

Media Release

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Indigenous Eye checks a priority

Aboriginal people with diabetes are advised to have an annual eye check according to Professor Hugh R Taylor AC, Harold Mitchell Chair of Indigenous Eye Health, University of Melbourne.

Eye exams have recently been added to the Indigenous adult health check to provide another opportunity for any issues to be picked up and referred for treatment.

Up to 98 percent of blindness from diabetes is preventable with early detection, intervention and timely treatment. Over 1500 Aboriginal people in Tasmania with diabetes need an eye exam every year.

Speaking at the 45th Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) Congress in Hobart, Professor Taylor Launched the Annual Update on the implementation of the 'Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision'.

Professor Taylor continues to work for changes to improve eye care outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Since the launch of the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision report, developed by the University of Melbourne Indigenous Eye Health Unit in February 2012, the Aboriginal health and eye care sectors have been working with government to improve the coordination and effectiveness of eye care and increase awareness.

"Progress is being made to address the 94% of unnecessary vision loss and blindness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Roadmap tackles the barriers that limit access to eye care services for the treatment and prevention of eye diseases and conditions including cataract, diabetic retinopathy, trachoma and refractive error - the need for glasses," said Professor Taylor.

Australia is the only developed country in the world to still have trachoma, although rates are declining in some areas.

"It's lamentable that eye health isn't being better addressed, particularly when we have the treatments for these conditions," he said.

Work to implement the Roadmap covers key areas including primary health care; coordination and case management; monitoring and evaluation; the elimination of trachoma; governance; workforce; health promotion and awareness and health financing.

The practical steps to implement the Roadmap have been welcomed nationally across Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and the eye health and health care sectors.

Vision loss accounts for 11% of the gap in health and most importantly this gap is amenable to treatment. A pair of glasses can improve a person's quality of life and cataract surgery can restore sight overnight.

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Timely access to laser treatment for those who have diabetic retinopathy can prevent 98% of the vision loss from diabetes. With improved hygiene, antibiotics and surgery blindness from trachoma can be eliminated.

“We require consistent government commitment from the Commonwealth and the State and Territory Governments to better utilise available resources to coordinate care. We have the treatments, its time to make sure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who aren’t able to access eye care can get it”, said Professor Taylor.

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