING:** Is there a particular vision weakness at which glasses are needed?

**LUSK:** Well, it depends. Well, there's a lot of differing philosophies I suppose, but it's that there is no - as Dr Gole himself sort of mentioned, I guess - there's no strict medical criteria that glasses are needed. A significant percentage of these children in the study who apparently didn't need glasses actually had relief of the symptoms from the glasses.

**KING:** I gather, after talking to Dr Glen Gole there, there's some argument between optometrists and ophthalmologists over the over the treatment of vision impaired, or possibly vision impaired.

**LUSK:** Optometrists and ophthalmologists - and we have fine optometrists and ophthalmologists in Queensland and Australia - I think, on a patient level, have a very good working relationship. And, I mean, I don't think this is a forum to sling mud over the fence at each other, but certainly there's differing opinions.

You cannot argue with the fact, though, that in this study that of these children who supposedly didn't need glasses had relief of their symptoms. And probably a more important finding from the study, and others, is that there's a significant percentage of children who were found that had a vision problem and didn't have spectacle correction. I think that's probably the most important conclusion to draw from this research.

**KING:** Dr Glen Gole said that parents or grandparents listening should be a bit sceptical. What would you advise parents listening, you know, to that research?

**LUSK:** When you see your optometrist or your eye care professional, if you have any concerns about this sort of research or anything else that's raised in the media, take the time to talk to your optometrist about it. I mean, we're in a good position to not only prescribe glasses and check eye health but give good advice and counsel. That's probably one of our main, you know, roles in eye care.

**KING:** Adam Lusk, thanks for your time this morning.

**LUSK:** No trouble.

**KING:** That's Adam Lusk, the Vice-President of the Optometrists Association.

The research was done by the Westmead Hospital in Sydney.

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