



# MRFF Australian Medical Research and Innovation Strategy and Priorities review

## Strategy

### 1. What are the most critical current and future issues and factors impacting on the health system, including primary prevention, and on the health and medical research sector that the next Strategy needs to address?

In 2016, the National Eye Health Survey<sup>1</sup> found 453,000 Australians were blind or vision impaired, recent modelling by Vision 2020 Australia indicates this is now closer to 840,000.<sup>2</sup> By 2030, this could exceed 1.04 million due to unmet eye care needs, an ageing population and predicted increases in systemic health problems such as diabetes and dementia. The next Strategy needs to address the following challenges -

- Lack of eye care services and poor workforce utilisation to meet population needs in regional and remote areas.
- Eye care is not embedded in chronic disease management and health care models are poorly integrated.
- Australians who are blind or have low vision experience barriers and discrimination when accessing services and support and continue to have significantly lower rates of employment compared to other Australians (including those with other disabilities).
- People who rely on the public system to receive sight saving treatment experience significant barriers to access.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience blindness and vision loss at three times the rate of other Australians and wait significantly longer for treatment.
- Funding for eye research does not meet current needs and an overarching national strategy is lacking.

### 2. Suggest options for how the next Strategy could address these critical issues and factors?

- Develop and implement innovative strategies to enhance care delivery and address service gaps.

---

<sup>1</sup> Foreman et al, 2016, *National Eye Health Survey 2016*, Vision 2020 Australia.

<sup>2</sup> This estimate is based on modelling by V2020 Australia which includes 2019 ABS population data, available data regarding the prevalence of the 5 most common causes of vision loss (cataract, uncorrected refractive error, diabetic retinopathy, aged related macular disease, and glaucoma) and data from the 2016 National Eye Health Survey

- Innovation in workforce utilisation to strengthen primary eye care and improve access and uptake of eye care services.
- Ensure people of all ages have equal access to services to support independence and community participation.
- Prioritise equity in eye health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by –
  - Supporting Strong Eyes, Strong Communities – a five year plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision 2019-2024, consistent with the Australian Government’s commitment to ending avoidable blindness by 2025 in the current Long Term National Health Plan<sup>3</sup>.
  - Prioritise proposals that embed locally accessible clinical care and research facilities within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to maximize accessibility.
  - Prioritise proposals that train and mentor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in leadership.
- Develop innovative ways to deliver eye care services at greater scale, including -
  - therapy for patients with blinding eye diseases previously considered untreatable.
  - support for investigator initiated and industry-sponsored clinical trials and experiments, and translation of pre-clinical innovations.
  - ophthalmic testing to support identification of chronic conditions such as dementia, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease.
  - application of genomics and molecular-genetic technologies to enhance diagnosis and treatment.
  - studies aimed at enhancing care delivery and addressing service gaps.

**3. Given the new and significant impact of COVID-19 on health services and health research, how should the new Strategy address COVID-19 related topics and impacts?**

- Restrictions on non-essential treatment during COVID led to an increase in wait lists for eye care. Ensuring a clear plan is in place to support the re-establishment of essential eye care services will be a critical first step in avoiding an upsurge in avoidable vision loss and an overwhelmed health system.
- Undertake research to ensure the learnings from the impacts of COVID upon the health and research sector are captured, and the innovation and creative responses are understood and embedded in forward health provision and system design. Including –
  - Ways to support the development of suitable clinical space and facilities that allow for safe practice service delivery.
  - Develop new models of screening for eye disease, effectively triaging patients to higher levels of care and monitoring of stable chronic disease that are community based and involve multi-disciplinary eye health care teams.
  - Research into digital health solutions. Telehealth services piloted during the pandemic offer opportunities for delivering remote screening, diagnosis and support for rural and remote communities.

---

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, Department of Health 2019, *Australia’s Long Term National Health Plan*, [https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-s-long-term-national-health-plan\\_0.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-s-long-term-national-health-plan_0.pdf)

- Innovative new technologies including new diagnostic methods, digital apps and artificial intelligence to screen, treat and prevent disease.
- Connecting and integrating health services to increase access and improve patient care.

## Priorities

### 1. How can the current Priorities be improved to better address the requirements under the MRFF Act? If so, how (this could include consideration of what elements of the Priorities work well to guide MRFF investments and what could be improved for research translation and impact)

Vision 2020 Australia recommends the addition of eye health and vision loss as a priority. Vision loss has received a very small proportion of MRFF support (0.1% of total funding),<sup>4</sup> despite the high societal burden and the broad impact on health. Vision loss in Australia costs the economy \$27 billion per year<sup>5</sup>.

Good vision is critical to quality of life and keeping people healthy, well and independent. With 96% of older Australians estimated to have sight problems by the age of 75<sup>6</sup>, identification, management and treatment of vision loss is critical.

Prioritising investment in vision research is essential to ensuring Australians receive effective treatment for eye conditions, and that health service is optimised to meet growing needs. With 90% of vision loss and blindness being preventable or treatable, investment in research can have a positive impact.

### 2. What are the most critical current and future issues for the health system and the health and medical research sector that the next Priorities need to address through research translation/implementation?

- Ageing population - The current priorities as they relate to ageing primarily appear to focus on dementia, but for a large number of Australians, better identification, management and treatment of other sensory conditions, particularly vision loss, is critical to their quality of life - keeping them healthy, well and independent for longer.
- An increase in non-communicable disease such as diabetes and other systemic health problems that can lead to a rise in vision loss and other associated health problems.
- A lack of health system integration.
- Marginalised, socially disadvantaged and rural and remote populations experience inequities in accessing eye care services.

### 3. Suggest options for how the next Priorities could address these critical issues?

- Reword the descriptor of the “Ageing and Aged Care” priority to support research that promotes health, wellbeing and independence of older Australians, prevents the onset of common age-related conditions and enhances treatment and care for those conditions.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert et al, Med J Aust 2021, A comparison of the distribution of Medical Research Future Fund grants with disease burden in Australia, 214 (3).

<sup>5</sup> Vision 2020 Australia by Access Economics Pty Limited, Clear Focus: The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009, June 2010 – updated to 2021 costings by Health Consult (2021)

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2005). National framework for action to promote eye health and prevent avoidable blindness and vision loss. Retrieved from <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/eyehealth-pubs-frame>

- Given the critical importance of a more systemic approach to health system design and delivery, prioritisation should be given to funding health system research that enhances multidisciplinary teamwork across the existing priorities. In an area such as chronic disease or avoidable vision loss, for example, such research might bring together elements spanning primary care, digital health, consumer driven approaches and comparative effectiveness.
- Better evidence in access and equity is required to improve outcomes for all population groups, followed by a deliberate effort to build equity into design that is informed by co-design and consultation with target populations.
- Identify sight and eye health as a critical area for future funding to ensure the health and wellbeing of the Australian population.