

Eye care

Elevating ocular health requires a clear vision

A unique service seeks to improve the vision of society's most marginalised people.

The numbers are staggering: more than half the population reports having a long-term eye condition, according to federal government figures.

In 2014-15 it resulted in more than eight million Medicare claims for optometrist consultations.

While up to 95 per cent of vision loss is preventable or treatable, disadvantage and isolation prevents many Victorians from getting the eye care they need.

It's thought about 35 per cent of Indigenous Australians have never had an eye exam. The National Eye Health Survey 2016 found Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are three times more likely to live with blindness or vision impairment than non-Indigenous Australians.

More than half of the survey's participants found to have an eye condition were unaware they had it.

The Australian College of Optometry was established in 1940 and shortly after started clinical services and enrolling students.

For more than 30 years, the college has delivered the Victorian Eyecare Service (VES), funded by the Victorian government, targeting disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.



The Victorian Eye Service takes optometry to people who would otherwise miss out.

Last year the ACO, in partnership with rural practitioners provided more than 77,000 consultations and dispensed almost 50,000 pairs of glasses or other visual aids to more than 62,000 patients under the VES program.

The ACO's main clinic is in Carlton, with a network of clinics in metropolitan Melbourne and a mobile eye-care service.

Outreach services began in 1998 for patients with disabilities who could not access mainstream services, and expanded in 2003

with services to Indigenous Australians, the homeless and other vulnerable Victorians. Barriers to receiving eye care can include cost and accessibility.

ACO chief executive officer Maureen O'Keefe says the VES is a valuable public eye health program for those most in need.

"Since the introduction of the VES in 1985, more than 2 million quality eye care consultations and services have been provided to Victorians experiencing disadvantage," O'Keefe says.

To ensure the service is getting to the people who most need it, the ACO partners with rural practitioners, charities and other public health organisations.

Poor vision and eye health, says O'Keefe, can seriously affect quality of life.

The ACO's clinical services director, Associate Professor Sharon Bentley, says many eye conditions are picked up in the exam process.

"For instance, cataracts, uncorrected refractive error - fixed with contact lenses or spectacles - macular degeneration and glaucoma," Dr Bentley says.

Increasingly, the ACO is seeing more people with diabetes.

The growing prevalence of the disease can cause eye health problems and lead to blindness.

"It can be managed and treated but you have to make sure you are regularly seeing an eye care practitioner," Dr Bentley says.

LOW COST EYE CARE & GLASSES

for pensioners and health care card holders

The Australian College of Optometry provides high quality, comprehensive eye care services. Examinations are Bulk Billed. Low cost, subsidised prescription glasses for concession card holders start from \$40 for single vision and from \$97.50 for multifocal glasses.

We also welcome carers, family & friends (*non subsidised rates apply*).

Main Carlton Clinic – Cnr Keppel & Cardigan Streets, Carlton, VIC 3053

Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5.30pm | Saturday 8.30am – 5.00pm

Other clinics: Braybrook, Broadmeadows, Berwick, East Preston, Frankston

For appointments call: (03) 9349 7455