5-1-1998

A public survey on perceptions of vision care: A Portland study

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Recommended Citation
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Abstract
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Degree Type
Thesis

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A PUBLIC SURVEY ON PERCEPTIONS OF VISION CARE:

A PORTLAND STUDY

By

Tanya K. Mahaphon
Robert E. Franks Jr.

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the
College of Optometry
Pacific University
Forest Grove, Oregon
for the degree of
Doctor of Optometry
May 1998

Adviser:
Willard B. Bleything, M.S., O.D.
A PUBLIC SURVEY ON PERCEPTIONS OF VISION CARE: A PORTLAND STUDY

Tanya K. Mahaphon:

Robert E. Franks Jr.:

Willard B. Bleything, M.S., O.D.:
Biography of Authors

Tanya K. Mahaphon received her bachelor's of science degree in biology from the University of California, San Diego. Currently she is working on her Doctor of Optometry degree and a concurrent master's degree in education with an emphasis on visual function and learning at Pacific University in Forest Grove, OR. Upon graduation in May 1998, she hopes to participate in a year residency in vision therapy or low vision.

Robert E. Franks Jr. Grew up in Vacaville, CA. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in chemistry at California State University, Sacramento. After completing a year of graduate work in chemistry, he was accepted to Pacific University in 1996. At the moment he is working on his Doctor of Optometry degree. He hopes to enter into a private practice upon graduation in May 2000.
Acknowledgments

We would like to give special thanks to the following people:

Willard B. Bleything, O.D., M.S., our thesis advisor, for his guidance and encouragement throughout our project. His knowledge and experience with the subject matter provided valuable information to the design of our questionnaire.

Chip and Connie Mullinax, Paul and Kathy Hendrickson, Hayes Redmond, and Beth Pittman for their help in the collection process of the data.
Abstract

A questionnaire was developed to sample a general population’s knowledge and perceptions about vision care and vision care providers. The questionnaire also sampled current choice of eye care provider, frequency of eye examinations, and satisfaction with eye care services. Of the 248 respondents, about 67% get their eyes examined every one to two years. People aged 60 years and older tend to have their eyes examined every two years rather than annually. For their last eye exam, people choose private optometrists(33.6%), ophthalmologists(29.0%), HMO's(15.4%), optical chains(12.0%), school screenings(4.6%), not sure (3.3%), and health fairs(0.4%). Overall, 81% of the respondents underestimated the schooling/training for optometrists and ophthalmologists and overestimated the training/schooling for opticians. The population choose optometrists for refractive situations such as contact lenses, ophthalmologists for disease treatment and surgery, and opticians for eyeglass and frame situations. Vision therapy was associated more with ophthalmologists than optometrists. There is a lack in public knowledge about vision care services provided by optometrists such as vision therapy and disease treatment.
Introduction

With the broad scope of optometry which includes refraction, contact lenses, primary care eye health, disease management, binocular vision therapy, and low vision, what do our patients know about our role in vision care? Currently, every state in the United States except for District of Columbia has a therapeutic pharmaceutical law which enables optometrists to treat various forms of eye diseases. Do our patients know that we are qualified in diagnosing and treating eye diseases or do they automatically make an appointment with the ophthalmologist for a red eye? With the increase in computer use, binocular vision problems are becoming more prominent today. Do our patients know that optometrists can provide services such as vision therapy to help enhance their binocular vision and visual efficiency? How misinformed is the general public about the roles of different eye care providers? Unpublished data from a 1996 AOA survey, a follow-up survey to the 1989 AOA survey on "Public's perceptions (and misconceptions) about optometry amplified in new consumer survey," found that only 18% polled knew that both ODs and MDs do not grind lenses.¹

Louis Harris and Associates found that out of 1006 people, 80% consider sight the most important of the five senses.² Yet, people until ages 50 and up consider the dentist more important to good health than an eye doctor.² Also, a recent Bausch and Lomb survey found that "Americans are more likely to service their cars than get an annual eye exam."³ This should be a wake up call for all eye care providers: optometry, ophthalmology, and opticianry that the general public does not see the importance of an annual eye exam! We need to do more public education and awareness of the importance of vision care.

Although the American public may feel they are getting enough information about vision care and products, are they really getting the correct information? The Louis Harris survey reports 74% of the 1006 people polled felt they were getting enough information about vision care and products, but only 15% of those people answered correctly that 20/20 does not mean perfect vision.²

There have been previous surveys on factors that influence choice of eye doctor such as office image³, advertising style⁴, patient recommendations⁵. The purpose of this study is to find out what people know about the different eyecare providers and how this affects their choices of who to see for different visual problems.
Specifically we wish to determine...

...how often do people get their eyes examined? Does this correspond with people's last eye exam? How does age and educational level relate to the frequency of eye examinations? How do these results compare to Luce and Luce's results from 1989?6

...how many people go to an optometrist, ophthalmologist, or optician for eye care? Are there preferences in eye care providers based on educational level and age of the person? How do these results compare to previous studies conducted by Luce and Luce at the Portland Rose Festival on June 1989? 6 Were people satisfied with the service they received by that eye care provider?

...how many years of college and professional/training do people think optometrists, ophthalmologists, and opticians receive? Is there a correlation between educational level of the public and their knowledge about the schooling/training for these eye care professions?

...which eye care provider do people choose for different visual situations such as contact lenses, broken glasses, red eyes, frame change, problems reading and writing at school, distance blur, and regular eye check-up? Does current eyeglass or contact lens wear or educational levels of the person correlate to preferences in eye care providers?

...what services such as ordering/fitting glasses, eye surgery, vision therapy (eye exercises), making eyeglasses, disease treatment, and prescribing eye drops do people associate with optometrists, ophthalmologist, and opticians?
Methods

A structured questionnaire was utilized to gather information about the public's knowledge of vision care and vision care providers (See Appendix 1). To classify the "general" public surveyed, subject background information questions were included such as age group, gender, ethnic background, education level, visual status, and current vision care provider.

For descriptive analysis, multiple choice questions were used to survey the subjects. The first section included questions on the educational level of opticians, optometrists, and ophthalmologists. To obtain a more real world representation of public opinion on vision care, the second section was case scenarios of different visual problems taken from a previous study. The subjects were asked to personally choose the vision care provider they would go see. To reaffirm the public's knowledge of the scope of practice for the different vision care providers, the last section was a chart of different vision care services. The subjects were asked to mark the services that apply to an optometrist, an ophthalmologist, and an optician.

To obtain the most diverse cross section of the "general" public, the survey questionnaires were distributed by eight optometry students to bystanders at the Portland Rose Festival Parade on Saturday, June 7, 1997. Attempts were made to equally poll subjects on both parts of the parade route to include different socio-economic classes.
Results

Out of 275 questionnaires distributed at the Portland Rose Festival, we included 248 in our results. The other 27 surveys were discarded due to gross incompletion of the questionnaire. The questionnaires that were missing answers for just one or two questions were included in the results.

There was a good age distribution of the subjects with the mode age range of 41-50 year olds (Appendix Graph A). The majority of the surveyed population were female (64%) to male (36%) (Appendix Graph B). The ethnic breakdown of the population was predominantly white/Caucasian (90%) Appendix Table Graph C. The educational attainment of the subjects was fairly evenly distributed with the majority having some college education with no degree (Appendix Graph D). The majority of the polled population were residing in the Portland Metro area, excluding Vancouver, WA, and the rest were from Salem and Eugene.

About 86% of the surveyed population wore either glasses, contact lenses, or both. Approximately 64% of the subjects had some form of vision insurance. Of the people polled, 67% get their eyes examined every year or every two years (Appendix Graph E). This agrees with the findings that 76% of the subjects had their last eye exam within the past two years (Appendix Graph F).
In Graph 1, the majority of every age group between 15-60 years old had their eyes examined within a year. Most of the 60 years and older group had their eyes examined within the past two years.

**Graph 1**
Graph 2 shows how often different age groups get their eyes examined. The age group between 15-20 years old was divided between every year (47%) and over 4 years ago (32%). This trend was the same for age group 21-30 years old with 36% getting eyes examined every year and 32% over 4 years ago. For age groups 31-40 years old, 71% get their eyes examined every two years or more often. For ages 31-40, 66% have their eyes examined every two years or sooner. The majority of the age group between 51-60 year olds get their eyes examined every two years (51%) with only 23% getting their eyes examined every year. The majority of subjects over 60 years old also reported having their eyes examined every 2 years (53%) with 26% getting their eyes examined every year. Overall, close to 70% of people age 31 and older get their eyes examined every two years or less.
The distribution of where the subjects went for their last eye exam is seen in Graph 3. The results show that most of the surveyed population went to private optometrists, ophthalmologists, HMO's, then optical chains, respectively.

![Graph 3]
Graph 4 shows where the surveyed population, based on their educational level, went for their last eye exam. The populations without high school diplomas and with some college education but no degrees went to private optometrists for their eye exams. The population frequenting optical chains are largely represented by those with Bachelor’s degrees. The populations going to HMO’s are mostly high school graduates and the people with graduate and professional degrees.
Overall, 81% of the population thought the services provided were very good or good (Appendix Graph G). Graph 5 represents the degree of satisfaction with the quality of service received by the different vision care providers. People were most satisfied with private optometrists, HMO's, ophthalmologists, then optical chains, respectively.
Out of 246 responses to the questions about the years of college and professional school/training optometrists, opticians, and ophthalmologists complete, 62% of the people answered either 2 or 4 years for opticians. About 75% polled thought the optometrist completed 6 years or less of combined school and training. Approximately 74% of the people answered ophthalmologists complete 8 years or less of school and training. This trend for the population to underestimate the years of college and school/training for optometrists and ophthalmologists is seen in Graph 6.
Comparing the educational levels of the subjects with their answers to the years of school and training for the different professions, all educational levels underestimated an optometrist’s combined college and school/training to be either 4 to 6 years as seen in Graph 7.

Graph 7
In Graph 8, there is an association found between educational level of the subjects and their answers to an ophthalmologist’s schooling and training. The only population that correctly answered ten years of college and school/training for ophthalmologists were subjects with graduate and professional degrees. The majority of the subjects with high school diplomas or less answered 4 to 6 years for ophthalmologists college and school/training.
Graph 9 shows that the majority of subjects with bachelor’s and graduate/professional degrees answered correctly for opticians completing 2 years of college and school/training. The majority of subjects with high school diplomas or less tended to overestimate the years of school/training completed by opticians.
For the case scenarios, the general public responded similarly to each case scenario regardless of educational level, being an eyeglass wearer, or contact lens wearer. Overall, people chose to see optometrists for a change from glasses to contact lenses (49%), problems with distance vision blur (62%), and for an eye check-up (59%). For situations with broken glasses (55%) and a fashion change for outdated glasses (61%), people chose to see opticians. The general public overwhelming chose to see an ophthalmologist (71%) for red, swollen, and itching eyes. For the situation involving a 3rd grade child having reading and writing problems, the public was mixed between seeing an optometrist (49%) and ophthalmologist (38%). See Graph 10 below.

Graph 10
The only significant difference in the case scenario answers between eyeglass wearers and contact lens wearers is the trend for contact lens wearers to prefer optometrists more for the different case scenarios except for fashion change in frames. There were increases in percentages of contact lens wearers to eyeglass wearers choosing optometrists for situations with changing from glasses to contact lenses (16% increase), red eyes (7% increase), distance blur problem (6% increase), eye check-up (8% increase), and reading/writing problems (8% increase). Oddly enough, there was a 6% increase in choosing an optometrist to fix broken glasses. See Graph 11 & 12

**Graph 11**

*Visual Status (Glasses) and Case Scenarios*
Visual Status (CL's) and Case Scenarios

Graph 12
When analyzing how the various educational levels of subjects relate to the case scenarios, the majority of each educational level answered the case scenarios the same except for the scenario with broken glasses (Appendix Graph H). People with 12th grade education (no diploma) and less chose optometrists over opticians to fix broken glasses. As the educational level increases, there is a corresponding increase for choosing opticians to help with broken glasses.

There were some other trends with the educational levels and case scenarios. The higher educational levels tended to choose ophthalmologists more for changes from glasses to contact lenses, red eyes, and problems with reading/writing. See Appendix Graphs I, J, K. For the situation with a fashion change in glasses, the lower educational levels chose optometrists more while higher educational levels overwhelming chose to see opticians. (Appendix L)

For the case scenarios with distance vision blur and eye check-up, all educational levels choose, optometrists then ophthalmologists. (Appendix Graphs M & N).

When comparing how different age groups answered the case scenario about who to see for a regular eye check-up, the majority of age groups between 15-50 years old responded optometrists while age groups between 51-60 years old and over 60 years old were divided between optometrists and ophthalmologists. See Graph 13.

![Graph 13](image-url)
Graph 14 represents the results of the table comparing the different disciplines (optometrist, optician, ophthalmologist) with various services provided. The general public associated ordering/fitting glasses almost equally between optometrists and opticians. Eye surgery was overwhelmingly associated only with ophthalmologists. Vision therapy was associated with ophthalmologists and optometrists. Although making eyeglasses was mainly associated with opticians, 70 responses out of 230 subjects (about 30%) associated optometrists with making eyeglasses. Disease treatment was mainly associated with the ophthalmologists. Only 26% of the population polled associated optometry with disease treatment. In contrast, both optometrists and ophthalmologists were associated with prescribing eye drops.
Discussion

Approximately 67% of the people polled get their eyes examined every one to two years with 76% of the subjects having had their last eye exam within the past two years. This percentage has increased from a Gallup Poll Survey conducted by Rienecke and Sternberg in 1981 which found that only 52% of adults have an eye exam every two years. The increase in the frequency of exams might be attributed to the public's increase in awareness of eye health maintenance or the fact that this was a regional survey and the Gallup Poll Survey was a nationwide survey.

The American Optometric Association recommended guidelines for patient ages 61 and older is an annual eye exam if asymptomatic/risk free. Surprisingly, the 60 years and over age group tended to have their eyes examined every two years (53%) rather than every year (26%). This should be a cause of concern for eye care providers since the four leading causes of blindness are glaucoma, cataracts, age-related macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy. These diseases generally affect the older population and can be diagnosed early by annual eye exams. With prompt treatment and monitoring, vision can be prolonged and in some cases blindness prevented.

For their last eye exam, people choose private optometrists (33.6%), then ophthalmologists (29.0%), HMOs (15.4%), optical chains (12.0%), school screenings (4.6%), not sure (3.3%), and health fairs (0.4%). The population frequenting HMO's the most was graduate/professionals and high school graduates which makes sense that these populations probably have some form of health insurance plan. The population frequenting the optical chains was people with bachelor's degrees. Overall, 81% of the people were satisfied with the eye care services. People thought the services provided by optometrists were very good (49%) and good (39%), HMOs very good (45.9%) and good (40.5%), ophthalmologists very good (43%) and good (47%). People were varied about optical chains and responded very good (20.7%), good (44.8%), adequate (27.6%), poor (3.4%), and very poor (3.4%).

There is an overall trend by the general population, regardless of educational level of the person, to underestimate the years of college and professional school/training of optometrists. About 75% polled thought that optometrists complete 6 years or less of post high school education. This is similar to the results found by Luce and Luce in 1989 where the majority of the population thought optometrists complete six years of schooling/training. There has been no reported increase in the public's knowledge of the schooling/training completed by optometrists. The public's knowledge about schooling/training for opticians and
ophthalmologists was also poor. Only 39% of the people knew opticians complete 2 years of schooling/training, only 14.4% knew that ophthalmologists complete 10 years of schooling/training, and only 13.4% knew that optometrists complete 8 years of schooling/training. Maybe, this reflects the general public's lack of knowledge about how complicated the visual system is and that healthy vision is more than being 20/20. The public's lack of knowledge about opticians can be attributed to the fact that most opticians are non-certified meaning that they are trained on the job and received no formal education.

From how the general public answered the case scenarios, we can get a good idea of the public's knowledge about the different eye care professions. The general public choose optometrists for situations with contact lenses(49%), distance vision blur(62%), and eye check-ups(59%). The public chose opticians for broken glasses(55%) and fashion change with glasses(61%). For red eyes, the public overwhelmingly chose ophthalmologists(71%). For the situation with a child having reading and writing problems at school, the public was fairly mixed between an optometrist(49%) and ophthalmologist(38%). The general public is fairly knowledgeable about eyeglass, contact lens, and eye exam services; however, they do not know that optometrists can diagnose and treat red eyes. They also do not know that optometrists help with visual related learning difficulties while most ophthalmologists do not.

The general public associated optometrists with providing services in ordering/fitting glasses, vision therapy, and prescribing eye drops. Ophthalmologists were associated with eye surgery, vision therapy, disease treatment, and prescribing eye drops. Opticians were associated with ordering/fitting eye glasses and making eyeglasses. The general public's knowledge about optician's and ophthalmologist's roles in eye care is fairly good; however, the general public lacks knowledge about the scope of services provided by optometrists, especially the services of vision therapy and disease treatment. Although the public acknowledges that optometrists prescribe eye drops, they do not associate that with disease treatment. This lack of association between prescribing eye drops and disease treatment probably can be attributed to the public's relation of eye drops and contact lenses. In general, there is a lack of knowledge about vision therapy(eye exercises) that has not changed.7 This is reflected in these survey results. People do not know who to go to for vision therapy either an optometrist or an ophthalmologist. Also people associate vision therapy more with ophthalmologists than optometrists.
Concluding Remarks

We can improve the quality of vision care by better defining the scope of the eye care professions so that the general public will be aware of who is qualified to give certain services. The field of optometry has many different services to offer the general public in regards to clear vision, eye health, visual efficiency enhancement through vision therapy and low vision. The problem is that the general public does not know about these services and that optometrists are qualified to provide these services.

We need to focus on educating the public on these issues:

• Importance of regular eye exams, especially the 61 years and older age group, for the detection and treatment of any eye diseases regardless of visual status.

• Optometrists are highly educated and trained eye care specialists with eight years of college and professional training. Ophthalmologists are highly specialized medical doctors with ten years of college and professional training.

• Both optometrists and ophthalmologists are able to treat eye diseases such as red and swollen eyes.

• Vision therapy (eye exercises) is a special service provided mainly by the field of optometry to help with visual problems such as using two eyes together at the same time (binocular vision), focusing problems (accommodative dysfunction), and with visual-perceptual problems. All these visual problems can exist with 20/20 vision and can affect school work, near work such as computer use, and daily tasks.
Appendix

Graph A
Gender

Female 64%

Male 36%

Graph B
Ethnic Background

- Foreign National
- White/Caucasian
- Pacific Islander
- Hispanic
- Black/African American
- Asian
- American Indian
- Alaskan Native

Graph C
Educational Attainment

Graph D
How often get eyes examined?

- Over 4 yrs. (21%)
- Every 2 yrs. (35%)
- Every 3-4 yrs. (12%)
- Every yr. (32%)

Graph E
Satisfied?

- very good: 40%
- good: 41%
- adequate: 18%
- poor: 1%
- very poor: 0%

Graph G
Educational Attainment w/Broken Glasses

Graph H
Educational Attainment w/Glasses to CL's

Graph I

- Graduate or Professional Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Associate Degree
- Some College, No Degree
- High School Graduate
- <12th Grade, No Diploma

Legend:
- Not Sure
- Optician
- Optometrist
- Ophthalmologist
Educational Attainment w/Red, Swollen, Itchy Eyes

Graph J
Educational Attainment w/Problems Reading and Writing

Graph K
Educational Attainment w/Fashion Change

Graph L
Educational Attainment w/Distance Vision Blur

Graph M
Educational Attainment w/Eye Check-Up

Graph N
Appendix I

Pacific University

We are trying to get a general idea of how the public views various eye care providers. The information gathered will be used to better help serve the needs of the public. It is being done by students from Pacific University with the supervision from one of the faculty members. Your views and opinions are very important to us.

Thank you for your participation.

1. What is your age?
   □ 15-20
   □ 21-30
   □ 31-40
   □ 41-50
   □ 51-60
   □ 61-70
   □ 70 and over

2. What is your gender?
   □ male
   □ female

3. What is your ethnic background?
   □ Alaskan Native
   □ American Indian
   □ Asian
   □ Black/African American
   □ Hispanic
   □ Pacific Islander
   □ White/Caucasian
   □ Foreign National

4. What is your educational attainment?
   □ Less Than 9th Grade
   □ 9th to 12th Grade, No Diploma
   □ High School Graduate
   □ Some College, No Degree
   □ Associate Degree
   □ Bachelor’s Degree
   □ Graduate or Professional Degree

5. What is your zip code? ______________

   Do you wear glasses? □ yes □ no
   Do you wear contact lenses? □ yes □ no
7. How often do you get your eyes examined?
   □ every year
   □ every 2 years
   □ every 3-4 years
   □ over 4 years

8. When was your last eye exam?
   □ within a year
   □ 2 years ago
   □ 3-4 years ago
   □ over 4 years ago
   □ never had eyes examined

9. Where did you go for your last eye check-up?
   □ ophthalmologist
   □ private optometrist
   □ optical chain (ex. Binyon's)
   □ HMO (ex. Kaiser)
   □ school screening
   □ health fair
   □ not sure
   □ never had eyes examined

10. Were you satisfied with your service?
    very poor  poor  adequate  good  very good
    1          2        3         4       5

11. Do you have vision insurance?
    □ yes
    □ no

12. How many years of college and professional school/training do you think an optometrist completes?
    □ 2 years
    □ 4 years
    □ 6 years
    □ 8 years
    □ 10 years
    □ not sure
13. How many years of college and professional school/training do you think an optician completes?
   - [ ] 2 years
   - [ ] 4 years
   - [ ] 6 years
   - [ ] 8 years
   - [ ] 10 years
   - [ ] not sure

14. How many years of college and professional school/training do you think an ophthalmologist completes?
   - [ ] 2 years
   - [ ] 4 years
   - [ ] 6 years
   - [ ] 8 years
   - [ ] 10 years
   - [ ] not sure

These following questions are case scenarios. Please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge.

15. You have worn glasses for many years and now you would like contact lenses. Who would you go see?
   - [ ] ophthalmologist
   - [ ] optometrist
   - [ ] optician
   - [ ] not sure

16. You have broken your only pair of glasses and you need to get them replaced. Who would you go see?
   - [ ] ophthalmologist
   - [ ] optometrist
   - [ ] optician
   - [ ] not sure

17. For the past 2 days your eyes have been red, swollen and very itchy. Who would you go see?
   - [ ] ophthalmologist
   - [ ] optometrist
   - [ ] optician
   - [ ] not sure
18. Since your glasses look old and out-dated, you decide that you’re ready for a new fashion change. Who would you go see?
   - ophthalmologist
   - optometrist
   - optician
   - not sure

19. You have a child in the 3rd grade, who according to the teacher, is having problems in reading and writing skills. Who would you go see?
   - ophthalmologist
   - optometrist
   - optician
   - not sure

20. Your eyes have never given you any problems, but just recently you notice that your distance vision isn’t as clear as it used to be. Who would you go see?
   - ophthalmologist
   - optometrist
   - optician
   - not sure

21. You are having no problems at all with your eyes, but you feel it’s time for an eye check-up. Who would you go see?
   - ophthalmologist
   - optometrist
   - optician
   - not sure
22. Please check the services that you feel are provided from each discipline (ophthalmologist, optometrist, and optician). If you feel that a discipline provides more than one service, please check all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplines</th>
<th>ordering/fitting eyeglasses</th>
<th>eye surgery</th>
<th>vision therapy (eye exercises)</th>
<th>making eyeglasses</th>
<th>disease treatment</th>
<th>prescribing eye drops</th>
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References


