

## **Towards an integrated outreach eye health care service**

Regional, remote and Indigenous communities have reduced access to health care providers and health services, and experience significant health disadvantages compared to their urban counterparts.

National Indigenous Eye Health Survey statistics show Indigenous children, especially in remote areas, have better vision than their mainstream peers with vision loss in Indigenous children 5 times less common than in mainstream children.

Over time these statistics change, with blindness rates in Indigenous adults 6.2 times higher than the rate in mainstream Australia.

Lions Outback Vision helps bridge the gap by providing equitable access to quality eye health care services within remote communities, but its success depends on effective and collaborative partnerships across health care sectors and between health care providers.

February's outreach eye health conference *Connecting the Dots – A Collaborative Approach to Remote Eye Health* demonstrated Lions Outback Vision's commitment to supporting, promoting and delivering innovative and integrated eye health care services to people in remote communities.

The conference's primary aim was to help build relationships and partnerships between eye health professions and across the optometry, ophthalmology and aboriginal health sectors. Cooperation and collaboration between the groups ensures the long-term sustainability of outreach eye health care programs across the State.

The *Connecting the Dots* conference provided information sessions and workshops that focused on skills, protocols and best practice for delivering culturally appropriate eye care services to Indigenous and remote Western Australians. Inter-profession discussions across a broad range of eye health care topics were encouraged throughout the conference and this helped eye health professionals share information, initiatives, knowledge, and personal and professional experiences.

The conference program included keynote speakers from optometry, ophthalmology and aboriginal medical services, as well as inter-profession discussion forums and smaller discipline-specific workshops.

Professor Hugh Taylor from Melbourne University also presented the latest update from his Roadmap to Close the Gap initiative.

Part of the conference was dedicated to information sessions and up-skilling workshops for aboriginal health workers, providing them with an opportunity to develop their eye health care skills-sets and build their knowledge base in a supportive and collaborative learning environment.

Director of Lions Outback Vision Associate Professor Angus Turner said Outback Vision had been working since its establishment in 2010 to increase eye health services in remote and rural areas and make them more efficient.

“The conference brought together optometrists, aboriginal health workers, ophthalmologists and ophthalmology registrars – all the people that provide outreach eye health care services across WA,” Professor Turner said.

Delegates were able to use the conference format to meet and establish networks with other eye health care professionals working in outreach eye health care delivery across WA. Professor Turner said this was particularly helpful in making health workers feel they were part of a team.

“Health workers often feel isolated when working out in remote communities,” he said.

“The conference clearly highlighted and acknowledged the importance of working together to improve eye health in Indigenous and remote communities across Western Australia.”

*Connecting the Dots* was well attended and all delegates actively contributed in the workshops, which aimed to identify and address some of the key outreach eye health care issues still to be tackled.

Professor Turner said the conference also helped build a framework to develop efficient service procedures and systems.

“One way to improve efficiency is to integrate aboriginal health workers with outreach optometry services so that primary eye health care is triaged rather than being sent directly to ophthalmology, which isn’t always the best use of scarce specialist resources,” he said.

He said Western Australia was in a unique position to achieve an integrated service.

“We’re lucky in WA; no-one feels that any patient, any community or any aspect of eye health is ‘their turf’, which might be an indication that everyone knows there’s a lot of work to do,” he said.

Professor Turner said it was crucial to nurture and grow the direct line between aboriginal health workers, optometrists, and ophthalmologists.

“A good relationship is the backbone of a coordinated approach to delivering quality eye health services to people in remote communities,” he said.

Lions Outback Vision is committed to continuing the success of *Connecting the Dots*, the first ever Western Australian outreach conference dedicated to promoting a collaborative, inter-professional approach to Indigenous and remote eye health care.

It is Lions' vision that the conference will become a leading annual forum for the professional development of Indigenous and remote eye health care professionals across Western Australia. Feedback from conference delegates was overwhelmingly positive with several attendees saying they would like to be involved in a similar event next year.

For more information visit [www.outbackvision.com.au](http://www.outbackvision.com.au)



Conference Attendees



Conference presentation