

Media Statement**21 September 2020****Lions Eye Institute welcomes funding commitment from the WA Government**

A significant funding commitment from the Western Australian Government towards the new North West Hub in Broome will play a key role in revolutionising the provision of eye health care across the Pilbara and Kimberley regions.

Yesterday, the Lions Eye Institute (LEI) welcomed the announcement by Premier Mark McGowan MLA and Minister for Health, Mr Roger Cook MLA, that will see the WA Government invest \$4.7 million towards the Kimberley's first permanent Lions Outback Vision (LOV) eye clinic.

The North West Hub, an initiative of Lions Outback Vision, will provide greater equity of eye health services, transforming patient care in the remote, regional and vulnerable Aboriginal communities that are spread throughout the north west of Australia.

As well as enabling patients to be treated close to home, without the need to travel thousands of kilometres, it will build capacity among Aboriginal health workers, create local employment and offer an opportunity for the local health care workforce through training and training in rural medicine for junior doctors and optometrists.

The Hub will be based in the former Kimberley Klub backpackers hostel, which was donated to the LEI by the Wen Giving Foundation and Hawaiian Group. Transformation of the site commenced in July, with stage 1 to be completed by the end of the year.

The WA Government funding will be used to provide Broome based eye health professionals who will deliver eye health services to the people of the northern areas of Western Australia, ensuring the increasing demand for eye health services is met by improved access. The clinic will also provide outreach services to Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra, Wyndham and Warmun with specialists travelling from Broome to treat patients in their local hospitals or clinics.

For LOV's McCusker Director, Associate Professor Dr Angus Turner, the progress of the Hub represents the realization of a vision he has long held, to more effectively care for patients in Australia's remote north west.

"This area has significant eye health challenges and to date we have been doing all we can to address these through our travelling Vision Van and regular regional clinics, but now we will be on the ground with a full-service clinic that will operate as a hub and spoke model," Associate Professor Turner said. "We can see and treat patients in Broome at the hub, and deliver regular services to communities."

Approximately 11 per cent of the north west Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are vision impaired or blind, and 35 per cent of this population have never had an eye exam. There is 14 times the rate of vision impairment from diabetes among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

“Up to 95 per cent of vision impairment and blindness among Aboriginal people is preventable, so it is critical that we see and treat patients as early as possible in order to arrest what can be rapid declines in their vision,” Associate Professor Turner said.

The Hub will be fitted with state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment and an education centre, and will be staffed by local health workers, ophthalmologists, optometrists and nurses. In the future, the Hub will be expanded to become a multi-disciplinary clinic, sharing facilities and fostering collaboration with visiting specialists that could include cardiology, ear/nose/throat and other specialist services.

Some of the LOV team are already permanently based in Broome, where a temporary clinic has been in place in the centre of town while the Hub undergoes refurbishment. They have been collaborating with community groups across the Kimberley, implementing diabetic education programs and working with the Broome prison to provide assistance with eye health challenges in diabetic inmates.

The Managing Director of the Lions Eye Institute, Professor Bill Morgan, said there was a critical need for better eye health services in the north west of the state. “In the North West, demand far exceeds service capacity, due to the lack of available eye care specialists and competition for hospital theatre time. Many patients need to be transported to Perth through the WA Government’s Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATs), travelling far from home to be treated.”

The North West Hub will bring an increased number and frequency of clinics, consulting and surgery days, as well as enhanced integration with local optometry and other health care professionals.

“We are most grateful to Minister Cook and the WA Government for their support for this important initiative,” said Professor Morgan.

The North West Hub has also received support from the Australian Government, Australian Capital Equity and The Fred Hollows Foundation. Optical technology companies Carl Zeiss, Novartis, Alcon and Topcon have donated surgical and diagnostic equipment.

For media enquiries:

Michelle Hutchins, Lions Eye Institute, michellehutchins@lei.org.au or 0409 452 611

Photo – (L_R) Professor Bill Morgan LEI, Josie Farrer MLA Kimberley, Associate Professor Dr Angus Turner LOV, Peter Forbes, Chairman LEI, Premier Mark McGowan MLA, Bec Smith, Director WACHS Kimberley

