



## Canadian Association of Optometrists Pre-Budget Submission August 2016

Contributing to Economic Growth in Canada  
The impact of vision care on Canada's economy  
Priorities for the Federal 2017 Budget

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## About CAO

The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is the national voice of optometry in Canada. We represent more than 4,600 doctors of optometry (ODs) and 400 optometry students across the country. We are dedicated to collaboratively advancing the highest standard of primary eye care through the promotion of optimal vision and eye health in partnership with all Canadians.

Doctors of optometry are independent primary healthcare providers that represent the front line of vision health. ODs provide nearly 90 percent of primary eye care in Canada. Their prime responsibility is to maintain eye health and good vision of the public. Optometrists carry out comprehensive eye exams, and they diagnose, treat, and manage eye care for patients with numerous chronic conditions including low vision, glaucoma, diabetes, cataracts and macular degeneration.

Optometrists deliver patient-centered, cost effective, collaborative care.



## **Executive Summary**

Our submission presents two priority recommendations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance. These recommendations not only address standards of quality eye health and vision care for all Canadians; they acknowledge the enormous economic costs of vision disorders. The CNIB's annual estimated cost of vision loss (CVL) in Canada is \$19.1 billion, including direct health costs of \$11 billion and indirect costs of \$8.1 billion.<sup>1</sup> Vision loss costs Canada's economy more than diabetes, cancer and musculoskeletal diseases combined.<sup>2</sup>

Healthy Canadians are healthy employees. Good eye health is a component of good overall health, yet many Canadians do not make this natural link. In order to contribute to continued economic growth, individual Canadians as well as employers, governments, industry, and other stakeholders need to be aware of how to best promote and preserve eye health.

We recognize that if a growing economy is to properly flourish, economic burdens must also be acknowledged and addressed. Optometrists are acutely aware of the costs associated with the increases in the prevalence of eye disease among Canada's aging population. In the next decade, the number of Canadians with vision loss is set to increase by almost 30 percent. If this happens, the economic cost of vision loss in Canada could rise to as much as \$24.6 billion by 2024.<sup>3</sup>

Optometrists also recognize that vision health is key to a better future for Canada's children. Undetected and untreated vision problems can interfere with a child's ability to learn and achieve success in adult life. In fact, the incidence of vision problems is much higher in children at risk including indigenous children. We need to ensure that we have the right policies and programs in place to address optimal eye health for all Canadians, young and old.

Canada's doctors of optometry (ODs) are seeking to improve and optimize delivery of eye health and vision care services for all Canadians. In order for Canadians to obtain the quality eye care they deserve, vision health must be an investment as well as a priority in fiscal discussions. A viable workforce supported by thorough access to primary care has the tools to fully contribute to and improve Canada's economy.

### **Recommendation #1**

That the government establish a federally-funded public awareness campaign about the importance of eye health and vision care.

### **Recommendation #2**

That the government commit to a National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Vision Loss, so that all Canadians can benefit from the elimination of vision impairment caused by preventable conditions and modifiable risk factors.



## 1. What federal measures would help Canadians maximize their contribution to the country's economic growth?

A national focus on eye health and vision care is imperative for individuals to achieve their full potential and contribute to the nation's economy. Beginning with early learning and child development and extending to active employment, vision contributes to Canada's ability to engage in education and participate a fruitful labour market.

### **The Impact of Vision Loss on Employment:**

Despite the fact that people with vision loss have a comparable education to the general population, they are much less likely to be employed. In fact, despite the emergence of government policies to create equity for people with disabilities, those with vision loss are more likely to be unemployed than people with other disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Employee health and well-being is directly linked to improvements in future workplace retention, productivity and healthcare costs. There is a significant connection between improvements in a workforce's well-being over time and in better employee health and performance outcomes—which should accrue to a company's bottom line.<sup>5</sup>

What's more, only a third of Canadians with vision loss are employed, half of which are low-income (make under \$20, 000 a year).<sup>6</sup> Canada's low-income and indigenous populations cannot access treatment with mounting costs and poor accessibility of vision care. To encourage prevention and preserve their right to proper vision care, we have an obligation to make sure Canadians are educated about their vision health and making the correct choices to promote long term vision health. With the exception of age, risk factors for eye disease such as smoking and diabetes resulting from obesity and poor diet can be easily mitigated through properly educating Canadians about their eye health.

Lack of proper education about good vision care choices are related to low income and socioeconomic status. Social and financial hardship are exacerbated without the knowledge or tools for Canadians to access and afford proper eye care. Given that seven in ten Canadians who need corrective eyewear or contact lenses say they cannot function in their everyday lives without corrective eyewear, the implications for Canadian populations in need (aging, indigenous, and low income) raise serious concerns.

It is for these reasons that early intervention, such as comprehensive eye exams, are a key component to the quality of participation, work performance and workplace functioning capacity. These factors are further limited by visual impairment, which is entirely preventable in 75 % of cases.<sup>7</sup>



## **The Impact of Vision Loss on Children, Education and Long-term Economic Growth:**

Vision disorders are a common pediatric health problem in Canada with an estimated 25 percent of school-age children having vision problems. Vision is considered the most important sense for learning and it is estimated that 80% of what children learn in primary grades is gained through visual input.<sup>8</sup> In fact, vision affects every aspect of a child's development: gross and fine motor skills (large and small muscle movements), language skills, imitation (copying) and repetition (repeating), as well as interpersonal and social skills.

A federally-funded public awareness campaign aimed at parents would address and educate on the benefits of early eye evaluations, proper preventative measures to ensure eye health, and identify the role of eye health professionals thus ensuring that Canadians make better decisions regarding their vision.

## **The Financial Impact of Seniors on the Economy**

Canada's aging population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. After age 40, the number of cases of vision loss doubles every decade, and triples at age 75. One quarter of Canadians over 75 have developed irreversible vision loss. We know that vision loss has a devastating impact on independent aging: doubling the difficulties of daily living and social dependence, tripling the risk of depression, and quadrupling the risk of hip fractures. On average, admission to nursing homes for seniors with vision loss happens three years earlier. Vision loss also doubles the risk of falls and the mortality rate in seniors.

In order to appropriately respond to aging Canadians' vision health needs, optometrists encourage strong, committed leadership from government and involved stakeholders through a National Framework for Action.



## 2. What federal actions that would assist Canada's businesses to contribute to economic growth

A healthy workforce contributes to a growing economy. Astonishingly, the annual indirect costs of vision loss are close to \$8 billion<sup>9</sup>, which is the overall single largest cost is associated with **lost productivity** at 48%, or lost earnings for Canadians with vision loss estimated at \$3.9 billion annually.<sup>10</sup>

Eye health and safety in the workplace is critical, and contributes to productivity and growth. Every day, 700 Canadian workers suffer eye injuries.<sup>11</sup> That number is astonishing when you consider that most of these accidents are preventable. While employers have the responsibility to provide necessary eye safety equipment, and to train employees to do their jobs safely, additional supports and information are clearly required. The Canadian workforce, and employers, need to better understand hazards and to have safety messages reinforced through multiple channels.

Employees and employers together would benefit from a public awareness campaign focusing on workplace eye health and vision safety as well as a firm commitment from government to a National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Vision Loss so that all Canadians could benefit from the elimination of vision impairment due to preventable conditions and modifiable risk factors while at the workplace.

## 3. What federal measures that would ensure urban, rural and remote communities enable residents to make their desired contribution to economic growth and expand, prosper and serve domestic and international customers in order to contribute to growth?

Canada is challenged in maintaining strong and healthy urban, rural and remote communities. Primary care, including eye care, is part of the necessary strategy. Doctors of optometry practice in most communities across the country, providing care to patients where they live and work.

Rural and remote communities are seeking smart growth strategies to strengthen their economies, provide better quality of life, and contribute fully to Canadian society. Awareness of vision health and access to optometric care in these communities is necessary to help achieve these goals. This is core to any fully functioning community, no matter the setting. Bringing chronic disease management through primary eye health care providers, allows access to treatment as well as education in order to self-manage chronic disease to remote and rural regions.



### **Recommendation #1**

**That the government establish a federally-funded public awareness campaign regarding the importance of eye health and vision care.**

Improving Canadians' knowledge about vision health is a sound investment in the well-being of our population and also our economy. Enhancing public awareness about eye health is the first line of defense in reducing the risk of chronic eye disease (e.g. glaucoma, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, low vision, and macular degeneration), avoidable vision loss, and blindness. 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 your eyes and visual system, and helps identify underlying health conditions that show symptoms in the eyes.

A modest investment of \$25 million over a five year period towards a public awareness campaign would help inform Canadians about the importance of vision health, and help save money in the future by addressing eye-related conditions before they become a burden on the public health care system.

### **Recommendation #2**

**That the government commit to a National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Vision Loss, so that all Canadians can benefit from the elimination of vision impairment due to preventable conditions and modifiable risk factors.**

With the emerging crisis in eye health and vision issues facing Canada's senior demographic, a coordinated blueprint is required. It is time for a nationally-coordinated action plan where governments, health professionals, non-government organizations, industry, and individuals work in partnership towards the promotion of eye health and the prevention of vision loss.

A National Framework for Action would address the underlying issues that are common to the promotion of eye health and prevention of eye disease and vision loss. This is fundamental to enabling Canadians to contribute more fully, in the manner of their choosing, to the country's economic growth. This Framework is also required for employee and business productivity needed to serve, expand, and prosper in domestic and international markets. Ultimately, reducing the risk of eye disease and injury, increasing early detection, improving access to quality eye health care services, and leveraging a strong evidence base would all be included in a National Framework for Action.

Let's create a future where every Canadian has the opportunity to fully participate in life, whether at school, at home, or in the workplace.



## References

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- <sup>9</sup> CNIB. 2012. The Cost of Vision Loss in Canada
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- <sup>11</sup> CNIB. Eye Safety at Work. Accessed July 22, 2016 from <http://www.cnib.ca/en/your-eyes/safety/at-work/Pages/default.aspx>



