Mapping Integrated Care Cases in Australia

**Title of the project:** Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program

**Location:** Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital, South Brisbane QLD Australia

**Funder**
Clinical Excellence Division, Queensland Department of Health
Children’s Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service

**Project Partners**
Optometry Queensland and Northern Territory
Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmology
Primary Health Networks
School of Optometry and Vision Science, Queensland University of Technology
1. SUMMARY

The Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program (POAP) is an interprofessional education and collaboration model involving paediatric ophthalmologists from Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH) and community optometrists. POAP upskills community-based optometrists to provide ongoing care for children with stable eye conditions who have been treated at, and discharged from, LCCH. The key to implementation was recognising and tackling the long and complex history of mutual mistrust and lack of communication between these eye professionals. The major collaboration was around finding the common ground in diagnosis and management that formed the basis of the education program, evidence-based management protocols and discharge guidelines.

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More information can be seen online: https://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/chq/health-professionals/paediatric-health-resources/paediatric-optometry-alignment-program/
2. BACKGROUND

What are the aims and objectives of the Project?

The aim of the Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program (POAP) was to:

- increase engagement between community-based optometrists and the outpatient Eye Clinic of Lady Client Children’s Hospital (LCCH);
- increase the knowledge and skills of the community-based optometrists in paediatric eye care, enabling delivery of care for children with stable eye disease in the community, closer to home;
- initiate discharge pathways for children whose eye conditions could be managed by primary care optometrists;
- improve the access to high standard eye care, within clinically recommended timeframes, for Queensland children; and
- build relationships and develop formal communication pathways between community-based optometry and specialist ophthalmology department.

A high-level governance committee was formed to oversee the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of various eye health projects including POAP.

How did the Project come to being and what are the significant milestones?

In June 2015, there were more than 1,700 children waiting for an ophthalmology outpatient appointment at the Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH), and many of these had been waiting longer than clinically recommended.

The reasons for this access block included:

- large numbers of children returning to outpatients for monitoring of stable, treated conditions including strabismus and amblyopia, who could potentially be managed in the community by appropriately trained optometrists;
- few private ophthalmologists in Queensland providing paediatric care; and
- inappropriate referrals to the Ophthalmology Department from optometrists, GPs and general paediatricians, due to limited training of these professional groups in the assessment and management of paediatric eye conditions.

Funding was received from the Queensland Department of Health to develop the Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program (POAP) to address the waitlist issues. The initial project aims were to:

- promote discharge of patients to community optometrists who have undergone extra training with the Ophthalmology Department; and
- optimise entry into the Ophthalmology Department, through the development of referral guidelines and templates, and
2. BACKGROUND

To create a network of ‘aligned-optometrists’ who could provide complementary eye-care services to children and young people, a continuing education program was developed and delivered by clinical members of the LCCH Ophthalmology Department. The education program included:

- face-to-face workshops presented in Brisbane and in Cairns;
- development of an on-line portal for access to further education materials, and quarterly short meet-ups delivered face-to-face and by videoconference;
- development of dedicated communication channels for community-based optometrists to ask for advice from LCCH-based clinicians; and
- access to evidence-based and current best practice clinical management guidelines developed specifically for optometrists.


POAP has created a network of nearly 100 community-based, LCCH-aligned optometrists, in metropolitan and regional locations from Cairns in far north Queensland to the Tweed Coast in northern New South Wales.

Discharging stable patients to aligned optometrists began in May 2016, with approximately 320 patients discharged by the end of the 2017 calendar year.

Since commencement of the program, the diversity of patient groups to be referred to community-based optometrist has expanded from children with some stable eye conditions to including children with conditions with increased likelihood of ocular consequence now being referred directly to paediatric optometry in the community, thus relieving hospital waiting lists.

The greatest achievement of POAP has been the establishment of trust between eye-care practitioners who contribute to the detection and management of childhood vision disorders.

"Mutual trust makes inter-professional collaboration possible, reduces uncertainty and contributes to the formation of networks of multidisciplinary professionals focused on the needs of patients."

Other outcomes of POAP include:

- Establishment of the first optometry clinic within the LCCH ophthalmology outpatients’ clinic, providing opportunity for increased involvement of optometry in public health delivery;

- Formation of a Journal Club hosted by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) School of Optometry and Vision Science. It is co-ordinated by one of the aligned optometrists and lecturer at QUT, targeted at:
  - Sessional academics
  - Final year optometry students
  - Interested private practitioners.

The journal club meets quarterly with discussion of two to three key papers in paediatric optometry or binocular vision topics.
2. BACKGROUND

How is the project funded, managed and governed?

The Queensland Department of Health funded the initial pilot for two years, then continued funding a project officer position for another year. It is anticipated project officer funding will continue if access to high quality eye care continues to improve.

Community optometrists pay to attend the workshops, therefore the education component is self-sustaining.

The Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program is governed by an interdisciplinary committee, including:

- Director Ophthalmology, Children’s Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service
- Community-based optometrist
- Orthoptist from Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH)
- Medical Director Integrated Care
- Deputy- Director of Medical Services LCCH
- Senior Project Officer, Integrated Care

The Committee co-designed the model and delivered the educational workshops in collaboration.

How is care organised and delivered to users and patients in local communities?

Integrated care between community-based optometrists and hospital-based ophthalmologists and orthoptists offers opportunity for provision of care closer to home and contributes to reducing hospital demand.

As part of the Paediatric Alignment Program (POAP), a dedicated email address was established to facilitate community-based optometrists receiving advice about paediatric eye care and specific questions about de-identified patients; an accessible and cost-neutral process.

To further support delivery of services within Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH), an optometry clinic within the ophthalmology outpatient department was established in 2016. The optometry clinic services are planned to expand in 2018, with clinical placement opportunities for Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Master of Optometry students to gain valuable paediatric specialty experience.

Discharging of stable patients began in May 2016, with approximately 320 patients discharged to aligned optometrists by the end of the 2017 calendar year, meaning 320 families now receive best-practice care, closer to home.

How is the project being taken forward in the future?

We plan to complement the existing POAP training with ongoing mentoring of optometrists through Project ECHO® (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes). Project ECHO® is a key enabler of integrated care (see separate case study). It is a collaborative model of education and care management which exponentially increases access to specialty-level care in rural and underserved areas by providing front-line clinicians with the knowledge and support they need to manage complex patients.

The diagnosis and management of childhood amblyopia has been identified as a potential ECHO® topic.
2. BACKGROUND

Further evidence-based clinical practice guidelines supporting interprofessional eye care are also in progress for future publication.

Programs like POAP are being considered by other regional hospitals in Queensland, and interstate tertiary children's hospitals, with CHQ providing support.

The project team hope to influence undergraduate optometry university courses to include more paediatric content.
3. EVIDENCE

What is the evidence related to improvements in the experience of service users?

Establishing the Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program (POAP) recognised the need for inter-professional collaboration as a response to the increasing numbers of children requiring specialist eye care.

- Total of 159 community-based optometrists attended the POAP workshops dedicated to paediatric eye care.
- Of those 159, optometrists, 94 community-based optometrists agreed to use collaborative care protocols and are now aligned with Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH).
  - This represents nearly ten per-cent of optometrists registered to practice in Queensland.

As previously noted 320 patients have been discharged into the care of LCCH-aligned optometrists and are now receiving optimal care closer to home.

GPs throughout Queensland have been provided information about the LCCH-aligned optometrists so they can advise their patients about them.

What is the evidence related to positive influences on care and health outcomes to individuals and/or communities?

Whilst care and health outcomes have not been specifically evaluated, patient satisfaction was evaluated as part of the program. A small cohort of families were surveyed as the evaluative component of a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Master of Health Management dissertation (n=10). All parents indicated that the optometry practice they visited was much closer to their home than the hospital and 8 of the 10 families were satisfied with the overall care they received from the optometrist they visited and none were dissatisfied.

What is the evidence related to impact on reducing the unnecessary utilisation of care facilities (e.g. of hospitals and long-term residential homes), or the growth in use of alternatives (e.g. domiciliary care; care in the home; self-care)?

In January 2016, 72% of all children on the Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital (LCCH) Ophthalmology waitlist, had waited longer than clinically recommended, as defined by the Department of Health. By the end of November 2017 this was reduced to 36% of all children waiting.

This reduction can be attributed to:

- discharge of stable, treated patients to aligned optometrists, which meant that more new patients could be seen in the LCCH clinic
- more appropriate referrals from optometrists and GPs
- GPs able to refer some patients to aligned optometrists rather than outpatients.
For the first time, an optometry-led clinic was established at the LCCH. This was a direct result of the increase in trust which occurred through POAP. This has also contributed to waitlist reduction/improved access.

Furthermore, for the year 2016/17 over 60% of children and families travelled over 20km to attend the LCCH Ophthalmology Outpatient Department and approximately 25% travelled more than 50km. With the increase in the number of optometrists confident in caring for children expanding across the state, this number is expected to drop as care is delivered closer to home.

**What is the evidence that suggests the project has been able to secure a more cost-effective or sustainable care solution when caring for vulnerable people and communities through integrated community care?**

Cost-effectiveness analysis has not yet been conducted for the Paediatric Optometry Alignment Program.

However, a satisfaction survey conducted with a small cohort of parents of discharged children rated the convenience and affordability of visiting an aligned optometrist between good and excellent. This satisfaction is despite the fact that some optometrists privately bill, and may reflect savings in terms of travel, parking and time off work, compared to travelling to the LCCH for an appointment.

**Has the project ever been, or is it currently subject to a research and evaluation study?**

An interim process evaluation was conducted in June 2016, and found positive engagement and success for the optometrists who attended the initial workshop, which led to the continuation of program’s educational program and discharge processes.

This project is currently in a full evaluation phase, forming the basis of a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Master of Health Management dissertation. This QUT project is a specific investigation of whether this new model of collaborative care for children with chronic eye conditions improves access to specialist paediatric eye care while maintaining the quality of patient care and family satisfaction. Further, the nature of the inter-professional relationship between tertiary hospital specialist eye clinic professionals and community optometrists caring for children has been explored and tested to determine whether the relationship changes after introduction of a collaborative care program.
About IFIC Australia

The core mission of IFIC Australia is to develop capacity and capabilities in Australia and the Asia Pacific Region in the design and delivery of integrated care. IFIC Australia seeks to achieve this by providing a platform to develop and exchange ideas and promote activities in the region in keeping with IFIC’s mission.

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