
CLOSING THE GAP REFRESH

OPTOMETRY AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION TO THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS (COAG)

MARCH 2018

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ABOUT OPTOMETRY AUSTRALIA

Optometry Australia is the national peak professional body for optometry, and represents over 80% of optometrists registered to practice in Australia. Since 1918 we have united the sector to make Australia a world leader in the delivery of vision and eye health services and patient care. Our focus is to lead, engage and promote the profession of optometry, optometrists and community eye health.

Optometry Australia established the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health Advisory Group in 2008 to develop sustainable solutions to improving eye care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The working group has developed a number of guidelines and principles documents to support the provision of sustainable eye care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Optometry Australia is also a member of Vision 2020 Australia, and is a frequent contributor to Vision 2020 Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee and its policy development and advocacy work.

CONTACTS

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INTRODUCTION

Optometry Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) open consultation regarding the 2018 Refresh to the Closing the Gap agenda and targets.

The 2008 Closing the Gap framework provided an ambitious and targeted agenda for enabling improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across a range of domains, including in health, education and employment. Closing the Gap Refresh provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to recommit to improving outcomes across these and other domains, and to foster genuine engagement and cross sector collaboration in order to shape an innovative framework, identify achievable targets and implement effective initiatives. The continued focus of all stakeholders - including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, federal and jurisdictional governments, businesses, academia and civil society - towards implementing effective initiatives has been, and will be, a critical component of achieving success.

Optometry Australia therefore calls on the Australian Government to recommit to the Closing the Gap Statement of Intent, and undertake a process of true consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, giving sufficient time to the process, to co-design the Closing the Gap Strategy refresh together, and develop policy and solutions that will work on the ground.

As the principal providers of primary eye health and vision care, Optometry is Australia's largest registered eye care profession, performing around 75% per cent of primary eye examinations across the nation.

- In 2014–15, around 84,000 Indigenous Australians had had an eye examination by an optometrist or ophthalmologist in the preceding 12 months
- While the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people receiving an eye examination in the previous 12 months has steadily increased over the last ten years (13% in 2005-06 to 15% in 2014-15), the rates remain significantly lower than for non-Indigenous Australians (20% in 2014-15).
- The number of occasions of service for Indigenous patients under the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS) almost tripled between 2009-10 and 2014-15 rising from 6,975 to 18,890 (26 occasions of service per 1,000 Indigenous Australians)

Optometrists play a key role in preventative care, early detection and treatment of eye and vision problems such as refractive error (the need for spectacles), and detection and referral of systemic conditions that affect the eye such as diabetes and hypertension. The role of optometrists is critical to reducing the heavy social and economic costs associated with avoidable blindness and vision impairment, and preventing or slowing the development of ocular and systemic conditions that can require costly specialist care to treat or manage.

Blindness and vision impairment impacts people throughout their lives, preventing children from succeeding at school and adults from reaching their economic potential. Barriers to accessing culturally safe eye health care exacerbate these issues further for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and this has resulted in a significant 'gap' in eye health between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians.

The 2016 National Eye Health Survey¹ found that:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have 3 times the rate of both blindness and vision impairment than non-Indigenous Australians.
- The proportion of Australians with vision impairment is higher in outer regional and very remote areas when compared to other areas.
- Almost half (47%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with diabetes had not had an eye examination in the previous 12 months (the frequency recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council).

The good news is that nearly 90 per cent of blindness and vision impairment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can be attributed to three conditions – refractive error (63%), cataract (20%) and diabetic retinopathy (5.5%). All of these conditions are preventable, if detected early enough².

The [Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision](#) was released in 2012 following extensive consultation with Aboriginal community and the broad range of key sector stakeholders³. The Roadmap is a sector-endorsed, evidence-based policy framework which makes 42 recommendations promoting sustainable improvement of access to eye health services, and include priorities for the long-term for governance, monitoring and evaluation, health promotion and financing for Indigenous eye health. A major focus is improved service coordination and systems improvement to facilitate the Indigenous patient journey from primary through to tertiary care, including cataract surgery and treatment for diabetic retinopathy.

In line with the views of the Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee (CTG CSC), in *A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset*⁴, Optometry Australia calls on the Australian Government to recommit to the [Closing the Gap Statement of Intent](#) through the establishment of a true consultation process which ensures that the 'refreshed' Closing the Gap Strategy is co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health leaders and includes community consultations.

Further, Optometry Australia believes that acknowledgement of the importance of primary and allied health care, including eye health care, is fundamental to success in the Closing the Gap targets. Interventions in eye health care are among the most cost effective available, with tangible outcomes and results. Further, eye health care initiatives provide opportunities for partnerships across a range of domains, including service delivery, health promotion, research, innovation and enterprise.

¹ Foreman, J. et al, 2016, [National Eye Health Survey 2016: Summary Report](#), Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, Melbourne.

² Foreman, J. et al, 2016, [National Eye Health Survey 2016: Summary Report](#), Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, Melbourne.

³ Taylor, H. et al, 2012, [Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision](#), Indigenous Eye Health, Melbourne School of Population Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

⁴ Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2018. [Close the Gap: A ten-year review: the Closing the Gap Strategy and Recommendations for Reset](#).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Close the Gap Refresh emphasises the need for provision of consistent and sustainable initiatives, including those which deliver eye health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
2. That the Close the Gap Refresh targets are evidence based and supported by best-practice initiatives which enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement, leadership and ownership.
3. That the Close the Gap Refresh reinforces the existing strong focus on improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and identifies specific indicators to ensure targeted action against specific health conditions.
4. That the Close the Gap Refresh emphasises the need for targeted research investment into eye health outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, such as the continued provision of funding to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare to produce Indigenous Eye Health Measures reports.
5. That the Close the Gap Refresh acknowledges the importance of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by identifying specific action to strengthen access to culturally aware and culturally safe health, and eye health, services.
6. That the Close the Gap Refresh acknowledges that social determinants contribute heavily to the gaps in health, education, employment and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

RESPONSE TO DISCUSSION PAPER

1. HOW CAN GOVERNMENTS, ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES, AND BUSINESSES WORK MORE EFFECTIVELY TOGETHER? WHAT IS NEEDED TO CHANGE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY?

Optometry Australia welcomed the mid-2017 announcement that jurisdictional Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS) fund holders were being allocated three years of continued funding. Optometry Australia continues to encourage the Australian Government to continue providing triennial agreements in acknowledgement of the strain annual contracts put on both communities and optometrists. We believe that government funded programs, including outreach services like the Visiting Optometrists Scheme and jurisdictional subsidised spectacle schemes must be appropriately and consistently funded in order to ensure ongoing trust and faith among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members.

The VOS supports optometrists to deliver outreach optometric services to underserved locations, and is integral to ensuring primary eye care remains accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This additional funding remains necessary to support sustainable outreach optometric service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Optometry Australia encourages the Australian Government to address concerns that the ongoing MBS rebate indexation freeze continues to threaten the ongoing sustainability of VOS programs and access for low-income patients when optometrists are unable to viably continue to bulk bill.

The [Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision](#) emphasises the need to support affordable access to prescription glasses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people⁵, particularly given that

⁵ Taylor, H. et al, 2012, [Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision](#), Indigenous Eye Health, Melbourne School of Population Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

uncorrected refractive error causes almost two-thirds of vision impairment among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people⁶. Effective schemes that provide cost-certainty and affordable access to prescription spectacles make a dramatic impact in improving vision across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population for a relatively small investment. While subsidised spectacle schemes exist in all Australian states and territories, the existing schemes vary and often have limited impact in overcoming barriers to access.

Optometry Australia was pleased to receive advice in late 2017 that the Honourable Ken Wyatt MP, Minister for Health, has tasked the Commonwealth Department of Health with engaging with jurisdictional governments to identify where schemes require amendments in order to align with the [Principles for nationally consistent subsidised spectacle schemes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Recommended implementation standards](#). These principles and recommended implementation standards were developed in partnership with the National Community Controlled Health Organisation, and were endorsed by Vision 2020 Australia. Alignment to these principles will assist to reduce cross border issues, ensuring a nationally consistent approach to improving access to prescription glasses among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Optometry Australia is committed to working with the Australian and jurisdictional governments to ensure that these schemes and services delivered through them are sustainable, effective and culturally aware.

Recommendation 1: That the Close the Gap Refresh emphasises the need for provision of consistent and sustainable initiatives, including those which deliver eye health care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2. HOW COULD THE CLOSING THE GAP TARGETS BETTER MEASURE WHAT IS WORKING AND WHAT IS NOT?

It is important that the refreshed Closing the Gap agenda sets achievable targets and is supported by investment in effective data collection, management and analysis software and processes.

Importantly, the current health related targets are to close the life expectancy gap within a generation (by 2031) and to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade (by 2018). Optometry Australia recommends that additional sub-targets related to health are developed such as access to medical, primary and allied health professionals, including eye health and optometric services.

Further, Optometry Australia suggests that the Close the Gap Refresh could be aligned to the Sustainable Development Goal framework, which provides an ambitious and targeted agenda for the alleviation of poverty reduction of inequality both in Australia and around the world. For example, alignment to the SDGs would include targets which seek to support:

- Sustainable Development Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
 - Target 3.4.1: Mortality rate attributed to cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory disease
 - Target 3.8.1: Coverage of essential health services (defined as the average coverage of essential services based on tracer interventions that include reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, infectious diseases, non-communicable

⁶ Foreman, J. et al, 2016, [National Eye Health Survey 2016: Summary Report](#), Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, Melbourne.

- diseases and service capacity and access, among the general and the most disadvantaged population)
 - Target 3.8.2: Number of people covered by health insurance or a public health system per 1,000 population
- Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries
 - Target 10.3.1: Proportion of the population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed within the previous 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law
- Sustainable Development Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
 - Target 17.17.1: Amount of United States dollars committed to public-private and civil society partnerships

Ultimately, Optometry Australia calls on the Australian Government to ensure that the Close the Gap refresh targets are evidence based and supported by best-practice initiatives which enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement, leadership and ownership.

Recommendation 2: That the Close the Gap Refresh targets are evidence based and supported by best-practice initiatives which enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement, leadership and ownership.

3. WHAT INDICATORS SHOULD GOVERNMENTS FOCUS ON TO BEST SUPPORT THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLES? SHOULD GOVERNMENTS FOCUS ON INDICATORS SUCH AS PROSPERITY, WELLBEING OR OTHER AREAS?

Optometry Australia strongly encourages the Australian Government to continue its focus on improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Close the Gap Refresh. Optometry Australia believes that acknowledgement of the importance of primary and allied health care, including eye health care, is fundamental to success in the Closing the Gap targets. Interventions in eye health care are among the most cost effective available, with tangible outcomes and results. Further, eye health care initiatives provide opportunities for partnerships across a range of domains, including service delivery, health promotion, research, innovation and enterprise.

As the principal providers of primary eye health and vision care, optometrists play a key role in preventative care, early detection and treatment of eye and vision problems such as refractive error (the need for spectacles) and myopia, and detection and referral of systemic conditions that affect the eye such as diabetes and hypertension. Given that nearly 90 per cent of blindness and vision impairment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can be attributed to three preventable or treatable conditions – refractive error (63%), cataract (20%) and diabetic retinopathy (5.5%)⁷; Optometry Australia believes that a significant headway towards closing the gap can be made using eye health outcomes as a measure.

In the 2016 *Closing the Gap in Eye Health and Vision Care by 2020* sector proposal, Vision 2020 Australia and supporting member organisations, including Optometry Australia, called on the Australian Government to task Primary Health Networks with targeted key performance indicators

⁷ Foreman, J. et al, 2016, [National Eye Health Survey 2016: Summary Report](#), Vision 2020 Australia and the Centre for Eye Research Australia, Melbourne.

to drive the systemic coordination of the health system in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health and vision care.⁸ The recommended process indicators were:

- Percentage of Adult health checks, MBS 715, completed
- Percentage of target population screened for diabetic retinopathy
- Diabetic retinopathy treatment rate
- Cataract surgery rate
- Cataract surgery within 90 days of booking
- Number of visiting optometry days
- Number of visiting ophthalmology days

While Optometry Australia acknowledges that these indicators may be too specific for inclusion in the Close the Gap Refresh agenda, an implementation plan which outlines specific indicators for health conditions which disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would enable targeted effort by all stakeholders, including governments, primary health networks and service providers.

Recommendation 3: That the Close the Gap Refresh reinforces the existing strong focus on improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and identifies specific indicators to ensure targeted action against specific health conditions.

In May 2017 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) published the [Indigenous eye health measures 2016](#) report, measuring against 22 newly developed eye health indicators covering the prevalence of eye health conditions, diagnosis and treatment services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, the eye health workforce and outreach services. The report examines differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, as well as differences by factors such as age, sex, remoteness, jurisdiction and Primary Health Network.

This type of research is imperative to support targeted investment into sustainable service delivery and Optometry Australia encourages the Australian Government to continue to provide the AIHW with funding to support the reports development, beyond 2018.

Recommendation 4: That the Close the Gap Refresh emphasises the need for targeted research investment into eye health outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, such as the continued provision of funding to the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare to produce Indigenous Eye Health Measures reports.

4. SHOULD ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CULTURE BE INCORPORATED IN THE CLOSING THE GAP FRAMEWORK? HOW?

While Optometry Australia is not well positioned to provide advice on a specific mechanism for inclusion, we acknowledge the importance of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Optometry Australia supports the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation in its contention that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to be in control of their own development, health and wellbeing. Optometry Australia believes that an understanding of culture is fundamental to the comprehensive model of holistic, culturally aware primary health care provided by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) and that access to culturally aware and culturally safe services is critical to informed control of health care.

⁸ Vision 2020 Australia, 2015, [Close the Gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision Care Sector Funding Proposal](#), Melbourne.

Cultural understanding and awareness is imperative to closing the gap for health - and specifically in eye health. Optometry Australia therefore supports the community controlled health model, noting that the 150 ACCHOs across the country currently service approximately half the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. Their focus on multi-disciplinary care has proven to be most effective in reducing child mortality and improving life expectancy. This focus also has particular benefit for the ongoing management of chronic disease, including fostering and managing links between patients with diabetes and optometry and ophthalmology services⁹.

Recommendation 5: That the Close the Gap Refresh acknowledges the importance of culture to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by identifying specific action to strengthen access to culturally aware and culturally safe health, and eye health, services.

5. WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE KEY TARGETS OR COMMITMENTS THAT SHOULD BE MEASURED IN A REFRESHED CLOSING THE GAP AGENDA?

Optometry Australia acknowledges that social determinants contribute heavily to the gaps in health, education, employment and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Closing the gap in eye health will see interrelated benefits across social determinants of health, including education and employment. This should be better recognised in the Close the Gap refresh, reflecting that these issues are interrelated and that closing the gap will only occur with holistic approaches that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In eye health and vision care for example, Optometry Australia notes that Australia continues to be the only high-income country in the world with trachoma. The Australian Government deserves to be congratulated for its commitment to the elimination of trachoma by the year 2020, as well as its renewed commitment of \$20.8 million in funding announced in early 2017, allowing the continued activities of the trachoma elimination program for four years, until 2021.

However, without implementation of all elements of the SAFE Strategy, and particularly without a focus on ensuring facial cleanliness and environmental improvement, trachoma cannot be eliminated. An integrated approach which takes into account the full cultural, social, emotional and economic context of Indigenous people's lives is imperative.

Recommendation 6: That the Close the Gap Refresh acknowledges that social determinants contribute heavily to the gaps in health, education, employment and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

⁹ Vision 2020 Australia, 2015, [Close the Gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health and Vision Care Sector Funding Proposal](#), Melbourne.

CONCLUSION

Optometry Australia recognises that closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians is a much greater agenda than just eye health and indeed, than just health in general. However, closing the gap in eye health will see interrelated benefits across other areas of concern, including education and employment.

A refresh of the Close the Gap agenda presents an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and all stakeholders working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, wellbeing and prosperity to come together and identify where each can impact and create change. This is an opportunity to build on the successes achieved to date.

Optometry Australia is committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and peak representative organisations to ensure integrated, targeted and concerted efforts to close the gap in eye health are developed, supported and implemented.