

Media Release

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\$70M to Close the Gap on Treatable Indigenous Eye Health

Researchers from the University of Melbourne say \$70 million could 'close the gap' on Indigenous eye health, which unlike other health conditions is preventable and treatable.

Presently Indigenous Australians suffer six times the blindness of mainstream Australians and 94 percent of vision loss in Indigenous Australians is unnecessary, preventable or treatable.

'The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision' is the first comprehensive framework to 'close the gap' on Indigenous eye health and draws together more than five years extensive research and consultation.

The report was authored by University of Melbourne academics Professor Hugh Taylor, Melbourne Laureate Professor and Harold Mitchell Chair of Indigenous Eye Health, Andrea Boudville and Mitchell Anjou of the Indigenous Eye Health Unit, and was launched by the Hon Warren Snowdon MP, Federal Minister for Indigenous Health in Adelaide today.

Professor Taylor said there was no reason for Indigenous Australians to go blind unnecessarily. "We now have the plan and if we have the will and government support we can solve this critical health issue.

"Unlike many other conditions, we have the solutions for the key eye care conditions and vision loss can effectively be eliminated overnight.

"What is needed are additional resources to increase the availability of eye care, and good co-ordination and case management of the patient journey.

Professor Taylor is calling for support from all governments, Federal and State and Territory to fund \$70 million over five years to implement the Roadmap.

"With a doubling of funding, we estimate, that demand for eye treatments such as cataract surgery will increase by 7 times, diabetic examinations by 5 times and use of eye glasses by 2.5 times," he said.

Vision loss is a significant contributor to the gap in health for Indigenous Australians. It is equal third in impact on health with trauma related conditions and rated above stroke and alcoholism. For over 35 years, since the work commenced by Fred Hollows, researchers say only marginal improvements have been made in this critical area of health.

The Roadmap provides policy recommendations to eliminate unnecessary vision loss through 42 interlocking strategies. It addresses primary eye care, refractive services, cataract, diabetic eye disease and trachoma. The report stresses the need for assessment of population-based needs, strong co-ordination, monitoring of performance and national accountability.

It includes costs-estimates for the Commonwealth and State/ Territory Governments and builds on community consultation and control, the regional delivery of services and the National Health Reforms.

"I am delighted that Minister Snowdon has launched the Roadmap. We have worked hard and consulted widely to ensure the recommendations are comprehensive and are well supported by the sector and Indigenous community. The Roadmap will facilitate system changes to improve access to eye care and reduce unnecessary vision loss for Indigenous Australians," Professor Taylor said.

"The next steps for closing the gap on Indigenous eye health - we hope - is the Federal Government's commitment to the Roadmap and funding its staged introduction," he said.

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