



Media Release

EMBARGOED 12.01AM Monday 30 October, 2017

Indigenous eye health is improving, but more needs to be done

Blindness among Indigenous communities is on track to drop to the same rate as non-Indigenous communities by 2020, thanks to work spearheaded by University of Melbourne eye health expert Professor Hugh Taylor.

The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision was launched by the University of Melbourne Indigenous Eye Health group in 2008 and is now active in 37 regions covering over 60 per cent of the nation's Indigenous population.

“At the beginning of this work, 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. This is a very encouraging improvement but more needs to be done,” says Professor Taylor, who today launches the 2017 Annual Update of the Roadmap at the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists Annual Scientific Congress in Perth.

“With on-going work from all stakeholders, we are determined to close the gap for Indigenous vision by 2020,” Professor Taylor says.

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

Professor Taylor says the 2017 update shows progress is being made on every recommendation in the Roadmap but he says ongoing systems reform and some increased funding would enable even better delivery of services within communities.

The University of Melbourne team are part of the effort along with Indigenous leaders, partners and community members to eliminate trachoma from Australia, particularly through programs to encourage clean faces.

“We are the only developed nation with endemic trachoma. It is only found in Indigenous communities. We need more timely reporting of data to allow more intense targeted intervention in hot spots,” Professor Taylor says.

“There is also a need for cross-portfolio activity orchestrated by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to ensure functional and safe bathrooms in these communities.”

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