

# VISION 2020: THE RIGHT TO SIGHT—AUSTRALIA

**Kylie Evans and Brien Holden**

*Cooperative Research Centre for Eye Research and Technology, University of New South Wales*

**Carley Nicholls**

*Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia*

This article describes *Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia*, a initiative that supports increased public awareness of, and greater access to, the services and treatments that are available to improve the visual health of all Australians.

## BACKGROUND

Many thousands of Australians are needlessly blind or visually impaired. Almost 50 per cent of legal blindness and 70 per cent of visual impairment are caused by conditions that are preventable or treatable. Among indigenous Australians blindness and visual impairment is significantly higher than in other populations. Services and treatments for blindness and visual impairment are among the most successful and cost-effective of any health

### **SOME KEY OBJECTIVES OF VISION 2020: THE RIGHT TO SIGHT—AUSTRALIA**

#### **To support and promote**

- protective behaviour, including smoking cessation and reducing exposure to ultraviolet light;
- improved detection of those with cataract through vision tests;
- research into new treatment strategies;
- optimal rehabilitation for all those with vision loss.

#### **To encourage**

- all Australians to have their vision tested on a regular basis;
- every person with diabetes to have their eyes examined at least every two years;
- early detection in all people with glaucoma, research into the genetic basis of glaucoma, and improved glaucoma treatment;
- greater awareness of the general public and health care professionals in the eye care needs of those with low vision, and greater access to appropriate low vision services and treatments for all Australians;
- adequate screening programs within indigenous communities, and an integrated primary health care approach to visual health within these communities.

interventions. It is important to ensure that these services and treatments reach all those who need them.

## THE VISUAL HEALTH OF AUSTRALIANS

Blindness and visual impairment:

- have enormous personal, social and economic costs;
- limit the activities of otherwise healthy people;
- are associated with an increase in mortality;
- are a significant burden on the individual, the family, and the community.

The Centre for Eye Research Australia cites the principle causes of preventable blindness and visual impairment as:

### **Cataract**

Cataract is a disease of the eye in which the lens becomes clouded causing loss of sight. High exposure to ultraviolet light and smoking increases the risk of cataract. The prevalence of cataract increases with the age of the population. At present 122,000 cataract operations are performed in Australia each year, and 29,800 people have visual impairment due to cataract. Because of Australia's ageing population, the need for cataract surgery will increase.

### **Uncorrected and under-corrected refractive error**

It is estimated that 15,100 Australians are legally blind, and 212,000 Australians have some visual impairment, due to under-corrected refractive error that could be eliminated with the appropriate glasses. The reasons for this include: lack of awareness of services and treatments; the remoteness of some population groups; and the lowered visual health expectations of older Australians.

### **Diabetes**

In Australia, there are 400,000 known diabetics, each of whom is at increased risk of blindness or visual impairment due to diabetic retinopathy. Many diabetics do not have regular examination of their eyes, even though with early and appropriate treatment, up to 98 per cent of severe vision loss can be prevented. The major impediments to diabetics receiving appropriate eye care are lack of awareness and poor communication.

### **Macular degeneration**

As the age of the general population increases, two out of every three older Australians will develop age-related macular degeneration (AMD), and one in four will lose their sight because of AMD. AMD is a degenerative retinal eye disease that causes the progressive loss of central vision. Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment or prevention for AMD.

### **Glaucoma**

Glaucoma is a disease of the eye marked by increased pressure within the eyeball and loss of eyesight. It is estimated that over 126,000 Australians have glaucoma,

and half of those with glaucoma are undiagnosed. One person in seven will develop glaucoma, but if detected early and treated effectively the loss of vision can be prevented or delayed.

#### **Low vision**

Of the approximately 400,000 Australians with impaired vision, only one-third access rehabilitation services. The effect of impaired vision can lead to loss of confidence, self-esteem and independence; and people with impaired vision are at an increased risk of injury such as from falls.

#### **Trachoma and Trichiasis**

Trachoma is a painful and contagious inflammation of the inner surface of the eyelids. Many indigenous communities have the same incidence of trachoma as they did 20 years ago, with 50–70 per cent of children in some indigenous communities experiencing active trachoma. The eyelid scarring caused by trachoma can cause trichiasis, which is a condition where eye lashes turn inwards and cause corneal scarring and blindness. In some communities one in five elderly people have trichiasis.

#### **VISION 2020 AUSTRALIA**

In November 1999, the 6th General Assembly of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness was held in Beijing, China. The focus of the assembly was *Vision 2020: The Right to Sight*, a global campaign to eliminate avoidable blindness established by an alliance of the World Health Organization, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, and the Partnership Committee of the International Non-Government Development Organisations. At the assembly, representatives of several Australian organisations involved in the prevention of blindness

and sight restoration met to coordinate an Australian response to the global campaign.

In October 2000, *Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia* was launched. It is a partnership that brings together a wide range of Australian organisations involved in service provision, research, education and community work to promote sight as a basic human right, and to build the capacity of services to respond to the public health problem of blindness and visual impairment. The principal goals of *Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia* are to:

- advocate for the visual health of all Australians;
- increase awareness of blindness and visual impairment as a major public health issue;
- address the problems and conditions that affect the sight of all Australians;
- target education and service provision to the community, particularly to aged and indigenous Australians;
- control the major causes of preventable blindness and visual impairment;
- train eye care personnel to provide appropriate eye care;
- coordinate eye care efforts;
- create an infrastructure to build capacity to manage visual health.

*Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia* is an opportunity to advance Australian eye care. All health care professionals, researchers and service providers of eye care are encouraged to support its activities. For further information contact the Secretariat, *Vision 2020: The Right to Sight—Australia* by mail at PO Box 328, Randwick, New South Wales 2031; by telephone at (02) 9385 7435; by facsimile at (02) 9385 7436; by email at [V2020-a-sect@cclru.unsw.edu.au](mailto:V2020-a-sect@cclru.unsw.edu.au); or by visiting the Web site at [www.vision2020australia.org](http://www.vision2020australia.org).

#### **FROM THE GROUND UP: A CONFERENCE ON ABORIGINAL HEALTH IN THE 63RD MILLENNIUM**

Date: Tuesday 1 May to Friday 4 May 2001

Venue: Penrith Panthers, NSW

Conference themes:

- improving access to health services
- addressing identified health issues
- improving social and emotional wellbeing
- increasing the effectiveness of health promotion
- creating an environment supportive of good health
- environmental health and housing.

For conference registrations please contact: Conference Secretariat, PO Box 1565, Strawberry Hills, New South Wales, 2012; Telephone: (02) 9698 1099; Fax: (02) 9690 1559; Email: [ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au](mailto:ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au).

*Hosted by the Aboriginal Health & Medical Research Council of NSW (ABN 66085654397)*