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Joint Position Statement between:

Canadian Vision Rehabilitation Society
Canadian Ophthalmological Society
Canadian Glaucoma Society

Vision Rehabilitation:

An Essential Component of Comprehensive Eye Care in Canada

Vision rehabilitation is a critical and evidence-based component of comprehensive eye care. As Canada's population ages and the prevalence of chronic eye disease rises, irreversible vision loss represents an increasing public health challenge. Ensuring timely and equitable access to coordinated vision rehabilitation services is essential to preserving independence, safety, and quality of life for Canadians living with vision impairment.

Definition and Scope

Low vision refers to irreversible vision impairment that cannot be corrected by medical, surgical, or conventional refractive interventions, including glasses or contact lenses. This may involve reduced best-corrected visual acuity, impaired contrast sensitivity, visual field loss, or the presence of scotomas.

In North America, legal blindness is defined as best-corrected visual acuity of 20/200 or worse in the better-seeing eye, or a visual field diameter of 20 degrees or less in the better-seeing eye.¹ In Canada, individuals meeting these criteria may qualify for the Disability Tax Credit administered by the Canada Revenue Agency.²

However, the need for vision rehabilitation extends well beyond the threshold of legal blindness. Individuals with moderate vision impairment frequently experience substantial functional limitations and may benefit significantly from early rehabilitation interventions.

Epidemiology and Impact

Globally, an estimated 295 million people were living with moderate to severe vision impairment in 2020, including 43.3 million who were blind.³ In Canada, the leading causes of irreversible vision loss include age-related macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma.³

Vision impairment is associated with significant functional and psychosocial consequences, including difficulty with reading, mobility, driving, medication management, and other activities of daily living. It increases the risk of falls, social isolation, depression, anxiety, and visual hallucinations, and contributes to diminished overall quality of life.^{1,4} Vision loss also carries substantial economic and societal costs, including increased health care utilization, reduced productivity, and greater reliance on social support services.³

Vision Rehabilitation in Canada

Vision rehabilitation aims to mitigate the functional impact of irreversible vision loss and enhance safety, independence, and participation in daily life.⁵ Interventions may include:

- Optimization of residual vision
- Prescription of optical and electronic assistive devices
- Adaptive techniques and environmental modifications
- Orientation and mobility training
- Skills training for daily living
- Access to community-based and educational resources

Vision rehabilitation services in Canada are delivered through diverse models and providers, including ophthalmologists, optometrists, occupational therapists, vision specialists, assistive technology providers, community organizations such as CNIB / Vision Loss Rehabilitation Canada, government-funded multidisciplinary centres in Quebec, the Centre for Equitable Library Access, and others.^{6,13}

Vision rehabilitation is distinct from vision therapy and addresses a separate clinical domain.¹⁴

The World Health Organization's *World Report on Vision* identifies rehabilitation as an essential component of the continuum of eye care, alongside health promotion, prevention, and treatment.¹⁷ Ideally, individuals with irreversible vision loss should have access to coordinated rehabilitation services through multiple entry points, including referral by physicians and eye care providers.

Barriers to Access

Despite clear evidence supporting the benefits of vision rehabilitation, access across Canada remains inconsistent.

Barriers include:

- Inadequate or variable public funding for services and assistive devices
- Financial constraints for patients
- Limited awareness among patients and providers
- Inconsistent referral practices
- Geographic disparities in service availability

It is estimated that only 5–10% of Canadians who could benefit from vision rehabilitation currently access these services.^{15,16} Existing funding models vary considerably between provinces, and dedicated funding to support eye care professionals in delivering rehabilitation services is often lacking.¹³ Addressing these barriers is essential to achieving equitable care.

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