

## MEDIA RELEASE

**Embargoed until Friday 27 May 2011**



### **Closing the gap for Indigenous eye health an achievable vision**

The significant eye health and vision problems experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be eliminated to bring us one step closer to closing the gap in Indigenous health, according to two new reports from the University of Melbourne and the Australian Institute of Indigenous Studies.

Blindness rates amongst Indigenous Australians are six times those in mainstream Australia and there is a major shortfall in the provision of eye care services to Indigenous communities.

However, these reports have shown this dire situation can be reversed by increasing eye care resources by about four times current levels, adopting a national and coordinated approach to policy, and delivering services in partnership with the community control sector.

The Minister for Indigenous Health, the Hon Warren Snowdon, today launched the two reports prepared by the University of Melbourne's Indigenous Eye Health Unit: *Projected Needs for Eye Care Services for Indigenous Australians* and *A Critical History of Indigenous Eye Health Policy-Making*.

Professor Hugh Taylor AC said the findings are a vital step in the nation's quest to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health.

"These reports demonstrate the extent of eye disease and vision loss amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and outline how new policy can be effectively introduced to improve Indigenous eye health throughout Australia, including the elimination of trachoma," said Professor Taylor.

*Projected Needs for Eye Care Services* is a nationwide study identifying the need for eye care services in different Indigenous communities. The report maps the estimated number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia with eye disease and vision loss in each region and the related workforce required to address the problems.

"Across the whole country, by adding just eight full-time equivalent ophthalmologists and approximately 40-60 full-time equivalent optometrists to work with Indigenous communities we will meet the current eye health needs," said Professor Taylor.

"Nationally there are 250,000 cataract operations performed each year. It would take only an additional 3,000 operations for Indigenous Australians to eliminate cataract blindness in these communities."

*A Critical History of Indigenous Eye Health Policy-Making* is an in-depth look at more than thirty years of nationwide federal and state government Indigenous eye health policy.

"This report suggests previous policy making and implementation in Indigenous health has been unclear in approach and unstructured in delivery and we need to learn lessons from the past," said Professor Taylor.

"Since 1976 there have been at least six occasions where recommendations for national coordination in the area of Indigenous eye health policy have been made and not followed through. As a result effective policy implementation has only been achieved when championed by one passionate individual. This approach is unsustainable and has led to the problems we continue to face."

**For expert views on news, and the latest news from the University of Melbourne go to:  
[www.newsroom.melbourne.edu](http://www.newsroom.melbourne.edu)**

“This report indicates ways in which clear and direct policy can be effectively introduced to improve Indigenous eye health. The next step will be to provide a roadmap for the implementation of this new policy and the delivery of eye care to Indigenous Australians.”

The reports were prepared collaboratively by Jilpia Jones and Graeme Henderson formerly of the Australian Institute of Indigenous Studies with Professors Hugh Taylor and Ian Anderson from the University of Melbourne.

*Copies of the report are available upon request or at the launch.*

**For more information and to set up interviews contact:**

Melody Trowse, Haystac: T 03 8689 Ph 03 9693 8752 M: 0418 536 528  
E: [melody.trowse@haystac.com.au](mailto:melody.trowse@haystac.com.au)

Emma O'Neill, Media Unit, University of Melbourne: T: 03 83447220 M: 0432758734  
E: [eaoneill@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:eaoneill@unimelb.edu.au)

**For expert views on news, and the latest news from the University of Melbourne go to:  
[www.newsroom.melbourne.edu](http://www.newsroom.melbourne.edu)**