



Submission to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science, and Technology

Re: Bill C-284 – A National Strategy for Eye Health in Canada

Presented by Dr. Nina Ahuja, BScHons MD FRCSC (Ophthalmology) CHE, Chair, Council on Advocacy, Canadian Ophthalmological Society, and Ms. Elisabeth Fowler, CEO, Canadian Ophthalmological Society

Introduction

Honorable Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate regarding Bill C-284. My name is Dr. Nina Ahuja, and I am the Chair of the Council on Advocacy for the Canadian Ophthalmological Society. Today, Elisabeth Fowler, CEO of the Canadian Ophthalmology, and I stand with our esteemed colleagues from across the eye care profession to request the swift passage of Bill C-284, which will establish a national vision strategy to safeguard the eye health of Canadians. This bill presents an opportunity to improve the quality of life for millions while ensuring a comprehensive, collaborative, and patient-centered approach to eye care.

The Case for a National Vision Strategy

Vision loss is an issue that affects over 1.2 million Canadians today, with more than 8 million living with one of the top four eye diseases—age-related macular degeneration (AMD), cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma. This burden is growing with our aging population, and the economic impact was estimated at \$32.9 billion in 2019. Timely access to essential eye health services is critical to prevent vision loss and reduce long-term healthcare costs.

However, access to eye care services is not equal across Canada. Canadians, particularly those in rural and underserved areas, face significant barriers to care. This is

why **Bill C-284's focus on ensuring access to essential eye health services**—distinct from discussions about universal coverage—is critical for addressing these disparities.

Framework for the National Vision Strategy

To address the current gaps in eye care delivery, the Canadian Ophthalmological Society proposes the following key elements for the national vision strategy:

- 1. Ensure Access to Essential Eye Health Services for All Canadians**

Every Canadian, regardless of location, economic status, or background, should have access to essential eye health services. This includes routine eye exams, screening for common eye diseases, and access to treatment. We emphasize that this is about ensuring equitable access to necessary services, not universal coverage—a separate policy discussion.

- 2. Promote Collaboration Across the Eye Care Professions**

The strategy must promote collaboration between ophthalmologists, optometrists, orthoptists, and opticians. A coordinated approach ensures that patients receive the right care from the right provider at the right time, maximizing patient outcomes and resource efficiency. As ophthalmologists, we look forward to working collaboratively with optometrists and other stakeholders, bringing the greatest expertise to bear in helping discern appropriate and safe expansions of scope where needed, while ensuring patient safety and positive outcomes remain the priority.

- 3. Public Education and Awareness Campaigns**

Canadians need to be educated on the importance of routine eye care and the risks associated with vision loss. Public awareness campaigns will help highlight preventable causes of blindness and encourage proactive eye health management, particularly in vulnerable populations such as Indigenous communities, seniors, and children.

- 4. Optimize Resource Utilization through Technology**

Technological advances like AI and telemedicine can help extend the reach of eye care services to remote areas and reduce the burden on healthcare systems. AI tools can support early detection of eye diseases, while telemedicine can connect patients in underserved areas with specialists.

- 5. Foster Innovation and Research**

A dedicated Vision Health Desk, led by a Chief Vision Health Officer within the Ministry of Health, will coordinate national research efforts and develop standardized screening guidelines. There is currently no dedicated funding for eye

health under the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and establishing this desk will close that gap, fostering innovation in treatment and prevention.

6. Provincial and Indigenous Collaboration

The national vision strategy must work in collaboration with provincial and Indigenous health systems to ensure cultural relevance and regional adaptability. Given that the federal government plays a direct role in healthcare delivery to Indigenous populations, we are committed to working with federal partners to ensure that Indigenous communities have equitable access to eye health services.

Expected Outcomes and Impact

The passing of Bill C-284 will not only create a framework to address existing gaps in eye care delivery but will also lay the foundation for better outcomes across Canada. By ensuring access to essential eye health services, we will:

- **Reduce preventable blindness** by promoting early detection and treatment.
- **Decrease the economic burden** associated with vision loss by investing in prevention.
- **Improve quality of life** for millions of Canadians, particularly those in vulnerable and underserved populations.
- **Ensure that patient safety remains paramount** by fostering collaboration among the different eye care professions, ensuring that tasks requiring advanced medical training remain with appropriately qualified professionals.

Conclusion

We urge the Senate to pass Bill C-284 and create a lasting impact on the vision health of all Canadians. As the Canadian Ophthalmological Society, we stand ready to collaborate with government, public health agencies, and our partners in optometry, orthoptics, and opticianry to ensure that the strategy is implemented effectively, and that patient safety and positive outcomes are prioritized.

Next Steps

Upon passing the bill, we look forward to collaborating with the Health Canada to begin the development of a framework, ensuring it is in place to serve Canadians equitably and efficiently.

Attached is our proposed framework to offer our perspective for the National Vision Strategy, which we submit for review and consideration as part of the implementation process.

Thank you.