

Looking deadly! A systematic approach to improving eye care for Aboriginal Victorians

Susan Forrester¹, Jimi Peters¹, Mitchell Anjou², Uma Jatkar², Jonathan Jackson³, Genevieve Napper³

¹Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, ²Indigenous Eye Health, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, ³Australian College of Optometry

With a systematic and collaborative approach, significant improvements have been achieved in eye care access and outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal communities since 2010. The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) has worked in partnership with a broad range of stakeholders and the Victorian Government to improve eye care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in Victoria.

Community control within a regional approach: The University of Melbourne published the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision in 2012 and this national, sector-endorsed framework provides an evidence-base for community controlled eye health initiatives. The Roadmap recommends a regional close the gap approach for vision, within a jurisdictional support structure, so as to ensure sustainable and successful implementation and outcomes.

VACCHO is the peak Aboriginal health body representing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) in Victoria. VACCHO builds the capacity of its membership, and advocates on key issues on their behalf. A Statewide Eye Health Project Officer is engaged at VACCHO and provides a pivotal role, linking and supporting ACCHOs, strengthening stakeholder relationships and support networks, increasing workforce development opportunities, and supporting regional eye health workers. Project officers are based at a number of VACCHO member organisations, and work toward improving eye care pathways and stakeholder engagement regionally.

The Victorian Aboriginal Spectacle Subsidy Scheme (VASSS) is an additional subsidy to the Victorian Eye care Service, managed by the Australian College of Optometry, and offers a specifically selected frame range, extends eligibility to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members resident in Victoria, and provides a fixed and reduced patient contribution of \$10 for glasses.

The Department of Health and Human services Victoria currently provides financial support for the Statewide Eye Health Project Officer, the VASSS, the regional project officers in four (of eight) Department of Health and Human Services regions, and facilitates a Victorian Aboriginal eye health committee. An advisory group governs these projects, comprising Victorian, federal and regional stakeholders, and oversees the funded programs. Regional eye health committees made up of local and regional stakeholders support the regional ACCHOs and project officers.

Conclusion: A planned and collaborative approach with effective stakeholder engagement has provided opportunity for significant improvements in service delivery, access and outcomes in Aboriginal eye care in Victoria. Community knowledge and acceptance of eye care programs is being achieved, and elements of the approach in Victoria may be of value to other states and territories.