

INCREASING THE DIVERSITY AND QUALITY OF CLINICAL TRAINING FOR OPTOMETRY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

The Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences of the University of Melbourne has embarked on some important enhancements to the clinical training of its later year students of the Bachelor of Optometry course in 2008. After an extensive review of the clinical training experience of 4th and 5th year Bachelor of Optometry students in 2006 and 2007, and in recognition of the changed teaching environment required of the Doctor of Optometry program beginning in 2011, the Department has instigated a suite of new initiatives to broaden the clinical profile of the patients being seen by existing and future optometry students, and give greater exposure to disease management in a diversity of clinical settings.

Specifically, some issues identified by the Department that have been targeted for development include:

Increasing contact lens fitting experience: There has been a continuing decline in 'hands-on' experience for the 4th and 5th year students in contact lens fitting and after care. In 2007 we experienced a 25% occupancy rate of contact lens patients in the teaching clinic of our placement provider and on average students completed 8 contact lens fits in their final year of training, with virtually no RGP fits. Our goal is to substantially enhance these numbers.

Numbers and diversity of active disease presentations: Due to the nature of the incumbent patient base attending the Victorian College of Optometry (VCO) under the Victorian Eyecare Scheme (VES) there is a relatively long waiting time for appointments and our students gain limited exposure to active disease presentations. In 2007, students examined on average 11 patients, across the three Ocular Disease clinics (Retina; Glaucoma; Cornea). Most patient exposures did not have active ocular disease limiting the students' experience in this key clinical area. Our goal is to substantially enhance the diversity of exposure and the numbers of patients seen with active ocular disease.

Knowledge base in ophthalmic dispensing options: Over the last few years feedback from practitioners who employ or teach our students indicates that their product knowledge in both high end ophthalmic lens dispensing and of the latest contact lens products is limited, especially compared to the students' strong knowledge and competence in other areas of their training. Our goal is to afford such exposure.

Patient demographics: An ongoing issue for the Department has been the limited age range of patients with whom students interact to gain their hands-on experience. In 2007 over 75% of the patients examined were over 65 years of age. The majority of the remaining patients came from the paediatric clinic thus our student experiences are limited to patients aged 4-18 and 65 or more. While these age ranges reflect an important patient demographic, the balance is not at all representative of the real-world situation; students gained little experience with patients aged 18 to 65 years, a part of the population that makes up the largest component of most optometry practices. Our intention is to address this shortcoming and to afford such exposure.

To constructively address these issues the Department has decided to adopt several new teaching initiatives, including:

- The establishment of a modern 4 consulting room optometry practice. This is being located on the edge of the University campus in order to target the 45,000 students and 6,000+ staff of the University of Melbourne as potential patients. The objective of this initiative is several-fold; primarily it will provide exposure to patients in the 18 to 65 year age bracket and increase the amount of 'hands-on' contact lens experience that students receive in their 4th and 5th years of clinical training. In addition, this clinic will facilitate a focused program of practice administration and management experience promoted in this new environment. The new practice, University of Melbourne EyeCare, will open in the first week of April 2008 on Swanston Street opposite the Potter Museum. The Department discussed this initiative with the major representative body of the Optometry profession, in the form of the OAA (Victorian Division) in January 2008, and the initiative was well received. The enterprise has also received strong support from the ophthalmic industry, who considers such a teaching initiative as well overdue. The University of Melbourne formally announced the development of this new teaching clinic in a media release on February 29, 2008.
- Increased Exposure to active ocular disease. This will be achieved by developing a private practice placement scheme (disease sub-specialty), ensuring that students get direct experience in the management of active ocular disease and the use of therapeutic agents. This scheme began in March 2008 recruiting some 20 sub-specialist and general ophthalmologists to the program. By April of this year our current cohort of final year students will have been exposed to more active ocular disease and therapeutic prescribing than were the 2007 cohort over their entire final year of training.
- New Hospital Placements. In 2008 the Department initiated a new hospital placement in addition to the clinics of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. From March 2008 students will attend the Ophthalmology Department of the Alfred Hospital for medical retina and post-operative cataract (1 & 7 days) clinics. These hospital placements will provide students an intimate knowledge of the surgical management of their patients with an emphasis on therapeutic co-management.

These initiatives have been undertaken by the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences to broaden the patient demographic and enhance the diversity and quality of clinical training of its students. These were discussed with the Optometry Council of Australia and New Zealand (OCANZ) during their accreditation of the Melbourne course in 2007. OCANZ fully supported the Department in moving forward with these teaching initiatives to improve students' clinical training and experience.

In addition to these new initiatives, the University of Melbourne is keen to maintain the Victorian College of Optometry as a valued clinical placement provider for the provision of opportunities for students to examine older (65+ years) and pediatric (<16 years) patients. It is anticipated that a clinical placement agreement will be finalized for placements to start at the VCO the first week of April, 2008. All other placements in the course began early March 2008.

We consider that these changes will give later-year students of the University of Melbourne Bachelor of Optometry, and future Doctor of Optometry students, a markedly improved diversity and quality of clinical training to launch their professional careers. It will also afford practice management training not presently available in the existing teaching clinics.

The Department is confident that these new exciting clinical training initiatives will consolidate its position as the leading Optometry training centre in the Australasia region, today and for the future.

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