



A Western School of Optometry — The Peat Marwick Report is Not All Bad —

Since the early forties, optometric leaders in the West, particularly from Saskatchewan, have been discussing, and lobbying for, the establishment of a Western School of Optometry. This came to a head in 1944 when a committee of the Saskatchewan Optometric Association prepared and presented a lengthy brief to the President of the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.¹ This brief was most comprehensive and covered the nature and scope of optometry, its history, the evolution of its educational programme, social and economic factors in health care manpower, the need for a school and proposed improvements in the training system. This document is preserved in the archives of the provincial association. Photocopies are being distributed to C.A.O., the optometry museum in Waterloo and the two schools.

Why the proposal was not acted upon at that time is uncertain but the end of the war in 1945 and the great influx of veterans into universities did have some effect. The demand was immediate. The development of a new facility was too long a process to respond to this demand, so the Ontario College expanded to satisfy the influx. At best, this expansion could not be classed as permanent but it did provide a short term solution to the need for optometric services.

The prosperity of the post-war years and the marked increase in population only served to emphasize to optometric leaders the need for improvements in optometric training institutions. The drastic reduction in optometric enrolment in our two schools, more so in Toronto, demanded some long range planning, including the need for adequate public funding to permit upgrading the physical facilities and the hiring of more faculty for teaching and research.

From its founding in 1925 the College of Optometry of Ontario subsisted on student fees, the license fees of Ontario optometrists and donations from individuals and provinces. Between 1946 and 1955 D.V.A. grants for student veterans financed, in part, the expanded activities at the College but these were discontinued with the departure of these large

veterans classes. The School in Montreal, although only an affiliated institution, did receive some provincial assistance but hardly enough to say the school was well-to-do.

The survival of optometry was now critical — decreased enrolments, the difficulty of attracting faculty people, the need to carry out research in physiological optics to justify our existence as a separate health care discipline, forced the schools to embark upon campaigns for greater recognition in the form of a university school and public funding. Both schools achieved their objectives of university integration: the Ontario college became the School of Optometry Faculty of Science, University of Waterloo in 1967. The school in Montreal gave up its affiliated status to become fully integrated into the University of Montreal in 1969.

The integration of the two independent schools into their respective provincial university systems brought about increased enrolment, almost doubling the pre-integration rate. But, once again, this was a short term solution and now a crisis again looms as the large classes of veterans from the late forties and early fifties begin to approach retirement age. The average age has risen sharply, despite the increased number of graduates from Waterloo. In Quebec, however, the age has remained low and the majority of practitioners are below the age of 40.

For English Canada the manpower problem, particularly in the Western provinces, has remained. The need for a Western School has never disappeared. Successive C.A.O. councils have given it continued and ever-increasing attention. In 1968, council set up a Western Facilities Committee to investigate the establishment of a School of Optometry in a Western University. Although a great deal has been accomplished in informing political leaders and administrators of the scope and nature of optometry, the benefits to society and to the health care system of a Western School, several obstacles still must be overcome. The first, and most obvious, is the opposition by medicine and ophthalmology who have mounted a nationwide campaign to show that "ophthalmic technicians,"² moulded on the D.N.D. concept, are capable of fulfilling all the functions of an optometrist and

are less expensive to train. What is not mentioned is that these technicians cannot practice as independent people. They must work out of the ophthalmologist's office and, hence, there is lessened distribution and less availability of services.

The four Western provinces, in the past, have consulted and co-operated on educational facilities in order to avoid duplication and so reduce cost. The best example of this "consortium" concept might be the School of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon, which serves the four Western provinces who share its costs. The idea of regional educational facilities is a rational approach to education and is receiving more attention, particularly in Western Canada and the Maritimes.

As one would expect, any such decision by an interprovincial body is not made overnight, but taken only after adequate study of cost, priority, need and benefit to society, not to mention manpower studies, particularly in the field of health care.

Irrespective of the nature of a new facility and of a favourable report by such a committee, two conditions must be met. These apply to optometry as well as any other field.

- 1- a university or province must *want* the new facility and established faculties at the chosen university *must* be agreeable to accepting it.
- 2- a provincial government or governments must provide the funding for capital, and annual operating grants. An agreement such as was reached in the case of veterinary medicine, or similar to that established for student places at Waterloo, must be determined.

Up to the present time, two approaches have failed because, in one case, funding was lacking. In the other case, established faculties, led by medicine, voted against an optometry school claiming that their already-constrained budgets would be further reduced by an optometry department.

Some four years ago, the four Western provinces commissioned the firm of Peat Marwick and Partners to prepare a report on health training in these provinces. The study was to cover cost, manpower training, public need and demand for services.

The Peat Marwick report has now been made public. Although at first reading it seems unfavourable to optometry, it is not as negative as might first be thought. Among its many recommendations, two are very pertinent to optometry:

- 1- the report admits the need for more optometrists but suggests that new manpower be obtained from existing institutions in Canada, U.S.A. or overseas.
- 2- the report recognizes the oversupply of ophthalmologists and recommends a reduction to two residencies per year for the four provinces.

So although the report does not recommend, at this time, a new school of optometry it recognizes two of optometry's most important arguments: the need for more optometrists and the oversupply of ophthalmologists.

The question of a Western School of Optometry reverts once again to the political arena. Finances are the key to the solution. Compared to other health care training facilities, optometry is the *least* expensive. It seems strange that politicians are so apprehensive about funding an optometry school, particularly when students from these provinces must exile themselves to obtain an education in optometry, at much greater cost to themselves, and the provinces, than if they were to attend a Western School.

Governments are more apt to be responsive to our petitions if we demonstrate that our participation is more than vocal. The credibility of the profession must be proven by the provision of some capital grants from the profession and its practitioners. The Canadian Optometric Education Trust Fund is the agency par excellence for the collection of such money. Optometrists across the country must recognize their duty and responsibility in this matter and respond generously. We are far from reaching 100% participation among our membership. We encourage those who have not yet pledged their support to do so without delay. Optometry needs the manpower!

Reference

- 1- A Paper Concerning and Proposing a College of Optometry at the University of Saskatchewan, presented to the President by the Saskatchewan Optometric Association, Part I, June 1944, Part II, Nov. '44.
- 2- Perspectives on Health Occupations — A Study of the Canadian Medical Association Committee on Allied Health, July, 1983.

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