What’s fair in vision care? Potential approaches for equitable access to spectacles

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Aims

• To understand the benefits and disadvantages of existing spectacle schemes, particularly access to them by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Australians.

• To gauge optometrists’ support for the concept of a ‘national spectacle scheme’ (NSS) for Indigenous Australians.

• Using these findings, to recommend potential approaches for improved access to affordable spectacles for Indigenous Australians, to ensure more equitable vision care.

Methods: A survey questionnaire was administered to Australian optometrists and associated personnel (Oct 2011 and Sep 2012), to provide a scoping analysis of existing spectacle schemes in each state/territory of Australia, understand benefits, barriers, and optometrists’ insights about access to the schemes by Indigenous Australians, and gauge the level of support for the concept of a NSS for Indigenous Australians.

Relevance

• There are significantly higher rates of vision impairment amongst Indigenous Australians, half of which is due to uncorrected refractive error (URE).

• State and territory government subsidised spectacle schemes are available to Indigenous Australians meeting pensioner/concession criteria. Yet, higher rates of URE in this population suggest that such schemes may be under-utilised.

• One potential approach to overcoming correcting refractive error (i.e. cost) is a National Spectacle Scheme (NSS), proposed in concept by a range of stakeholders in the Indigenous eye care sector. Such a targeted approach may align with similar ‘close the gap’ measures to overcome the distinct disparity in visual health experienced by Indigenous Australians.

Results

• Survey respondents indicated majority support for the concept of a NSS, and indicated they would likely use this scheme, given some considerations regarding defining eligibility criteria, promoting availability of the schemes to the target population, and logistical and administrative concerns relating to the introduction of an additional scheme.
Based on the survey findings, and broader lessons learnt and discussions with other service providers and government representatives, a concept/position paper was developed, proposing some possible approaches:

- introduce a standardised NSS, specifically for Indigenous Australians
- introduce a NSS, but with broader eligibility criteria to (all economically disadvantaged people)
- advocate to state/territory governments to conform their pensioner spectacle schemes to a set of common criteria to ensure equal opportunity to access affordable vision correction for all people.

Conclusions

- A ‘position paper’ regarding spectacle provision for Indigenous Australians has been prepared, ready for submission to government and other relevant stakeholders.

- This survey primarily uncovered practitioner perspectives; the ultimate decision and policy should be developed in consideration of other factors.