

A passport to better health; eye care in the Western Murrumbidgee Local Health District



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Introduction:

Vision impairment is 2.8 times more common among Indigenous Australians, primarily due to uncorrected refractive errors, cataracts, and diabetic retinopathy.

To tackle this issue, Foresight Australia and Griffith Aboriginal Medical Service (GAMS) are improving eye care in the Western Murrumbidgee Local Health District (MLHD), covering 125,243 km².

This initiative involves donating diagnostic tools and training GAMS Aboriginal Healthcare Workers and General Practitioners in ophthalmic screening and diagnosis, with four upskilling courses provided to date, two funded by the Australian and New Zealand Eye Foundation.

Additionally, the diabetic retinopathy screening program in Griffith has been enhanced with training in photography and assessment, and a dedicated Aboriginal Healthcare Worker has been appointed for eye screening and retinal photography. Optometrists affiliated with GAMS, through the Brien Holden Foundation, also contribute essential clinical care in the region.



The Eye Clinic:

In addition to training local healthcare workers, a partnership involving Griffith Base Hospital, MLHD, Gordon Eye Surgery, Chatswood Private Hospital, and several RANZCO Fellows has established a well-equipped public clinic in Griffith.

The clinic operates regular four-weekly sessions with Ophthalmologists, Orthoptists, and a RANZCO registrar, enhancing clinical and surgical capacity in the area.

It provides a referral pathway to improve access to eye care and complements the screening efforts by GAMS. This surgical service has significantly reduced cataract surgery waiting times.

Outreach Program:

The 'Tackling Indigenous Smoking' (TIS) program by GAMS conducts outreach health screenings across various towns in the MLHD under the "Passport to Better Health" initiative. In 2024, screenings took place in ten towns, with 280 people screened—70% of whom were Indigenous, and 29% were smokers. The program screens for hypertension, weight, diabetes, nicotine dependence, alcohol and drug dependence, and social-emotional wellbeing.

Starting in 2025, eye disease screening will be added, including visual acuity tests, portable slit lamp examinations, and intraocular pressure measurements as needed.

The program will also expand its reach throughout South-Western NSW.

Thanks to a recent donation of a portable retinal camera from the Turrumurra and Griffith Rotary clubs, the outreach team can now include photographic diabetic retinopathy screenings. Aboriginal Healthcare Workers have been trained to capture retinal images for assessment by qualified personnel.

Lessons Learned:

Training and equipment provision empower local Aboriginal Healthcare Workers to effectively screen for common conditions affecting Indigenous Australians.

Outreach efforts by these workers reduce barriers to access, enhancing early detection and participation in eye care.

Collaboration with external eye care organizations and local optometrists has demonstrated the benefits of a coordinated referral system. Additionally, integrating ophthalmic screening into broader health programs like the "Passport to Better Health" ensures that eye health is a regular part of preventive care in Indigenous communities.

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