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## **PEAK HEALTH GROUPS WELCOME GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR NEW NATIONAL DIABETES EYE SCREENING PROGRAM TO PREVENT BLINDNESS**

Leading diabetes and eye health groups today applauded the Australian Government funding announcement for a new national diabetes eye screening program to reduce vision loss and blindness in people with diabetes.

The Australian-first initiative program is a major step in the fight against diabetes related blindness and will enable early detection and treatment to protect the sight of over 1.2 million Australians living with diabetes.

Health Minister, Hon Greg Hunt MP, today announced \$1 million in funding for year one to commence development of the program outlined in a proposal put forward by leading diabetes and eye health groups. Specsavers has committed a matching \$1 million a year for five years.

Diabetes Australia will partner with Vision 2020 Australia, Oculo, Specsavers and engage all leading organisations in the eye health and diabetes sectors across Australia to support this critical initiative.

Diabetes Australia CEO Professor Greg Johnson said too many people with diabetes were missing out on eye checks that could prevent them from losing their sight.

“Diabetes is the leading cause of blindness in working age Australians. We are pleased the Australian Government and industry partners are supporting this important initiative. Other industry partners are expected to contribute funding, and ongoing government funding will be sought for a five-year program,” Professor Johnson said.

“There are around 600,000 Australians with diabetes who are missing out on the recommended eye checks that would enable early detection and early treatment to prevent blindness.”

Vision 2020 Australia CEO Judith Abbott said the program would help establish a national system to support eye checks for all people with diabetes.

“This will benefit the 1.2 million Australians with diabetes who are registered with the National Diabetes Services Scheme, providing them with alerts and reminders to have eye checks and creating electronic records that include retinal photos to help coordinate their care”

“The program will encourage people with diabetes to visit existing optometry services and specialist ophthalmic service providers for Medicare-funded eye checks and early interventions,” Ms Abbott said.

Optometry Australia CEO, Lyn Brodie said the program’s intent is to engage all optometry service providers across the nation and create stronger e-health linkages between GPs and other healthcare providers and optometrists.

Dr Peter van Wijngaarden from the Centre for Eye Research Australia and the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital said that the program will help to facilitate greater levels of connection in the eye health sector.

“We have world-leading eye care providers in Australia, but we need to do better to make sure that people with diabetes access care at the right times and don’t fall through the cracks,” Dr van Wijngaarden said.

“The implementation of systematic eye check programs has dramatically reduced rates of diabetes-related blindness in the United Kingdom, Iceland, Poland and Sweden.”

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists President A/Prof Mark Daniell said that with newer and more effective treatment such as intravitreal injections, the major challenge to preventing vision loss has been patients presenting too late for treatment.

“The new national diabetes eye screening program is an excellent initiative by chasing up patients who have not been screened. This initiative aligns with RANZCO’s collaborative care guidelines, which provide clear standards of care for diabetic retinopathy.”

Oculo CEO Dr Kate Taylor said that Oculo was the only clinical communications platform specifically for eye care in Australia, and currently connected over half of all eye health services in Australia.

“Through Oculo and a new public portal to be built, optometrists, ophthalmologists, GPs, endocrinologists and diabetes health care professionals will be able to record patient eye checks and make sure patients get appropriate notifications for regular eye tests through the National Diabetes Services Scheme.”

Mr Peter Larsen, Optometry Director from Specsavers said they were contributing \$1 million a year for five years to improve awareness amongst people with diabetes about the need for regular eye checks.

“This is great news for the eye health sector and we are confident that it will dramatically increase the number of people with diabetes who are having their eyes checked in the recommended time frames,” Mr Larsen said.

“Specsavers looks forward to working with Diabetes Australia on proactive, targeted communications that encourage people to have timely eye checks to assist with early detection of problems and enable early treatment to save sight.”

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