



Close the Gap for Vision by 2020

National Conference 2019

Strengthen & Sustain

Conference Summary Report

The Close the Gap for Vision by 2020: *Strengthen & Sustain* National Conference 2019 was held at the Alice Springs Convention Centre on 14 and 15 March 2019. It was organised by Indigenous Eye Health (IEH) at the University of Melbourne and co-hosted by Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT). This is the third National Conference held by IEH to support efforts to close the gap for vision.

The 2019 theme '*Strengthen & Sustain*' provided a framework for delegates to explore successes and opportunities to strengthen eye care, and initiatives and challenges to sustain progress towards the goal of equitable eye care by 2020. '*The theme resonates with the foundational principles of our sector including the need to build capacity and self-determination*' John Paterson, CEO, AMSANT

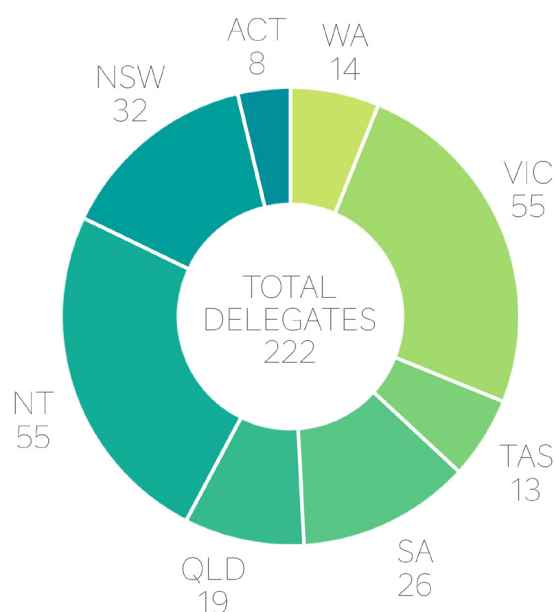
Over two days, in Alice Springs, the heart of Australia, more than 220 delegates came together to share stories, learnings and new ideas, and be inspired by the breadth of content, diversity and depth of presentations from over 60 speakers from local communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, non-government organisations, professional bodies, and government departments across Australia. The Conference featured a mixed program of keynote speakers, plenary, table top and poster presentations and a series of upskilling workshops.

Delegates were reminded by Professor Hugh Taylor, from IEH, of how far we have come as a sector. 53 of 63 regions across the country that are now working to co-ordinate eye care for Indigenous people – covering more than 80 percent of the nation's Indigenous population. He also noted 19 of 42 systemic issues identified in The Roadmap to Close the Gap for Vision have been fixed and three quarters of the intermediate activities have been completed.

John Paterson, from AMSANT said '*The action against over 40 recommendations is substantial and impressive, particularly given the number of stakeholders in many sectors who have contributed to its achievements*'.

The Minister for Aboriginal Health, Ken Wyatt through a video message, Warren Snowdon, Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Health, and Caroline Edwards, Deputy Secretary for Department of Health shared their insights and appreciation of the sectors achievements and outlined future challenges.

Delegates were privileged to hear from Dr Kris Rallah-Baker and Shaun Tatipata, strong Aboriginal leaders in eye health as they shared personal reflections and their vision for the future. Pantjiti Unkari McKenzie, a practising Ngangkari healer talked in language about her role in providing holistic healing services to community. This provided delegates with the opportunity to experience the importance of language in Indigenous culture, a key focus of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous languages.



In opening day 2 of the Conference, Donna Ah Chee, CEO, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, asked delegates to lift their gaze upstream to the key determinants of eye health, including trachoma, where overcrowding and poor housing maintenance have critical impact. Senior Central Australia Aboriginal leader William Tilmouth also said that we need to embrace the environmental health concerns of Aboriginal people to ‘*see through the mist*’ and understand that the problems relating to housing are also related to law and justice and to government red tape, and these are all sources of health problems.

Donna Murray, CEO of Indigenous Allied Health Australia facilitated a panel discussion around workforce issues that challenged Conference delegates to think about culture as an enabler for growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce, and how individuals and communities, can grow and be empowered by Aboriginal community control.

The Conference provided a wonderful opportunity to highlight the varied and tremendous work going on around the country, acknowledge that progress was being made through collectives/stakeholder groups working together, including within regional groups, that self-determination was critical to sustainable systems change, workforce was an area for additional activity and that eye care needed to be developed within the community controlled model of holistic, integrated care and with a view to the broader determinants of health and well-being.

John Paterson suggested ‘*the eye care gap will not sustainably close – along with the rest of the health gap – unless we have the political commitment to self-determination and a commitment to fixing the social determinants of health, equitably, based on need and Aboriginal-led*’.

Conference discussions resulted in the Alice Springs Declaration 2019 where delegates spontaneously and unanimously supported a demand that both levels of government (Australian and Northern Territory) urgently work to ensure that Aboriginal housing investment can be made available to address the critical housing needs in the NT and contribute to improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal Territorians.

The 2019 annual Leaky Pipe Awards were presented at the Conference dinner after the second day. The awards recognise and celebrate the achievements of individuals and groups in progressing activities to close the gap for vision. Congratulations to Heather Wilson from Central Australia Aboriginal Congress, NT, for the service delivery award; Tony Coburn from CheckUp, QLD, for the unsung hero award; Western NSW eye care partnership and project officer Jane Hager, NSW, for the regional engagement award; and Shaun Tatipata from The Fred Hollows Foundation, NT, for the community leadership award.

Feedback from the Conference was overwhelmingly positive, with delegates reporting they had opportunity to learn and share within the unique beauty and cultural significance of Alice Springs, appreciated extent of content, and range of speakers, especially the strong Aboriginal voices, and made some very useful connections. Delegates confirmed that opportunities like the Conference were invaluable in order to maintain the momentum, support and advocacy as collective efforts focus towards close the gap for vision by 2020.

‘I walked away filled with the assurance of community voices finally being heard to assist the coalface strategies being implemented across our country. #CTGV19’ - Conference delegate tweet

The 2020 Close the Gap for Vision by 2020 National Conference is planned for March 2020.



This report, the full conference report, photo gallery and supplementary materials can be accessed at IEH website www.iehu.unimelb.edu.au

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