

# Strengthening Eye Care Pathways and Eye Care Access

Koolin Balit  
North and West Metropolitan Region  
Aboriginal Eye Health Project



AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF  
**OPTOMETRY**

CLINICAL SERVICES • EDUCATION • RESEARCH





## Background

Maintaining good vision and eye health is essential for all people, with significant benefits to individuals and to the community.

However, blindness is six times more common among Aboriginal people compared with non-Aboriginal people and low vision almost three times more common (*National Indigenous Eye Health Survey, 2008*).

The main causes – cataract, refractive error, diabetic eye disease and trachoma – are preventable or treatable.



## The Project

The *Strengthening Aboriginal Eye Care Pathways and Eye Care Access* project was undertaken by the Australian College of Optometry (ACO), funded by the North Metro and West Metro Health (NMWMH) office of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and overseen by a regional stakeholder advisory group.



## Objectives

The objectives were to review eye care services and eye care pathways for Aboriginal residents of the NMWM and support optometry services to become more culturally responsive.





# Key Findings

The NMWM Aboriginal population has grown rapidly and is projected to continue to grow, particularly in the outer West and outer North suburbs, with a corresponding increase in the need for eye care services. However, the provision of eye care services to the Aboriginal population in the NMWM has not grown to the same extent, and has not been redistributed in the areas of population growth, leaving a significant gap.

**● Areas of greatest growth and need**



## Facts about eye care services provided in the NMWM<sup>1</sup>

(and what these facts suggest):

- the ACO, through the Victorian Eyecare Service (VES), funded by the DHHS, is a major provider of comprehensive primary eye care services to the Aboriginal population in the region;
- the ACO delivered 124 optometry days, more than three quarters (82.2%) of which were in the North, mainly through a regular, two-day per week service at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) in Fitzroy;
- **59% of the current need for Aboriginal eye tests is being met by the ACO in the North, but only 44% in the West;**
- the need for spectacles among Aboriginal people aged 40 years and over is close to being met through ACO services in the region, with 473 spectacles provided, very likely due to the popularity of the Victorian Aboriginal Spectacles Subsidy Scheme (VASSS, a further subsidy to the VES allowing Aboriginal people to obtain spectacles for \$10);
- although 134 Aboriginal people with diabetes received an eye examination, **only 25% of the need for Aboriginal people with diabetes to have an annual eye test is being met in the North, and even less in the West;**
- GP clinics provided 1,396 MBS 715 services (Indigenous health assessment that should include a basic eye check) across 593 clinic locations in 2013-14 (most recently available data), which equates to 11% of the total NMWM Aboriginal population, suggesting a possible under identification of eye problems;
- **access to private ophthalmology services presents a significant cost barrier for most Aboriginal people**, with gap fees ranging from approximately \$300 to over \$1,700 depending on the service;
- **cataract surgery rates are almost seven times less for Aboriginal people than for non-Aboriginal people in the NMWM**, a problem that is in part related to lack of coordination and follow-up along the referral pathway, lack of identification of Aboriginal people early in the process and long waiting times at public hospitals in the NMWM; and
- **there is a lack of standardised data on eye care services available in the NMWM.**

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<sup>1</sup> Data provided are for 2015, unless otherwise stated.



# Recommendations

## Governance

- 1.1 Establish the NMWM Aboriginal Eye Health Stakeholder Committee to implement the recommendations identified during the project period (as below).
- 1.2 Aboriginal Community consultative processes should remain central through the involvement of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO), VAHS, The Gathering Place Health Service Werribee, Sunbury Community Health Centre Koori team and Djerriwarrh Community Health Centre Koori team.

## Priority for Aboriginal People

- 2.1 Improve identification of Aboriginal people, particularly at NMWM public hospitals, as well as private services.
- 2.2 Assign higher priority to Aboriginal people to reduce waiting times for outpatient appointments and to ensure cataract surgery within 90 days of booking.
- 2.3 North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network and Inner North West Primary Care Partnership organisations to continue to work collaboratively with VACCHO in supporting delivery of cultural safety programs and co-ordination of care.

## Coordination of Care

- 3.1 Appoint an Aboriginal Eye Health Care Coordinator in the region.
- 3.2 Improve integration and coordination of optometry and ophthalmology services at Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and elsewhere to expedite the referral process when required.



## Capacity Building

- 4.1 Encourage private optometrists to participate in delivering low cost eye care, particularly in outer suburbs, through programs such as the Visiting Optometrists Scheme and VASSS.
- 4.2 Ensure there are adequate spaces, equipment, staff and training for eye care services at ACCHOs and Community Health Centres.
- 4.3 Obtain funding for VAHS to develop a detailed plan for a satellite clinic in the outer North that includes an eye care service.
- 4.4 Obtain funding to upgrade the slit lamp at VAHS, as well as obtain a retinal camera (to support annual eye tests for Aboriginal people with diabetes).

## Evidence and Evaluation

- 5.1 Monitor the success of eye health initiatives by developing NMWM eye health performance indicators that are consistent with state and national indicators.
- 5.2 Improve standardisation, collection and reporting of eye care service data in the NMWM.

## **North and West Regional Stakeholder Advisory Group**

Australian College of Optometry; Department of Health and Human Services, North Metro and West Metro Health; Indigenous Eye Health, University of Melbourne; Inner North West Primary Care Partnership; North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network; Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital; Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation; Victorian Aboriginal Health Service; Vision Initiative/Vision 2020 Australia

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Contact: [aco@aco.org.au](mailto:aco@aco.org.au)

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