



OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA
QUEENSLAND & NORTHERN TERRITORY

QUEENSLAND STATE ELECTION 2004

In the lead up to the 7 February Queensland State Election, President Nancy Atkinson wrote to the Health Minister, Shadow Minister, leaders of One Nation, Greens and Democrats plus all sitting independents, enclosing a document titled "A Better Deal for Optometry Patients."

She stated, "our profession is one of the most accessible of all health professions in the State. No matter where you are you can be confident that there is a qualified optometrist not too far away. Some important aspects about our profession are:

- Optometrists do not have waiting lists – a patient in an emergency situation can see an optometrist without delay, often after hours.
- Optometrists are highly trained and high achievers. To undertake QUT's BAppSc(Optom), four-year degree, a student will need an OP1. With the introduction of access to therapeutic agents by optometrists, the degree will be extended to five years.
- Optometrists are required to accumulate 40 CPD points (approximately 20 hours) in continuing education each year and failure to do so attracts penalties.
- Optometrists diagnose all eye conditions and diseases and prescribe remedies. Soon they will use and prescribe a range of ocular drugs for the treatment of those conditions and diseases. Optometrists refer patients to general practitioners and ophthalmologists and also receive referrals from those practitioners.
- Optometrists undertake voluntary aid work in indigenous communities throughout Queensland and in neighbouring countries including East Timor.

"In the lead up to this year's election I ask that you kindly review the issues I have raised."

She then went on to detail five key issues of concern to the State's 650 optometrists and estimated 1.7million patients. They are:

1. QUEENSLAND VISION INITIATIVE

80 % of the world's blindness is preventable or avoidable and in Australia:

- over half of vision loss is correctable
- one in four people will lose their sight as a result of macular degeneration
- everyone will develop cataract if they live long enough
- one in ten people will develop glaucoma

80% of the vision impairment in Australia is caused by five conditions:

- cataracts
- glaucoma
- diabetic retinopathy
- age-related macular degeneration
- uncorrected refractive error (the need for corrective spectacles)

Optometrists Association Australia Qld/NT Division has joined with twenty like-minded organisations including the Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists, Australian Medical Association Queensland, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Pharmacy Guild of Australia, QUT School of Optometry and Royal Blind Foundation to research and implement the "Queensland Vision Initiative."

The goal of the Initiative is to make all Queenslanders aware of the need to have regular eye examinations and to employ good eye care habits. This will be done through an ongoing community awareness campaign and a range of information materials. The long-term savings to the health budget are substantial.

Already, several of the organisations have pledged over \$15,000 in cash and \$40,000 in-kind to engage a project officer to take the Initiative to its next stage. Ultimately, the Queensland Government will be asked to provide funding to facilitate media and press coverage for the campaign. It might be the case that the Health Promotion Fund is the most appropriate vehicle for funding. Fortunately, the production costs for commercials have already been covered.

Do you support the Queensland Vision Initiative?

2. SPECTACLE SUPPLY SCHEME

The Queensland Government operates the "Spectacle Supply Scheme" for citizens who hold a Pensioner Concession Card, Health Care Card, Low Income Health Care Card or Queensland Seniors Card. Eligible cardholders, or clients, are afforded free spectacles.

Any of the State's 650 optometrists may examine a "client" and prescribe spectacles but only those optometrists registered under the scheme as dispensing agents may assist with frame selection, dispensing and fitting.

The number of dispensing optometrists has declined over recent years due to the poor compensation they receive for their service. That compensation has risen from \$3, to \$7.50 and currently it is \$10. This Association commissioned a study that revealed the appropriate level of cost recovery to be \$50.

Do you support the Spectacle Supply Scheme and will you work with the Association to introduce a fairer level of payment for participating optometrists so that many more may become registered as dispensing agents?

3. THERAPEUTIC ACCESS FOR OPTOMETRISTS

On 25 April 2003, Health Minister The Hon Wendy Edmond MP, announced she had agreed to endorse the extension of clinical practice into ocular therapeutics, for appropriately trained optometrists. She advised that she was prepared to recommend to Government that the relevant legislative and regulatory changes be made to support this alteration in practice. She added that, while approval was subject to agreed clinical pathways, she had determined that the changes would be based on the list of drugs currently available for prescribing in Victoria.

That was a welcome announcement for Queenslanders as it foreshadowed a reduction in waiting times to see ophthalmologists, by giving optometrists access to proven, topical (eye drops) therapeutic agents for the treatment of conditions. Queensland had finally caught up with other Australian States and a large part of the Western World.

The Minister formed a "Ministerial Advisory Committee, comprising the Chief Health Officer, optometrists, an ophthalmologist, general practitioner, pharmacist, academic and officers of Queensland Health. Negotiations have been cordial, however, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and Pharmaceutical Society of Australia have conducted a covert campaign aimed at slowing down the introduction of therapeutics for optometrists.

Our profession contends that Queensland patients are entitled to the same standards of care as are available to their southern counterparts and that Queensland optometrists are the equal of practitioners in other therapeutically-qualified Australian States.

Will you support Queensland optometrists in their quest for practice equality with optometrists in other States and are you committed to the reduction of waiting times to see ophthalmologists in Queensland by allowing optometrists the right to use and prescribe therapeutic agents in practice?

4. VISION TESTING FOR DRIVERS

National uniform law requires drivers to advise their own Driver Licensing Authority (Queensland Transport)

of any permanent or long-term injury or illness that affects their safe driving ability. The law can impose penalties for failure to report. In the case of good vision, this process replaces the former practice whereby Queensland Transport conducted basic vision screenings before a licence was issued.

If a patient indicates in a licence application that he/she has a vision disorder that affects safe driving ability, then he/she is required to have an optometrist, or other eye care professional, complete a medical certificate. That certificate should be returned to Queensland Transport for assessment. If an optometrist, or other eye care professional, is aware that a patient is continuing to drive and is likely to endanger the public, then he/she is required to take other measures including notifying Queensland Transport.

It is quite simply the case that drivers do not advise Queensland Transport of vision disorders and it is also the case that others are not even aware that they have a vision disorder.

This Association contends that the safest way to deal with this problem is to make eye tests by optometrists and other eye care professionals compulsory before a licence is issued. Do you support this concept?

5. VISION TESTING FOR SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

Education Queensland embraces a restrictive policy that prevents schools from advising parents and caregivers to consult an optometrist if it is considered that a child may have a vision disorder. Instead, parents and caregivers are advised to consult the School Health Service or a general practitioner.

Optometrists are universally acknowledged as the primary providers of these services and receive referrals from general practitioners on a regular basis. Optometrists are better trained to provide these services and have the technology to best determine if a vision disorder exists.

Last year this Association conducted a national children's vision campaign, which resulted in over 600 schools asking for an optometrist to speak to teachers, parents and children about good vision and eye care. This response confirmed that current referral systems are not working.

Do you support the right of optometrists to be included in Education Queensland guidelines for referral along with the School Health Service and general practitioner, and will you make representations to the Education Minister for changes to those guidelines?

The Division will be seeking urgent meetings with the new Minister, Shadow Minister, minor parties and independents as soon as the election results are settled.

End.

Authorised 1 February 2004,
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