

Orthoptics: meeting the challenge of the 21st century

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The beginning of March heralded Orthoptic Awareness Week. Past years have seen a focus on diabetic eye health, ocular injuries in children, 3D vision and strabismus. This year we turn our attention inward, reflect on our past and look to the future by highlighting recent changes to orthoptic education which has evolved to meet the increasing demand on health-care services.

The education of orthoptists in Australia has evolved significantly since its beginnings at the Alfred Hospital in Victoria over 70 years ago when orthoptists trained in the hospital setting and developed expertise specifically in ocular motility and strabismus.

Since then the education of orthoptists has moved into the university sector and the scope of practice has broadened significantly. Indeed, the education standards of orthoptists are amongst the highest in the world with Australia being the first country to offer a university bachelor degree program in orthoptics.

Today there are two institutions offering orthoptic programs in Australia: La Trobe University and the University of Sydney. Both institutions offer a two-year masters qualifying degree and La Trobe University also offers a four-year undergraduate entry program, a combined bachelor and masters degree.

The increasing burden of eye disease and the growing focus on efficient delivery of enhanced

patient care has seen orthoptists meet these 21st century challenges by diversifying their practice.

In the last several decades orthoptists have developed expertise in broader areas of detecting eye disease, understanding and investigating neuro-ophthalmic disorders and providing low vision assessment and rehabilitation. That is in addition to maintaining their expertise in the management of ocular motility disorders and paediatric conditions.

A strong focus on research, evidence-based and inter-professional practice has ensured that orthoptists are able to adapt to their ever-expanding role in eye-health-care services.

Clinical education continues to be at the forefront of orthoptic training. Both the University of Sydney and La Trobe University dedicate a significant component of their courses to clinical placements.

For instance, at La Trobe University clinical education and professional practice is undertaken in the last 18 months of the course largely within the Orthoptic Clinical School at the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital which includes a network of public and private clinics providing ophthalmology and orthoptic services.

Students are also able to travel and undertake placements in regional settings, interstate and overseas including countries such as Canada, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States.

Clinical placements are important in providing students with opportunities to integrate theoretical learning into clinical practice to facilitate their development as highly-skilled practitioners.

Students now also undertake comprehensive training in understanding the scope and function of service-delivery management.

That includes an understanding of care pathways, the ability to critically review clinical protocols and procedures and use an evidence-based approach to identify gaps and weaknesses in current models of care.

Graduates are therefore not only skilled in orthoptic practice but also in understanding the broader health care context and service development.

That has led to graduates working in diverse fields such as those working as part of rural health networks providing services in remote communities.

In addition, there is a strong focus on research with students gaining significant training in research methods and provided opportunities to undertake research projects within their degree.

At the University of Sydney that has translated into an internationally-recognised research group working in the area of the development of visual acuity in young children and refraction in children and adolescents, particularly myopia. They have published 18 papers on these topics in highly-ranked journals in the last

five years and achieved funding from major granting bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council. That research is making an active contribution to the evidence-base for orthoptic practice.

The focus in orthoptic education has led to graduates being placed in major clinical research ophthalmic departments overseas such as the Children's Hospital Boston, the paediatric training hospital for Harvard Medical School, where three graduates of the University of Sydney now work.

Through the evolution of orthoptic education to meet the challenges of 21st century health care, the orthoptic profession continues to develop and broaden, maintaining workforce demand and providing a bright and rewarding career and future for graduates working in a variety of settings including hospital outpatient departments, private ophthalmic practices, low vision agencies, universities and research centres. ■

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