

Evaluating a Nurse and Aboriginal Health Worker diabetic retinal photo triaging model.

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In November 2016, the Commonwealth Government introduced MBS items for general practitioners and specialists to test for diabetic retinopathy (DR) with a non-mydratic retinal camera. Diabetic retinopathy is caused by high blood sugar levels damaging small blood vessels in the eye's retina. Damaged blood vessels can leak, new abnormal blood vessels may grow, and retinal detachment can occur, all of which may cause vision loss and blindness. One in four diabetics will develop DR, with Aboriginal patients twice as likely to develop DR as non-Aboriginals. While early detection and prompt treatment can prevent up to 98% of visual impairment, 47% of diabetic Aboriginal Australians do not have the recommended annual eye examination and 25% of diabetic Aboriginal Australians have never had a comprehensive eye examination.

The lack of a trained retinal photo assessor is a barrier to the use of retinal photography to detect and refer diabetic retinopathy in numerous Western NSW Primary Care Services. Trained assessors (generally GPs, optometrist or ophthalmologists) are required to assess retinal photographs to determine if referral is required. GPs services at Brewarrina Aboriginal Medical Service (BAMS) are provided via part time rotations, resulting in GPs trained in retinal photo triaging not always being available. Optometrists and ophthalmologists provide services at BAMS only periodically. BAMS's Aboriginal Health Practitioner (AHP) and nursing staff are long term employees who are regularly present onsite, and so it was decided to utilise these health professionals to triage retinal photographs to overcome the gap in the diabetic retinopathy photography service pathway. Nurse and AHP staff underwent approved training. The accuracy of their triaging of retinal photos was then compared to an experienced photography assessor until competency was established.

This presentation will share the learnings and insights gleaned during the implementation of this innovative service delivery project and discuss the wider applicability of this model.