

Mapping UNSW Impact Global Development

Primary SDG	3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING
Broad theme	Improving eye health services in Indigenous Australian communities
Research	Providing training, planning and toolkits for eye care workers and service providers in remote Indigenous communities
Impact region	Australia
Faculty	Science
School/Institute	Brien Holden Vision Institute
Academic	Dr Anthea Burnett
Project partners	Australian Government Vision CRC: \$956,707 in funding for 2010-2015
	Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council; various others
Related SDGs	10: Reduced Inequalities

Elevator pitch

UNSW can roll out a proven model to improve eye care services in Indigenous communities across Australia, significantly reducing the shocking disparity in vision impairment and avoidable blindness cases in the Indigenous Australian population.

The Challenge: How can we prevent blindness and improve vision in rural Indigenous communities?

Indigenous Australians are six times more likely to become blind than non-Indigenous Australians, with diabetes-induced eye disease a major reason. Almost all of this vision loss - 94% - is preventable or treatable. But Indigenous people in remote and regional communities cannot easily access eye care service providers and treatment, or even spectacles.

Diabetes-related blindness is 14 times higher among Indigenous Australians than non-Indigenous Australians. Once this kind of disease takes hold it is not treatable, which is why early-stage eye assessments and examinations are so important. Less than a third of Indigenous people are getting their eyes examined each year.

UNSW's solution: Provide models, training and tools to Indigenous workers and local providers

In 19 Indigenous communities across NT and NSW, Brien Holden and partners designed practical and simple solutions to improve access to eye care service providers and encourage Indigenous people to get their eyes checked. They trained nearly 300 Indigenous eye health coordinators and primary health care workers in eye examinations, they provided regional planning for visits by eye care specialists, and they gave providers a toolkit to help them organise patients, set targets and create an effective referral system that accounts for cultural sensitivities and behaviour.

By engaging directly with local groups and focussing on practical and simple solutions, over 20,000 Indigenous Australians received eye care service, the number of Indigenous people with diabetes seeking a yearly eye exam rose from 33% to 48%, and referrals for people with diabetes doubled.

With further funding, this proven model can be rolled out to other areas across the country where 230,000 Indigenous people live remotely in over 400 communities.

The Impact: Prevent blindness, improve vision among rural Indigenous population

National roll out of this vision care model would help to reduce the shocking disparity in blindness among the Indigenous population. Assuming the results from the 19-community project can be replicated, it could mean more than 12,000 more Indigenous Australians receive the eye care they desperately need.

Brien Holden's work builds the longevity of proper eye care in these communities. They empower local health care providers with tools and knowledge, and their work encourages providers to be more proactive with diabetes sufferers in their community who are at greater risk of incurring vision loss. The result is Indigenous people are more aware of the need to get checked up regularly, and they have access to an optometrist on cultural terms they are comfortable with.

Researcher

Dr Anthea Burnett is the Research Manager at the Brien Holden Vision Institute (Public Health) and a visiting fellow at the School of Optometry and Vision Science. Anthea is responsible for the design and implementation of research programs around patient experience, epidemiology, instrument design and health economics across Asia Pacific. She was inspired to support improvements in primary eye care in Indigenous communities because of the inequity those communities face relative to non-Indigenous Australia.

Ben Falkenmire 05.10.17