

Trachoma arts based health promotion brings hygiene to life in remote communities

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Trachoma is the world's leading cause of infectious blindness, which was eradicated from most countries 100 years ago through improvement in living conditions. Australia is the only high-income country among 53 developing nations with endemic blinding trachoma and has made a commitment to its elimination by 2020 using the WHO endorsed SAFE Strategy (Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial cleanliness and Environmental improvements).

Trachoma is one of four readily treatable eye conditions that lead to 98% of vision loss in Indigenous Australians. Caused by bacteria, trachoma is transmitted by direct contact with infected eye and nose secretions most commonly in young children who live in poor, crowded living conditions, where personal and environmental hygiene are limited. There are 204 remote communities at risk of trachoma and adults across the country can be found with scarring and in-turned lashes (trichiasis).

Improved coordination and coverage of screening and antibiotic treatment programs has led to considerable reduction in trachoma prevalence, from 14% in 2009 to less than 4% in 2013. However for sustainable trachoma elimination behaviour change around facial cleanliness and holistic hygiene practices must be encouraged along with the provision of safe and functional bathroom and washing facilities.

Culturally safe trachoma health promotion resources in use since late 2010 have been the basis for an extensive range of multi media and social marketing initiatives to promote trachoma elimination. These include; television advertisements and jingles, a 5-part women's radio series and community services announcements, mascot Milpa the Goanna, children's TV character Yamba the Honeyant, music and dance DVDs, on-line teaching resources, The Yamba and Milpa Trachoma Roadshow and annual AFL football clinics with Indigenous Trachoma Ambassadors. All are aimed at supporting clinics, schools, early childhood and family services in remote communities where trachoma is endemic. In addition, a creative commons approach to sharing art-work and resources has forged partnerships with services and brought to life dozens of adaptations of trachoma resources to reflect local agency priorities and different language and culture.

Clean faces and good hygiene practices are not only vital for eliminating trachoma, but also to reduce infectious diseases common in young children in remote Indigenous communities. Arts based trachoma health promotion initiatives have shown a capacity to support and revitalise hygiene programs. Creatively encourage hygiene behaviour change may help to reduce the burden of childhood infectious disease and eliminate trachoma by 2020.