Growing an optometry workforce for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

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Eye health of Indigenous Australians:\(^1\)

- blindness 6x more common
- vision impairment 3x more common
- 94% of vision loss preventable or treatable
- 35% of adults have never had an eye exam
- only 20% of people with diabetes have had a retinal examination in past 12 months
- 30% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians report vision problems\(^2\)

Optometry Workforce Requirements - NT

• 2014 BHVI NT Program:
  – 79 communities serviced by 53 optometrists
  – 119.6 weeks (598 days) of outreach optometry
  – 29% by 14 ACO optometrists

• Population Based Needs Assessment:
  – 268.4 weeks / year required for all NT locations outside Darwin & Alice Springs
  – 5.6 FTE optometrists
  – Best employed in P/T positions
  – Locums still required
Optometry workforce requirements - VIC

• 2014 ACO Vic Program:
  – Urban, rural and regional communities serviced by 17 optometrists (including services within 20 ACCHOs)
  – ~ 296 days (approx 59 weeks) optometry for Aboriginal communities
  – Also access through network of private practices in regional towns

• Population Based Needs Assessment:
  – Approx 4 FTE optometrists required
  – ACO staff and participating private practices
2 organisations
Australian College of Optometry
Brien Holden Vision Institute

• Public Health optometry programs
• Supported by Visiting Optometrists Scheme and Medicare billing
• Low cost glasses available
• ACO – also support from Vic Department of Health and Human Services through Victorian Eyecare Service; employs 45 full time optometrists
NT Aboriginal Vision Program

- Circuit-style provision of services
- VOS: Visiting Optometrist’s Scheme
- Services provided on invitation
- Partnerships are key:
  - Regional Eye Health Coordinators
  - Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services
  - NT Government Department of Health
  - Optometrists, Ophthalmologists
  - Other NGOs (e.g. FHF, IRIS, Vision 2020)
- Not just clinical services
  - Education
  - Health Promotion
  - Research
  - Advocacy
  - System-level changes

Expansion since 2007
- 2007: 18 locations, 609 eye exams
- 2014: 79 locations, 4953 eye exams
ACCHO access to Optometry services in Victoria

~ 54 service access sites across Vic
Vic Aboriginal Eyecare program

- In partnership with VACCHO
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
  Fitzroy clinic established 1998
- Supported by statewide Koolin Balit
  Aboriginal Eye Health Advisory Group

- Victorian Aboriginal Spectacle subsidy
  scheme available statewide through
  ACO services and participating private
  practices
Collaboration: growing a workforce

- ACO familiar with public health & outreach optometry
- Broad clinical skills and experience important
- Peer support, network of like-minded optometrists
- Collegiate links and collaborations.
- Flexible leave so ACO staff work in NT: mutual benefit.
Growing an optometry workforce

• Outreach optom workforce developed by:
  ▶ Mentoring and orientating new optometrists
    • student placements
    • mentoring by other optometrists
    • cultural orientation programs
  ▶ Involving optometrists in some ‘public health’ aspects of the program
    • community eye health promotion
    • training / in-services
Growing a workforce

- Outreach optometry workforce developed by:
  - Representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye care and optometry’s role to the broader Australian optometry workforce.
    - conferences
    - workshops
    - collegial networks
Collaboration: many levels

• Can be a ‘balancing act’ to consider and cater for needs and priorities of:
  ▶ communities and patients
  ▶ coordinating organisations
  ▶ partner organisations
  ▶ the optometrists

• Key: keep patients central.

? Key success factors for sustainability
Policy Recommendations

• Like other health professions, optometry can contribute to improving health and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

• Australia’s optometry workforce should be actively equipped with the training, preparation, skills and experience to foster their active contribution to eye care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in urban, regional, rural and remote Australia

• Investment in required in supporting optometry workforce needs and expansion of pre- and post-registration experience opportunities. This needs to be recognised by funding bodies and support embedded into eye care programs
Support for NACCHO/Optometry Australia recommendation that

• The Australian Government commit to a national approach to improving access to prescription glasses amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians by:
  
  • option 1: Establishing a single, “National Indigenous Subsidised Spectacle Scheme” funded by the Australian and State/Territory Governments.
  
  • Option 2: Supporting State and Territory Governments to establish their own individual and nationally-consistent Indigenous Spectacle Schemes through an inter-governamental partnership arrangement.
Please come and visit us at the Indigenous Eye Health booth

Fred Hollows Foundation
Brien Holden Vision Institute
Australian College of Optometry
Vision 2020 Australia
Optometry Australia
Indigenous Eye Health – University of Melbourne