



Media Release

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Indigenous eye health is a good news story for closing the gap

'Striving Together' to further close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous eye health is the theme of a major conference this week.

Indigenous Eye Health (IEH) at the University of Melbourne will host the Close the Gap for Vision by 2020 National Conference at Melbourne's Arts Centre on Thursday and Friday.

The federal Health Minister, the Hon. Greg Hunt MP, will open the conference on National Close the Gap Day, Thursday, 15 March.

More than 150 participants working in Indigenous eye care across Australia will attend, representing a mix of community groups, clinics, health professions, state and federal governments, peak bodies, Aboriginal health organisations, NGOs and government agencies.

IEH has assessed the need, barriers and enablers to eye health services delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This evidence, extensive community consultation and stakeholder engagement has guided the development of a comprehensive and feasible policy framework, the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision.

The *Roadmap* was launched in 2012 and is now active in 41 regions covering more than two thirds of Australia's Indigenous population.

Roadmap successes include increased cataract surgery funding, optometry and ophthalmology visits, new Medicare listings supporting eye care screening, health promotion, regional and jurisdictional oversight and new diabetic retinopathy cameras and training.

University of Melbourne Professor Marcia Langton said the conference coincided with National Close the Gap Day, and was an opportunity to discuss and celebrate IEH's ground-breaking approach.

"This purposeful collaboration of health service providers and integration of all the steps on the patient's pathway has worked to reduce blindness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," Professor Langton said.

National Conference chair Professor Hugh Taylor said when the work began, rates of blindness and impaired vision were up to six times higher than for non-Indigenous populations.

"This rate now stands at three times more than the national rate," Professor Taylor said. "This is a very encouraging improvement, but more needs to be done. With ongoing work from all stakeholders, we are determined to close the gap for Indigenous vision by 2020."

Mr Hunt said it was tragic that blindness rates were so high in Indigenous adults. "It is inspiring to see a wide range of organisations working toward this important common goal guided by the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision," he said. "This conference shows the progress that can be achieved when you work together."

IEH's *Roadmap* partners, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), Optometry Australia, Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) and Vision 2020 Australia, will attend the conference with Aboriginal and eye health sectors working in Indigenous eye care across Australia.

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