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Orthoptics Australia Ltd

Occupation Professional Association

Summary

Orthoptics Australia is a national professional association, with member bodies in each state and the Australian Capital Territory. Formed to promote and advance orthoptics, the Association's goals are to: build a strong, connected community through strategic partnerships across eye care and the broader health sector; strengthen the evidence base to expand practice, support advocacy, and promote equity in eye health; raise awareness of the value, diversity, and expertise of orthoptists and grow membership and advocate for more opportunities, influence, and recognition of the profession across Australia.

Details

Orthoptics is an eye healthcare discipline specialising in the assessment, diagnosis and non-surgical management of eye disorders. Orthoptic practice is based on clinical assessment and evidence-based research. Until orthoptic education entered the Colleges of Advanced Education sector in the 1970s, the profession was exclusively female. While the number of male orthoptists has increased since that time, orthoptics remains a predominantly female profession.

Orthoptists work in diverse clinical and professional settings, including public and private hospital orthoptic and ophthalmology clinics, private practices, community health facilities, rehabilitation services, and low vision centres. Additionally, orthoptists contribute as educators, researchers, administrators, and advisors within the healthcare system, universities, and the optical and pharmaceutical industries. Over time, the profession has evolved from a narrowly defined clinical role in eye movement disorders to a diverse discipline with recognised expertise in multiple subspecialty areas of eye disorders. Orthoptics commenced in England in the late 1920s, in response to the growing recognition of the need for specialised management of strabismus ('turned eye'/squint) and other disorders of binocular vision. The profession was closely aligned with ophthalmology (predominately male-dominated) from its inception, and early training was conducted within hospital settings under ophthalmological supervision.

In Australia, the first orthoptic clinic and training school was established at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne in 1931, closely followed by the opening of a clinic and training school at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children in Sydney in 1933. Training during this early period was hospital-based and followed an apprentice-style model, reflecting medical and allied health practices of the time. It was initially envisaged that orthoptic education in Australia would mirror the British system, with training schools attached to major teaching hospitals in each state. However, there was insufficient patient load to run more than the two training programs nationally, one in Sydney and the other in Melbourne. In 1938, the College of Ophthalmologists – now the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) – established the Orthoptic Board of Australia (OBA). The Board was responsible for overseeing orthoptic education, including the development and regulation of the training curriculum. In its early years, the OBA was composed entirely of ophthalmologists.

Between the 1930s and 1956, orthoptic education underwent significant transformation. Training evolved from a six-month apprentice-style course delivered by ophthalmologists to a structured two-year diploma program increasingly administered by orthoptists. Within the first few years of this transition, orthoptists assumed responsibility for clinical training. Over time, they also took on the teaching of academic subjects, while ophthalmologists continued to provide lectures in specialist areas. This period marked the gradual professionalisation and increasing autonomy of orthoptics as a distinct allied health discipline.

A significant milestone occurred in 1947 when Great Britain granted reciprocity of practice to Australia. This agreement allowed British-trained orthoptists to practise in Australia and vice versa. The granting of reciprocity was an important international endorsement of the quality and rigour of Australian orthoptic training and practice. In 1964, the first orthoptist was appointed to the OBA, reflecting orthoptists' growing role in shaping the profession and its educational standards. Further major change occurred in the early 1970s, when orthoptic education transitioned from hospital-based training into

colleges of advanced education. In Sydney, training was provided through the New South Wales College of Paramedical Studies, later known as Cumberland College of Health Sciences. In Melbourne, education was delivered by the Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences. This transition aligned orthoptic education with broader developments in allied health education and facilitated greater academic recognition. By 1991, orthoptic education in Australia had attained degree status, with programs established at the University of Sydney and La Trobe University in Melbourne. In 2014, the Sydney-based training program moved to the Graduate School of Health at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS).

Traditionally, orthoptists focused on the assessment and management of eye movement disorders, particularly strabismus, diplopia (double vision), and amblyopia (lazy eye). As the profession evolved, higher academic qualifications equipped orthoptists with additional skills and knowledge, enabling an expansion of both scope of practice and clinical roles. Over time, orthoptic practice broadened, with practitioners increasingly sub-specialising and developing expertise in areas such as community and public health, ophthalmic technology, low vision and rehabilitation, clinical research, education, and roles within the optical and pharmaceutical industries.

In addition to its role in education, the OBA served as the registration authority for Australian-trained orthoptists and those with overseas qualifications, until its dissolution in 1997. By then the Board comprised equal numbers of orthoptists and ophthalmologists, and the chair was an orthoptist, reflecting the evolution of the professional relationship, increasing autonomy, and the recognition of orthoptics as an established and independent discipline. This shift also reflected broader social change in the status of women. In 2000, the OBA was replaced by the independent Australian Orthoptic Board, which assumed responsibility for the registration of orthoptists in Australia; it is chaired by an orthoptist.

The professional association for orthoptists in Australia, now known as Orthoptics Australia (OA), was inaugurated in 1944 as the Orthoptic Association of Australia (OAA). It was established as a federal organisation with state branches and has operated continuously since that time. Membership initially comprised ordinary members holding an orthoptic qualification, honorary members drawn from distinguished ophthalmologists and overseas orthoptists, and associate members who were orthoptists no longer active in the workforce. Emmie Russell served as the Association’s first President.

Orthoptics Australia, together with the United States association also formed in 1944, is the second orthoptic association in the world, following Britain (1937). From its inception, the Association has held an annual general meeting, typically in conjunction with the annual scientific meeting. State-based meetings are also held regularly to support professional development and collegial engagement at a local level, and to promote orthoptics within the local community. In 1986, the OAA was incorporated as an association under New South Wales law. A new constitution was adopted in 2016. Further governance reform followed in 2019, prompted by the Association’s national scope and aspirations and reflecting membership growth. The legal structure was amended to one incorporated under the Commonwealth Corporations Act 2001. In 2020, Orthoptics Australia became a company limited by guarantee, adopting the name Orthoptics Australia Ltd.

At the international level, Australia was one of five founding member organisations of the International Orthoptic Association (IOA) established in 1967. The IOA has since grown to include 24 member countries. Australia hosted the International Orthoptic Congresses in 2004 and 2025, reflecting the standing of Australian orthoptics within the international community.

The Association started in 1944 with fewer than 20 members. Membership participation, expressed as a proportion of practising orthoptists, has consistently been high and continues to grow. Today, OA has more than 600 members, reflecting both the growth of the profession and the ongoing commitment of orthoptists to professional representation, education, and standards of practice.

Published resources

Book

Rear Vision: Celebrating Australia's early orthoptists, Brown, Shayne and Jill Gordon, 2019

Hindsight: The history of orthoptics in Australia 1931-1960, Brown, Shayne, 2022

Through Our Eyes: The history of orthoptics in Australia 1960-1991, Brown, Shayne, 2025

Archival resources

Orthoptics Australia, Melbourne
Records of Orthoptics Australia

Author Details
Shayne Brown

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