

MEDIA RELEASE

WIMR's Centre for Vision Research and partners announced to conduct the Australian Eye and Ear Health Survey

The 2016 National Eye Health Survey was the first nationwide survey to determine the prevalence and major causes of vision impairment and blindness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians in city, regional and remote areas. In view of increased prevalence of diabetes since the 2016 Survey and the critical eye complications that may follow, the Australian Government Department of Health has sponsored the call to conduct a Second National Eye Health Survey.

The Centre for Vision Research at The Westmead Institute for Medical Research (WIMR) and partners including the University of New South Wales, The George Institute for Global Health, the Brien Holden Foundation and Macquarie University are proud to announce the award of the tender to conduct this Survey with an added Ear Health component as part of this nationwide survey.

This Survey called the 'Australian Eye and Ear Health Survey' will examine close to 5,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal Australians over a period of two years.

Professor Paul Mitchell AO, Director of WIMR's Centre for Vision Research who will lead the study, says, "Having a thorough and accurate understanding of the prevalence of eye disease and hearing loss in Australia is essential. It allows us to anticipate and plan prevention and treatment approaches that address the issues of vision and hearing loss now, and well into the future."

Macquarie University has provided support to ensure assessment of ear health occurs in parallel to the collection of data on eye and general health measures in this Survey. The ear health component of this Survey will be led by Professor Bamini Gopinath, Cochlear Chair in Hearing and Health at Macquarie University Hearing. Professor Gopinath says, "We have a unique opportunity to expand the scope of the Second National Eye Health Survey to also establish prevalence, risk factors and impacts of hearing loss in Australia. This will not only help to determine the current state of hearing health in Australia, but it will provide vital information to the Government to assist in its policy development, guiding future resource allocation and hearing health service delivery."

According to Australian statistics, more than 453,000 people who are blind or vision impaired are currently living in Australia.¹ Hearing loss has been reported in even more people with over 3 million

¹ Joshua Foreman, Stuart Keel, Jing Xie, Peter van Wijngaarden, Jonathan Crowston, Hugh R Taylor, Mohamed Dirani, National Eye Health Survey 2016, Vision 2020 Australia

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2016. Australia's health 2016. Australia's health series no. 15. Cat. no. AUS 199. Canberra: AIHW

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. Indigenous eye health measures 2018. IHW 210. Canberra: AIHW

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. Indigenous hearing health. Canberra: AIHW. Viewed 20 July 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/indigenous-hearing-health>

Australians (14%) affected. The presence of long-term hearing loss also increases with age, affecting 49% of Australians aged 75 years and older.²

Vision and hearing loss remain key health issues, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In 2016, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) estimated that 18,300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 40 and over had a vision impairment or were blind,³ and that the three leading causes of vision loss for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 40 and over were refractive error (61%), cataract (20%) and diabetic retinopathy (5.5%).⁴ In 2018-19, data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSIHS) reported that among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, hearing loss was prevalent in 62% of those aged 45 to 54 years and 81.8% of those aged 55 years and over.⁵

Professor Mitchell says, “Our study will use new, non-invasive imaging technologies to help improve eye disease detection rates. Importantly, it will assess a broad representation of people from across Australia. We will also look to assess potential links between eye disease/vision and hearing loss and critical health and/or social outcomes.”

“The WIMR Centre for Vision Research and partners are honoured to have been entrusted with this important study, and proud to be playing this vital role in improving the vision and hearing of all Australians,” says Professor Mitchell.

The Australian Eye and Ear Health Survey will begin in the coming months starting in NSW, and is expected to run for two years. Local doorknockers will invite residents living in the eligible communities to participate in the Survey.

Reporting from the Australian Eye and Ear Health Survey will contribute to Australia’s commitment to eradicate avoidable blindness in fulfilment of the United Nations General Assembly resolution *Vision for Everyone: accelerating action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*; and *Integrated people-centred eye care, including preventable vision impairment and blindness*, adopted by World Health Organisation Member States. The Survey will also fulfil several of the key priorities and actions outlined in Australia’s Roadmap for Hearing Health.

[Click here](#) for more information about the work of WIMR’s Centre for Vision Research.

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Editors notes on the consortium

WIMR's Centre for Vision Research

The Centre for Vision Research studies eye diseases and the problems with the eye associated with other conditions such as obesity and coronary artery disease. The Centre's research aims to understand why eye diseases occur – the prevalence, incidence and risk factors - as well as the genetic and environmental conditions that may threaten vision. Professor Paul Mitchell is Director of WIMR's Centre for Vision Research and the lead researcher on the Australian Eye and Ear Health Survey. He has a full-time academic appointment as Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Sydney (Westmead Hospital). He works clinically as a medical retina specialist and is Ophthalmology Director for the Sydney West Local Health Network. His clinical focus is on management of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), diabetic retinopathy and other vascular retinopathies and on systemic diseases effects on the eye.

The University of New South Wales (UNSW)

UNSW is one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities with strong regional and global engagement. UNSW creates an academic environment where outstanding students and scholars from around the world can be inspired to excel in their programs of study and research. Partnerships with both local and global communities allow UNSW to share knowledge, debate and research outcomes. The School of Optometry and Vision Science at UNSW is one of the largest in Asia and the only Optometry School in NSW. The School is committed to forming partnerships with ophthalmic industry and across the health care sector, and focused on translational research which will lead to practical application and significant improvements in ocular health.

The George Institute for Global Health

The George Institute is a leading independent global medical research institute established and headquartered in Sydney, with additional major centres in China, India and the UK and an international network of experts and collaborators. The Institute's mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide, particularly those living in disadvantaged circumstances, by challenging the status quo and using innovative approaches to prevent and treat non-communicable diseases and injury.

Brien Holden Foundation

The Brien Holden Foundation is an Australian NGO that works in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve access to optometry services as part of their broader primary health care programs, contributing towards the prevention of avoidable vision loss through access to full eye examinations, access to glasses and referrals to specialists. Brien Holden Foundation provides services directly, guides policy through participating in relevant sector working groups and committees, conducts research, develops & delivers eye health training to primary health care practitioners, and actively collaborates with other organisations working with these communities.

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Macquarie University

Macquarie University is a global hub of hearing and hearing-related research, education and engagement. We combine academic strength, clinical expertise, and a visionary approach as we seek to transform hearing health policy and practice and hearing-related endeavours. We deliver world-class education for clinicians and researchers to transform their understanding of hearing and hearing health, and are working to empower healthcare professionals, individuals and communities to reduce the global burden of hearing loss.

Media contact

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