

# Embedding Optometry in Aboriginal Health Services: Learnings and Future Directions

José Estevez<sup>1</sup>, Lisa Penrose<sup>2</sup>, Gary Crierie<sup>3</sup>, Lauren Hutchinson<sup>4</sup>, Dean Milner<sup>5</sup>, Anna Morse<sup>6</sup>, Vicki Sheehan<sup>7</sup>, Genevieve Napper<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Optometrist, South Australia

<sup>2</sup> Optometrist, Queensland

<sup>3</sup> Optometrist, Western Australia

<sup>4</sup> Optometrist, New South Wales

<sup>5</sup> Optometrist, Northern Territory

<sup>6</sup> Optometrist, Northern Territory

<sup>7</sup> Optometrist, Queensland

<sup>8</sup> Optometrist, Victoria

## Introduction

- The three main causes of vision loss in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are uncorrected refractive error, cataract and diabetic retinopathy.
- Optometry services provide comprehensive eye exams at the primary and secondary care level enabling early detection, timely treatment and appropriate referrals for these conditions thereby reducing avoidable vision loss.
- Optometrists also contribute to eye care education, clinical pathway support, policy and systems development and participation in regional Aboriginal eye care groups
- There are many benefits to integrating Optometry within Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS) and primary health networks (Table 1).

## Optometry Services

- Across Australia there are examples of optometry services embedded within Aboriginal medical services including Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and government clinics in Aboriginal communities.
- Optometry services are guided by the Optometry Australia guidelines for provision of sustainable eye care services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.<sup>1</sup>
- Strong partnerships between all stakeholders and optometry are key for sustainability (Table 2).

## Benefits of Integrated Optometry Services

**Table 1:** Benefits of Optometry Services within Aboriginal Medical Services

Diagnosing, managing and triaging of many ocular and medical disorders (e.g. glaucoma, red eyes, neurological, hypertension, trauma, keratoconus)
Reduction in ophthalmology waiting lists and maximising each specialist visit
Reducing patient inconveniences with unnecessary long trips and on site management
Providing affordable and accessible spectacles and/or contact lenses
Optimum client and practitioner relationship within a culturally safe environment
Ease of physician or allied health referral for ongoing continuity of care
Professional support and training of local staff such as Aboriginal health workers, nurses and managers; off site support via phone and email
Onsite support with retinal camera training and maintenance



## Eliminating Avoidable Blindness

- The recent National Eye Health Survey found that 67% of Indigenous people had an eye examination within the preceding two years.<sup>2</sup>
- Furthermore, around half (52.7%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with diabetes had not had an eye examination within the past 12 months as recommended by national guidelines.<sup>2</sup>
- This indicates there is still work to be done and an essential necessity for more integrated optometry services within Aboriginal medical services and an increase in the uptake of eye health services.

**Figure 1:** Professional support of Aboriginal Health Workers in retinal camera and assessing vision is pivotal to long-term success of eye programs



**Table 2:** Keys to sustainable and embedded Optometry Services within Aboriginal Medical Services

Models of Optometry vary and will depend on location, size and population of the AMS – Agreed partnerships between Optometry and the AMS for that location are important
Sustainability is supported by a mix of optometrists, program managers, nurses, Aboriginal health workers and regional eye care coordinators working within an established model
Interaction and participation with local events outside the health practitioner role cements the importance on being part of the community and enhances eye care outcomes

## Future Directions

- Increase optometry services in Aboriginal medical services and pathways and partnerships with local optometrists
- Embed eye services within day-to-day clinic practice
- Co-ordination and education roles within services need further recognition and support
- More Indigenous Australian optometrists graduating each year

## Acknowledgements

- The authors acknowledge all collaborating Indigenous organisations and the staff members and volunteers in each community who contribute to the delivery of eye health programs.

For further information or to get in contact with the authors:

Genevieve; napperga@gmail.com, Jose; jose.estevez@flinders.edu.au, Lisa; info@lisapeye.com.au, Gary; Gary@crierie.com Lauren; lauren-hutchinson@hotmail.com Dean; deanmilner@outlook.com.au Anna; a.morse@brienholdenvision.org Vicki; vsheehan@wuchoppern.org.au

References:  
1. Optometry Australia, Clinical Practice Guides. Available at <http://www.optometry.org.au/for-optometrists/guidelines/optometry-australia>

2. Foreman J, Xie J, Keel S, Taylor HR, et al. Utilization of eye health-care services in Australia: the National Eye Health Survey. Clin Exp Ophthalmol. 2018;46(3):213-221