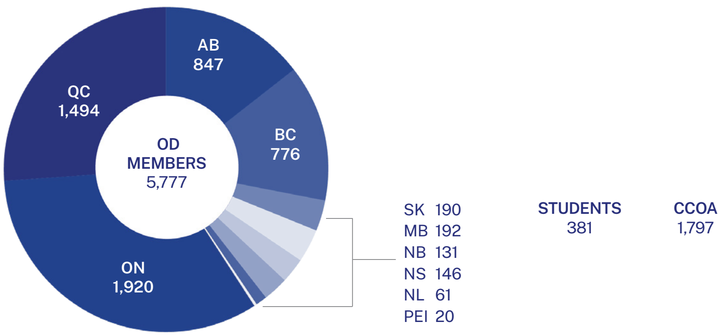
CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF OPTOMETRISTS
ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES OPTOMÉTRISTES

Strategic Plan 2023–2026

About the Canadian Association of Optometrists

The Canadian Association of Optometrists (CAO) is the national voice of optometry. Optometrists are independent primary health care providers and represent the front line of vision health. Optometrists practice in a range of settings: most work in private practice, others work in clinics, hospitals, community health centres, corporate optometry, research, teaching and administration. Recognized at home and internationally as a leading advocate for the profession, CAO is dedicated to providing leadership and support to its +7,900 members (Optometrists, Students and Optometric Assistants).

CAO Members *(as of Dec. 31, 2022)*



Vision

Healthy eyes and clear vision for all Canadians. For life.

Mission

The Canadian Association of Optometrists is the national voice of optometry, providing leadership and support to its members to enhance the delivery of healthy eyes and clear vision for all Canadians.

CAO Values

- Accountable
- Collaborative
- Impactful
- Innovative

External forces in healthcare

The previous strategic plan provided the framework for CAO's priority-setting, including during the organization's pandemic response. CAO recently completed a strategic development process for its new plan which will guide operations from 2023 and beyond. The process included a review of the long-term strategic deliverables from the previous plan, an assessment of the current context in which optometrists are operating, and primary research through interviews with CAO Council members, staff, and stakeholders from various organizations, including not-for-profit associations, government bodies, optometrists' associations, colleges, schools, and industry. In addition, two focus groups with past presidents and volunteers and panel discussions were held to gather the perspectives and expectations of CAO membership.

Optometrists have been operating in a challenging landscape for the past few years, due in large part but not exclusively to the pandemic. Some of the external forces currently affecting the sector include ongoing healthcare challenges such as longer wait times for patients, backlogs (most services, surgeries, or hospitalizations were halted or experienced a substantial reduction during the pandemic), labor shortages and mental wellness or burnout among healthcare workers, and global supply chain issues leading to delays and shortages. Canada has higher healthcare spending as a percentage of GDP (12.7%) than the average OECD country[1]. Costs have been growing at a steady pace and accelerated with COVID-19, leaving governments facing fiscal challenges at all levels and heightened inflation or interest rates. While 75% of funding is public, private sector total health expenditure is increasing faster in other areas of healthcare (dental, pharma). Patients are increasingly expecting access to care anytime, anywhere. Like many sectors, the eyecare industry is facing challenges related to climate change in terms of sustainable procurement, carbon footprint, packaging, and recycling processes.

The next few years are expected to bring significant change for optometry, although there is not a consensus on exactly how this will affect optometrists, patients, or the system overall.

1 Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2021). National health expenditure trends, 2021: data tables – series H. Ottawa, ON:CIHI. Available from: https://www.cihi.ca/en/national-health-expenditure-trends-2021-snapshot#:~:text=Total%20health%20spending%20in%20Canada,and%20in%201997%20constant%20dollars.

Growing demand and role for optometry

More than 8 million Canadians are living with eye disease from one of four conditions: age-related macular degeneration (AMD), cataract, diabetic retinopathy (DR), and glaucoma. Almost everyone will experience impaired vision or an eye condition at some point in their lifetime and require eye care services[2]. However, 45% of Canadians say they don't know as much as they should about how to take care of their own vision health[3]. With an aging population, the demand for optometry services is expected to grow[4]. The myopia epidemic, as described by the World Health Organization, has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, especially among children[5]. Costs (about 30% of Canadians do not have public or private insurance coverage for vision care[6]), and out-of-pocket burden (74% of private vision care expenditures were incurred by Canadians, compared to 36% for drugs and 42% for dental[7]) are partly preventing Canadians from accessing vision care.

Other issues such as awareness and availability of services could further increase demand across age groups.

Meeting the demand for eye care in remote areas is expected to require changes to current models, such as adopting teleoptometry mechanisms where appropriate. Challenges in providing enough optometrists were identified, including recruiting for practices outside of large centers (including rural-but-not-remote areas)[8].

Optometry is generally seen as the logical primary role for vision care, serving as a gatekeeper and a hub that connects patients to other professionals such as opticians and ophthalmologists. There are many implications for how optometry might be practiced in this landscape, including greater integration with the healthcare system and different ways of engaging with other professions (e.g., more multiprofessional clinics, both within and beyond vision care). Many see it as important or even crucial to increase the scope of practice to enable optometrists to provide services that are expensive or unavailable from others, such as ophthalmologists.

2 Burton, M.J., Ramke, J., Marques, A.P., Bourne, R.R, Congdon, N., Jones, I., …& Faal, H.B. (2021). The Lancet Global Health Commission on Global Eye Health: vision beyond 2020. The Lancet Global Health, 9(4), e489-e551. Available from: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30488-5/fulltext

3 Public Opinion Research – Vision Care and Canadians. National survey of 2000 Canadians conducted for the CAO. Abacus data August 2021

4 Deloitte. (2021, May). The cost of vision loss and blindness in Canada. Canadian Council of the Blind. Available from: https://www.fightingblindness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Deloitte-Cost-of-vision-loss-and-blindness-in-Canada-report-May-2021.pdf

5 Wang, J.,Li, Y., Much, D.C., Wei, N., Qi, X., Ding, G., …& Qian, X. (2021). Progression of myopia in school-aged children after COVID-19 home confinement. JAMA Ophthalmology, 139(3), 293-300. Available from: https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaophthalmology/fullarticle/2774808

6 Eye care in Canada 2022 – Leger survey conducted for the Canadian Ophthalmological Society and the Canadian Association of Optometrists. June 2022

7 Canadian Institute for Health Information. (2021). National health expenditure trends, 2021: data tables – series H. Ottawa, ON:CIHI. Available from: https://www.cihi.ca/en/national-health-expenditure-trends-2021-snapshot#:~:text=Total%20health%20spending%20in%20Canada,and%20in%201997%20constant%20dollars.

8 Distribution of optometric services in Canada. Geographic access to optometric services. May 2019.

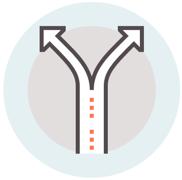
Although there are potential financial benefits to task-shifting and integrating optometry more closely with the healthcare system, challenges related to payment (by governments and insurers) remain significant. Private group vision care benefits have not changed significantly in recent decades, and most plans do not take advantage of the significant clinical and cost-effective advancements that have been made in optometry over the past 30 years. There is hope that the value of optometry and vision care will be more widely recognized.

Disruptive advances in technology

In the next decade or so, it is expected that there will be significant changes in the way technology is used in optometry and other professions. These technological advances, such as teleoptometry and the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in diagnostics, may have different impacts on optometry practices, data and communication, and accountability. While the implications and economics of these technologies are not fully understood, some, such as AI-enabled screening, are being adopted quickly. Technology can either enable optometry to address workforce shortages or access issues, or it can disintermediate the profession by replacing optometrists with diagnostic equipment in pharmacies. It is important for optometry leaders to ensure that the profession is prepared to take advantage of these opportunities and to advocate for legislation and regulations that reflect the appropriate and effective use of technology in optometry.

Approaching a turning point: Changing business models

As revenues from product sales continue to decline, optometry practices are increasingly reliant on other sources of income such as payments from the healthcare system and insurers, as well as out-of-pocket payments from patients. The growth of corporate activity in optometry is expected to lead to more optometrists working as employees rather than business owners, and the influence of corporate players may increase through price discounting. It is also anticipated that specialization (in areas such as ocular disease, contact lenses, low vision, and rehabilitation) will become more common, although currently the majority of optometrists do not specialize (60%)[9]. These changes may lead to greater diversity in the way optometrists practice. There is a sense that the profession is at a turning point, driven by technological advances, as well as political and economic factors. In light of these changes, what can CAO do to help optometrists and the profession navigate these shifts in the sector?



9 2022 Member Survey Conducted for the Canadian Association of Optometrists. Framework Analytics Inc. June 2022

Overall perceptions of CAO

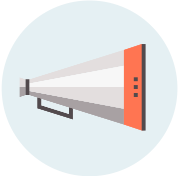
According to a member survey conducted by Framework in spring 2022, there was strong and improving member satisfaction with the organization, but some members were not fully familiar with CAO. However, members indicated that the organization was focusing on the right priorities, with promotion of the profession, advocacy, and communication with members about issues impacting optometry across the country ranking as the top three priorities. Optometrist education, support for students, and education for optometric assistants (through the CCOA program) were also highly ranked.

Promotion and advocacy

CAO is seen as playing a broad advocacy role at the federal level, both with the government and other national organizations such as the Canadian Council of the Blind and the Canadian Ophthalmological Society. Engaging with insurers on national issues was also noted with approval.

Working with provincial associations

There is a general consensus that CAO should work effectively with provincial associations, but there are differing views on what this entails and how it should be done. Some members believe that CAO should have a strong national role and voice, connecting provinces to share and compare information (such as through the optometrists leadership forum). There is also a belief that coordinated national initiatives are stronger than those undertaken on a provincial level. However, others are concerned about the potential for duplication of services with provincial associations and advocate for greater coordination between the CAO and these organizations.



Keeping members informed/ Providing education

CAO is perceived as a "knowledge broker" and a trusted source of information. Some members believe that the organization has opportunities to increase its thought leadership, particularly in the face of technological and business transformations. However, it is important for CAO to align with the provinces, for example by avoiding conflicts with provincial advocacy messages. CAO has invested in policy and research and has a unique online education platform.

Strategic Directions

Based on these strengths and the input of members, the organization is now prioritizing four strategic directions for 2023-2026.

1 Position Optometry as the hub for eye health and vision care:

- Advance our federal advocacy to support the adoption of a national strategy for eye care, the creation of a vision desk at the Public Health Agency of Canada, increasing research funding, implementing streamlined process strategies for new medicines and technology, enhancing access for vulnerable populations, and providing specific funding to foster public awareness
- Enhance the voice of optometry to the public
- Promote the role of optometrists in treating eye care emergencies to reduce wait times

2 Advance practice conditions for optometrists across Canada:

- Support provincial efforts to enhance optometry scope
- Promote the modernization of vision care benefits
- Develop and provide education to practitioners on supporting dispensing revenues
- Support early-career optometrists with their transition to practice

3 Advocate for improved eye health, vision care access and outcomes for all people in Canada:

- Promote comprehensive eye exams to the public
- Enhance access to vision care services for Indigenous and underserved communities
- Enhance research capability of optometrists

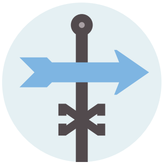
4 Champion beneficial integration of technology into optometry practice:

- Facilitate adoption of AI and teleoptometry by optometrists and create conducive environments to ensure proper reimbursement and regulatory conditions are in place

Operations Enablers

to enhance CAO's capacity to move the profession forward

- Enhance optometrists' competencies and foster collaboration by expanding CAO biennial congress content and programming
- Continue to expand the CCOA program
- Continue to grow and improve the Vision At Work program in Ontario
- Address under-resourced areas of operations
- Ensure ongoing financial sustainability through revising fees and non-dues revenues
- Increase collaboration with the provinces



Endnotes

1. Canadian Association of Optometrists Strategic Plan 2020-2022.
2. Teleoptometry and Artificial Intelligence – Opportunities and Challenges for the Profession. A Discussion Paper for OLF 2023.
3. 2022 Member Survey Conducted for the Canadian Association of Optometrists. Framework Analytics Inc. June 2022.
4. Public Opinion Research – Vision Care and Canadians. National survey of 2000 Canadians conducted for the CAO. Abacus data. August 2021.
5. Eye care in Canada 2022 – Leger survey conducted for the Canadian Ophthalmological Society and the Canadian Association of Optometrists. June 2022.
6. Distribution of optometric services in Canada. Geographic access to optometric services. May 2019.
7. World Health Organization. October, 2019. World report on vision.
8. External reports by The Lancet (Commission on Global Eye Health), Deloitte (Cost of Vision Loss in Canada), and others were also consulted.

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