

## News

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### Erica Fletcher promoted to Professor



Melbourne optometrist, Erica Fletcher was promoted to the rank of professor at The University of Melbourne in November 2014. Professor Fletcher qualified in optometry at

The University of Melbourne in 1988, where she subsequently completed Masters and PhD degrees. In 1996, she was awarded a highly coveted CJ Martin Award from the National Health and Medical Research Council to undertake her post-doctoral training with Professor Dr Heinz Wässle at the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Frankfurt, Germany. After a brief return to the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences at The University of Melbourne as lecturer, she was enticed in 2003 to take up a position in the Department of Anatomy and Neurosciences at Melbourne. There she was quickly acclaimed for her teaching and her research. Professor Fletcher's research is primarily focussed on understanding the causes of retinal diseases. She is head of the Visual Neuroscience Laboratory, where the current questions being pursued are mechanisms underlying diabetic retinopathy, the reasons for the death of photoreceptors in retinal degeneration. In 2006, she was awarded the Irvin M and Beatrice Borish Award by the American Academy of Optometry for her contribution to vision research. She has already published over 110 research papers that have accumulated an impressive number of citations.

### Melbourne optometry moves to medicine



The Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences at The University of Melbourne became part of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences on January 1 2015.

It was previously part of the Faculty of Science. The Head of the Department, Associate Professor Allison McKendrik, says that teaching and research in optometry have increasingly become aligned with its new

Faculty, especially its research in visual neuroscience, which is carried out in the multi-disciplinary Melbourne Brain Centre. The move also makes sense in view of the expanded scope of optometric practice to include treatment of ocular diseases and the right to use and prescribe pharmacological therapeutic agents.

Optometry became a course at The University of Melbourne in 1961 in the then new Faculty of Applied Science. There was no Department of Optometry at that time and the course was run by the Australian College of Optometry, which was made an affiliated College of the University. The Department of Optometry was established in 1973. The Faculty of Applied Science was disbanded in 1968 and optometry then came under the umbrella of the Faculty of Science where it stayed for the next 47 years. There was an earlier proposal that optometry should be moved to the Faculty of Medicine, when Professor Graeme Ryan was the Dean of the Faculty, but this involved a merger of the Departments of Optometry and Ophthalmology and neither discipline was ready for that and the idea did not proceed.

### First Doctors of Optometry at The University of Melbourne

Four years ago The University of Melbourne replaced its five-year undergraduate course in optometry with a four-year graduate course leading to the degree of Doctor of Optometry. This was part of the University's plan to switch all its professional courses to a graduate level, requiring completion of a general undergraduate degree as a prerequisite for entry. The first cohort of Doctor of Optometry students completed their course at the end of last year.

### Sharon Bentley heads Australian College of Optometry Clinical Services



Dr Sharon Bentley took up her appointment as Director of Clinical Services at the Australian College of Optometry on November 3 2014. She succeeds Associate Professor Jonathan

Jackson, who resigned last year to return to Ireland. Dr Bentley was formerly Senior Lecturer in optometry at Deakin University in Geelong.

She is a graduate in optometry at The University of Melbourne, where she also completed a Masters degree and a PhD degree in 1997. Her postdoctoral experience was in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, Dalhousie University, Canada and she has worked in the Population Health Unit of the Centre for Eye Research Australia at The University of Melbourne. She holds a Master of Public Health degree.

Dr Bentley's special interest is low vision. She is a Low Vision Diplomate of the American Academy of Optometry and a long-standing sessional optometrist at the Kooyong Low Vision Clinic. She is also Convener of the Optometry Australia Low Vision Working Group and Chair of the Vision 2020 Low Vision and Rehabilitation Committee. Her current research interests are the impact of vision impairment on functional performance and quality of life, the development of tools for measuring outcomes in clinical trials and in particular the bionic eye and the evaluation of low-vision services.

Clinical Services at the Australian College of Optometry is a large and diverse operation. It provides over 60,000 clinical services a year with a staff of some 30 full-time and 30 part-time optometrists working in six locations in Melbourne. It works in partnership with Vision Australia to staff the Kooyong Low Vision Clinic and has a large network of out-reach services to indigenous communities, the homeless, the very disabled and the frail aged. It manages the government-subsidised Victorian Eyecare Service. It also provides clinical experience and training for optometry students at a number of universities in Australia.