COLLEGE OF
OPTOMETRISTS
OF ONTARIO

PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY
ACCESS TO EYE CARE FOR INDIGENOUS PERSONS IN ONTARIO

Professional Advisories are intended to provide optometrists with additional guidance and information on policies and initiatives developed or supported by the College of Optometrists of Ontario. This Advisory concerns access to eye care for Indigenous persons in Ontario, and is based on a report developed in collaboration with the College of Opticians of Ontario, *Summary Report – Eye Care Service Delivery for Indigenous Persons in Ontario*. Informed by the original report, this document can be used by optometrists to reflect on and enhance their practices.

- The College of Optometrists of Ontario would like to thank Counsel Public Affairs, including Leslee White-Eye, Devan Sommerville, and Shawn Cruz, for authoring the original report.

Optometry has been a regulated profession in Ontario since 1919. The College of Optometrists of Ontario is the self-regulatory authority responsible for registering (licensing) and governing optometrists in Ontario. The College's authority and limitations of its powers can be found in legislation including the *Regulated Health Professions Act* and the *Optometry Act*.

Indigenous people in Ontario face significant disparities in health outcomes and access to care. These inequities are evident in eye health: higher rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease increase the risk of issues like diabetic retinopathy, yet many Indigenous individuals have limited access to ongoing eye care.

Systemic barriers—including geographic isolation, lack of culturally sensitive care, and ongoing racism—further restrict equitable access. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action emphasize the urgent need for culturally safe, compassionate health services.

In response, the College of Opticians of Ontario and the College of Optometrists of Ontario commissioned a project engaging Indigenous communities to understand their eye care experiences. This Advisory draws on those insights to guide optometrists in addressing Indigenous patients' needs and developing culturally appropriate practices to improve access, trust, and health outcomes across Ontario.

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FRAMING THE ADVISORY: A DISTINCTIONS-BASED APPROACH

The Colleges engaged Counsel Public Affairs to lead a distinctions-based engagement project, respecting the constitutional diversity of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Facilitated sessions gathered insights from participants with knowledge of health and eye care access. Sessions included cultural protocols such as Elder openings, were led by experienced Indigenous facilitators, and supported by preparatory guides and staff training. The project emphasized:

- Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis constitutional and cultural differences
- Ensuring representation from each group to capture diverse perspectives
- Using culturally sensitive facilitation and encouraging personal and community stories

The sessions highlight the importance for optometrists to recognize Indigenous diversity and tailor care to support both eye health and reconciliation.

PATIENT PERSPECTIVES AND KEY THEMES

Participants shared experiences illustrating miscommunication, systemic barriers, and trauma:

- Incorrect prescriptions dispensed, with follow-up concerns dismissed, leaving patients feeling unsafe
- Denial of treatment for Bell's Palsy-related eye issues, requiring makeshift solutions
- Challenges navigating NIHB claims, delaying or denying care
- Geographic isolation limiting access, contrasted with positive experiences in culturally respectful community care

From these discussions, five key themes emerged:

1. Cultural Competency and Historical Awareness: Understanding Indigenous histories and colonial legacies is essential for respectful care.
2. Access and Systemic Barriers: NIHB challenges and geographic isolation necessitate advocacy and flexible care models, including virtual options.
3. Interprofessional Collaboration: Coordinated care among eye care and health professionals supports continuity and quality.
4. Patient Autonomy and Support Networks: Respecting patients' choices and involving family or community advocates enhances navigation and outcomes.
5. Building Trusting, Long-Term Relationships: Sustained relationships foster positive, continuous, and culturally responsive care.

FIVE CLINICAL TAKEAWAYS FOR OPTOMETRISTS

1. **Prioritize Cultural Humility and Competency** – Engage in ongoing development to provide respectful, culturally safe care.
2. **Navigate NIHB with Knowledge and Sensitivity** – Support patients through claims and appeals, acknowledging systemic barriers.
3. **Offer Flexible and Inclusive Care** – Where possible, use teleoptometry, community clinics, and culturally appropriate practices; include helpers when needed.
4. **Collaborate Across Disciplines** – Coordinate with ophthalmologists, primary care, and Indigenous health professionals for holistic care.
5. **Build Trusting, Long-Term Relationships** – Foster rapport through respect, active listening, validation, and clear communication about rights and processes

SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

Delivering effective eye care to Indigenous patients requires cultural humility, structural awareness, and commitment to equity. Practitioners can support improved health outcomes by integrating culturally informed practices, flexible care models, interprofessional collaboration, and patient-centered engagement rooted in trust and respect.

It is our hope that this report can facilitate dialogue and self-reflection among optometrists in Ontario, and where applicable lead to the implementation of key takeaways.

RESOURCES

COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRISTS OF ONTARIO

- Optometric Practice Reference – Standards of Practice https://www.collegeoptom.on.ca/resources/standards-of-practice/

INDIGENOUS HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

- Indigenous Primary Health Care Council (IPHCC) https://ipchc.ca/
- National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH) https://www.nccih.ca/
- Assembly of First Nations https://www.afn.ca/

GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH RESOURCES

- Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) Program https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1576084891056/1576084939151
- Public Health Agency of Canada — Indigenous Health https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/aboriginal-children-youth-health.html
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada — Calls to Action https://nctr.ca/records/reports/#trc-reports

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS AND TRAINING

- Cultural Safety Training for Health Care Providers (NCCIH) https://www.nccih.ca/495/Training_and_Education.nccih?id=110
- Indigenous Cultural Competency Online Training (Ontario Hospital Association) https://www.oha.com/Education/IndigenousCulturalCompetency

LEGISLATION AND POLICY

- Canadian Constitution Act, 1982 — Section 35 https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/index.html
- Indian Act https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/
- Ontario Human Rights Code https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90h19