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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Expanding the traditional role of optometry: Current practice patterns and attitudes to enhanced glaucoma services in Ireland

Catriona Barrett<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, James Loughman<sup>a,b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Dublin Institute of Technology, 19A Lower Kevin Street, Dublin 8, Ireland

<sup>b</sup> DIT Centre for Eye Research Ireland, Environmental Sustainability and Health Institute, Dublin, Ireland

<sup>c</sup> African Vision Research Institute, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

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### KEYWORDS

Case-finding;  
Glaucoma;  
Optometrist;  
Survey

### Abstract

**Purpose:** To investigate current diagnostic equipment availability and usage for glaucoma case-finding within community optometric practice, and to explore optometrists' attitudes towards an enhanced scope of clinical practice.

**Methods:** An anonymous survey was developed, validated, and distributed to all optometrists in Ireland.

**Results:** 199 optometrists (27% of registrants) responded to the survey. 87% had access to the traditional triad of tests necessary to conduct adequate glaucoma case finding. Standard automated perimetry was the most commonly absent (13%) of the three essential screening tests. 64% of respondents indicated that monocular direct ophthalmoscopy was their first choice technique for fundus examination. 47% of respondents had access to contact applanation tonometry, though just 14% used it as first choice during routine eye examinations. Among the 73 participants with access to both contact and non-contact tonometry (NCT), 80.8% used NCT preferentially. The significant majority (98%) indicated an interest in enhanced glaucoma services with 57% agreeing that postgraduate training was an essential prerequisite to any increase in scope of practice.

**Conclusion:** Irish optometrists are well equipped with the traditional tests used in glaucoma detection. However, implementation of enhanced referral schemes or glaucoma monitoring or management services would require equipment upgrades and associated training in at least half of the surveyed practices. There is strong interest in furthering optometric professional development and expanding the traditional role boundaries of optometrists, incorporating further education as an essential prerequisite to an enhanced scope of practice.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [catriona.barrett@dit.ie](mailto:catriona.barrett@dit.ie) (C. Barrett).

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

Detección de casos;  
Glaucoma;  
Optometrista;  
Encuesta

## Ampliar el rol tradicional de la optometría: patrones actuales de práctica y actitudes hacia la mejora de los servicios para glaucoma en Irlanda

### Resumen

**Objetivo:** Estudiar la disponibilidad actual y el uso del equipo diagnóstico para la detección de casos de glaucoma dentro de la práctica optométrica comunitaria, y explorar las actitudes de los optometristas hacia la mejora del alcance de la práctica clínica.

**Métodos:** Se desarrolló, validó y distribuyó una encuesta anónima a todos los optometristas de Irlanda.

**Resultados:** 199 optometristas (el 27% de los registrados) respondieron a la encuesta. El 87% tenía acceso a la triada tradicional de pruebas necesarias para realizar una detección adecuada de casos de glaucoma. La perimetría automatizada estándar fue la más comúnmente ausente (13%) de las tres pruebas de cribado esenciales. El 64% de los que respondieron al test indicó que la oftalmoscopia directa monocular era su técnica de primera elección para el examen del fondo del ojo. El 47% de los que respondieron a la encuesta tenía acceso a la tonometría de aplanación de contacto, aunque únicamente el 14% la utilizaba como primera elección durante los exámenes oculares rutinarios. Entre los 73 participantes con acceso tanto a la tonometría de contacto como a la de no contacto (NCT), el 80,8% utilizaban NCT preferentemente. Una mayoría significativa (98%) indicó su interés por mejorar los servicios de glaucoma, el 57% de los cuales afirmó que la formación post-grado era un requisito previo esencial para cualquier incremento del alcance de la práctica.

**Conclusión:** Los optometristas irlandeses están bien equipados de las pruebas tradicionales utilizadas para la detección del glaucoma. Sin embargo, la introducción de programas de mejora de la derivación, o supervisión del glaucoma, o servicios de gestión, requeriría la modernización de los equipos y la formación asociada en al menos el 50% de los encuestados. Existe un fuerte interés por ampliar el desarrollo profesional de la optometría y expandir los límites de la función tradicional de los optometristas, incorporando mayor formación como requisito previo esencial para mejorar el alcance de la práctica.

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## Introduction

Optometrists play a vital role in detecting glaucoma, the world's leading cause of irreversible blindness.<sup>1</sup> Primary open angle glaucoma (POAG), the most common glaucoma subtype,<sup>2</sup> is insidious, progressive and irreversible, presenting a significant public health challenge.<sup>2</sup> As population screening for POAG is neither cost effective<sup>3</sup> nor viable,<sup>4</sup> it is primarily detected through opportunistic case-finding during routine eye examinations. Evidence from the UK<sup>5</sup> has shown that the vast majority of glaucoma and ocular hypertension cases are detected through opportunistic case-finding by community based optometrists.

In Ireland, as with many jurisdictions, there are no specific guidelines relating to glaucoma detection in optometric practice. In 2009, the Association of Optometrists Ireland (AOI) issued guidelines for optometrists outlining the procedures that might be carried out during a routine eye exam,<sup>6</sup> and this document does refer to the examination of patients at risk of glaucoma, stating that intraocular pressure measurement and visual field assessment should be carried out on all patients deemed to be at risk of glaucoma. The choice of equipment used for these tests and the protocol for determining those at risk from glaucoma are not defined, leaving considerable room for variation between practitioners.

Optometric practices wishing to provide state funded eye examinations in Ireland must sign an agreement that outlines the scope and content of the eye exam to be provided. This document states that the contracted optometrist agrees to 'provide eye examinations and advice to the best of his/her knowledge and ability for eligible persons...using suitable instruments and equipment in a suitable manner' and to 'carry out all tests judged to be necessary to determine the patient's need for vision care as in both sight and health provided that the exact format and content will be determined by the optometrist's professional judgement.'<sup>7</sup> It can be inferred, that the scope of the eye exam is quite broad and gives responsibility to optometrists to determine the patients' refractive correction and to rule out any form of ocular pathology including glaucoma, though the accepted standards for examination strategies are not clearly defined.

Clinical practice norms in optometry have evolved significantly over the past few decades, with optometric training in Ireland moving from a once part-time, evening course diploma, to a now full-time, four-year honours degree programme,<sup>8</sup> and optometrists are now highly trained health care professionals. The range of equipment and examinations in use within optometry practices has also grown, and optometrists are expected to make pragmatic judgements as to which investigations can feasibly

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