



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander COVID-19 Response

6 May 2020

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) acknowledges that COVID-19 is a serious threat to Indigenous populations, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians over the age of 50 and those with a chronic condition considered to be among the group of Australians most at risk of COVID-19.¹

Indigenous peoples have historically been disproportionately impacted by pandemics as a result of various inequities including access to appropriate health care. RANZCO acknowledges the work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector in ensuring that public health messaging and an appropriate policy response was developed at the onset of COVID-19.

During this time, RANZCO is:

- Supporting Indigenous-led responses to best models of COVID-19 testing, treatment and patient care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Advocating for personal protective equipment (PPE) for ophthalmologists who are undertaking essential clinical procedures.
- Continuing to support the eye health sector to prioritise cultural safety in the delivery of eye health services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Eye Health

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience poorer ophthalmic outcomes across a range of conditions which include refractive error, cataract and diabetic retinopathy. The 2008 National Indigenous Eye Health Survey (NIEHS) reported that 79 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults had self-reported eye problems, with 94 percent of vision loss in Indigenous Australians being preventable.²

RANZCO is well-aware of these disparities in eye health outcomes and strongly supports the ongoing treatment of these conditions during the time of COVID-19. It is important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients requiring ongoing ophthalmic care speak with their health care provider regarding how ongoing eye health treatment can be accessed during this time. There are a range of temporary telehealth item numbers available for specialist consultations during COVID-19, which can support continuity of care in some cases. It is very important that ongoing medical care is provided during COVID-19 as much as is possible, particularly for the vulnerable patient groups including the elderly and patients with chronic conditions.

RANZCO advocates for equity of access to all eye health care procedures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, noting the heightened importance of this as our health system continues to adapt and respond to COVID-19. The pandemic has created significant disruption to delivery of eye health services around Australia, with significant challenges arising from reduced access to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Equity of access to care, patient centred approaches and culturally safe community engagement are all essential elements to the post-pandemic response.

Elective Surgery

RANZCO supports the reintroduction of elective surgery in a staged and controlled manner, which balances patient needs and the ongoing need for capacity to treat COVID-19 patients. With respect to delivery of rural and remote eye health service delivery, RANZCO notes that regulations and biosecurity policy will vary across jurisdictions and impact on timeframes for the resumption of specialist clinics and theatre. It is important to work collaboratively across the eye health sector and jurisdictions to build a pathway back for the restoration of various eye health outreach services as soon as is feasible.

RANZCO acknowledges the pressure on the public health system with elective surgery waiting lists, and we are working across the eye health sector to advocate for collaboration

between public and private hospitals where possible. We encourage private practice to consider [bulk-billing](#) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients to ensure continuity and affordability of essential eye care services.

RANZCO Fellows are advised to refer to the [college guidelines](#) for further advice on prioritising surgery lists as elective surgery resumes.

Supporting Reconciliation

RANZCO is committed to the reconciliation process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which is formalised through our [Reconciliation Action Plan](#).

We respectfully acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations across Australia and hope your communities stay strong and healthy during this challenging time.

Additional Resources

- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) [COVID-19 resources page](#)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group [National Management Plan](#)
- Department of Health [COVID-19 resources](#) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- National Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) [COVID-19 information page](#)
- [Opinion piece](#) by FRANZCO and Australia's first Indigenous Ophthalmologist Dr Kris Rallah-Baker on the potential impact of the pandemic on Indigenous Australians
- [Opinion piece](#) by Shaun Tatipata, The Fred Hollows Foundation regarding eye health service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients
- RANZCO COVID-19 information page on [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander eye health](#)
- RANZCO COVID-19 information page on [temporary telehealth items](#)
- [Roadmap to Recovery](#); A Report for the Nation – Group of Eight, Australia
- World Health Organization [COVID-19 resource page](#)

References

¹Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group, [Communique](#), 31 March 2020

²Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Eye Health in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 2011

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/eye-health-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islanders/contents/summary>

