

THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

Aspects of Optometric Education in Australia

By G. Woo

Three schools of optometry in Australia were visited by the author during his sabbatical leave in 1977. This report presents some aspects of optometry in three states of Australia—Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Optometric education in Australia as in North America is conducted in universities and comes under the jurisdiction of individual states. There are six states in Australia, and optometric institutions are located in three of the states. This paper deals with educational aspects of optometry in those three states.

Part I: Victoria

In order to qualify as an optometrist in the State of Victoria, a potential candidate usually goes through the Optometry program at the University of Melbourne. This course is four years in duration. The prerequisite to entering the program is completion of the Higher School Certificate (Form 6) in five subjects. Typically, these subjects are: 1) English, 2) Chemistry, 3) Physics, 4) General Mathematics, and 5) Biology. General Mathematics and Biology may be substituted by Pure Mathematics and Applied Mathematics. Generally, counseling of students begins before they enter the University.

The four-year program is described in the Faculty of Science handbook. The Department of Optometry of the University of Melbourne teaches optometry courses. The number of optometry courses makes up 25 percent of the curriculum in Year II, 50 percent in Year III

and 100 percent in Year IV. The Victorian College of Optometry, however, provides clinical facilities for training optometry students. Examination of the didactic portion of the optometry curriculum in Years II, III and IV reveals that the courses given are similar to those given at British universities. As an example, a course in Physiological Optics will encompass all aspects of physiological optics normally given at a North American optometry school in four or five separate courses. Another example is the Public Health course. This includes not only public health optometry, but also illumination, occupational and environmental optometry. At North American universities, these are taken as separate subjects.

The first-year program is similar to the pre-optometry program at the University of Waterloo. However, only a limited number of students are admitted into Year I since there is a quota, and these students are usually pre-selected. Relatively few students, who are enrolled in other universities, would be able to join the program in Year II. Provided a student passes the prescribed subjects of Year I, a seat in the optometry program will be ensured. Between the third and the fourth years, optometry students are required to attend clinical sessions (approximately three weeks in duration) in addition to the regular university year, which ordinarily begins in March and ends in December. By the time a student graduates from the program, he would have seen approximately 120 patients in the clinic.

At the end of their fourth year, students are asked to write a set of comprehensive examinations in various subjects which they undertook in the previous three years. They are also re-

quired to pass oral examinations. Upon completion of the program, the degree Bachelor of Science in Optometry is conferred upon the candidate by the University of Melbourne. No additional examination is required for licensure in the State of Victoria.

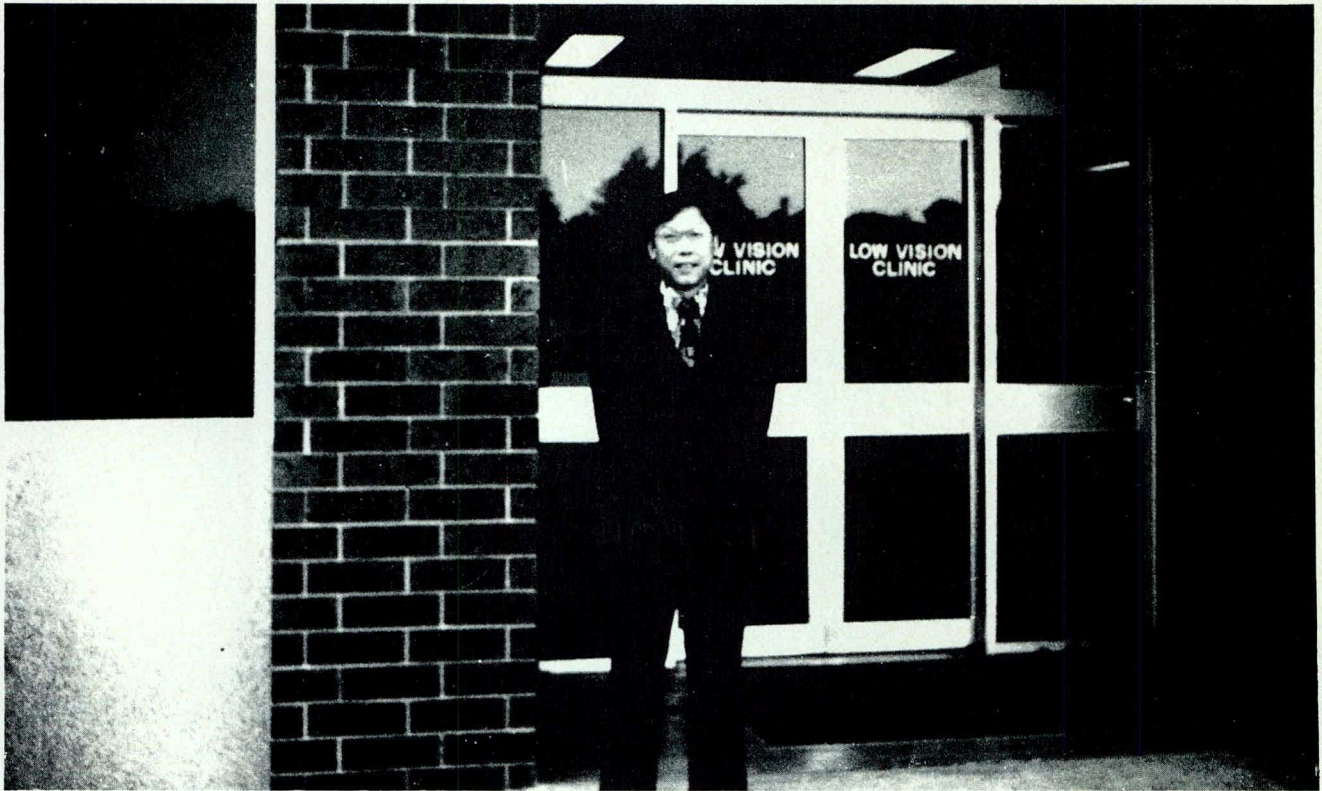
General clinical training facilities in the department seem to be more than adequate. Insofar as specialty clinics are concerned, the department is known for its participation in a joint Low Vision program sponsored by the Association for the Blind at Kooyong Centre for the Blind. Its contact lens clinic is also well equipped. Many papers in both low vision and contact lens areas have been published in international optometric journals. Active research is being carried out in these areas.

There is a register kept by the Registrar of the licensing body. Its main function is to register and deregister optometrists in the State of Victoria, as well as maintain the Optometrists Registration Act of 1958. The Registration Board also recognizes registrations in the other states of Australia by reciprocity. It considers specific programs in optometry in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom as being equivalent. In its 1976 regulations, a University of Waterloo graduate is eligible to register in the State of Victoria without further examination. Optometry programs in South Africa are excluded from this list.

The Board of Education of the Victorian College of Optometry arranges continuing education courses throughout the year. There is also a professional program held monthly. Practicing optometrists from the State of Victoria and neighboring states attend these

Winter/Spring, 1978

G. Woo, O.D., Ph.D., is Associate Professor at the University of Waterloo School of Optometry, Ontario.
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The Low Vision Clinic, Association for the Blind, Kooyong, Victoria

courses and meetings on evenings and weekends.

Although the undergraduate enrollment of optometry students is in the vicinity of 20 students per year, the department at present has five full-time graduate students working toward either the M.Sc. degree or the Ph.D. degree. There are a few research fellows from other agencies as well. Adjacent to the Victorian College of Optometry is the National Vision Research Institute of Australia founded by practicing optometrists throughout Australia and affiliated with the Victorian College of Optometry. It is still in its developmental stage and a director is yet to be announced.

The University of Melbourne offers programs in medicine and dentistry as well as optometry. Degrees conferred by the University in these other disciplines are M.B.B.S. (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery) and B.D.S. (Bachelor of Dental Surgery). The duration of the medical program is six years and that of the dental program is five years.

Part II: New South Wales

In the State of New South Wales, there is one School of Optometry within the University of New South Wales located in Winter/Spring, 1978

cated in Kensington near Sydney. The "school" status was established in January, 1977. The head of the school is Professor J. Lederer who at present occupies the only professorial chair in optometry in Australia.

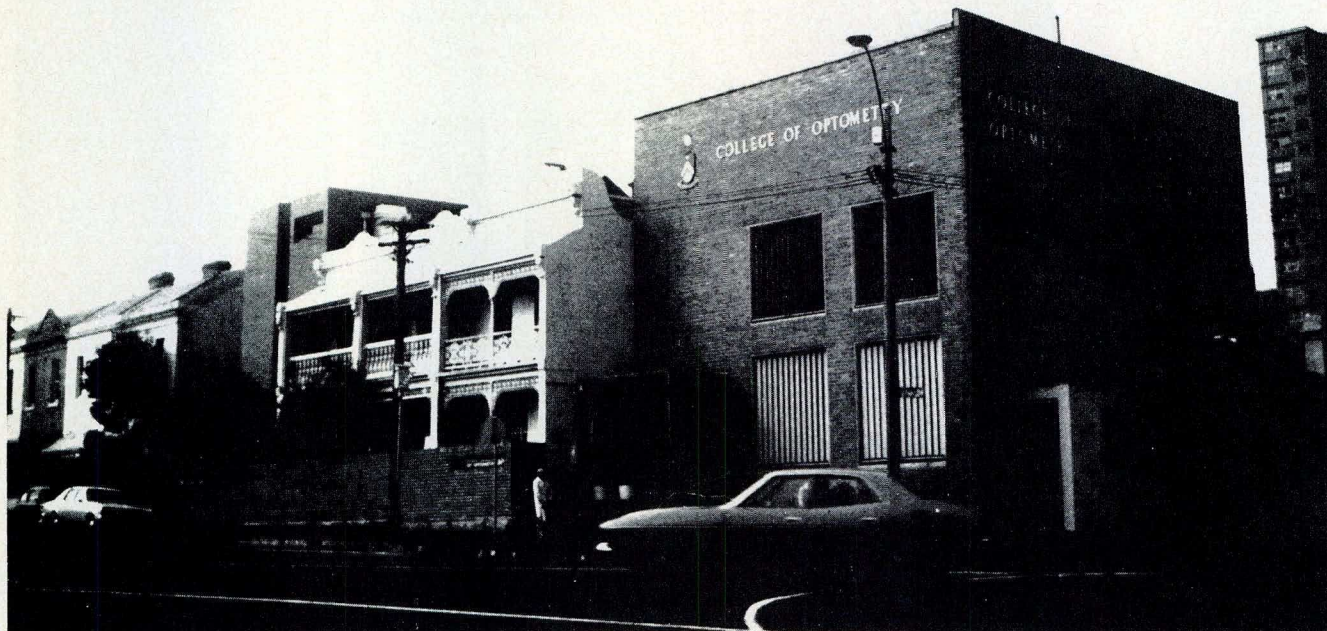
The program of optometry is four years in duration. University entrance requires completion of the Higher School Certificate. There is a quota on the number of students enrolled in the first-year optometry program. Failure or dropout rate is between 25 and 40 percent. Year II, or the first professional year, has a quota of an additional 20 students who transfer from other science programs either within the University of New South Wales or from any other Australian university. The first-year program includes Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Biology. The second and third-year programs consist of three major subjects and an elective. The final year is made up of four subjects and one elective. A detailed description of these subjects is in the School of Optometry handbook. Each term or semester is 14 weeks in duration. Completion of the course normally takes eight terms. Students begin to see patients in their third year. A total number of 100 patients in general clinic and between 30 to 50 patients in specialized clinics are seen by a student before he graduates.

There is also an externship program arranged by the department between students in optometry and private practitioners.

A socialized health care program (Medibank), equivalent to Ontario's OHIP, does not reimburse the University for services rendered by students although private optometrists are eligible for payment. Consequently, there is no actual fee for eye examinations at the optometry clinic. There are two groups of patients attending the clinic. The first group receives examinations only and necessary prescriptions are given to them to be filled elsewhere. The second group of patients receives examinations and spectacles without charge. These latter patients are either registered with various welfare agencies or with the Repatriation Department (veteran's affairs). Thus dispensing is not routinely performed, although students do get their experience in externship programs with practicing optometrists and with a limited number of patients from the second group of patients described earlier.

A number of well-equipped consulting rooms are in the general clinic. In addition, there is a pleiothoptic (pleo-optics and orthoptics) clinic, a contact lens clinic and a low vision clinic. Each of these specialty clinics is headed by

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The Department of Optometry, University of Melbourne, Melbourne

one of the faculty members. There is also an external clinic of pediatric optometry. An external low vision clinic is being developed jointly by the school and the Royal Society for the Blind in Sydney.

Upon completion of the optometry program, a student receives the degree B. Optom. (Bachelor of Optometry) from the University. With this degree, he may register with the New South Wales Board of Optometrical Registration where the register is kept without further examination. The New South Wales Board also considers specific programs in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom as being equivalent. It works closely with the Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications which is associated with the Immigration Department of the federal government of Australia in Canberra. It appears at the moment that both University of Montreal and University of Waterloo graduates may register in New South Wales without further examinations.

Although the New South Wales Optometry Act allows optometrists to use drugs, only those who have completed a course, "The use of drugs in refraction and examination of the eyes," may do so. The registrar keeps a list of optometrists who are eligible to use drugs. They need to show documentary evidence of their training and know-

ledge in ocular pharmacology. The University of New South Wales gives a course on pharmacology to optometrists from time to time and an examination is compulsory at the end of the course. A British graduate is generally considered proficient in the use of drugs by the Board, and he is exempted from the pharmacology course and the examination.

In 1977, there were 347 undergraduates enrolled in the program, and a total of ten part-time and full-time graduate students are enrolled either in the M. Optom. program or the M.Sc. or Ph.D. programs. The latter two degrees are research oriented degrees awarded by the Faculty of Science. The M. Optom. degree is a clinically oriented program, it consists of course work and a research project. The University of New South Wales has a medical program of five years duration, and the degree conferred by the University is M.B.B.S. (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery).

The Optometric Vision Research Foundation is loosely affiliated with the University of New South Wales. It generates funds primarily from optical industries and private practitioners and supports various research projects in the Schools of Optometry at New South Wales and Queensland.

Part III: Queensland

A three-year diploma course in optometry has been available at the Queensland Institute of Technology since 1966. It is given in the Department of Paramedical Studies. Since August, 1977, a Section of Optometry has been created. Prerequisites for entry into the course are similar to the University of Melbourne and the University of New South Wales. The number of students in the three-year program is 64. Recently there were some discussions on the possibility of changing the curriculum of the course to a four-year degree program. A tour of the facilities in the optometry clinic revealed that all clinical rooms are well equipped. Research activities, however, are much less apparent than at other schools in Australia.

It is interesting to note that in the state of Queensland, there are no opticians. Optometrists not only fill their own prescriptions but also those generated by ophthalmologists. Some optical firms hire optometrists to serve specifically as dispensing opticians. ●

Acknowledgements:

This project was supported by the College of Optometrists of Ontario and the Department of External Affairs, Government of Canada. The author acknowledges assistance given by Dr. B.L. Cole and Professor J. Lederer.

Winter/Spring, 1978