



November 3, 2023

Mrs. Cathy Burghardt-Jesson
300 Dufferin Avenue
LONDON, Ontario
N6B 1Z2

RE: Regional Crisis for Access to Ophthalmic Eye Care

Dear Mrs. Burghardt-Jesson:

I am writing to you in my capacity as Professor and Chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at Western University, Ophthalmologist-in-Chief at the Ivey Eye Institute and Academic Representative on the Eye Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. I never thought I would see that day, although it was predicted based upon population level data, that entire communities in Ontario would no longer have regional access to urgent and tertiary care for sight-threatening diseases. The ophthalmologist/patient ratios have been steadily declining with wait times for access to care increasing at alarming levels for patients of all ages. Newborns, active citizens in their peak working years and seniors, have all been affected.

In the last 5 years, community-based ophthalmology programs have closed due to a number of factors. This has caused a sharp rise in the number of patients being referred to the Ivey Eye Institute which is the region's tertiary ophthalmology center. The demands for patient care have increased substantially with over 150,000 patient visits/year while the number of ophthalmologists at the Ivey Eye Institute have reduced. It is clear we need to recruit more highly trained ophthalmologists to care for our patients. The challenge is that space and OR time have not increased. We have yet to have the funding needed for Minimally Invasive Glaucoma Surgeries (MIGS) even though these procedures have been available for over a decade and Ontario Health has recommended funding based upon an extensive review of the safety and efficacy of these procedures. We have had to send London and region patients to Hamilton and Toronto for MIGS as well as corneal transplants, oculoplastic and orbital disease. We are severely under-resourced for glaucoma care, which is the number one cause of irreversible blindness and will soon face another shortage of retinal specialists. In some cases, we have been at full capacity and have had to decline emergency eye services for patients throughout Ontario West and beyond.

Since starting my role as Chair/Chief in July 2022 I have recruited 3 new ophthalmologists and need to bring in at least 4-6 more to meet the needs. The critical problem is that the number of patients needing care has escalated, the number of ophthalmologists required to provide that care has escalated, but the space, equipment and especially the operating room resources have not increased substantively for the last 10-15 years. The other challenge is trying to meet the patient care needs while being constrained in a zero-based budget.

I am committed and dedicated to keeping the doors open for all patients in London and region that need urgent and complex eye care. I need your help and that of the region's municipal leaders to help our government understand that we are beyond crisis level at the Ivey Eye Institute. We have an immediate need to expand our operating room resources and to implement the funding for minimally invasive glaucoma surgery as per the recommendation of Ontario Health. The support from municipalities in London and region would be impactful as it would help us better meet the current needs of our regional population, reduce having to send patients to Toronto and to prevent the alarming trend of having to decline patients because we are unable to provide timely access to care within the current constrained resources.

Many thanks for your consideration of this request. I am happy to meet with you and your team any time if it would be helpful.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hutnik', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the left.

Cindy ML Hutnik
Professor and Chair
Dept of Ophthalmology, Western University
Ophthalmologist-in-Chief
Ivey Eye Institute

cc. Mayor George Finch
cc. Mayor Josh Morgan
cc. Deputy Mayor Shawn Lewis
cc. Legislative Clerk County of London
cc. Legislative Clerk County of Middlesex