

## PRESS RELEASE

### Barriers to Vision Correction for Children in a Disadvantaged School Community

On Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> November the Australian College of Optometry (ACO) launched its research paper *Barriers To Vision Correction For Children In A Disadvantaged School Community*.

Maureen O’Keefe, the ACO’s CEO said, “This project was one of great importance to the ACO and great value to the community. The ACO has years of experience working with disadvantaged school communities and we would like to see projects such as this one be implemented throughout Victoria, and indeed throughout Australia, and we are looking to partner with government and other funders to enable this. Vision is extremely important for quality of life regardless of location as it enables a person to independently carry out normal everyday activities and, most importantly for children, it facilitates the ease of educational participation. Regular eye examinations are vital in correcting refractive errors and detecting and treating eye disease”.

The study was conducted in order to explore the barriers to correction of vision problems in a disadvantaged school community and to inform the delivery of public health programs directed at the children from such schools. It was funded by Perpetual.

The study found that vision problems were common, with over 23% of all children having some disorder. Children at School B – a small private school north of Melbourne - were almost 3 times more likely to have had a previous eye test than children at School A – a primary school in Melbourne’s western suburbs with demographic indicators of social disadvantage, including recent refugee arrivals, low-income profile and families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The cost of glasses and medicines was perceived as a significant barrier to receiving vision correction by both parents and teachers at School A. Additionally parents perceived the normal costs of eye examination as being a barrier even before any treatment costs. Teachers lacked confidence in identifying students with vision problems.

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“Unfortunately the incidence of eye and vision disorders is highest amongst individuals and communities less able to access and afford full fee paying services offered in traditional clinical environments”, said Maureen O’Keefe. “In order to reduce eye health inequities, it is critical that subsidised public health eye care and accessible models of care are available to those most in need, including children dependent on parents experiencing disadvantage, indigenous Australians and displaced persons/ refugees. The ACO hopes to partner with government and other funders to bring this kind of eye care service to all Victorian children, especially those in disadvantaged communities”.

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