

## Detection and treatment of eye disease at risk

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The proper treatment of Australians suffering eye diseases of increasing incidence like Glaucoma and Age-related Macular Degeneration is at grave risk following the Federal Government's inadequate listing of a vital eye monitoring tool on the MBS this month.

Ignoring advice from ophthalmologists about the value of Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) in identifying and treating eye disease, the Government will rebate patients just \$34 for the procedure and restrict coverage to one service per patient per year; even then only for some of the conditions for which OCT is useful.

Australian Society of Ophthalmologists President Dr Michael Steiner says ophthalmologists throughout the country are in shock over the decision.

"OCT is the single most important diagnostic technology developed in eye care in the last 15 years" he said.

"Both detection rates, treatment outcomes and final treatment costs are going to be impacted upon negatively by this decision," Dr Steiner said.

More than a year ago the Australian Society of Ophthalmologists (ASO) submitted feedback to the Medical Services Advisory Committee about the importance of OCT.

The ASO identified OCT as:

- highly critical in diagnosing a range of eye conditions (including Glaucoma, Age-related Macular Degeneration, Diabetic Retinopathy, Macular hole, and Macular Oedema)
- widely accepted internationally and necessary for monitoring the effectiveness of treatments for Macular Oedema
- necessary for determining presence of fluid before treatments of intravitreal injection, and
- safer than other technologies used in these conditions (OCT is a non-invasive scan).

"It is deeply disappointing, but sadly unsurprising to find that this input from clinicians has been all but ignored," Dr Steiner said.

"Again, it is the patient who suffers."

"OCT is an effective diagnostic and treatment tool and in a developed country like Australia its use should be eagerly supported by government, after all Medicare is supposed to be the patients' health insurance vehicle," he said.

"If the Government fails to cover accepted procedures it is patients who are being ripped off by what purports to be universal health cover.

“Release of the National Eye Health Survey just two months ago reinforced the need for eye health and vision care to remain a priority in Australia,” Dr Steiner said.

He added that allowing one treatment per patient per year of OCT was ludicrous, especially for patients at high risk of visual loss and even blindness.

The \$34 MBS rebate is also inadequate.

Dr Steiner said this amount fails to accurately reflect the costs of OCT service delivery. Modern OCT machines cost in the order of \$100,000 and the scans are performed by an orthoptist who is a highly trained, university educated eye care technician.

What is OCT?

Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) is a non-invasive imaging test that uses light waves to take cross-section pictures of your retina, the light-sensitive tissue lining the back of the eye. With OCT, each of the retina’s distinctive layers can be seen, allowing your ophthalmologist to map and measure their thickness. These measurements help with diagnosis and provide treatment guidance for Glaucoma and retinal diseases such as Age-related Macular Degeneration and diabetic eye disease. It allows the Ophthalmologist to see exactly what is going on in the various layers of the retina.

“I would now hate to go back to practicing without my OCT machine,” Dr Steiner explained.

“These days it would be like working with one arm tied behind my back; it is just so useful in allowing me to properly diagnose my patients. I think back to my great teachers when I was training all those years ago and know that they would be in awe of this technology. Sadly the authorities don’t seem to understand, or worse, don’t seem to care.”

**Ends.**

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