



Canadian Ophthalmological Society Submission to the
Standing Committee on Health
Canada's Health Workforce

March 2022

Recommendations

1. Finance the creation of new standards in setting health human resources based on projected demand rather than historical data.
2. Increased funding for the creation of new residency positions in ophthalmology as demonstrated by projected demand.
3. Ensuring that graduating ophthalmologists have appropriate access to surgical opportunities to fully utilize their skills.
4. Removal of interprovincial labor mobility barriers on ophthalmologists to help improve equity for communities where services are lacking.
5. Examining the social and economic factors that negatively impact the retention of physicians in Canada.

Introduction

Ophthalmology is the branch of medicine that deals with vision health and the treatment of serious eye diseases. An ophthalmologist is a physician and surgeon who has had specialized training in the management of eye diseases. Following a four-year undergraduate degree, an ophthalmologist spends four to five years in medical school to become a physician, then an additional five years of specialized training to become an ophthalmologist. Those who subspecialize in a specific area of eye disease take an additional one to three years of training beyond this.

In addition to being medical specialists (MDs), ophthalmologists are highly trained surgeons who perform a range of procedures like cataract surgery, corneal transplantation and repairing damaged retinas using a variety of specialized tools from lasers to microsurgical devices.

Ophthalmologists diagnose, treat, and prevent serious eye diseases like glaucoma, cataracts, retinal detachments, eye cancer, diabetic retinopathy, and age-related macular degeneration.

Key Issues

Impact

In 2019, it was estimated that more than eight million Canadians were living with eye disease, of which 1.2 million had vision loss or blindness. Canadians over the age of 65 are most likely to suffer from vision issues and require the care of an ophthalmologist. However, vision loss and eye disease can impact anyone from children requiring eye muscle surgery (known as strabismus), to persons suffering from diabetes-related complications such as diabetic retinopathy.

In 2021, ophthalmologists performed over one million ophthalmic interventions, and cataract surgery was the most-performed surgery in Canada. Treating vision loss and eye disease dramatically improves quality of life of patients. According to the Conference Board of Canada 2020 report, *Ophthalmology in Canada*, people with vision loss were “more likely to suffer from negative health outcomes such as falls, hip fractures, depression, anxiety, admission into long term care, and use of home care or caregiver

services.”¹ A 2021 report by Deloitte estimates that people suffering vision loss had a 29 percent higher risk of mortality compared to those without. Vision care is imperative for a productive quality of life.

Future Care

The Conference Board of Canada’s report estimates that ophthalmic interventions are expected to increase by 48 percent over the next two decades.² Factors impacting future increases in demand include population growth and aging, as well as innovations and changes in clinical practice.

The downstream costs of inaction are staggering, rising from \$32.9 billion to \$56 billion by 2050.³ These include healthcare system costs such as hospital services (for injuries including falls), pharmaceuticals, services of eye health professionals, eye wear, medical research, etc.; productivity costs such as reduced employment participation, absenteeism, etc.; financial costs relating to aids and equipment, rehabilitation, residential care; and finally, loss of well-being, including years of life lost due to disability.³

Shortage

Studies show that the current and future supply of ophthalmologists is not following the rise in demand. The number of ophthalmologists has already decreased from approximately 3.7 per 100,000 people in 1995 to 3.4 per 100,000 people in 2018. The supply of ophthalmologists also varied considerably across Canadian provinces and territories. While the national average was estimated at 3.4 ophthalmologists per 100,000 people in 2018, this number ranged from 5.40 in Nova Scotia to 0.89 in the territories.⁴

In addition, a recent study found that 50% of ophthalmologists are aged 55 years or more. As such, many will be retiring in the next 10-20 years, which will contribute to the increased need for ophthalmologists.⁵

There are different factors that explain the growing gap between supply and demand. We mention above the increase in population and aging, but there are also structural issues that need addressing. These include too few residency positions for students, limited operating room time, interprovincial labor mobility restrictions on ophthalmologists, and the use of historical data rather than projected demand in setting health human resources.

As such, the COS recommends the creation of new standards in setting health human resources based on projected demand rather than historical data.

Furthermore, the COS recommends increased funding for the creation of new residency positions in ophthalmology as demonstrated by projected demand. We also recommend that these positions be

¹ Conference Board of Canada, *Ophthalmology in Canada*, <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=10874>

² Conference Board of Canada, Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Conference Board of Canada, Ibid

⁵ Canadian Medical Association, *Ophthalmology Profile*, <https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/2019-01/ophthalmology-e.pdf>

strengthened by ensuring that graduating ophthalmologists have appropriate access to surgical opportunities to fully utilize their skills.

Improved access to services is fundamental, and as such, the COS recommends addressing interprovincial labor mobility barriers on ophthalmologists to help improve equity for communities where services are lacking.

Finally, the COS recommends examining the social and economic factors that negatively impact the retention of physicians in Canada.

About the Canadian Ophthalmological Society

The Canadian Ophthalmological Society (COS) is the national, recognized authority on eye and vision healthcare in Canada. As eye physicians and surgeons, they are committed to assuring the provision of optimal medical and surgical eye care for all Canadians by promoting excellence in ophthalmology and by providing services to support their members in practice.

The COS' membership includes over 1,100 ophthalmologists and 220 ophthalmology residents. They work collaboratively with government, other national and international specialty societies, their academic communities (ACUPO), provincial partners and affiliates and other eye care professionals and patient groups to advocate for health policy in Canada in eye and vision health.