



THE HON WARREN SNOWDON MP
Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health
and Regional Services Delivery

28 September 2009

Looking into Indigenous Eye Health

A national report into Indigenous eye health released today shows adult Indigenous Australians suffer higher rates of blindness and other eye related health problems than non-Indigenous Australians.

The Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery, Warren Snowdon, welcomed the report, which is the first national survey of Indigenous eye health in over 30 years.

The National Indigenous Eye Health Survey found that 1.9 per cent of Indigenous adults were blind, over six times the rate of non-Indigenous adults. The major cause of blindness in Australia is blinding cataracts, and this is 12 times more common in Indigenous Australians than non-Indigenous.

The survey found that 94% of vision loss is preventable or treatable, but 35 per cent of Indigenous adults have never had an eye examination.

The report however also made positive findings for Indigenous children, as vision loss in Indigenous children was found to be five times less common than non-Indigenous children.

Mr Snowdon said the Rudd Government's \$58.3 million *Improving Eye and Ear Health Services for Indigenous Australians for Better Education and Employment Outcomes* measure will facilitate the early detection and treatment of eye and ear health conditions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"It is unacceptable that Indigenous people continue to suffer treatable vision loss at such rates. As we work with Indigenous Australians to close the gap in education and employment, we must also address this terrible and preventable health burden."

Mr Snowdon said the new measure includes:

- More than \$16 million for a major increase in services to address trachoma in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and other states if trachoma is identified.
- Additional funding of nearly \$6.5 million to expand the Visiting Optometrist Scheme to better target primary eye care for Indigenous Australians in remote and very remote communities
- Additional eye surgery where there is a high need for these services, particularly in Central Australia.

The National Indigenous Eye Health Survey was part of the Australian Government's National Eye Health Initiative, which focuses on improving the eye health of those at greater risk of eye disease and injury including people aged over 40 years, people with diabetes, people with a family history of eye disease and Indigenous Australians.

Media contact: Kate Sieper 0488 484 689.