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With the COVID-19 Crisis, AAO and ASCO Establishes Unprecedented Virtual Clinical Training Program to Keep Optometry Students on Graduation Track

As universities and hospitals suspend routine patient care to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) is partnering with the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) to help enhance case-based student education.

ORLANDO, Florida, April 8, 2020 – With COVID-19 leaving students unable to see patients in person, the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) is establishing an unprecedented virtual clinical education program to assist with case-based learning for optometry students and keep them on a path to graduation.

The Academy and its board members are working with the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO), and the deans and faculty of optometric schools and colleges, to develop an online experience that will help enhance students' clinical education.

As part of their clinical curriculum, optometry students typically see patients in clinics, practices, hospitals, and VA settings to gain first-hand patient experience, but in the current environment, many are unable to continue direct patient care. The new program, the **Student Online Clinical Case Education Program (SOCCEP)**, will provide several weeks of live streamed and/or recorded experiences, each approximately 30 minutes long. During each session a presenter will deliver a case study. Students will then have an opportunity to ask questions before the session concludes with the lecturer delivering a patient outcome.

Academy Board President Dr. Barbara Caffery said, "This is a direct and rapid response to the coronavirus crisis. Once our Academy Fellows in universities identified the clinical issue, we knew we were the only organization with the membership and reach to quickly pull together the resources they needed."

While the program was designed to help third- and fourth-year students build on their clinical experience, it is expected to be utilized as a supplemental and continuing education program for others. The organizers hope it will also help maintain the pipeline of new Doctors of Optometry and residents crucial to providing urgent and emergent care during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as service to patients with the pent up demand that will follow when the crisis ends. Academy Chief Executive Officer Peter Scott said,



“As a leading optometric association, we’re in a unique position to bring together partners from the academic world to make this happen. This is not a time to hold back.”

The SOCCEP program is unprecedented in the Academy’s nearly 100-year history, but it is perfectly aligned with the organization’s new strategic plan that actively seeks deeper engagement with members.

“We are committed to advancing excellence in eye care and in this time of urgency, that commitment is even more important,” said Dr. Caffery. She pointed out that this is a program that could live well beyond the current crisis. “The Academy is so much more than a meeting. We have the ability to make a positive impact in the daily lives of students, optometrists, and the public, and this is the first of our many initiatives that will provide exceptional education, support innovative research, and disseminate knowledge to advance optometric practice and improve patient care.”

Dr. Elizabeth Hoppe, Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) President and Founding Dean, Western University of Health Sciences, College of Optometry, concurs. “During these trying times, ASCO member institutions must continue the education of their students. Faculty members at ASCO institutions have really stepped up to the challenge and will continue to lead these online clinical education sessions for the foreseeable future.”

For additional information on the **Student Online Clinical Case Education Program**, visit www.aaopt.org/soccep or the ASCO website at <https://optometriceducation.org/compiled-clinical-education-resources/>.

About the American Academy of Optometry

The American Academy of Optometry (AAO) inspires excellence in optometric practice by fostering research and disseminating knowledge in vision science through its journal, *Optometry and Vision Science*, and the continuing education presented at its annual meeting. Fellows of the Academy are committed to the premise that learning is a lifelong obligation of a professional, as is the commitment to expand the profession’s knowledge base through ongoing fellowship and exchange. For more information, visit the website: <http://www.aaopt.org>.

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