‘I can see clearly now’—an Aboriginal success story

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This paper will present an overview of an eye health program that has been running for the last six years in a remote region of the Northern Territory. The service covers an area of 322 500 sq km. In 2006, the eye health program serviced 250 clients—fast forward to 2011, and 1200 people were seen, and the program continues to grow.

As well as the number of clients growing, knowledge and perception of eye health is slowly changing for people in one of the largest regions. Previously many people did not expect to be able to see as they got older, and thought loss of sight was normal, and that nothing could be done. Now the community are more aware of the services available to care for their eyes.

The journey has been long but highly exciting! The eye health service has been re-created under the guidance of many Aboriginal health professionals and the community members so that the service continues to be flexible to the clients, creating a more accessible service. Barriers such as transport to eye health services, access to affordable glasses, and flexibility of appointment times have been addressed, and are reviewed on an ongoing basis. The intense sunlight of our region, and sensitivity to it after some eye examinations was a concern, so we sought funding to offer free, fashionable sunglasses to all clients who wanted them.

Fear of eye surgery was and is of great concern, so an Aboriginal interpreter, a local person, was employed to be at every appointment and in surgical theatre. The eye team was there at every eye appointment also, so friendly faces were always available. The local Aboriginal Health Corporation has supported this program so that two people are now employed to maintain the level of care. Aboriginal people have advised and supported this program from the beginning to make it one they can proudly own. The clinics are run in very flexible ways so Aboriginal lifestyles and preferences were taken into account every time, knowing that one size does not fit all.

Confidence in our service by other organisations has been shown in many ways, the latest being that a DVD is being made on eye health in one or our own communities with the eye coordinator as consultant and gopher! This may soon be viewed nationally on TV and available for all health centres.

Seeing used to be a luxury, but it is now a right that all can and do demand.