

MEDIA RELEASE

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Closing the gap in Indigenous eye health is within reach

Health agencies are closer to eradicating preventable blindness in Indigenous Australians, according to an update on progress (http://iehu.unimelb.edu.au/roadmap/annual_updates) released by the University of Melbourne.

The news coincides with the launch of a new University of Melbourne developed national resources (<http://iehu.unimelb.edu.au/diabetes-eye-care/resources>) to prevent diabetes-related blindness in Aboriginal Australians in Canberra today.

The University of Melbourne's Indigenous Eye Health Director, Professor Hugh Taylor, said thanks to a \$6.63 million Federal-funding boost announced by Minister Nash in September, real progress has been made towards closing the gap in Indigenous eye health.

"Today we have released our 2015 Annual Update on the Implementation of the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision. Our Roadmap to close the gap has 42 recommendations. There is significant progress being made in every one of those areas, seven of which are now implemented."

"In terms of tackling trachoma, there are now 150 communities in the endemic areas where the prevalence of trachoma is zero," Prof Taylor said. "The number of remaining hot spots has been reduced to one-third."

Prof Taylor says that with continued and full government support at all levels, the gap for Indigenous vision can be closed within the next four years.

"The next steps are to eliminate the remaining hot spots for trachoma, to ensure every person who has diabetes gets an eye examination once a year and to develop regional eye care services."

"With concerted commitment and resources we could close the gap for vision in the next four years, it is really achievable, it is the low hanging fruit and it will close 11 per cent of the overall Indigenous Australian health gap."

Meanwhile, The Hon. Fiona Nash will today launch a new campaign for Aboriginal communities called 'Check Today, See Tomorrow'. It aims to promote to Aboriginal communities how to manage diabetes-related vision loss.

"We're delighted to launch the health promotion material on eye care for people with diabetes that has been developed with close collaboration and input by communities," Prof Taylor added. "It is good timing given the National Diabetes Strategy was launched last week."

Almost 37 per cent of Aboriginal adults are affected by diabetes, and approximately 13 per cent have lost their vision from the disease.

"An eye check at least every year will help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with diabetes take early action against eye damage such as diabetic retinopathy, which can cause vision loss," Prof Taylor said. "All Aboriginal people with diabetes need to have an eye check every year and by ensuring these regular examinations, we can prevent 98 per cent of the blindness caused by diabetes."

The news follows the *Value of Indigenous Sight* PwC report released earlier this year, which showed each extra dollar invested in the Roadmap, would return \$2.50 to the Australian economy from productivity, tax and welfare savings – a total of \$578 million.

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