

Need for National Eye Health Survey

Position Paper

Our position

In collaboration with the eye health and vision care sector, Vision 2020 Australia urges the Australian Government to fund the delivery of a National Eye Health Survey (NEHS) to commence by the end of 2014. The NEHS will be the first representative nationwide study of the burden of major eye disease in Australia. It will close a fundamental gap in evidence based policy and program delivery for eye health and vision care.

There is no nation-wide population health data on the prevalence and causes of vision loss and vision impairment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Prevalence data that is currently used for non-Indigenous Australians is based on studies from the early nineteen-nineties, from limited geographic and demographic sampling or from self-reported surveys.

More recent data is available on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with a National Indigenous Eye Health Survey (NIEHS) being conducted in 2008. However, Indigenous Australians are more likely to be affected by systemic and major eye disease than non-Indigenous Australians. Lower mortality rates, increased prevalence of co-morbidities and associated eye conditions and the existence of endemic diseases such as trachoma, mean that more frequent monitoring of population eye health data is required to ensure that policies and programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are working.

Efficient and cost effective eye health prevention, detection, early intervention and treatment of eye conditions and the provision of services and supports for independence and participation for people with unavoidable blindness and vision impairment, cannot be realised in Australia without accurate population health data on eye health and vision care.

The NEHS will:

- Determine the prevalence and causes of vision impairment and blindness in non-Indigenous Australians aged over 50 years and Indigenous Australians aged over 40
- Determine the prevalence of vision impairment by gender, age-groups and geographic location
- Measure the detection and treatment coverage rate of all major eye diseases and conditions, including cataract, diabetic retinopathy, glaucoma, age-related macular degeneration and refractive error; and trachoma within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Determine the proportion of Australians with undiagnosed major eye diseases and uncorrected refractive error; and
- Determine the proportion of Australians with known diabetes who have biannual retinal examination as recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC)

Vision 2020 Australia considers the NEHS to be the foundation for achieving Australia's international and national obligations in eye health and vision care. The NEHS will generate evidence on the magnitude and causes of visual impairment and eye care services, encourage the development and implementation of integrated national eye health policies, plans and programmes and enhance efforts for cross sector engagement and effective partnerships to strengthen eye health in Australia.

Policy context

The problem

In Australia, there is currently no nation-wide population based data on the prevalence and causes of vision impairment that captures both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian populations in city, regional and remote areas. The population health data most often cited by government and the eye health and vision care sector for non-Indigenous Australians are extrapolations of prevalence by data derived from the 'Melbourne Visual Impairment Project' and the 'Blue Mountains Eye Study' against general population statistics. However, these two landmark studies are more than two decades old. The other main source of prevalence data is from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, which is self-reported and does not extend to causes and types of eye conditions related to blindness and vision impairment.

There are several factors that demonstrate the need to determine accurate up-to-date population eye health data: the increase in Australia's ageing population since the early 1990s; the effects of urbanisation and changes in environmental factors on the prevalence of diabetic related eye disease and other major eye diseases; advances in the treatment and prevention of eye disease and the precision of diagnostic technologies; and the changing of mainstream lifestyles with a greater emphasis on indoor close quarter vision and less outdoor activity. Each of these factors and their combination and relationship with each other, culminate in a need to understand eye health in Australia and for data to be up-to-date and applicable nation-wide.

Public health interventions being planned and implemented need to be evidence-based and targeted to address eye health and vision care in the most effective and efficient manner possible, and accurate prevalence and causation data is essential to achieve cost effective eye health interventions and supports across Australia.

The policy environment

In 2005, the National Framework for Action to Promote Eye Health and Prevent Avoidable Blindness and Vision Loss (National Framework) was endorsed by all Commonwealth, state and territory Health ministers. The National Framework was a starting point for establishing a high level plan to prevent avoidable blindness and reduce the impact of vision loss in Australia. The National Framework was the first step in recognising that real action will require all levels of government, the private sector and the eye health and vision care sector to work together in a complimentary and cohesive manner to tackle the increasing problem of blindness and vision loss in Australia.

More recently, Australia and the international community have further strengthened their commitment to prevent avoidable blindness and the impact of vision loss. In May 2013, members of the World Health Organisation (WHO) endorsed a renewed strategy with the *Universal Access to Eye Health: A Global Action Plan 2014-19* (Global Action Plan). The Global Action Plan establishes a target to reduce the prevalence of vision loss by 25 per cent, sets key national indicators to monitor and track progress, and for the first time, places a focus on support for vision impairment.

Central to Australia's ability to meet its international obligations under the Global Action Plan and to achieve implementation of the National Framework, is the ability to monitor and report on progress against accurate and up-to-date baseline prevalence data.

Furthermore, in 2008, the National Indigenous Eye Health Survey (NIEHS) was conducted to explore the prevalence and causes of major eye disease among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Different to non-Indigenous communities, the prevalence of systemic and major eye disease is much higher in Indigenous communities, and more than often Indigenous Australians are subject to different environmental exposures. The onset and natural history of major eye disease, associated co-morbidities and mortality rates are markedly different in Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Therefore, it is essential to monitor changes in major eye disease and the effects of intervention and eye treatments in Indigenous communities at more regular intervals.

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, representing over 50 member organisations involved in: local and global eye care; health promotion; supports and services for people who are blind or vision impaired; research; professional assistance and community support.