



Australian Society of Ophthalmologists

# MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian Society of Ophthalmologists Incorporated ABN 29 454 001 424

## Litigation delays affecting patient eye safety

**19 December 2013**

A legal victory for ophthalmologists in the Supreme Court of Queensland today has regrettably not alleviated concerns about patient safety.

At issue was the legal standing of The Australian Society of Ophthalmologists (ASO) and the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) to challenge changes to the role and responsibilities of optometrists, initiated early this year.

ASO and RANZCO lodged a court challenge when the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and the Optometry Board of Australia (OBA) would not resile from extending the scope of practice allowing optometrists to diagnose and treat glaucoma without ophthalmic oversight.

This overturned traditional medical practice in which ophthalmologists, who are medical doctors, have overseen patient diagnosis and treatment for glaucoma.

The concern is that optometrists have been approved to assess medical conditions that are beyond their learning and experience.

By contrast, ophthalmologists study for seven years to become doctors and then spend another five years to become medical eye specialists. An ophthalmologist would acquire 12,000 hours of clinical training in treating eye disease before being authorised to responsibly initiate treatment for patients.

Today's ruling by Justice James Douglas has been hailed by ASO President, Dr Arthur Karagiannis and RANZCO President, Dr Stephen Best. His Honour found that the standing of both organisations to challenge was "clear".

However, both stressed their concern at the delay occasioned by the Optometry Board challenging standing. Sadly, they said, a court hearing date cannot now be secured until May or June 2014 with thousands of Australians potentially at risk of defective diagnosis in the interim.

The ASO and RANZCO initiative is fully supported by the Australian Medical Association which has described the optometrists' move as out of step with expert opinion on best patient care for those suffering glaucoma which is a serious eye disease affecting 300,000 Australians. The Medical Board, though, have taken no legal action to challenge the decision.

The ASO-RANZCO legal challenge seeks a return to the collaborative co-management regime of treating

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glaucoma that was in place before OBA amended the optometrical scope of practice.

Justice Douglas awarded costs against OBA-AHPRA today.

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