The Victorian Aboriginal Spectacles Subsidy Scheme: providing successful community eye health outcomes

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Introduction and aim

The Victorian Aboriginal Spectacles Subsidy Scheme (VASSS) commenced in 2010 providing additional subsidy to the long-established Victorian Eyecare Service (VES) funded by the Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and operating through the Australian College of Optometry (ACO)1. The additional VASSS subsidy is funded by the DHHS Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Branch under Koolin Balit, Victoria’s Aboriginal health plan. The VASSS aims to improve access to affordable spectacles and encourage uptake of eye examinations for Indigenous Victorians2. Through the VASSS Aboriginal patients can obtain bifocal, multifocal or single reading and distance glasses for a fixed fee of $10 every 2 years. The scheme is specifically designed to remove cost barriers by providing a low and accessible price point, cost certainty for glasses and is available to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents of Victoria, regardless of concession card status. The VASSS receives regular input from the statewide Aboriginal Eye Health Advisory Group convened by the DHHS, which includes eye health stakeholders from the Aboriginal community, government, not-for-profit and university sectors.

This presentation describes the implementation strategies and outcomes of the VASSS, key learnings from the 2016/2017 evaluation3 and thoughts about the broader applicability of some of the successful elements of the VASSS.

Overview of eye health disparities—the National Eye Health Survey

The National Eye Health Survey 20164 found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults have three times the rate of blindness and three times the rate of vision loss than the broader population and the causes are largely treatable. The main causes of blindness and vision loss are uncorrected refractive error, diabetic eye disease and cataract with two thirds of the vision impairment is caused by uncorrected refractive error.

Uncorrected refractive error can be effectively addressed by regular eye examinations and affordable glasses supply. The cost of spectacles is one of the known barriers to utilising the eye care system and some 8% of Indigenous adults have never had their eyes tested4. An effective system of subsidised spectacles supply is necessary to improve vision and eye health. Clear and comfortable vision is important for education, employment, self-management of health issues, community participation and leadership.

The VASSS has operated successfully over a number of years now and met program goals and demonstrably contributed to improved eye health.

Establishing the need

Australia’s Indigenous eye care needs have been estimated through the work of Indigenous Eye Health at The University of Melbourne using national condition prevalence data from 2008 and 2012 service delivery modelling5. The broad ‘first order’ estimates using 2011 Census population of 37,695...
Victorian Indigenous population suggest the annual need for comprehensive eye examinations is 6,408 and the number of people aged over 40 years requiring glasses is 2,411.

**The ACO and VES**

The ACO\(^1\) is the principal provider of low cost eye care for Victorians experiencing social and economic disadvantage through the VES. It is a non-government organisation founded in 1940 and its present day functions are to deliver public health eye care services, provide clinical optometry education, deliver continuing professional development programs and carry out vision and eye care research. The ACO employs 48 full time optometrists and 36 part time optometrists and provides 75,000 patient services per year from a central clinic in inner Melbourne, 5 satellite clinics and outreach and visiting programs in urban and rural Victoria.

**Methods and results**

The VASSS is part of several eye health initiatives through Koolin Balit (Victorian Government Strategic Directions for Aboriginal Health 2012–2022)\(^6\) including a statewide Eye Health Project Officer at Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) and regional Aboriginal eye health projects over seen by regional stakeholder groups in four regions that include local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs). These initiatives are aligned with the sector endorsed, national policy framework, the Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision produced by the University of Melbourne.

The main objective for the VASSS is to improve access to high quality affordable glasses for Aboriginal Victorians with additional outcomes including: increasing Aboriginal update of primary eye care (comprehensive eye examinations); identifying vision-threatening eye disease (eg. cataract and diabetic eye disease); improving onward referral of eye disease treatable by ophthalmologists; involvement of Aboriginal communities in eye health care planning; and increasing awareness of eye health risks within the Victorian Aboriginal community.

Key features of the VASSS include: low cost, cost certainty ($10 fixed client contribution); extensive and community approved frame range; broad eligibility; and ongoing community participation in approaches to service delivery.

The VASSS is available at 21 ACCHOs across Victoria and over 45 mainstream sites (including community health services and a network of private optometry partners working closely with visiting services in ACCHOs) in both urban and rural areas. Availability of the VASSS through ACCHOs is important for enabling effective delivery\(^5,11\). From 2010–2013, 4,199 pairs of subsidised spectacles were delivered and from July 2013 to January 2017 an additional 8,166 subsidised spectacles have been provided. At current level of funding and service provision approximately 2,200 pairs of subsidised spectacles are provided per year. Demand has continued to increase and funding support for an expanded and sustainable program is under consideration.

Community and stakeholder monitoring through the program has been an important strategy in the ongoing development of the VASSS. Quarterly reports are provided to the statewide stakeholder group with spectacle provision mapped against population-projected needs. This process has enabled community, government, service providers and other stakeholders to work together to continue improving outcomes. Evaluations of the VASSS were undertaken in 2012\(^2\) and 2016\(^3\) supported by community consultation through VACCHO\(^10\). VACCHO was established in 1996 and is the peak...
Aboriginal health body representing all ACCHOs in Victoria. The role of VACCHO is to build the capacity of its membership and to advocate for issues on their behalf.

Findings from the 2016 evaluation included: that the VASSS is successfully contributing to improved equity of access to visual aids and has successfully delivered refractive care over a sustained period of time; the VASSS has enabled increased access to comprehensive eye health examinations and has contributed to overall wellbeing and sense of self-management and self-agency; flexibility of the program in local regions has been a positive factor and consistency has also been key. The VASSS is consistent with sector-endorsed national principles and is an exemplar model that has application in other jurisdictions. Economically, the VASSS was found to have good return on investment and has generated direct and indirect benefits to health, Aboriginal health, productivity and quality of life. The 2016 evaluation also found that there are some adjustments that can be made to assist targeting of vision impairment and sustainability.

Conclusions and recommendations

The VASSS is an example of a successful and ongoing program that has met program goals and is providing improved health outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Community agency can be enhanced, in a number of ways, with subsidised spectacles schemes if premised and managed correctly—this has significant and broader implications. Additionally vision loss is the most commonly reported long-term health issue for Aboriginal Australians and is responsible for up to 11% of the health gap. A good system of subsidised spectacles supply is necessary to improve eye health (refractive error plus other conditions) and those jurisdictions or areas where there is not a good subsidised spectacles scheme will struggle to close the gap for vision. The VASSS is aligned with nationally consistent principles developed by Optometry Australia and adopted by Vision 2020 Australia and with the government and sector-endorsed Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision. Successes of the VASSS are potentially transferable to other jurisdictions.

Proposed policy recommendation

It is recommended that the NRHA support the position of Vision 2020 Australia:

“While subsidised spectacle schemes are currently operational in all Australian states and territories, existing schemes vary and often have limited impact in overcoming barriers to access.

Vision 2020 Australia believes that all schemes should be aligned with the set of nationally consistent principles and recommended standards developed in consultation with and endorsed by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and its state affiliate organisations, the Optometry Australia Principles for nationally consistent subsidised spectacle schemes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Recommended implementation standards.

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the Australian Government supports jurisdictional governments to update their subsidised spectacle schemes, ensuring a nationally consistent approach for improving access to prescription glasses among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

References
1. www.aco.org.au


10. www.vaccho.org.au


Presenter

Genevieve Napper is the Lead Optometrist Aboriginal Services at the Australian College of Optometry, a non-government organisation providing accessible eye care services for people experiencing disadvantage. In this role she works with Aboriginal community controlled health services to coordinate optometry services across urban and rural Victoria, and coordinates access sites for the Victorian Aboriginal Spectacles Subsidy scheme that provides glasses for $10 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians. Genevieve has worked in a range of roles developing new models of eye care and strengthening eye care pathways and eye care outcomes. She contributes to national policy development and systems improvements through membership of the Optometry Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision Care Committee and the Vision 2020 Australia national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander committee. She also serves as a Board member of Optometry Victoria and is an honorary Senior Fellow with the Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences at the University of Melbourne.