



Joint Statement – RANZCO and The Fred Hollows Foundation

2 June 2020

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are less likely to receive equity of access to cataract surgery and other ophthalmic treatment. Just 59 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need cataract surgery will get it, compared to 89 per cent of other Australians, and they will wait 40 per cent longer¹.

The Fred Hollows Foundation (The Foundation) and The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmology (RANZCO) are committed to working collaboratively towards closing the gap in eye health and improving access to culturally safe health care in Australia. We want to close the gap in the unacceptable health disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians.² As the Australian health system recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and recommences standard services, The Foundation and RANZCO note that access to ophthalmic care may worsen for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples if this is not specifically addressed in health service planning.

Additional barriers such as restrictions in and out of remote communities will limit access to ophthalmic services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and further delay access to cataract surgery and other essential eye health procedures. It is essential that equitable access is a core part of the planning for the return of elective surgery in the immediate and longer term. Without dedicated planning and commitment, the gap in eye health outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other Australians will further widen.

RANZCO and The Foundation support equity of access, patient-centered approaches and culturally safe care as essential elements of the post-pandemic response. We urge Departments of Health, hospitals and ophthalmologists to consider equity of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as elective surgery recommences.

RANZCO and The Foundation acknowledge the role that private hospitals and providers can play in supporting public hospitals to meet the backlog of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. Private hospitals and providers can show their ongoing commitment to a more just, equitable and reconciled nation by partnering with public hospitals to address the backlog of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients waiting for cataract surgery. This is in the spirit of the 2020 National Reconciliation Week theme; #InThisTogether.

RANZCO and The Foundation:

- Encourage ophthalmologists to bulk bill Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients to help ensure equity of access to cataract surgery and other ophthalmic treatment.
- Encourage health service providers to 'ask the question'; giving patients an opportunity to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- Encourage private hospitals to offer their capacity to public hospitals, to help meet the growing backlog of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients waiting for cataract surgery, especially during the next phases of the recommencement of elective surgery.
- Encourage the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee to include equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as a core principle in the resumption of elective surgery.

Further information:

- RANZCO Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [COVID-19 response statement](#)

References

¹<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/indigenous-eye-health-measures-2018/contents/summary-and> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28689897/>

²The life expectancy gap is 10.6 years between Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and 9.5 years between Indigenous and non-Indigenous females; <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/e48ac649-2fdd-490d-91cf-4881ab5ef5c2/aihw-ihw-193.pdf.aspx?inline=true>