

Routine eye exams help prevent vision loss

By Nancy Hopkins
Stouffville This Month

As a practising optometrist in Stouffville for 28 years, Dr. Martin McDowell has found reaction from his patients to the provincial government's plan to de-list OHIP coverage of eye examinations for those aged 20-64 years to be uniformly negative.

According to Dr. McDowell, his patients appear willing to pay taxes to cover essential services

such as eye care that they feel they require. He acknowledges the pressure the government is under to eliminate the deficit, but questions how much de-listing eye examinations will save taxpayers. With a budget of \$120 million, eye care represents a small percentage of the overall \$30 billion health care budget.

The budget speech contained a blanket statement that eye examinations for

individuals aged 20 to 64 would be de-listed, but the Ministry of Health has subsequently suggested that "medically necessary" eye examinations may be covered when patients receive a referral from their family physician. Dr. McDowell confirmed that details as to what constitutes "medically necessary" have not been provided.

OHIP compensation rates to Optometrist have not increased since 1988, which means the rate

compensated falls below the costs of providing an eye examination. In their ongoing negotiations with the Ministry of Health, the Ontario Association of Optometrist identified de-listing services as a last option. However, according to Dr. McDowell the association learned of the de-listing decision during the budget speech along with the rest of the public.

"I think the government made a move on this and now they are reacting to

reaction," he said. He believes that "vision is a health issue and to suggest otherwise is not accurate." Professionals in the eye care field practise with an ethical responsibility to care for the population, recommending routine exams for the purpose of early detection and treatment of eye disease.

"Routine care promotes early detection and early treatment which prevents vision loss," said Dr. McDowell. Cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, diabetes and high blood pressure constitute 'the five major health problems that affect eye sight and preventative steps can be taken to lessen the loss of sight or prevent it altogether.

Eye care is not specifically mentioned within the Canada Health Act and so, provinces are not required to provide this service to their citizens under medicare. Ontario is following the example of other provinces that have de-listed eye examinations as a means of saving money.

"My practice will continue -- there are enough patients of means to keep it going," said Dr. McDowell. "What concerns me is the little guy that is going to get hit with something he can't afford." The optometrist feels that the de-listing plan as currently outlined is "a policy that is going to hit the weakest and poorest and will produce only miniscule savings."



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