

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Care Fact Sheet

Australian Overview

Approximately 444,400 Australians aged over 55 are vision impaired, which represents 9.4 percent of the 4.7 million Australians in that age group. Major eye conditions are highly age-related. By 2004, almost 809,000 people in Australia will be seriously affected. Research estimates current Australian vision disorder costs to be \$9.85 billion. By 2020 hospital costs for eye care alone will reach \$5.86 billion annually. Cataract care will cost \$2.7 billion and more than half of eye care spending will be on people aged 65 and over.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Overview

- The prevalence of eye disease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is up to ten times that of the general community.
- The leading causes of blindness and vision impairment are cataract, diabetic retinopathy, refractive error and trachoma.
- Presbyopia (the need for reading glasses with increasing age) is the most common refractive error experienced by Aboriginal people.
- In many parts of Australia, access to spectacles can be difficult and cost prohibitive.
- Eye care programs for Aboriginal people in remote Australia are overstretched and waiting lists are long.

The health disparity between mainstream Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

- In some communities, the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is up to 20 years less than the general community.
- Rates of chronic diseases are significant; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders develop Type 2 diabetes earlier and the prevalence is significantly higher.
- Diabetes-related deaths in these communities are up to 35 times higher than that of the overall population.

Some positive initiatives in the Eye Health Sector

- Several Vision 2020 Australia member organisations are committed to improving the eye health and vision care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, providing eye care services in partnership with Aboriginal medical services and collaborative outreach programs.
- A national mapping exercise has commenced, seeking to identify service gaps and to assist Members in planning. The Fred Hollows Foundation has generously supported the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advocacy Coordinator and the mapping exercise is supervised by the Centre for Eye Research Australia and Optometric Vision Research Foundation.

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision Care

Mission

Our mission is to be the national advocate for member organisations that:

- Seek to eliminate avoidable blindness and maximise community participation for all those with vision needs; and
- Help those with permanent vision loss

The National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Avoidable Blindness and Vision Loss

This Framework exists as Australia's response to World Health Assembly resolution WHA56.26 on the elimination of avoidable blindness in member countries.

Aspects of the National Framework are particularly relevant to Vision 2020 Australia's plan to reduce the incidence and impact of avoidable blindness and vision loss within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Vision 2020 Australia will achieve this through working with its member organisations.

Vision 2020 Australia's Strategic Goals

- To reduce the incidence of avoidable vision loss through increased prevention, early detection, correction and intervention for all Australians, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- To reduce the impact of vision loss through increased utilisation of vision services by all Australians, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Purpose of the Vision 2020 Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee

The purpose of the Committee is to provide a forum to facilitate collaboration among member organisations that are committed to eliminating avoidable blindness and reducing the impact of vision loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Its approach is to advocate to relevant Australian governments and non-government agencies to promote improved access to vision care and eye health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Through collaboration, improvements in service delivery and culturally appropriate awareness raising initiatives will be identified and advanced.

Focus for Vision 2020 Australia in 2006-2007

- Mapping exercise detailing existing services. This initiative was identified at July 06 Member Forum.
- Attention to be directed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in urban settings and their access to eye health and vision care services.
- Advocating for the implementation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific National Framework initiatives.

Condition	Current Problems	What can be done
<p>Cataract</p> <p>A clouding of the lens of the eye which obstructs the passage of light from reaching the back of the eye. If untreated, it can lead to blindness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are three times as likely to report vision loss due to cataract but four times less likely to have surgery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide adequate support for specialists working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Assist mainstream ophthalmic services develop culturally accessible programs and practices
<p>Diabetic Retinopathy</p> <p>A significant cause of vision loss and blindness in adults in Australia. Both Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes can lead to damage to the small blood vessels that supply blood to the retina.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diabetes has become recognised as one of the most common and serious diseases facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people In 2001 the prevalence of self-reported diabetes amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was 11% compared to 3% for the non-Indigenous community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support people with diabetes in the management of their condition through awareness raising and education programs Strengthening current diabetic retinopathy screening programs within Aboriginal Medical Services Facilitate primary care workers capacity to utilise evidence-based practice and clinical guidelines for monitoring of diabetic retinopathy
<p>Refractive Error</p> <p>Out of focus defect of the eye which affects distance and/or near vision which if uncorrected leads to impaired vision or if severe, blindness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the most common refractive error experienced by Aboriginal people. In many parts of Australia, access to spectacles can be difficult and cost prohibitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for spectacle provision programs that are consistent state by state. Avail ready made spectacles to isolated communities. Strengthen support to Optometrists who currently provide vision care services through the Visiting Optometrists Scheme

Condition	Current Problems	What can be done
<p>Low Vision</p> <p>Vision loss severe enough to impede vocational, recreational or social tasks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of low vision services is limited in mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase referrals to low vision services from eye health and primary care providers. Improve support to organisations providing low vision outreach services
<p>Trachoma</p> <p>A chronic conjunctivitis caused by repeated infections, resulting in an inflamed eyelid, which eventually is pulled inward. The broken eyelashes scratch the eye surface causing scarring, excruciating pain and may lead to blindness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Australia, trachoma is found almost exclusively within the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander population and remains endemic in large areas of WA, SA and the NT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate to government for ongoing support to the National Trachoma Surveillance Unit and the development of simple clinical tests for the identification of Trichiasis