



# Progressing Eye Health and Vision Care in Australia

Policy and funding proposal, 2013



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## Executive Summary

*Progressing Eye Health and Vision Care in Australia* proposes a strategic approach to ensure that Australia successfully meets its international obligations. **Vision 2020 Australia calls on the Australian Government to commit to the development and funding of a National Framework Implementation Plan**, to support the implementation of Australia's *National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Avoidable Blindness and Vision Loss* (National Framework) and align Australia's efforts at the international level.

In January 2010, the Executive Board of the World Health Assembly (WHA) decided that a new action plan the *Universal Access to Eye Health: A Global Action Plan: 2014-19* (Global Action Plan) needed to be developed. Following extensive consultation with Member States and international partners the Global Action Plan was endorsed by the World Health Assembly in May.

The Global Action Plan is an important document for WHO Member States, WHO Secretariat, and international partners (NGOs) to guide and align efforts to end avoidable blindness and address vision impairment, and to help achieve the goals of VISION 2020. Importantly, this Global Action Plan sets as a global target, the reduction in prevalence of avoidable vision impairment by 25 per cent, significantly reducing the global prevalence of avoidable vision impairment by 2019.

WHO regions are now starting to develop **Regional Action Plans**. In early May 2013, the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office hosted a consultation workshop in Manila to begin to develop a *Regional Action Plan for the Prevention of Avoidable Blindness and Visual Impairment in the Western Pacific Region*.

The Australian Government's commitment to the reduction of avoidable blindness in our region has established Australia as a global leader in this field.

The revised WHO Action Plan ensures eye health is on the international agenda and creates a mandate for enhanced funding in Australia. For the first time, specific reference to low vision is included in the WHO Action Plan, hence its focus throughout this document, particularly with respect to key policy asks. Critically, Member States are required to report on key national indicators, signalling greater emphasis on the evidence base and establishing national targets.

Vision 2020 Australia commends the Australian Government for developing the National Framework in 2005, but more needs to be done.

This proposal, prepared by Vision 2020 Australia on behalf of its members, offers key recommendations that recognise and complement the WHO Action Plan and support the further development of Australia's National Framework.

Implementation of identified priorities within the National Framework is a vital step towards achieving our goal, to prevent avoidable blindness and reduce the impact of vision loss in Australia.

The eye health and vision care sector is committed and prepared to continue to work in collaboration with the Australian Government to achieve this goal.

## Key recommendations summary

### Principal Recommendation

Vision 2020 Australia calls on the Australian Government to commit to the development and funding of a National Framework Implementation Plan.

The National Framework Implementation Plan identifies four areas of priority. To address these areas, Vision 2020 Australia recommends the following:

| Recommendations   | 2014-17         |
|---|-----------------|
| <b>Recommendation 1:</b><br>Undertake a national eye health survey.   | \$3.09 million  |
| <b>Recommendation 2:</b><br>A focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<br><i>(exclusive of the Trachoma funding announced in the 2013-2014 Federal Budget).</i> | \$53.63 million |
| <b>Recommendation 3:</b><br>Strengthened links to low vision and rehabilitation.  |                 |
| <b>Recommendation 4:</b><br>Awareness of eye health and vision care.  | \$16.5 million  |

## The Facts

- It is estimated that in Australia, **75 per cent of vision loss is entirely avoidable: it is preventable or treatable.**<sup>1</sup>
- Increased public awareness of early detection and intervention is critical in preventing avoidable blindness and reducing the impact of vision loss. **Saving your sight could be as simple as having a regular eye examination.**
- Blindness and vision impairment is largely age related with the majority of people affected being over 65 years. Governments should ensure fairness and equity by providing **specialised disability support to older Australians** in the transition from disability to aged care support.
- Low vision and rehabilitation services play a vital role for people who are blind or vision impaired to maintain a level of **independence.**
- **There is significant disparity between the eye health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians** - Indigenous communities have **six times** the rate of blindness, **three times** the rate of low vision and **94 per cent** (compared to 75 per cent) of blindness is preventable or treatable compared to the rest of Australia.<sup>2</sup>
- Eye health in Australia should be a priority. **The annual economic cost of vision loss in Australia was estimated to be over \$16 billion** in 2009 but the personal and social cost is even greater.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Vision problems among older Australians, July 2005.

<sup>2</sup> National Indigenous Eye Health Survey, *Indigenous Eye Health Unit, The University of Melbourne in collaboration with the Centre for Eye Research Australia*, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Vision 2020 Australia, 2010. Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009, prepared by Access Economics Pty Limited, pg 10.

## Recommendations

The National Framework Implementation Plan (The Plan) will be an agreement between the Australian governments and the eye health and vision care sector, which will clarify responsibilities for addressing identified priorities, supported by adequate funding. It is essential that national indicators form part of The Plan to guide effective monitoring and evaluation.

### Recommendation 1: Undertake a national eye health survey

To align with global commitments, the prevalence and causes of blindness and vision impairment in Australia today must first be determined. A national eye health survey is required for Australia to provide a current baseline and track progress towards the reduction of avoidable blindness and vision impairment by 25 per cent by 2019 and effectively report the data required in the WHO Action Plan 2014-19.

The current data being used to assess national prevalence is out of date and derives from limited data sources gathered in the 1990s through the Melbourne Visual Impairment Project (1992-96) and the Blue Mountains Eye Study (1992-94).

The proposed budget is based on 30 sites across Australia. This nationally coordinated project will plan, manage, analyse and report the results of the survey. The planning and approval process would commence in 2014 with field work being conducted over a 12 month period during 2015, and analysis and reporting in the first six months of 2016.

It is recommended that a follow-up study be conducted in 2019-20 to assess changes and future needs. The follow up study will emphasise the achievement of outcomes and the identification of areas of need.

Regular collection, analysis and public reporting of this data at a national level will not only help Australia to fulfil its global reporting commitments to the WHO, but will:

- identify specific needs, underserviced groups and locations
- document successful interventions and lessons learned
- drive improved outcomes
- provide clarity around required eye health datasets.

#### Recommendation 1

Vision 2020 Australia recommends funding of \$3.09 million for the undertaking of a national eye health survey.

## Recommendation 2: A focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In supporting the WHO's previous Global Action Plan in 2009, Australia's Chief Medical Officer said:

"While we can be proud of our achievements, much more needs to be done for our Indigenous Australians."

**It is vital the Australian Government honour the *Close the Gap Statement of Intent*.**

By honouring the Statement, Indigenous health, including eye health, will continue to be addressed holistically. For example, from a tiered perspective, there is a close association between chronic disease, diabetes and diabetic retinopathy.

Australia is the only developed country where trachoma still exists and Vision 2020 Australia welcomes the \$16.5 million funding over four years for trachoma in the 2013-14 Budget. However, trachoma is just one of four main conditions responsible for the 94 per cent of preventable or treatable vision loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Other conditions include uncorrected refractive error, cataract and diabetic eye disease.

This funding proposal supports targeted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health activity as part of The Plan. Further details are outlined in *Progressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision Care*.

### Recommendation 2

**Vision 2020 Australia recommends funding of \$53.63 million over three years\* for the reduction of avoidable blindness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

*(Exclusive of trachoma funding announced in the 2013-14 Federal Budget).*

\* Within the context of *The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision, 2012*

### Recommendation 3: Strengthened links to low vision and rehabilitation

Vision 2020 Australia is a strong supporter of DisabilityCare Australia and commends the Australian Government on undertaking this major social reform in Australia and the Coalition for its support.

To strengthen links to low vision and rehabilitation in The Plan, it is essential that the impact of the introduction of DisabilityCare Australia is considered.

Vision 2020 Australia and its members have been active in the consultation process and remain committed and engaged in the process of turning theory into practice as DisabilityCare Australia becomes a reality and to ensure that it maximises positive outcomes for people who are blind or have functional vision loss.

DisabilityCare Australia continues to create a separation of government support between people aged less than 65 years and those over this age. It is a fact that blindness and vision impairment is largely age-related with the majority aged over 65. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on Aged Care (*Living Longer Living Better*) to ensure that fairness and equity in specialised disability support will be afforded to older Australians who are blind or have significant functional vision loss. It is essential that the impact of *Living Longer Living Better* be taken into consideration.

#### A holistic approach for blindness and low vision

*Living Longer Living Better* must recognise a holistic approach for blindness and low vision across health, disability and aged care sectors, much like its commitment to an inter-departmental strategy for tackling dementia. This aligns with the WHO Action Plan's objective 3: *Multi-sectoral engagement and effective partnerships for improved eye health strengthened*.

#### Consistent and equitable funding for low vision services and supports

At present, funding for services and supports for people who are blind or who have low vision is insubstantial. The majority of low vision services are provided by non-government organisations and rely heavily on public donations. Key services and supports include aids and equipment, orientation and mobility training, adaptive technology, dog guides, activities of daily living and counselling. The need for an assured funding base from government is essential to ensure the ongoing operation and expansion of low vision services, especially with an ageing Australia.

The cost of low vision services and supports can be prohibitive for individuals, particularly elderly people living on pension incomes, but is relatively low cost for the Australian Government to provide. For example, aids can cost as low as \$40 for a walking cane and as high as \$6,000 for a CCTV (closed circuit television) used as a magnification aid. These can, however, yield high return for people with vision impairment or blindness in terms of improving their quality of life and independence.<sup>4</sup>

### Recommendation 3

Vision 2020 Australia recommends funding for services and supports, on a needs basis, for people who are blind or have low vision. Further, consideration must be given to disability support through the aged care sector.

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<sup>4</sup> Macular Disease Foundation, *Response to the Inquiry into the Living Longer Living Better Legislative Reforms*, April 2013.

## Recommendation 4: Awareness of eye health and vision care

Vision 2020 Australia welcomed the funding for the 2009 National Eye Health Awareness Campaign and now calls on the Australian Government to build on this investment. This will ensure Australia continues to be a world leader in eye health and vision care promotion and awareness, among both the public and health professional networks.

### Increase community awareness through social marketing campaign

Increasing awareness of early detection and intervention is critical in preventing avoidable blindness and reducing the impact of vision loss.

This awareness campaign would include an amalgam of TV, radio, print and social media. TV and radio will primarily target those over the age of 40, encouraging regular comprehensive eye examinations with an eye care professional. It will also build community awareness of eye health risk factors and services available to assist people with vision impairment. Other target groups will include those with a family history of eye disease (such as glaucoma and macular degeneration), people with diabetes, smokers, those from a culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children and the ageing population

The campaign would seek to build on the 2009 National Eye Health Awareness campaign by utilising existing materials to maximise return on investment and continuity of messages to the public. It would also seek to integrate key eye health messages into other health promotion campaigns, such as diabetes awareness.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be targeted by engaging the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations in the development and use of effective eye health promotion resources as well as using the range of existing resources already developed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will also be targeted through TV and radio - National Indigenous TV channel and a range of local Indigenous radio stations.

Vision 2020 Australia and Medicines Australia are currently exploring opportunities for public-private partnerships to further enhance awareness of eye health and vision care.

### Build awareness, capacity and collaboration among health professionals

Through lessons learned from state-based programs and best practice models, there is scope to expand projects in states and territories to further build awareness, capacity and collaboration of health, allied health and eye health professionals.

The aim of the projects will be to build on the awareness raised through the social marketing campaign; and improve the understanding and awareness of health, allied health and eye health professionals of eye health and vision issues and referral pathways across the full continuum of care. Projects will ensure a platform for collaboration and sustainable partnerships between eye health and vision care providers, government and other organisations.

## Recommendation 4

Vision 2020 Australia recommends funding of \$16.5 million to increase awareness of eye health and vision care.

## Background

### Portfolio specific eye health issues

A **holistic approach** for vision impairment across portfolios is dependent on clear, transparent and **accessible mechanisms and pathways between the portfolios**; consistent assessment processes; accessible information available to consumers to make an informed choice; and surety to know that disability related needs will be addressed across the lifespan.

It is also **vital that vision impairment is not dismissed as a natural part of ageing** and likewise, other conditions such as mental health are considered independently of vision impairment rather than as a direct result of a person's disability.

### Health

**Access to timely and low cost eye care beyond a preventative focus**; ensuring that the health system is supportive and inclusive of people with disability including in the delivery of direct patient care (knowledge and understanding of vision impairment beyond the diagnostic to also recognise people who are vision impaired as functionally able); and in the provision of information (in accessible formats).

### Disability

Ensuring that people who are vision impaired have **access to the most appropriate supports** based on their needs and their aspirations which is not dependent on the frequency of their need nor cost.

### Aged Care

It is vital we ensure **people over the age of 65 have comparative and equitable access to the services and supports** that they need, when they need them.

Ageing in-place (that is, in own home) is reliant on a society which is inclusive - which includes building communities which are inclusive. The success of holistic health, disability and aged care systems are reliant on an increased emphasis on universal design of buildings, communities and new technology, as well as accessible transport to be able to get around safely and independently.

### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health

There is significant **disparity between the eye health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the rest of Australia**. The adoption of recommendations made in *the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision* will go some way in addressing this incongruence. Vision 2020 Australia has prepared the policy document, *Progressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care*, which addresses these issues in more detail.

## Snapshot of blindness and vision impairment in Australia

It is estimated that there are about 233 million people who are blind or have vision impairment worldwide: 34 million are blind and 199 million have vision impairment.<sup>5</sup>

In Australia, it is estimated that there are almost 575,000 people aged 40 or over with vision impairment.<sup>6</sup> Of these, around 66,500 people are blind. It is projected that by the year 2020, the number of people aged 40 or over with vision loss in Australia will rise to almost 801,000 and those who are blind will rise to 102,750.<sup>7</sup> This will impact on demands and costs for eye health and vision care services. With a rapidly increasing ageing population the costs of eye care will continue to increase faster than the population to more than double current expenditure.<sup>8</sup>

The statistics are sobering given the latest demographic projections. The 2010 Intergenerational Report indicates that between now and 2050, those aged 65 to 84 years are expected to more than double; and those aged 85 and over are expected to more than quadruple, from 0.4 million today to 1.8 million in 2050.<sup>9</sup>

Given the risk of eye disease increases three-fold with every decade after 40 years of age,<sup>10</sup> these forecasts have social and economic implications. Those aged 70 years and older comprise the largest proportion of those who are blind or have vision loss at nearly 70 per cent - and this figure is set to rise.

There are five conditions responsible for 80 per cent of vision impairment in Australia:

- uncorrected refractive error (59 per cent);
- cataract (15 per cent);
- age-related macular degeneration (10 per cent);
- glaucoma (5 per cent); and
- diabetic retinopathy (2 per cent).

The most common causes of blindness in Australia are:

- age-related macular degeneration (50 per cent)
- glaucoma (16 per cent) and
- cataract (11 per cent).<sup>11</sup>

In addition, eye disease can be exacerbated by chronic diseases, such as diabetes, and related lifestyle factors (that is, smoking, poor nutrition, excessive alcohol consumption, lack of physical activity).

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<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation, Global Burden of Disease Study 2010, 2012; Pascolini D, Mariotti SP. Global estimates of visual impairment: 2010. *British Journal of Ophthalmology*. 2011 December 1, 2011; and Holden BA, Fricke TR, Ho SM, Wong R, Schlenker G, Cronje S, et al. Global Vision Impairment Due to Uncorrected Presbyopia. *Archives of Ophthalmology*. 2008 Dec 2008;126(12):1731-9.

<sup>6</sup> Vision 2020 Australia, 2010, *Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009*, prepared by Access Economics Pty Limited, pg 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, The 2010 Intergenerational Report, pg 4.

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Eye Research Australia and the Eye Research Australia Foundation. *Clear Insight: The Economic Impact and Cost of Vision Loss in Australia*, prepared by Access Economics Pty Limited, 2004, pg 32.

<sup>11</sup> Vision 2020 Australia, 2010, *Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009*, prepared by Access Economics Pty Limited, pg 5.

Low vision significantly affects an individual's physical and emotional wellbeing. Generally, people with vision impairment tend to be less independent than their peers with normal vision and are more likely to:

- suffer twice as many falls, often leading to hospitalisation
- easily lose confidence in their ability to manage everyday life
- have three times the risk of depression, and
- be admitted to nursing homes up to three years earlier than those without vision impairment.<sup>12</sup>

## Why Government investment in eye health and vision care is wise

Effective interventions for eye health and vision care exist and can have a great impact on one's quality of life. Evidence clearly indicates the financial impact of effective eye health and vision care interventions. A study published in the American Journal of Ophthalmology in 2003 demonstrated that savings to the national health budgets of US \$223 billion could be achieved globally from 2000-2020 if VISION 2020 was successful.<sup>13</sup> Further, the WHO has identified spectacles and cataract surgery as one of the most cost-effective public health interventions that can be carried out,<sup>14</sup> and correcting refractive error is estimated to yield a net economic gain.<sup>15</sup>

In Australia, the financial cost of vision loss has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2004, the total annual cost of vision loss was estimated to be \$9.85 billion, rising to \$16.6 billion in 2009. This equates to \$28,905 per person, per year.<sup>16</sup> The rise in cost is likely to increase given Australia's projected demographics. Therefore, the importance of investing in eye health is critical given the productivity and economic return of investing now in order to prevent a continued rise in cost from vision loss in the future, which is largely avoidable.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg 10.

<sup>13</sup> Frick K and Foster A, 'The magnitude and cost of global blindness', American Journal of Ophthalmology 135 (2003), 471-476.

<sup>14</sup> Marseille E, 1996, 'Cost effectiveness of cataract surgery in a public eye health care program in Nepal', Bulletin of the World Health Organisation, 74 (1996), 319-324.

<sup>15</sup> Fricke T, Holden B, Wilson D, Schlenker G, Naidoo K, Resnikoff S, et al. Global cost of correcting vision impairment from uncorrected refractive error. Bulletin of the World Health Organisation. 2012 12 July 2012;90:728-38. Smith T, Frick K, Holden B, Fricke T, Naidoo K. Potential lost productivity resulting from the global burden of uncorrected refractive error. Bulletin of the World Health Organisation. 2009;87:431-7.

<sup>16</sup> Vision 2020 Australia, 2010. Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009, prepared by Access Economics Pty Limited, pg 10.

## About Vision 2020 Australia

Vision 2020 Australia is working in partnership to prevent avoidable blindness and improve vision care. Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of *VISION 2020: The Right to Sight*, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

As the peak body for the sector, Vision 2020 Australia represents over 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye care; health promotion; low vision support; vision rehabilitation; eye research; professional assistance and community support.

### Vision 2020 Australia members

- Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW
- Aboriginal Health Council of SA
- ASPECT Foundation
- Association for the Blind WA
- Australian College of Optometry
- Australian Diabetes Council
- Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute
- Blind Citizens of Australia
- Brien Holden Vision Institute
- CanDo4Kids - Townsend House
- CBM Australia
- Centre for Eye Health
- Centre for Eye Research Australia
- Centre for Vision Research
- Danila Dilba Health Services
- Diabetes Australia - National Office
- Diabetes Australia - Victoria
- Foresight Australia
- Glaucoma Australia
- Guide Dogs Association SA / NT
- Guide Dogs NSW / ACT
- Guide Dogs QLD
- Guide Dogs Victoria
- Indigenous Eye Health Unit
- Keratoconus Australia Inc
- Lions Australia
- Lions Eye Institute
- Macular Disease Foundation
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)
- OneSight Foundation
- Optical Distributors and Manufacturers Association of Australia
- Optometric Vision and Research Foundation
- Optometrists Association Australia
- Optometry Giving Sight in Australia
- Orthoptics Australia
- Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council
- Queensland Vision Initiative
- RANZCO Eye Foundation
- Retina Australia (National)
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO)
- Royal Australasian College of Surgeons
- Royal Guide Dogs Association of Tasmania
- Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children
- Royal Society for the Blind SA
- Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital
- Save Sight Institute
- School of Optometry and Vision Science, UNSW
- Sight for All Foundation
- SunSmart
- Sydney Hospital / Sydney Eye Hospital
- The Fred Hollows Foundation
- Vision Australia
- VisionCare NSW

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## About Vision 2020 Australia

Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

Vision 2020 Australia is the peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, leading advocacy efforts within Australia and globally, and raising community awareness about eye health and vision care. We provide a collaborative platform for our members—representing over 50 member organisations involved in local and global eye care, health promotion, low vision support, vision rehabilitation, eye research, professional assistance and community support.



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**National body working in partnership to prevent avoidable blindness and improve vision care**



### **ACFID Affiliate Member and signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct**

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the peak Council for Australian not-for-profit aid and development organisations. Vision 2020 is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct, which is a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice. As a signatory we are committed and fully adhere to the ACFID Code of Conduct, conducting our work with transparency, accountability and integrity. More information about ACFID and the Code can be found at: [www.acfid.asn.au](http://www.acfid.asn.au)